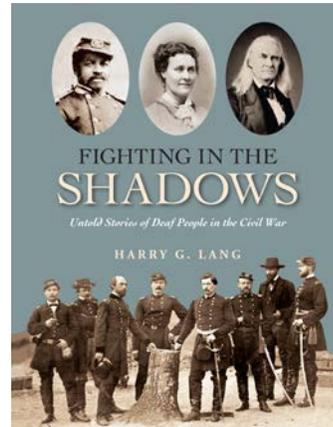
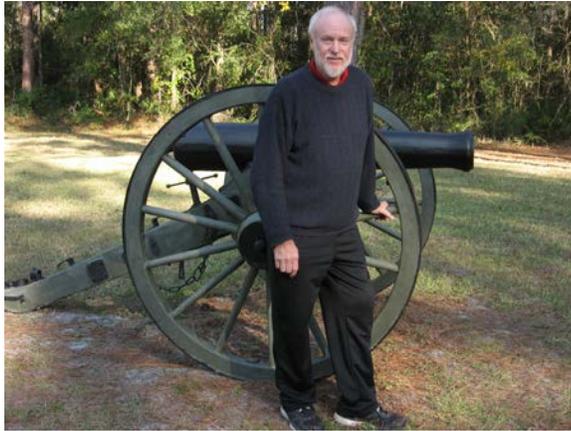


## An Interview with Harry G. Lang, Author of *Fighting in the Shadows: Untold Stories of Deaf People in the Civil War*



**GUP:** *Fighting in the Shadows* includes first-hand accounts of deaf people’s experiences during the Civil War that have never before been published. What was your research process? How were you able to piece these stories together?

**HGL:** People often ask me how I find so many interesting stories. I reply by saying I do “NIH research” and ask them if they know what NIH stands for. Invariably, someone in the audience will respond “National Institutes of Health.” I tell them that I do a different kind of “NIH research”—“Needle in the Haystack Research.” In other words, I read many books, articles, unpublished family records, biographies, and other documents, looking for relevant facts and anecdotes. I search the internet and then, as much as possible, I back up relevant findings by contacting families or locating original “primary” sources of information (correspondence, diaries, etc.). The mosaic of research findings are then assembled using an inductive approach, drawing generalizations from the many pieces.

**GUP:** *During the Civil War era, deaf people were marginalized and often viewed as ignorant and inferior by the larger hearing society. Did their participation in the Civil War change these attitudes?*

**HGL:** Deaf adults who were assertive were particularly successful in finding relevant roles during the Civil War. Some found their way into the armies as combatants. Others accepted noncombatant roles within the armies. Many of these men, as well as thousands of men who became deaf during the war from artillery noise, illness, and disease, were resilient, and continued to fight and support the armies despite the risks associated with deafness. Other women and men unable to serve as combatants fought with the pen as newspaper editors/writers, poets, diarists, and through correspondence. Still other deaf civilians supported the armies as nurses, doctors, farmers growing crops, sword-makers, ship builders, and many other roles.

Unfortunately, most newspapers, particularly in the South, were shut down. Deaf newspapers and journals stopped publishing, communication through mail was difficult, and there were few other ways to share information. The country was largely agricultural and the Deaf community had few

organizations or other means to share information. Until *Fighting in the Shadows* was published, no one made an effort to summarize either the military or non-military participation by deaf people. While the attitudes of deaf participants about their own ability to effect change in society was changed, there was little impact on the attitudes of hearing people in American society. In addition, the efforts by oralists to ban sign language in the schools in the years following the Civil War pushed deaf people back into the shadows.

However, there were attitudes changed by certain events during the war. As an example, the Emancipation Proclamation led to the unshackling of deaf and hearing slaves, and schools were opened in many states to serve deaf African American children.

**GUP:** *What effects did the Civil War have on the Deaf community?*

**HGL:** One of the fascinating discoveries during the research for this book was how many deaf pupils in the schools closely followed the unfolding events. They held debates in some schools, wrote home to their parents, formed militia willing to fight, marched in military dress in support of the armies, helped to manufacture bullets, printed Confederate currency, and met with visiting politicians. Quite a few of these young deaf men and women developed the necessary qualities to become leaders in the Deaf community's subsequent battles with oralists. Some became leaders in the National Association for the Deaf. The war provided opportunities for other Deaf adults to express their opinions in support of the causes in which they believed. After the war, some of these writers fought for the rights of other marginalized groups as well, including women's suffrage and the continued battles for civil rights for African Americans.

**GUP:** *Did any story resonate more with you than others? Was there any particular person whose life or experience stuck with you?*

**HGL:** Laura C. Redden, a deaf graduate of the Missouri Institution, was a remarkable young woman whose literary talents led to her becoming a war correspondent for the *Missouri Republican* newspaper at the start of the war. Her story shows how a deaf person can successfully accomplish many things in both the Deaf community and in collaboration with hearing people in the general society. She interacted with many famous people, most often through writing. She met with Abraham Lincoln several times, as well as with General Ulysses S. Grant and other officers. She was friends with John Wilkes Booth and taught him and his sister some signs so they could all enjoy their interactions and discussions of poetry. She compiled several books of war poems and biographical sketches of those serving in Congress. The fact that she considered both Lincoln and Booth as friends is especially interesting. Booth's own family had no idea of his plans to assassinate Lincoln, and neither did Laura Redden.

The stories of several other deaf and hard of hearing individuals struck me as particularly impressive. Susan Archer Talley was imprisoned as a spy. Like Redden, she was a prolific poet, but supportive of the South. Before the war, she was a personal friend of Edgar Allan Poe. Edmund Booth, a newspaper editor in Iowa, had his life threatened because of his outspoken views against secession of the Southern states. He helped to document the war, especially the experiences of Iowa soldiers who became "correspondents" and who referred to him as "Friend Booth." Still another remarkable figure was Prince

François Ferdinand de Joinville, who came from Europe to serve as a military advisor and assistant to General George McClellan during the Peninsula Campaign. These and many other deaf and hard of hearing people showed how attitudes and communication challenges could be overcome to provide opportunities to help determine the destiny of our country during this national crisis.

**GUP:** *Did anything surprise you during your research?*

**HGL:** There were many surprises, but one, in particular, fascinated me. I did not know about this until I discovered a quaint booklet in the Library of Congress titled “The Deaf Soldier.” The booklet was a compilation of about 100 short sketches of deafened veterans representing thousands of men who had formed an organization called The Silent Army. These men fought a new battle after the war, one against the US government for better pensions. Veterans with other disabilities were receiving much better pensions than those who were deafened. The stories of these men showed very similar experiences as members of the Deaf community—attitudes, unemployment and underemployment, struggles to communicate with family members and friends, difficulties with tinnitus and vertigo, and other challenges associated with what we now call Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. These men held conventions, sometimes at schools for the deaf, and adopted the manual alphabet (fingerspelling) as their “countersign”—a military term which implies a code needed to save one’s life when approaching a sentry. In this case, they recognized visual communication as critical to their survival in society after the war had ended.

