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Paul S. Bartu

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Afterword: Some Thoughts From the Former School Superintendent

Paul S. Bartu

Sir James Whitney School for the Deaf Superintendent, 1993–1998

It is a privilege to write an afterword to this journal issue as the former superintendent (1993–1998) of the Sir James Whitney School for the Deaf (SJW) in Belleville, Ontario, Canada. Please understand that the three featured articles in this issue were all originally booklets, each of which underwent modifications for reprinting in the *Society for American Sign Language Journal*. I recently received, with delight, the first three copies of the Ontario School for the Deaf (OSD)-SJW Archives and Museum booklets, privately sponsored and published in 2021:

1. *A Decade of Hard Work and Success, 2010–2020*
2. *John Barrett McGann, School Founder*
3. *RCAF Takes Over OSD, 1941–1944*

The co-authors are Dr. Clifton F. Carbin and Donna J. Fano. They have long been associated with the school and volunteered their time to care for, write, and preserve historical materials in its archives and museum.

These three publications brought back many fond memories of my time at the school. I was in the teacher-in-training program for a year, graduating in 1973. Twenty years later, I became superintendent, almost 100 years to the day in 1893 when my maternal grandfather, 7-year-old John Stacey Bartu, was enrolled at the school, then known as the Ontario Institution for the Education and Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb. He eventually married my grandmother, Lillian Curtis, a schoolmate from 1901 to 1911. My mother, Kathleen, and father, Nicholas John Bartu, also attended the same campus, then known as the Ontario School for the Deaf, from 1931 to 1940.

My five siblings and I grew up in Toronto as Children of Deaf Adults (CODAs) and have learned American Sign Language (ASL) since we were babies. We also were a part of the deaf community, comprising mostly former Belleville school students, and attended many of their functions and events with family friends. My grandparents offered room and board for some of them in our home. Throughout my childhood, I was mindful of many deaf people and their school's history. I recall my grandmother dragging me on Sundays to the Evangelical Church of the Deaf on Wellesley Street, a fate my brothers and sisters avoided! On several occasions, our parents took us to Belleville to visit the school, never realizing that I would spend so much time there in later years.

From personal experience as a CODA and a superintendent at SJW School, I know how difficult it is to champion recognition of the deaf community in the broader society and the hearing- dominated educational establishment. The concept of deaf culture has even evolved in recent years to become a common tenet of Canadian provincial and American state schools for deaf children. Today, it is an integral feature of policy and programs.

A striking and essential component of all three booklets is the extensive use of historical images of the Belleville school, campus events, and significant milestones. I encourage readers to read through the booklets, as they have a greater number of historical images than the featured articles in this special issue. In any case, the historical images in the booklets (and some in the featured articles) provide great visual appeal and enjoyment. Each booklet brings to life the many celebrations, graduations, student pageants, sports teams, and education programs throughout the Belleville school's long history. They are a valuable guide to anyone looking to establish a similar project at their provincial, state, or local school for deaf children or deaf organizations.

The importance of deaf history and deaf culture in our three provincial schools—Sir James Whitney School for the Deaf in Belleville, Ernest C. Drury School for the Deaf in Milton, and The Robarts School for the Deaf in London—only began to

emerge and develop in the mid-1970s and has grown exponentially until today. The degree to which deaf people now influence the schools still remains a heated controversy. Many critical positions within these schools held by deaf educators and hearing allies, including vice principals, principals, and even superintendents, are still constrained by the administrative structure of the Ontario Ministry of Education. The demonstration schools, Sagonaska, Trillium, and Amethyst, serve learning-disabled hearing students on each deaf school campus. And, of course, we have the W. Ross Macdonald School for blind/low vision, visually impaired, and deaf-blind students in Brantford. Combining this range of student populations with various special-education needs often compromises or dilutes the focus that needs to be paid to the unique cultural and linguistic needs of deaf students.

Additionally, the Ontario government's bureaucracy and operational/financial demands often impair the efficient management of all our provincial and demonstration schools. As a principal and later as a superintendent, I can recall not being able to hire essential new staff due to government-wide budget freezes, and administrative constraints sometimes hampered the smooth operation of our school programs. I also remember accepting a significant reduction in hard-won funding for new programs to meet the needs of multi-handicapped deaf children and students needing special mental-health services. Senior government officials believed that other programs should share financing administered by the Provincial Schools Branch. Even though those students could obtain health and psychiatric services in the broader community, deaf people could not access such services due to their need for ASL. I mention these issues because being operated by the government is a two-edged sword. The schools can readily access legislative funds through the Ministry of Education but are at the same time subject to overall government constraints. The government in the mid- to late 1800s established and funded educational institutions in the first place and now continues to support and operate these schools. Still, its policies and bureaucracies often hamper effective management, unlike those of more independently operated school boards.

The continued support of the archives and museum at the Sir James Whitney School is very gratifying to me, as these are unique amenities within the deaf community. I view with alarm the severe decline in school enrollment and the current influence of diminution of resource programs offered by the provincial schools to deaf and hard-of-hearing students in local school districts.

History allows us to understand our past and present institutions and values. I believe that our school and government officials can learn much about how deaf education has evolved for centuries. Also, deaf communities have grown and prospered despite widespread discrimination and ignorance by hearing authorities. It is of critical importance to preserve archival documents that illustrate the outstanding contributions of pioneers, hearing and deaf, and their influences that shaped education practices for deaf children in Ontario. These three booklets, and future entries, are another way to showcase this history and inform decision-makers in the government.

