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“Conspiracy of Silence”

Contesting Exclusion and Oral Hegemony

The Great Depression brought widespread unemployment to forty thousand deaf adults and continued educational failure to fifteen thousand deaf students in the United States.¹ Economic downturn illuminated the inadequacies of vocational programs. Deaf people engaged in frustrating and often unsuccessful negotiations to secure work from either increasingly disinterested private employers or the recalcitrant state and federal officials who managed the era’s governmental work programs. Deaf teachers and community leaders again sought to revamp technical instruction, and the continued determination of oralists to suppress sign language at public schools spurred broad and, in some instances, unprecedented opposition.



Efforts of deaf people to upgrade secondary-level vocational instruction were largely in vain in the 1930s.² Deaf teachers, although persistent, had little power now that their numbers had been reduced to less than 10 percent of the overall teaching force and less than half of all vocational instructors.³ The frustrations of Iowa’s J. Schuyler Long, one of the nation’s few remaining deaf administrators, underscored this collective powerlessness. At the 1931 convention of school administrators, Long appealed to his hearing peers. “Do you know the world as the deaf man finds it?” he asked. “The place to test the success of an educational system is not in the schoolroom nor in the conversations over the social teacups,” he explained, “but out where men toil and earn their daily bread.”⁴

In addition to their efforts to upgrade vocational programs, deaf critics praised the few school administrators who successfully ex-



Some deaf activists used comics to illustrate the ironies and problems inherent in deaf education and deaf employment. Illustration by Byron Burnes for *Vocational Teachers* 2 (June 1931), p. 4.

panded instruction. For example, Edmund Boatner, superintendent of the American School for the Deaf, established courses in welding, mechanics, and typewriter repair beginning in 1938, despite severe budget constraints. In two years, school officials helped one hundred students, as well as nonmatriculating adults, find positions at area firms, including some that previously had been closed to deaf workers.⁵

The national economic downturn also undercut the efforts of deaf teachers to fulfill their long-standing goal of building an advanced institution for technical instruction.⁶ Throughout the 1930s, scattered activists from across the nation put forward proposals for such a school.⁷ The efforts of Peter Peterson, an instructor at Minnesota's residential school, revealed activists' limited influence. Rather than calling for a national effort as attempted by earlier activists, Peterson proposed that deaf leaders ask Henry Ford to underwrite establishment of a college. "All we need is a Moses to lead us through the wilderness," he claimed.⁸

Despite their continued inability to spur the establishment of accessible, advanced vocational instruction, deaf activists in several cities secured limited federal support for community-based programs where deaf adults studied basic vocational and general academic subjects. Between 1934 and 1937, for example, William Marra, a recent graduate of Gallaudet College, helped more than 2,500 of Kansas City's working adults strengthen their skills. One single mother enrolled after being fired from her factory position because of her poor writing skills, and was rehired after attending classes. These efforts, although limited in reach, underscored the unmet need for instruction for countless other deaf adults.⁹

Few deaf students of either gender received up-to-date instruction, but the situation of female deaf students was most troubling. Reiterating charges first put forward in the nineteenth century, deaf critics claimed that administrators continued to use female students to perform institutional tasks and reduce school expenses but did little to prepare them for employment.¹⁰ Margaret McKellar, a Gallaudet College student, warned that without proper instruction most deaf women would be confined to "the vast army of unskilled laborers, doing household work, scrubbing floors, working in factories and laundries with small chances of ever advancing their standard of living."¹¹ These criticisms were confirmed in a 1933 survey of some 250 alumni from three dozen schools. Although the majority of respondents wanted to enter the paid workforce, they left school ill prepared because most never graduated.¹²

Deaf women found their employment restricted by formidable gender, economic, and racial barriers as well as by inadequate training.¹³ Surveys consistently revealed that deaf women were usually segregated in marginal industrial positions. One study of former pupils of Indiana's residential school, for example, noted that most women were employed in menial positions at machine and laundry work.¹⁴ Across the South, educational facilities for African American deaf students were poorly funded, if available at all. In Louisiana, for example, there was no school for deaf African Americans until 1938. The situation was even more perilous for African American women, whose status was scarcely acknowledged by educators. Given these

constraints, most African American deaf women were consigned to work as domestic helpers or unskilled laborers.¹⁵

