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Sticking Up for Sign Language: Historical Deaf Women in Action

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Abstract

The attention to deaf women during an important part of United States history when oralism dominated the education of deaf children is sparse. This motivated the research undertaken for this paper questioning what role deaf women played and the strategies they adopted to promote deaf children's sign language rights. A review of historical documents indicates that there are a number of deaf women who fought along with the rest of the deaf community against the oral only movement in the instruction of deaf children during the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. A number of recurring themes have been identified based on deaf women's rhetoric that underlie their strong intuition supporting American Sign Language as a language in its own right. The lack of scientific or linguistic research at the time did not deter deaf women from promoting sign language. Moreover, deaf women felt obligated to correct erroneous perceptions held by many educators during the turbulent time of intolerance and ignorance for human rights. This paper takes a look at how deaf women fought for their language and rejected oralism through insightful arguments to achieve education equality for deaf children in schools throughout the United States.

Introduction

Spanning from the 1890s to the 1960s, sign language experienced on-going attacks under the banner of oralism. The situation began to improve beginning in the 1970s as scientific and linguistic research on what became known as American Sign Language (ASL) helped generate legitimacy and respect for deaf people's language. Today in the 21st century, ASL and Deaf Studies classes are taught at numerous high schools, colleges and universities. Many schools for the deaf have bilingual policies. ASL interpreters are provided in many settings. Deaf people using ASL are now commonplace on television commercials and shows, and in films.

The dark period in United States history when oralism peaked in power and dominated the deaf education scene must not be forgotten. This "century of oralism" represents the time when the attack on deaf people's language was most menacing. Schools for deaf children found themselves in the eye of the storm, and the bitter and polarizing division among educators and the deaf community led to opposing factions with those on one side favoring oralism, the use of spoken English and lipreading and the other supporting the use of sign language. Amid these tensions, oralist ideology became a dominant force during this era.

In taking a look at the deaf women who lived during the century of oralism, it becomes apparent that the current scholarly literature yields very little coverage on this segment of the deaf community. This indicates a gap in our knowledge base about the lives and perspectives of historical deaf women. To gain a better understanding of deaf women's activism during the century of oralism, research was conducted on this topic. A careful review of historical documents produces new insights on the role of deaf women during these turbulent years of United States history. Deaf women did their share of fighting for sign language in the education of deaf children.

The historical terminology in the reference to ASL includes the generic naming of sign language. This term will be used here in most cases to represent the time. Given that more advanced knowledge about ASL has been gained in the last several decades, during the nineteenth and for most of the twentieth century, there was limited understanding about sign language. The concept that ASL is an autonomous language in its relationship to English or any other language was not well-founded then. While the argument favoring sign language for the reason of linguistic accessibility concerning deaf children's need for the development of a strong language base is powerful, it did not prevail during the time of oralist dominance in the United States. As will be illustrated, deaf women held remarkably strong convictions about the use of sign language and engaged in the intellectually stimulating debate over the role of signing in the education of deaf children.

The Fight for Sign Language

By all accounts, the century of oralism produced tension on whether deaf children should be taught using sign language *or* through articulation and lipreading. When looking back, it is clear that the considerations for human rights were not as widely endorsed as they are today. Deaf people were not valued as signers when it came to their education. The public at large and in particular, oralist educators can be described as grossly biased in favor of spoken language and were thus heavily engaged in discriminatory practices.

In this sociopolitical context, the oralists began to make headway in banning sign language in educating deaf students, members of the deaf community became alarmed, and many took action to fight this foe. Deaf leaders during these early years in the forefront of this cause were mostly men. During these years, women were expected to defer to men. However, deaf women were just as strongly opposed to the oralism movement as their male counterparts. Despite the constraints placed on them based on their gender, historical deaf women spoke out and took action.

