

Introduction

This historical study considers the working lives of deaf men and women in the United States from the mid-nineteenth century to the establishment of an industrial-based working class during World War II. It examines the strategies deaf adults used to prepare for, enter, and advance through the nation's mainstream workforce. In doing this, deaf workers are portrayed, to the extent possible, as they saw themselves. In the working world, they typically sought to de-emphasize their identity as sign language-using deaf persons and to be integrated into the mainstream work force. In their schools, however, they usually favored a bilingual approach, celebrating the centrality of American Sign Language and recognizing the value of English. In fact, as early as the latter half of the nineteenth century, deaf people defined themselves socially as members of a distinct community with shared formative experiences and language as well as full members of hearing society.¹ Outside the workplace, deaf adults have long defined themselves as bicultural, bilingual Americans.²

This study also demonstrates that the accomplishments and failures of deaf workers are inextricably linked to the language, identity, schooling, and general status of deaf adults. In addition, the position of deaf workers has been constrained by the changing relationship between the dominant able-bodied hearing culture and other minority communities and marginalized groups in this country.

Consequently, this book attempts to explain the varied factors within the deaf community and U.S. society at large that have alternately restrained and advanced the fortunes of deaf workers. I argue first that sign language-based educational methods have been of particular importance in shaping the identity, intellectual growth, and vocational success of this nation's deaf citizens. Indeed, the nineteenth century's greatest advance was the development of an incomplete but extended national system of sign language-based vocational and academic instruction for deaf students. Through the efforts of hearing and deaf leaders, education thus was recast from the privilege of the few to a right of the majority, and deaf people in the United States were brought into close association.

Second, I claim that the most intractable obstacles restraining deaf workers were centered not in the workplace as, one might expect, but in the classroom. By the late nineteenth century, a powerful constituency of hearing educators, parents, and professionals—oralists—opposed the creation of a signing deaf community and sought to assimilate deaf children and adults into mainstream society. Oralists gained control of the nation's schools where they forced deaf adults from the classroom and administrative positions, undermined vocational instruction, and replaced instruction in sign language with marginally useful oral-based approaches dependent upon speech and speechreading to convey information. My research indicates that the reduction or suppression of sign language restrained the academic, vocational, and intellectual progress of many, if not most, deaf students.

These developments, in conjunction with the limited years of schooling available to most students, left them ill-prepared to assume anything more than marginal positions in agriculture, industry, and commerce. In particular, my research strongly suggests that the ascendancy of oral-based methods was a hollow, even illusory victory. Even as they were dispersed across the nation, deaf adults vigorously and passionately advocated for sign language and opposed any efforts to ban their beloved language or impose methods that relied exclusively on oral-based approaches. This record of sustained resistance through shared linguistic and cultural identification is remarkable, if not unique, in American history.

Furthermore, I argue that compromise on these pedagogical differences was never reached, as these debates were linked to a broader intractable struggle over the very existence of the developing deaf community. Throughout the period of this study, the pervasive racist, ethnocentric, and assimilationist practices and values of the dominant culture restricted the rights and standing of all minority communities—including, of course, deaf adults.

Although distinguished by its American Sign Language-based communication system and its own cultural identity, the deaf community nonetheless internalized the dominant gender, racial, and class prejudices of hearing society. Consequently, racial, class, and gender divisions influenced the choices made by white, male, middle-class

deaf leaders regarding appropriate strategies to enter and advance through the economy, and they weakened leaders' commitment to aiding employment rights for all deaf people.

The formative institutions in the deaf community re-created these divisions. School administrators, whether deaf or hearing, established vocational programs that favored male students while slighting women. The majority of African American students attended inferior, segregated schools and were excluded from deaf organizations. Sharp economic divisions resulted from widely disparate educational and vocational opportunities. Although most deaf students never advanced beyond primary-level instruction, a small but influential elite completed secondary programs, graduated from Gallaudet College, found well-paying jobs, and assumed prominent positions in the deaf community.

In contrast to their pathbreaking efforts to define and defend their right to use sign language, deaf leaders and adults were typically cautious, even deferential, regarding their status and rights as workers. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, male deaf leaders had promulgated an influential gender-based code that influenced employment strategies used by deaf workers through the close of World War II. These leaders insisted that states provide academic and vocational instruction, especially to male deaf students, who in turn were expected to become successful workers and respected representatives of their community. This code failed to address the communication difficulties and widespread discrimination most deaf people confronted when they entered the mainstream economy.

Deaf leaders and workers debated and proposed additional employment strategies, but these strategies augmented rather than overturned this conservative precept. Most leaders sought to educate employers about the capabilities of deaf workers, believing that they lacked the power to directly challenge entrenched habits. The first four decades of the twentieth century brought only intermittent advances to the nation's deaf workers, and no development did more to hinder them than the continued dominance of oralist educational practices. The influence of federal and state agencies on deaf employment was mixed. In some situations, deaf workers were assisted by government efforts; in others they were discouraged or excluded from programs.

It was only during World Wars I and II that deaf adults were offered considerable short-term success as industrial employees, especially when employers encouraged the use of writing and sign language in the workplace.

Near the close of World War II, deaf leaders debated the issues that had influenced deaf employment for the previous fifty years. They rejected proposals to require government and private employers to hire deaf employees because they believed such legislation violated their long-standing code of individual responsibility and was appropriate only for “handicapped” individuals, from whom they sought to disassociate themselves. With the majority of adults employed in mid-level factory positions at the close of World War II, however, deaf working men and women faced a troubling future.

Chapter 1 examines academic and vocational instruction before oralist thought and practices became preeminent. Chapter 2 interprets the educational, vocational, and ideological conflicts between oralists and deaf and hearing opponents during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Chapter 3 traces the successful efforts of deaf and hearing activists to reverse a turn-of-the-century ruling by federal administrators to block deaf workers from government employment. Chapter 4 examines the influential but incomplete efforts of deaf activists to harness the power of the state government to oversee the status of deaf students and workers in Minnesota. Chapter 5 traces the influx of deaf women and men into the industrial workforce during the early decades of the twentieth century. Chapter 6 considers the efforts of deaf activists to reverse oralist rule at selected residential schools as well as the efforts of workers to enter New Deal work programs during the Depression. Chapter 7 centers on the movement of deaf workers into industry during World War II and their efforts to prepare for employment after the conflict. A brief epilogue sketches the status of deaf workers and the deaf community from the close of World War II to the contemporary era.

Although the geographic boundary of this book ranges across the United States, it is not a comprehensive national study, nor does it fully consider the experiences of all deaf workers in the diverse deaf community. Based primarily upon the records of organized state and national associations, this study focuses on the most highly educated

and professionally successful white males, who dominated leadership positions in most deaf associations. Although I attempt to show the ways that economic-, race-, and gender-biased assumptions influenced these leaders, this study is not centered upon deaf women, deaf individuals of color, or marginally schooled and employed deaf adults. I look forward to additional studies that will more fully illuminate their important but neglected history.³