Ultimately, the status of vocational programs could not be separated from the ongoing conflict over communication methods. As the national economic downturn forced administrators to reduce their budgets, deaf leaders charged that oralist practices dangerously undercut vital vocational programs and the very standing of students. Warren Smaltz, the leader of the Pennsylvania Society for the Advancement of the Deaf, claimed that oralist administrators engaged in a "conspiracy of silence" regarding their failures.¹⁶ Norman Scarvie, a vocational instructor at Iowa's residential school, was equally adamant. He charged that school officials neglected the "70 percent of our boys and girls who graduate out the back door."¹⁷

Irreconcilable differences continued to separate oralist administrators and deaf adults. Among the deaf community's activists, Roy Conkling, publisher of the independent newspaper *American Deaf Citizen*, may have been the decade's most persistent and prescient critic of oralist practices.¹⁸ A graduate of the Ohio School for the Deaf and an alumnus of Gallaudet College, the undaunted Conkling wrote under the pen name *Surdus Junius* or "deaf warrior," to directly challenge the state's right to suppress sign language and mandate pure oral methods. The suppression of sign language, the ouster of deaf teachers, and the imposition of oral methods, he charged, had created "slave conditions" from which deaf adults would eventually liberate themselves.¹⁹

As in previous decades, deaf leaders challenged oralist practices and administrators at schools across the country. In Texas, Idaho, Virginia, Georgia, and Montana, the efforts of activists to defend sign language and combined methods or to halt the summary dismissal of deaf teachers met with limited success.²⁰ The Texas campaign merits examination for its successes as well as its failures. On the one hand, Lone Star activists gained widespread, perhaps unprecedented, support from both hearing and deaf adults in their politically sophisticated drive against the coercive superintendent of the state residential school. On the other hand, they were unable to muster broad support for their more compelling claim that the suppression of sign language

undercut the intellectual development of children and often required coercive measures to be enforced.²¹

Deeply upset after meeting with students at the Texas School for the Deaf in the winter of 1937, leaders of the Texas Association of the Deaf initiated a campaign against Superintendent T. M. Scott. Scott was a political appointee who had presided over the Texas School for the Deaf for some fifteen years. Leo Lewis, president of the Texas Association, explained that he had visited with students in several classes and asked them if they understood the spoken communication of their teacher. “Not one knew. They are making mummies out of children, not educating them,” he charged in an independent newspaper.²²

Texas Association leaders knew that legislative support was vital if they were to oust Scott. After interviewing employees, former stu-

ATTENTION TEXAS SENATORS!
ATTENTION TEXAS REPRESENTATIVES!
*The Texas Association of the Deaf Has Faith and Confidence in You and
 and Know That You Will Soon Rectify the Deplorable Conditions in
 the Texas School for the Deaf*
THE EYES OF TEXAS ARE UPON YOU
 Neither an Educator of the Hearing Nor an Educator of the Deaf,
 Never Seeks Advice, and Says: "I'll run this school as I see fit!"

Ignorance ☹️

Severe Restrictions 🚫

Cruelty 😡

Fear 😨

☹️ Suppression

🚫 Neglect

😡 Intolerance

😨 Hypocrisy

THE TEXAS SCHOOL FOR THE DEAF IS IN THE CLUTCHES OF AN OCTOPUS—The tentacles of this monstrous oge dominates the lives of little deaf boys and girls—the tentacles are symbols of ignorance, severe restrictions, cruelty, fear, suppression, neglect, intolerance and hypocrisy.