The deaf community for the most part has been steadfast in their strong support for the use of ASL. The use of sign language in schools educating deaf children had been the standard until the 1890s when oralism began to take hold and increased steadily each year until it became the overwhelming majority. In 1893, 24.8% of deaf children were "taught wholly or chiefly by the oral method" (Fay, 1915, p. 115). By 1915, the percentage had significantly increased to 69.3% of deaf students (Fay, 1915). In tandem with oralism in schools for the deaf across the country, the numbers of deaf teachers drastically declined from a peak of 42.5% in 1870 to 14.5% in 1917 (Jones, 1918, p. 12).

This is where the century of oralism came in, and George W. Veditz and Olof Hanson are among the best known crusaders of sign language during this century. While deaf men took the lead in battling the enemy that was oralism, the relevant question for this paper is: What of deaf women?

It is most fortunate that there are historical records related to deaf women that merit attention. The fact that deaf women experienced discrimination specific to their gender (in addition to being deaf) is sobering. For example, Agatha Tiegel Hanson (1893, pp. 3-4), the first woman to earn a B.A. degree from Gallaudet University (then named the National Deaf-Mute College) described this status of women during her pre-graduation oratory:

> Her sex is ever a chain and restraint. Many liberties, healthy and helpful in themselves, are denied her by the decree of a false sentiment. In childhood she is tutored in the idea that her role on the great stage of life is secondary to that of the brother who plays by her side; and all meek and docile graces are carefully cultivated in her. She is not expected to reflect for herself.

Agatha Tiegel Hanson
Source: Doug and Mary Jones (descendants)

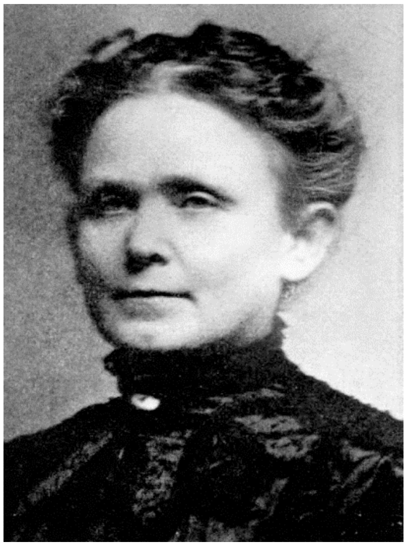
Some experiences specific to education had been forcefully expressed by Edith Mansford Fitzgerald, renowned for creating the Fitzgerald Key, a popular tool used for decades to teach deaf children English grammar. She explained how using only speaking and lipreading in school impacted her learning process. She noted, "for the very reason that I was not given signs, my growth, mentally, was stunted" (1906, pp. 166-168). She went on to explain as follows:

> Oral schools…believe it a good plan to place their pupils, when possible, in schools for the hearing. That is the way I was educated and I would give a great deal had it not been so. It will take years to make up the deficiencies that manual spelling [referring to the fingerspelling system of English] and signs, in the right places, would have avoided (pp. 167-168).

Edith Mansford Fitzgerald
Source: *Silent Worker*, May 1906, p. 118

The lack of intellectual growth with oral only instruction was also echoed by Laura C. Sheridan. Sheridan had the distinction of being the first woman to submit a paper to the Convention of American Instructors of the Deaf (CAID) in 1878 and the first to read her paper at the next convention in 1882, as well as being one of the first two deaf women to receive honorary M.A. degrees from Gallaudet in 1914 (Fifty-Seventh, 1914, p. 14). An eloquent writer, Sheridan was not averse to sharing strong opinions, although always in a very refined way. In articles she wrote for deaf periodicals, she attached her name to them. However, in this article advocating the use of sign language in 1908, she adopted a cloak of anonymity, using the pseudonym, "A Semi-Deaf Lady." That she wrote this 1908 article can be verified in a comprehensive index (Fay, 1915). Of the role oralism played on intellectual growth, she related a story from a mother of a deaf child as follows:

> ... last winter in conversation with a mother whose daughter had been educated wholly under the oral method, and jealously guarded from all knowledge of signs until after her graduation. She then acquired them by becoming closely associated in church work with a number of bright deaf people who had finished their education at Gallaudet College….'Within six months,' said the mother, 'her mental life was so broadened as to attract my attention and convert me to the combined system as the best for the instruction of deaf-mutes' (A Semi-Deaf, 1908, p. 145).



