

Preface

History Through Deaf Eyes, an exhibition based on the lives of deaf people in the United States, toured the country from 2001 to 2006. During its twelve-city tour, more than 415,000 people visited the exhibit and learned of the struggles and triumphs of the Deaf community, a cultural, linguistic minority within the larger hearing population. The impetus for History Through Deaf Eyes came from Gallaudet University, the only university in the world founded specifically to provide higher education to deaf and hard of hearing people. Gallaudet is a cultural home to many deaf people. Drawing heavily on the university's extensive Archive collection, the exhibition represents nearly 200 years of United States Deaf history. At each opening of History Through Deaf Eyes, visitors asked, "Where's the book?"

The photographic narrative presented here brings to the public images of people and events both well-known and obscure. The story told in pictures and text reflects the content of the exhibition as well as the focus of the documentary *Through DEAF EYES*, a film produced by WETA TV, in Washington, D.C., and Florentine Films/Hott Productions in association with Gallaudet University, and nationally broadcast on PBS stations. Quotes from the film punctuate this photographic history, and images found within these pages can be seen in the documentary.

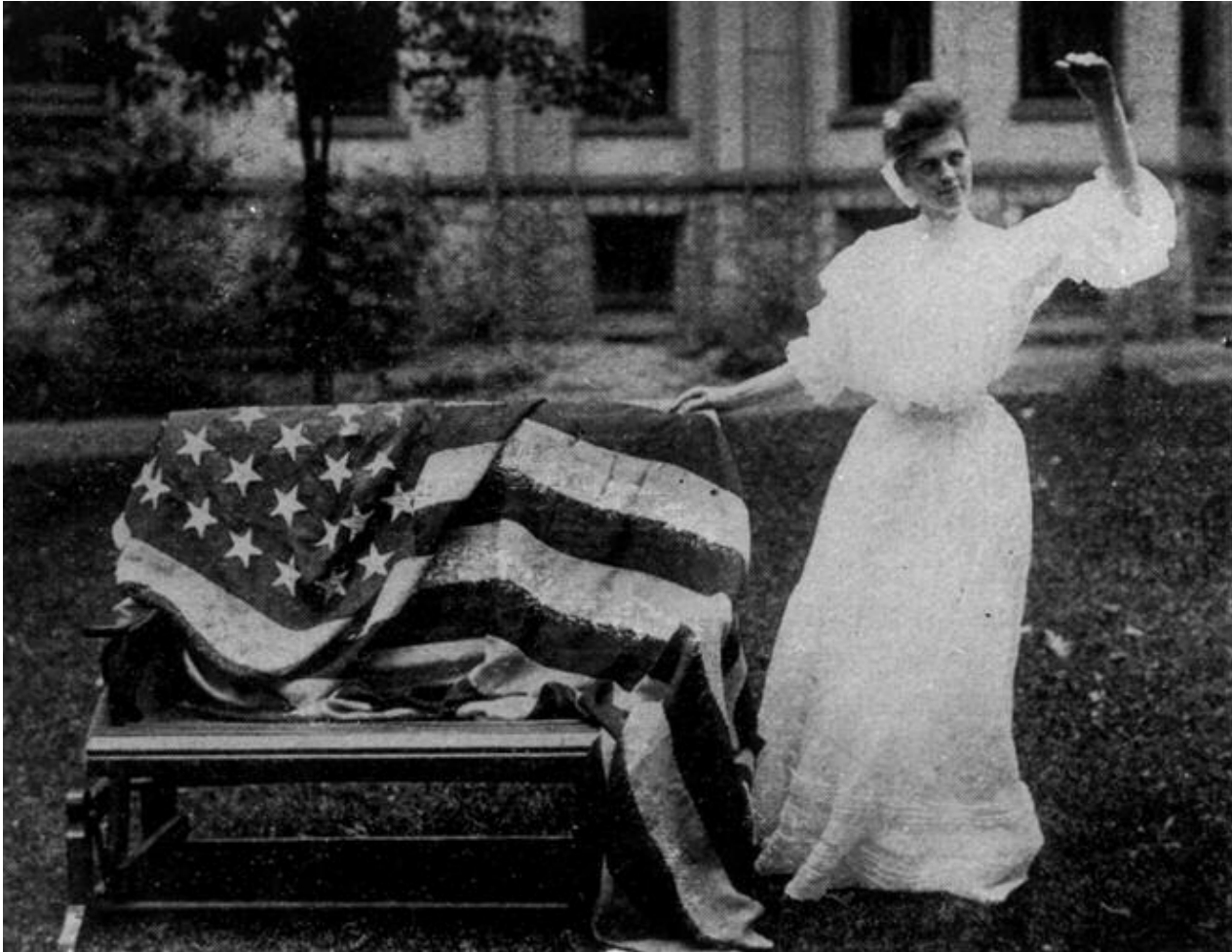
NOTE: The word *deaf* has both physical and cultural meanings. In this book, we will use *Deaf* to refer to cultural entities and concepts: Deaf community, Deaf culture, Deaf club, and Deaf lens, for example. We will use *deaf* for all other references.