The fight for the Texas School for the Deaf illustrates that the tradition of vigorous advocacy and action typically associated with contemporary deaf activists has longstanding routes in the deaf community. A variety of this announcement appeared in deaf journals across the country during 1939.

dents, and parents, activists forwarded charges to members of the Texas House Eleemosynary Committee who monitored the school. The charges accused Scott of dozens of violations, including refusing to meet with deaf parents, arbitrarily firing instructors, improperly expelling students, and allowing staff members to beat students.²³ “We are convinced our school is not fulfilling the purpose for which it is created,” the Texas Association charged, “that instead it is confusing our heads, breaking our hearts, and tying our hands.”²⁴

State officials responded favorably. Alarmed by the breadth and severity of these accusations—especially the charges of physical punishment—members of the oversight committee began investigating Scott’s efforts in 1938. State representatives interviewed Scott, Lewis, students, and parents, collecting hundreds of pages of testimony.²⁵ Brushing away the criticism, Scott assured state officials that 80 percent of his students could read lips.²⁶ “The sign language means nothing in the world to a deaf person, if they are taught the lipreading,” he maintained.²⁷

As Scott’s fate hung in the balance, Texas Association leaders worked to strengthen their momentum. To this end, they held an emergency convention to enlist the support of former students, parents, and adults, and they circulated a petition calling for the removal of the superintendent.²⁸ Lewis also criticized school policies in the *Modern Silents*, the newspaper he published. Charging that widespread student resistance to oralism and the suppression of sign language forced supervisors to use physical force to maintain order, he asked pointedly: “Why the need for this doubled staff of nursemaids or whip wielders or whatever you choose to call them?” Texas Association leaders also presented the State Board of Control—the agency responsible for oversight of the school—with an extraordinary, even unprecedented document: a petition, with more than 7,500 names, demanding Scott’s resignation. There was no doubt that the state’s deaf citizens, joined by deaf and hearing supporters from outside the state, were united in their resolve to change the situation.²⁹

This determined and well-documented drive had revealed Scott as an expendable embarrassment. In December 1938, the state’s House Eleemosynary Committee held new hearings in which parents and students once again criticized school management.³⁰ Students at the

Texas School for the Deaf—in a demonstration suggestive of the protests that would shut down Gallaudet University half a century later—boycotted classes and marched to the state capitol to protest.³¹ In early 1939, members of the State Board of Control agreed to appoint a new superintendent.

The deaf community's victory, although remarkable, was not complete. Scott's ouster greatly lessened the climate of coercion, and his successor invited members of the Texas Association and parents to the school for consultation.³² Still, these substantive changes did not signal a rejection by state officials or hearing parents of oral-centered practices. Although Texas Association leaders supported the combined method and recommended that all teachers be fluent in sign language, they declined to press these positions, lest the focus be shifted away from Scott. Officials ended the physical and psychological abuses of the Scott administration, but there is no indication that hearing parents or officials agreed with deaf adults that pure oralist practices were themselves abusive.

Chapter 6. “Conspiracy of Silence” Contesting Exclusion and Oral Hegemony

1. The national deaf population was 57,804, as noted in the 1930 census. Of this group, 15,881 individuals were between the ages of five (an early age for admission to most schools) and nineteen. I derived the estimate of 40,000 adults by subtracting the number of student-age individuals from the overall group. See *The Blind and Deaf-Mutes in the United States, 1930* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1931), 16 (Table 6).

2. For representative discussions, see “Training for Girls in This Machine Age,” *Vocational Teachers* (September 1930): 1; Odie Underhill, “Here and There,” *The Frat* (November 1933): 4; Norman G. Scarvie, “Practical Training For Underprivileged Pupils,” *Twenty-ninth CAID*, 136–37.

3. Regarding the percentage of deaf teachers in 1935, see Leonard Elstad, “Normal Training of Deaf Teachers,” *Report of the Proceedings of the Convention of American Instructors of the Deaf* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1935), 194–97. Regarding the status of deaf teachers, see Norman G. Scarvie, “Practical Training For Underprivileged Pupils,” *Twenty-ninth CAID*, 136–37; “This Vocational Business,” *Vocational Teachers* (June 1931): 17 (reprint, *Pennsylvania Society News*).

4. J. Schuyler Long, “How Can We Further Advance the Education of the Deaf by Consultation with Our Graduates?” in “Proceedings of the Fifteenth Conference of Superintendents and Principals of American Schools for the Deaf,” *Annals* 76 (January 1931): 136.