These three OSD-SJW Archives and Museum booklets collectively demonstrate the vitality and vibrancy of the deaf community, especially in the home of the first provincial school for deaf children in Belleville, Ontario. Still, they remind me of the complicated birthing process of deaf education, which has always been fraught with controversy and debate about the "right way" to educate deaf children. Deaf people are often relegated to the sidelines when it comes to decision-making. It is unmistakable that their communities worldwide evolved from children who finished their educational training at residential schools and shared a common signed language. Even oral deaf students from school board programs in later life learn signed language and continually become members of vibrant deaf organizations.

For 100-plus years—and, indeed, during my own career—deaf people have found an authentic voice in the debate. There has always been an issue about whether they can be teachers. The argument over methodologies, such as instruction using spoken language or signed language in the classroom, was personified in a feud between Alexander Graham Bell, an oralist, and Edward Miner Gallaudet, a manualist. Bell strongly espoused the oral approach and the necessity of teaching speech and articulation, while Gallaudet favored the combined approach of using signed language and employing deaf teachers.

When our provincial school for deaf children in Belleville opened in 1870, it followed Gallaudet's views. Wesley "Willie" Jones Palmer, the superintendent from 1870 to 1879, and Robert Mathison, the superintendent from 1879 to 1906, were staunch supporters of the combined method, including some articulation classes and the employment of deaf people as teachers, assistant teachers, house parents in each dormitory, and other positions. Then came a policy change in 1906, without input from the deaf community: The hearing educators and government officials decided to follow Bell's views. As a result, Charles Bernard Coughlin, a medical doctor and the school's superintendent from 1906 to 1928, gradually phased out manual classes and deaf employees. By 1931, signed language had officially disappeared from the classrooms. This practice prevailed until the early 1970s, when the school's communication policy changed to reintroduce signed language, fingerspelling, and the employment of deaf staff.

Let us go back to an incident between Bell and Gallaudet in 1895. Superintendent Mathison of the Belleville school valiantly tried to bring these two adversaries together at the 14th Convention of American Instructors of the Deaf (CAID), held

in Flint, Michigan, USA, on July 2–8. They both gave impassioned speeches concerning the unification of the two rival groups, CAID and the American Association to Promote the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf (AAPTSD). In his book *Never the Twain Shall Meet: Bell, Gallaudet and the Communications Debate* (1987), Richard Winefield describes a key moment:

In a dramatic moment during the last session of the convention, Dr. Mathieson [*sic*], of the Ontario school, rose, and walking up to the front of the platform lifted his hands, [saying] “Let us have peace.” Then turning to the crowded hall he asked those present to join him in a request to Dr. Bell and Dr. Gallaudet to shake hands and forget their differences. For a long tense moment neither man moved, but at last each stepped forward simultaneously, and the tips of their fingers met in a frigid handshake. (p. 64)

In the past two decades, we have seen an alarming decline in the number of teachers with fluent or adequate ASL skills, as the bias in training programs and school officials favors auditory-verbal and oral approaches. Dr. James C. MacDougall, of McGill University and the Canadian Deaf Research and Training Institute in Montreal, wrote an interesting article titled “Irreconcilable Differences: The Education of Deaf Children in Canada” for the 2010 issue of *Education Canada Magazine*. In it, he briefly outlines the great debate about communication, the impact of mainstreaming, the implications of cochlear implants, the literacy challenges, and the short supply of qualified teachers needed to work with deaf children. His most significant recommendation is the call for a royal commission to investigate the affairs of the deaf in Canada, which has never come to fruition. I realize that education in our country is the responsibility of provincial governments, not the federal government. However, I would argue that interprovincial collaboration with federal government support ought to examine and better address the needs of deaf and hard-of-hearing students.

I had seen dramatic changes in the education of deaf students between the 1970s and 1998 when I retired for the first time, including our province’s acceptance of deaf people into teacher-training programs, the change in the communication policies from pure oralism to visible English (essentially, the Rochester Method), to total communication, to the acceptance of ASL, and the establishment of a bilingual-bicultural approach.

In the mid-1980s, our three provincial schools—Sir James Whitney School for the Deaf in Belleville, Ernest C. Drury School for the Deaf in Milton, and The Robarts School for the Deaf in London—were designated as regional resource centers to collaborate with school boards. The Ontario government has since provided funds to support our resource staff as consultants to local school board teachers and administrators of schools for deaf and hard-of-hearing children. They also offer educational assessments, workshops, and assistance in transferring students from school boards to provincial schools when applicable. Sadly, the breadth and scope of these activities have greatly diminished in recent years. It is difficult to predict what the future holds for the three provincial schools for the deaf.

They face severely declining enrollments due to the widespread adoption of cochlear implants and the move to fully mainstream most deaf and hard-of-hearing children. I firmly believe that provincial schools should play a critical role in ensuring that all deaf and hard-of-hearing children achieve success. Nevertheless, some questions remain unanswered: (a) Will the provincial schools be closed? (b) Will they merge into one facility? (c) Will the Ontario government establish a governance model to allow the provincial schools to operate at arms’ length from the government? (d) Will faculties of education or provincial schools take a more active role in providing teachers of the deaf who possess skills in ASL?

Additional information worth reading about the history of deaf Canadians, their education, signed languages, struggles, accomplishments, and other anecdotes, especially in Ontario, can be found in the *Deaf Heritage in Canada: A Distinctive, Diverse, and Enduring Culture* (Carbin, 1996). To this end, continued efforts to preserve, elucidate, and celebrate the history of schools for the deaf worldwide should be encouraged. I look forward to reading more historical booklets currently in the works by Dr. Clifton F. Carbin and Donna J. Fano that the deaf community can cherish. In a recent conversation, they said they aim to continue their research and write more booklets before the Belleville school’s next alumni reunion in 2025.

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