Studying the lives of deaf people illuminates not only a minority community but also the majority hearing population. Through the story of deaf America we learn much about our broader history. While the values and judgments of society have had an impact on the education, employment, and family life of deaf people, historical eras often can be illuminated by examination through a Deaf lens. For both deaf and hearing readers, the history of the Deaf community offers a unique and fascinating perspective on the workings of human difference.

Photographs often pose contextual questions of where and when. We wonder who took the picture and why; if the setting was staged; and whether the photograph casts a positive image, reinforces a negative vision, or implies multiple interpretations. Each picture was taken for a reason—to persuade others into action, to expose wrongs and misfortune, to present good work, to remember.

Remaining mindful that the photographers may have had different reasons to capture the moment, our intention for this book is to present a community history. For this reason, we selected images that reveal in subtle and obvious ways something about the lives of deaf people and the collective experiences of the Deaf community.

The photographs come from multiple archives held at schools for deaf children and by individual collectors. For each image presented, dozens more did not make it into the book. Still, there are many holes in the photographic record. The photographs we discovered included far more young children



Patriotic themes and imagery were often presented within the Deaf community. This 1906 photograph from the Michigan School for the Deaf shows a woman signing “The Star-Spangled Banner,” twenty-five years before it became the national anthem. (Reprinted from *The Silent Worker*, May 1906, Gallaudet University Archives #16006-21, Washington, DC.)

than teenagers or adults, and people of color were conspicuously underrepresented. The nature of deaf leadership historically reflects the larger society, thus we were able to find many more photographs of

white men than of women or ethnic/racial groups. It is our hope that this book will prompt more people to come forward with their collections and stories to fill the historical gaps that remain.

CHAPTER ONE



Introduction

DEAF PEOPLE AND VISUAL COMMUNICATION

Human beings are social animals who communicate with each other almost constantly through sounds and movements. From the moment we are born, we are engaged in the learning and use of one or more complex languages. This imperative to employ language is deeply embedded in our genetic heritage. If two infants are placed together in isolation, they will begin to create their own language. So fundamental is the need to maintain communication with others that one of the most severe punishments we can inflict is solitary confinement.

Language is most often conveyed via speech and hearing, but we can just as readily use gesture and sight. Native Americans, for example, created relatively complex gesture languages for intertribal communication as well as for ritual use. Australian aborigines developed sign languages for use when speech was ritually taboo, such as during mourning periods for women or initiation ceremonies for men. Some linguists theorize that humans communicated via gesture for thousands of years before they developed speech.

However, most sign languages, especially the most complex among them, have been developed by Deaf communities. Just as geographical and

◀ In this 1907 school photograph, students and their teacher pose for the camera. All but two of the boys (*first row, right*) are able to be still for the seconds the shutter is snapped. Their signing to each other is captured and produces a double image. (Gallaudet University Archives, #13747-18, Washington, DC; from the Alice Teegarden Album.)