5. On the Connecticut school, J. Pierre Rakow, "Typewriters Mechanics," *American Era* (March 1938): 61–62, 72; "Deaf Workers Make Good," *American Era* (May-June, 39): 90–91; "Mr. Boatner's Address," *American Era* (November 1939): 14–15; Edmund Boatner, "Placement-An Increasingly Important Function of the School," *American Era* (March 1940): 61–62; Editorial, "Placement Record," *American Era* (May-June 1940): 90; Edmund Boatner, "Address," *American Era* (October 1940): 1.

6. At the 1930 NAD convention, Troy Hill argued that a college open to all students, whatever their skills in written English, would substantially advance the position of deaf workers. See Troy E. Hill, "The NAD and the Future of the Deaf in America," *Proceedings of the Sixteenth Triennial Convention of the NAD and Fourth World Congress of the Deaf* (New York: Fanwood Press, 1930), 52. Applicants to Gallaudet College had to pass a demanding written examination.

7. For proposals from Roy Conkling, the editor and publisher of the independent *American Deaf Citizen*, and from Harvey Barnes, a vocational instructor at Illinois's residential school, see "Advanced Vocational Training at Gallaudet," *American Deaf Citizen* (7 May 1932): 2; Barnes, *Proposal to Establish an Opportunity School*.

8. Editorial, "What the Deaf Need, A Moses," *Companion* (26 November 1936): 6–7; Editorial, "What Shall the Solution Be?" *Companion* (29 April 1937): 6–7.

9. William J. Marra, "The Federal Adult Education Project For The Deaf," *Annals* 82 (November 1937): 406–10; "Kansas City, MO.," *DMJ* (22 July 1937): 5. For background on Marra, see Georgetta Graybill, "A Man of Many and Varied Talents; Pioneer in Adult Education for the Deaf," *Deaf American* (September 1971): 3–6. In addition, programs were also held in Chicago, Oklahoma, and New Jersey. See Alan B. Crammatte, "Vocational Guidance in Schools for the Deaf," *Annals* 84 (March 1939): 404.

10. On Tom Anderson, likely the most influential advocate for improved vocational instruction, see Tom L. Anderson, "The Handwriting on the Wall," *Proceedings of the Thirtieth Convention of American Instructors of the Deaf* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1938), 211, 211–15 (hereafter, *Thirtieth CAID*). Deaf writers lashed out at these policies in the pages of *Vocational Teachers*, an independent national periodical edited by Anderson. See "Salt Risin'," *Vocational Teachers* (June 1931): 21.

11. Margaret McKellar, "Suggested Vocational Training Courses for Girls," *Vocational Teachers* (March 1931): 6–9.

12. As one frustrated respondent explained, “There are lots of things deaf girls can do. They only need a chance, which they never get.” Bertha Peterson and Clara Brown, “Home Economics in Schools for the Deaf and the Marital and Occupational Status of the Alumni,” *Annals* 78 (March 1933): 197.

13. For a frank discussion, see the views of the superintendent of Louisiana’s residential school, L. R. Divine, “Trades Open to Deaf Girls in the South,” *Thirtieth CAID*, 68–70.

14. On Indiana, see Robert Baughman, “Trades Open to Deaf Girls in Indianapolis,” *Thirtieth CAID*, 70–72. For broadly comparable reports, see Leila Gerry, “Vocational Placements of Deaf Girls in the East,” *Thirtieth CAID*, 72–75; “Present Occupations of Former Pupils,” *Fanwood Journal* (1 February 1933): 11.

15. On instruction to deaf African Americans in Louisiana, see “Who Will Give This Little Boy a Chance?” *Volta Review* (October 1937): 548; “New State School for Negro Deaf in Louisiana Started,” *Ohio Chronicle* (24 December 1938): 1 (reprint, *Annals*). On the position of deaf women in Georgia, see Georgia State Department of Public Welfare, *Georgia’s Deaf* (Atlanta, Georgia: Report on the United States Work Projects Administration of Georgia Official Project, 665-34-3-90), 18–23.

16. Warren M. Smaltz, “The Deaf in Modern Industry,” *Eighteenth Triennial Convention of the National Association of the Deaf* (n.p., 1937), 67, 63 (hereafter, *Eighteenth NAD*). On Smaltz, see Berg, *A Missionary Chronicle*, 166–67. For an illustration of Superintendent Elbert Gruver’s views, see Elbert Gruver, “A New Emphasis in the Education of Deaf Children,” *Vocational Teachers* (October 1932): 1.