Laura C. Sheridan
Source: *Silent Worker*, December 1915, p. 52

The real-life experiences that Sheridan described challenged myths brought forth by oral proponents that oralism would improve the quality of life for deaf people. The combined system that Sheridan mentioned is a term coined by Gallaudet University's first president, Edward Miner Gallaudet to counter oralist forces by offering a broader concept which promoted signing along with teaching deaf children to speak. With this description of a real life situation, Sheridan sought to expose the oral movement's flaw when real life situations were at odds with their expectations.

The destruction of oralism did not only rob deaf students of a quality education, but also reduced teaching opportunities for deaf adults. One such instance is when Tiegel Hanson applied for a teaching position at her alma mater, Western Pennsylvania School for the Deaf where she had been class salutatorian. This turned out not to be an option. The response Tiegel Hanson received from Superintendent William N. Burt (1896, p. 29) explained:

> I do not think there will be a vacancy in our corps that you can fill. There was a law [passed] by the legislature last winter requiring us to teach by the oral method as far as we can. That being the case if we have to make an addition to our corps of instructors we must employ an oral teacher.

This letter made it abundantly clear that oralism was to be valued over sign language and that deaf teachers did not have a place in this sphere. This first-hand experience in being denied a teaching position was a factor in increasing Tiegel Hanson's resolve to defend the sign language she so loved and to battle the movement to reduce the numbers of deaf teachers. This would be a formidable challenge. Legislation, such as the ruling in Pennsylvania, was beginning to pass requiring spoken language instruction for deaf children.

Observing the detrimental impacts of oralism on deaf children and the deaf community—a community that thrived in large part due to the visually based sign language that brought ease of communication to the community—prompted a forceful reaction.

Rejecting Oralism as Solution

Oralists often posit that teaching deaf children to speak and lipread will not only provide them with a model of the English language but will guarantee their success in interacting with the wider society. With Sheridan, she pointed to this critical factor as the rationale that prompted the focus on oralism:

> Dissatisfied hearing teachers started it. Why did they start it? Because they thought that miserable sign language, which would not give a sign for every word, which presented no kind of order in its use, and which the children using it could rarely translate into words, must be responsible for the imperfect use of English prevailing among the pupils, and for the discouraging failures in the schoolroom to teach that English to them more perfectly. What remedy more simple than to cut them off from the use of signs and shut them up rigidly

> to a use of spoken and written words only? Under such circumstances language would come to them by use as it comes to the hearing child (A Semi-Deaf, 1908, p. 143).

Supporting this thesis, William L. Walker, Principal of the South Carolina School for the Deaf had this to say:

> I believe the first step in the solution of the problem of methods lies in the elimination of the sign language from the schoolroom, creating an English atmosphere, and then I believe the solution of the problem will be easy, for the question of manual versus oral will work itself out (Convention, 1908, p. 47).

Interestingly, some of the staunchest supporters of oral only instruction, such as Walker, had strong deaf connections. Walker, who is hearing, had developed his signing ability while growing up on the campus of a school for the deaf where his father was the superintendent. It appears the ideology of oralism won over Walker and it was beyond his comprehension how deaf children could develop English literacy through the use of sign language.