This engraving from a cemetery near the South Carolina School for the Deaf shows the word *heaven* in fingerspelling rather than text. It suggests that the visual language of sign was cherished by the deceased and hints at a signing hereafter. (South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind, Spartanburg.)



Among Deaf family and friends, signing proved to be a comfortable and clear means of communication. (Gallaudet University Archives, Washington, DC; from the album of Maude Edington Parker, a Gallaudet student, 1913.)

cultural conditions that isolate populations have led to the creation of distinct spoken languages, so has the physical and social condition of not hearing led to the creation of Deaf communities and sign languages. Hundreds of sign languages are in use around the world today. While each is distinct, all use the shape, orientation, position, and movement of the hands, as well as subtle uses of facial expression and movement of the head and body. Combinations of these elements make possible a variety of

linguistic expressions as unlimited as the combinations of sounds used in spoken languages.

Deaf people also cultivate, to varying degrees, the difficult arts of lipreading and speaking (tasks made more or less challenging by, among other factors, the degree of deafness and the age at which deafness occurred). Lipreading is difficult and imprecise in any language, and it is made even trickier by the many sounds and words in English that look identical on the lips. Sole reliance upon oral communication has

been more common among some populations than others, such as those people who became deaf as adults. The more common alternative for people deaf from an early age has been to cultivate a means of communication better suited to the visual sense, in other words, some form of gestural language.

AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

Whenever significant numbers of deaf people have congregated in one place, as in large cities or in residential schools, Deaf communities that rely on naturally evolving sign languages have come into existence. The little-known history of the American Deaf community parallels the experiences and struggles of other minority groups. Deaf Americans have organized politically to protect and promote their interests; formed local, state, and national organizations; established newspapers and magazines; founded schools; and gathered in churches where American Sign Language was the language of song and sermon alike. The great majority have found not just their friends but their spouses within the Deaf community.

American Sign Language (ASL) is the visual/gestural language that is the primary means of communication within the Deaf community in America and parts of Canada. ASL signs, like spoken language words, represent concepts. Many of the signs correspond fairly directly with English words, but many do not. Interpreting from ASL into English and vice versa is a difficult and inexact task, just as interpreting between any two languages always is.

American Sign Language traces its roots not to Britain, as American English does, but to early nineteenth-century French Sign Language because the first deaf teacher in the United States came from France. While ASL and French Sign Language have diverged considerably over the years, they are still mutually intelligible to a limited extent—somewhat



“There was a little girl who lived next door, a neighbor, and she didn’t sign. I used gestures to communicate with her. One day I was in her house and

saw her talking with her mother by using their lips. It was so different; they didn’t sign at all. I ran home and asked my mother what was happening there and she said that they are hearing; it was called being hearing. So I asked, ‘If they’re hearing, what are we?’ My mother said, ‘You’re Deaf, I’m Deaf, your father is Deaf; your brothers are Deaf.’ I asked, ‘Well, if we’re Deaf, is this girl the only hearing one?’ ‘No,’ my mother explained, ‘most people are like her.’”

Sam Supalla

like modern Spanish and Italian. British Sign Language and ASL are, for the most part, mutually unintelligible. Similarly, the vocabulary and grammar of ASL are distinct from English. ASL has its own syntax and is governed by a unique set of grammatical rules, just as Japanese Sign Language is distinct from spoken Japanese, and Swedish Sign Language is distinct from spoken Swedish.

In spite of the upsurge in ASL research in recent decades and the growing popularity of ASL courses in high schools and colleges, misconceptions about this language are still common. For example, many people assume that there is one universal sign language. This assumption often coexists with the entirely incompatible and equally erroneous notion that ASL was invented by educators as a visual representation of English. The usual conflation of “language” with

“spoken language” is behind such beliefs, and this makes it difficult to convince people that ASL is a natural language, like any other (whether spoken or signed) that has evolved within a linguistic community.