17. Norman G. Scarvie, “Practical Training For Underprivileged Pupils,” *Twenty-ninth CAID*, 136. For a comparable opinion, see Arthur G. Norris, “A Review and a Prophecy,” *Twenty-seventh CAID*, 36–41.

18. Roy Conkling ended publication of the paper in December 1942. On Conkling and the paper, see *Ohio Chronicle* (5 December 1942): 1, 2.

19. “Keep Them within Bonds,” *American Deaf Citizen* (24 March 1933): 4. See also, “It’s Our ‘Language,’” *American Deaf Citizen* (12 April 1929): 2.

20. On Idaho, see *NAD Bulletin* (December 1934): 2; “NAD Activities,” *NAD Bulletin* (January 1935): 1; J. F. M., “Combined System Wins Out in Idaho,” *NAD Bulletin* (May 1935): 2. On Virginia, see “Ouster Proceedings Start,” *American Deaf Citizen* (6 April 1934): 1; William Schaub, “President’s

Address,” *Proceedings of the Seventeenth Triennial Convention of the National Association of the Deaf* (n.p., 1934), 7–11 (hereafter, *Seventeenth NAD*); “Executive Board Report” *Eighteenth NAD*, 21–24; “No Deaf Graduate From Virginia School,” *American Deaf Citizen* (10 June 1938): 1 (reprint, *Staunton Evening Leader*); “Alumni Vindicated,” *Modern Silents* (May 1939): 9 (reprint, *Staunton News Leader*). On Montana, see Marcus L. Kenner, “President’s Address,” *Eighteenth NAD*, 11–12.

21. Minimized, if mentioned at all, in school records and only intermittently cited in mainstream newspapers, most accounts of these contests were recorded in the publications of deaf organizations whose members led these challenges.

22. “Experimentation is Condemned by Deaf,” *Modern Silents* (January 1938): 14 (reprint, *Dallas News*, (12 December 1937). Deaf activists had long opposed Scott. See “Investigation of Deaf Association’s Charges Made on May 5 to 7,” *Modern Silents* (September 1938): 4–7.

23. “Protests and Charges by Association before the House Eleemosynary Institutions Investigating Committee Corroborated by Sworn Testimony and Evidence,” *Modern Silents* (June 1938): 3–4.

24. “PROTESTS AND CHARGES as Presented by the Texas Association of the Deaf,” *Modern Silents* (December 1938): 4–5.

25. On the investigation, see “Protests and Charges by Association,” 3–4; “Investigation of Deaf Association’s Charges Made on May 5 to 7,” 4–7; “Additional Information on Investigation,” *Modern Silents* (October–November 1938): 8.

26. On Scott’s claim regarding the lipreading abilities of students, see “Additional Information On Investigation,” 8. Scott’s assertions exceeded the estimates of even the most optimistic oralist professionals.

27. “Investigation of Deaf Association’s Charges Made on May 5 to 7,” *Modern Silents* (September 1938): 4–7.

28. “Proceedings of the Special Called Convention,” *Modern Silents* (August 1938): 9–10.

29. “Investigation of the Texas School for the Deaf,” *Modern Silents* (October–November 1938): 2.

30. Governor-elect Lee O’Daniel publicly questioned Scott’s competence and endorsed the investigation. “Deaf Fight for Justice and a Fair Deal,” *Modern Silents* (December 1938): 6; “Children Sent Home for Re-counting Incidents of Cruel Treatment at Investigation,” *Modern Silents*

(January 1939): 3; “Representative Ross Harding Decries Cruelty to Deaf Children,” *Modern Silents* (February 1939): 4.

31. “Legislative Committee Approves Resolution Recommending Ouster, Deaf Association Victorious,” *Modern Silents* (March–April 1939): 9; “Oust Scott March By Pupils Averted,” *Modern Silents* (March–April 1939): 12 (reprint, *Austin Statesman*, 24 February 1938).

32. “Superintendent-Elect E. R. Wright,” *Modern Silents* (September 1939): 2; “An Open Message,” *Modern Silents* (September 1939): 3.