Deaf adults, on the other hand, believed that oralism would come at the expense of intellectual growth. In today's terms, linguistic accessibility plays a paramount role for how deaf children can best attain intellectual and academic growth, including the learning of English as their second language in the written form. Deaf women like the rest of the deaf community had strong intuitions about this concept and argued that sign language was the avenue. Tiegel Hanson illustrated the ease of learning with deaf students who enrolled at Gallaudet University. Tiegel Hanson (1900, p. 81) noted, it was through signing that popular Gallaudet professor John B. Hotchkiss "makes history real and living." Providing a vivid depiction of the force of sign language, she explained,

> … he takes a paragraph from a text book and dwells on it till it is a picture moving before the eyes. The French revolution, the customs of centuries ago, the characters of kings and of men who live in their immortal words and deeds, all are painted so vividly that they are no longer printed names and dates, but men that lived and events that happened (p. 81).

Tiegel Hanson credited Hotchkiss' ability to transform text to life to his excellent "command of this picture language so loved and defended by the deaf" (p. 81). Indeed, Tiegel Hanson had greatly benefitted from her college education in large part because signing provided the best means for a visually based community to freely express and exchange thoughts and ideas. Sign language was so critical and integral to the deaf community, that as Tiegel Hanson pointed out, it was to be "defended."

Outspoken advocate Sylvia Chapin Balis was another who vehemently defended sign language. Though a skilled lipreader, she was known to always "stick up" for signing (Runde, 1951, p. 4). Chapin Balis was the first deaf woman to be elected to the CAID Executive Committee in 1901—a committee composed almost entirely of superintendents and the Gallaudet President—and along with Sheridan, the first deaf woman to receive an honorary degree from Gallaudet in 1914. Like Tiegel Hanson, Chapin Balis credited sign language and master signers for the most inspiring sermons:

> I never enjoyed nor understood Bible stories, sermons, or lectures through hearing or reading as I did through the medium of signs as used by my teachers…and other masters of the language. The wonders of the Bible, the beauty of its narratives, the power of its words, its deepest meanings, its warnings, exhortations, and promises have never been so vividly presented nor so deeply impressed upon my mind and heart as by that medium…. the finest sermon ever penned fails to thrill and enthral [sic] as would a sermon delivered in the graceful, beautiful, clear gestures of the old masters of the silent language (1905, p. 312).

In praising and defending the sign language that the deaf community so revered, there were several recurring themes. In this quote from Chapin Balis (1905, p. 314), three themes emerge: "the good and the happiness of the majority are to be attained by Nature's own language, signs, which are stimulants to thought and observation, arousing to activity dormant minds which no other methods can successfully reach." The first is that happiness is more likely to be achieved with the free flow of communication without struggle or constraint, and this would be signing for deaf people. The second is that sign language is a natural, living, breathing language. Third, signing is for deaf people, the avenue to stimulating the mind, broadening the capacity to think and express oneself.

Sylvia Chapin Balis
Source: *Silent Worker*, May 1906, p. 118

While sign language was to be praised and defended, the sole use of articulation and lipreading left much to be desired. Deaf people during historical times did not object to the use of speech and lipreading either in articulation classes or as a practice in the wider society. It was to its sole use in the instruction of *all* deaf children that they vehemently objected to. The issue with spoken English is that it does not accommodate deaf people who don't hear the language. However, sign language being a visual language, is fully accessible and every deaf person can learn it and achieve fluency. Knowing this, deaf women had much to say about the practice of oralism that was sweeping the country in these early days. Oral "methods" were thus, condemned. This condemnation was evident in several recurring themes early deaf women used.

Oralism: A Ridiculous Endeavor

Chapin Balis was one who made particular use of this theme to condemn this devastating practice. This was even though she was an expert lipreader and had even been called to a movie set to train an actor playing a deaf role on how to look natural as a lipreader. The speech training Chapin Balis herself had received was a story to tell. Mocking the training, she recalled:

> … the foolish system by which I had at one time been tortured into using speech. I am not certain I can give you any idea of the tediousness of the process, as I made it a point to forget the whole disagreeable proceeding as speedily as circumstances would allow. But it was after the style of ba, be, bi, bo, bu, fa, fe, fi, fo, fu, and so on through the weary length of the alphabet and to the very limits of my patience. What I wanted was to read and talk. I imagined I had gotten beyond the infantile coos and goo, goos [sic] of that period, and possessed strong opinions of my ability to express myself like other rational beings (Balis, 1895, pp. 35-36).