ASL is often confused with the manual communication systems invented in the 1970s for the purpose of teaching written English to deaf children. These systems attempt to represent English on the hands by adding prefixes, suffixes, and verb-tense endings to ASL signs and by arranging the signs in English word order. “Manually Coded English” systems have their roots in the early nineteenth-century system called “methodical sign language,” which was used in the schools in France and the United States. These systems are codes, not true languages.

Because deaf people live among hearing people, they typically are bilingual. Much as Spanish speakers living in the United States sprinkle their conversations with English words and expressions, deaf people introduce elements of English into ASL. They *fingerspell* (use particular handshapes to represent the letters of the English alphabet) many proper nouns, such as personal names, place names, brand names, and titles of books, plays, and movies. They also fingerspell to communicate exact English words. Fingerspelling lies along the boundary of the hearing and Deaf worlds and mediates between English and ASL.

Like spoken languages, ASL is handed down from generation to generation, but this transference occurs most often within the Deaf community rather than in hearing families, in which, typically, there is only one deaf member. Descriptions of signs from the nineteenth century indicate that the language of the Deaf community, which was called “the natural language of signs,” has not changed essentially since that time. Films made by the National Association of the Deaf between 1910 and 1921 show deaf people using a sign language that, while different in some particulars, such as the production of certain signs and style of delivery, is understandable

to ASL users today. How has that intergenerational transmission occurred? This brings us to the question of culture.

DEAF CULTURE

Deaf people have formed distinct cultures and signed languages all over the world for at least the last three hundred years. Indeed, wherever sufficient numbers of deaf people have been present, they have formed social groups in which a visually oriented language and culture flourish. These cultures do not include all who lack hearing but rather those deaf people who use sign language, share certain attitudes about themselves and their relation to the hearing world, and identify themselves as a part of a Deaf community. In American Sign Language, this is often referred to as the *Deaf World*.

What makes Deaf people a cultural group instead of simply a loose organization of people with a similar sensory loss is the fact that their adaptation includes language. An environment created solely by a sensory deprivation does not make a culture. . . . What does form a culture for Deaf people is the fact that the adaptation to a visual world has by human necessity included a visual language. In the United States this is American Sign Language. . . .

This cultural identity is intrinsically bound to the language. When the Northern and Southern soldiers in a Deaf Civil War legend signed what could be glossed as DEAF-SAME, it was not an affirmation of a mutual lack of hearing, but rather one of mutual identity. In fact, in this legend, which continues to be told, it is an identity that transcended North and South allegiances. (Susan D. Rutherford, “The Culture of American Deaf People,” Sign Language Studies 51 [Summer 1988]: 725–26, 729)

The American Deaf community is characterized by a number of cultural attributes, among them the possession of a rich and diverse literature. Like many



- The Chronological Literary Society, June 1888 -

Deaf literary societies, such as this one pictured in 1888, were established to provide a place for deaf readers to share their love of written literature. (Gallaudet University Archives, #13145-9, Washington, DC.)

languages spoken all around the world today, ASL does not have a commonly used written form, but it does have a long-standing unwritten literature that includes various forms of oratory, folklore, and performance art. The rhetorical style of oratory is marked by the use of particular, sometimes archaic, signs, and is used for formal occasions. Folklore includes a variety of traditional language arts, such as narratives on traditional themes, jokes and puns, games, and dis-

tinctive naming practices. Performance art includes poetry and plays composed in ASL. These genres follow conventions analogous to, but distinct from, those of spoken languages. ASL poetry, for example, is based upon visual rather than aural patterns. This literature has been recorded on film, videotape, and digital media dating back to 1902.

Deaf culture has also been expressed in an astonishing array of social, political, and economic organi-



In 1902, American Mutoscope and Biograph company produced "Deaf Mute Girl Reciting 'The Star-Spangled Banner.'" Preserved by the Library of Congress, the film shows an unknown signer presenting a beautiful rendition of what is now the national anthem. (Archival film material from the collections of the Library of Congress.)

zations. The National Association of the Deaf, founded in 1880, currently has active member affiliates in every state. Local clubs have long served as regular meeting places and social centers. The National Fraternal Society of the Deaf was founded in 1901 to provide insurance to deaf people, and over the years it has expanded its operations to become involved in legislative, civic, and social activities. Since 1945, the American Athletic Association of the Deaf has organized sporting events on a national level, as well as American participation in what is now known as the Deaflympics. Dozens of newspapers and magazines written by and for deaf people, with titles such as the *Silent Worker*, *Deaf Life*, and *Silent News*, have existed within the Deaf community over the past century and a half.

These more formal expressions of culture are only the tip of the iceberg. Cultural expression is manifested most importantly in the decisions and actions of everyday life. Deaf cultural norms dictate the rules for the sharing of information, how to politely begin and take turns during a conversation, and appropriate etiquette for social gatherings. When deaf people marry other deaf people (which

they do over 90 percent of the time), that, too, is an expression of cultural values. The transmission of cultural knowledge between generations, which has gone on remarkably effectively in spite of tremendous obstacles, is both the necessary precondition for, as well as the mark of, an enduring culture.

ORAL COMMUNICATION

Lipreading, like sculpting or painting, is an art.

—Bonnie Tucker, *The Feel of Silence*

Deaf people have always communicated by oral means to one extent or another, either exclusively or in addition to sign language. People who lose their



"Do you lipread? That's a very dangerous question, because if you say yes, they talk [way too fast]."

Carol Garretson



“You asked me to speak so I could demonstrate how successful I was as an oral Deaf person. Understand that speaking is only one way and that if I speak, and the other person hears me, they assume that I don’t need any sort of

interpreting or sign or anything like that. They assume that I can hear them, and that’s the problem with speaking. It’s one-way communication and that’s why I don’t. I don’t want people to assume that I can hear them—because I can’t. It’s much easier just to turn off my voice.”

Kristen Harmon

hearing in adulthood are less likely to learn to sign or to identify with Deaf culture; however, signers and nonsigners share many experiences, face similar struggles, and work together on many issues. Their combined efforts have contributed to the development of new technologies such as the teletypewriter (TTY) and television closed captioning, and civil rights legislation such as the Americans with Disabilities Act.

“You are at a store purchasing something. The clerk says \$3.30 when you think she says \$3.13; \$3.40 when you think she says \$3.14; \$3.60 when you think she says \$3.16 and any one of the numbers vice versa as well as a thousand and one more confusing words look-alike speechreading words.”

“You get dizzy at a meeting trying to locate who is talking and when you finally locate the speaker, he has finished and someone else has started and you must begin your game of ‘hide and seek’ all over again.”

“You drink Manhattans instead of other drinks and you smoke certain brands of cigarettes because your favorites are often difficult to pronounce.”

Roy Holcomb, Hazards of Deafness, quoted in Jack R. Gannon, Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America (Silver Spring, MD: National Association of the Deaf, 1981), 210, 216

Watch yourself in a mirror while you say the following words: bat, bad, ban, mat, mad, man, pat, pad, pan. Most hearing people are surprised to find that every one of these words looks exactly like the others. The cat in the hat may just as well be the hat in the cat. Only 30 to 40 percent of English is unambiguously visible on the lips under ideal circumstances. What would make circumstances less than ideal? Mustaches. Beards. Distance. A speaker who moves around, such as a lecturer. A group discussion. Dim lighting or glare. An old joke about three elderly and hard-of-hearing men on a train points to the difficulties: as they pull into a station, one says, “Ah, it’s Weston.” The second replies, “I thought it was Thursday.” The third: “Me too, let’s get a drink.”

The challenge of oral communication is to learn to form words and modulate speech patterns with a voice that can be heard only imperfectly or not at all, and to learn to distinguish the words that others form on their lips. Since many words look alike, the lipreader depends also upon body language, context, and other cues to follow a speaker. It is, at best, an imperfect art.

Since I was a child, some of my misunderstandings have brought gales of laughter I couldn't help joining in with. A few have become oft-told family anecdotes. Some years ago, for example, during the flu season, I sat one afternoon in the living room reading a book while suffering from a typhoon in the bowels. Suddenly and prodigiously I broke wind. My elder son, Colin, then five years old, dashed in wide-eyed from the kitchen and inquired, "What's that big loud noise?"

Mystified, I arose from the couch, peered out the window, and said, "What pig outdoors?"

My son stared at me dumbfoundedly. What pig?

Go ahead, look in the mirror and watch your lips: to a lipreader, "What's that big loud noise?" looks exactly like "What's that pig outdoors?" (Henry Kisor, What's That Pig Outdoors: A Memoir of Deafness [New York: Hill and Wang, 1990], xv–xvi)

Lipreading is most effective when paired with hearing. Hearing people unconsciously lipread to supplement their hearing in noisy environments. Many people with mild to moderate hearing losses, especially those who wear hearing aids, and people who have cochlear implants find lipreading a useful complement to whatever hearing they possess. Most people with severe to profound losses, however, have difficulty grasping more than isolated words or phrases. Intelligible speech presents similar difficulties:

Speaking is difficult when you cannot monitor your own voice and when you have only the feeblest of cues to enable you to know how you sound to others. As one Deaf person has put it, "For me, speaking is like walking about in public naked" (Jerome Schein, At Home Among Strangers [Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press, 1990], 33).

While most deaf adults have always supported the teaching of lipreading and speech in the schools, many have expressed concern that too often it has had questionable benefit and has come at the

expense of children's general education and overall language development.

DEAF COMMUNITIES

Deaf people live in every community. In most times and places their numbers are small, but exceptions appear from time to time. One such exception took place on Martha's Vineyard from the seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries. Because of an unusually high rate of inherited deafness on the island during that period, many people were bilingual in English and sign language. Consequently, deafness appears to have had little effect on social relations. In the general U. S. population, fewer than 1 in 5,000 children were born deaf at that time (many more became deaf from illness), but on Martha's Vineyard the number was closer to 1 in 150, and on parts of the island it was as high as 1 in 25. As a result, many hearing islanders were able to switch back and forth from spoken English to sign language depending upon who was present, and there seems to have been no difference between the social and economic lives of hearing and deaf people. They intermarried regularly, did the same sorts of work, earned the same incomes, and participated in the daily life of their communities on an apparently equal basis.

"I had already spent a good part of the afternoon copying down various genealogies before I thought to ask Gale what the hearing people in town had thought of the deaf people.

'Oh,' he said, 'they didn't think anything about them, they were just like everyone else.'

'But how did people communicate with them—by writing everything down?'

'No,' said Gale, surprised that I should ask such an obvious question. 'You see, everyone here spoke sign language.'

'You mean the deaf people's families and such?' I inquired.

'Sure,' Gale replied, as he wandered into the kitchen to refill his glass and find some more matches, 'and everybody else in town too—I used to speak it, my mother did, everybody.'

The Martha's Vineyard experience suggests strongly that the concept of a handicap is an arbitrary social category. And if it is a question of definition, rather than a universal given, perhaps it can be redefined, and many of the cultural pre-conceptions summarized in the term 'handicapped,' as it is now used, eliminated.

The most important lesson to be learned from Martha's Vineyard is that disabled people can be full and useful members of a community if the community makes an effort to include them. The society must be willing to change slightly to adapt to all."

Nora Ellen Groce, Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), 2–3, 108

In most places and at most times, however, deafness is relatively uncommon. As a result, one of two conditions is necessary to bring a Deaf community into being: a large and concentrated urban population or a deliberate decision to send deaf people to a centralized location, such as a school. The former condition occurred in Paris when the population grew to well over half a million in the eighteenth century. The latter occurred in the United States in the nineteenth century when residential schools for deaf students were established, bringing together large numbers of deaf people. And that is where we begin our story.