Chapin Balis went on to criticize Visible Speech, the invention of Alexander Graham Bell's father, calling it "another form of torture devised by my superiors" (1895, p. 35). Noting she had in her collection a letter written entirely in Visible Speech symbols from a former teacher, she wrote:

> … the only thing contained in it of which I am certain is my own surname at the beginning, the writer's full name at the end, and the place from which it came, but that I discovered by a diligent scanning of the post-mark. I am still waiting to learn all that comes between those two names. May the writer never discover upon what stony ground her carefully sown symbols fell! I keep it not only as a curiosity, but as a memento of the patience of the much-tried teacher who wrote it (p. 36).

She made no bones about being "amazed and horrified" at the notion that deaf children would be taught "wholly" by this method (p. 36). She had learned, however, that methods had improved from her school days, so keeping an open mind, she visited two schools for the deaf—one practicing oralism only and the other fingerspelling only. Afterwards, she presented a favorable report of her observations at these two schools but continued to advocate for the use of signing.

Oralism: A Barrier to the Pursuit of Happiness

As indicated earlier, this is another recurring theme. Since oral only instruction was often a barrier to the free flow of communication for deaf students, protestations to this approach centered around the notion that deaf children would be put through strenuous, exhausting, and likely futile exercises all day long during their school years. Since supporters of oralism seemed to have no clue the strain these strenuous exercises had on deaf children, early deaf women often pointed to this unnatural phenomenon as an interference to the deaf child's happiness.

Referring to an article written by Fitzgerald describing her struggle to lipread despite being an expert lipreader, Sheridan wrote:

> … it must be accepted as true that at least pleasure must be counted out in all the efforts of deaf-mutes to catch thought by reading the lips of speakers who are engaged in any kind of extended discourse. And every human heart has the right to all the pure and unadulterated happiness that it can get (A Semi-Deaf, 1908, p. 142).

Chapin Balis (1905, p. 314) told the ignorant exactly how oralism could get in the way of happiness:

> Can one conceive of anything much more trying to sight and of greater strain to the nerves of a restless child than to be compelled to sit still and gaze at one object, and that a most uninteresting one, for any length of time? Add to the above bad light, either too strong, insufficient, or ill arranged; indistinct spelling or, maybe, so rapid that only the most expert can possibly catch an occasional word.

Oralism: You Gotta See it from the Deaf Child's Perspective

Oral proponents frequently promoted articulation and lipreading in the instruction of deaf children based on the belief that this would foster their success in the wider society. On the other hand, sign language supporters argued that oral only instruction ignored the best interests of deaf children. Deaf women, thus, sought to enlighten oral advocates. They wanted oral proponents to consider the experiences of deaf children who were forced to struggle with speech and lipreading. To help them envision what the deaf child was going through, Chapin Balis (1905, p. 312) spelled it out for them. She wrote:

> What can be more uninteresting and wearisome than an endless stream of letters and words, an expressionless face, and an immovable body? Do they never stop to consider how little enjoyment they themselves would derive from a service spelled or spoken at them in a foreign language?

Similarly, Sheridan urged them to see it from the deaf child's perspective:

> Dear ultra-oralist, do you not see that the reason the deaf love the sign language is because…the ease with which it is used makes it possible to present ideas quickly and in rapid succession all day long, so that, for happiness and mental development, in the elevated atmosphere of a fine school it affords for the deaf child what spoken language in a good home gives to the hearing child? (A Semi-Deaf, 1909, p. 144).

Oralism: Stunting Intellectual Growth

Another recurrent theme was that every deaf person who signs is going to understand most everything that is signed, in contrast to reliance on lipreading where the opposite is true. Deaf people have often pointed out that oral proponents seem to focus almost entirely on the ability to speak, ignoring the whole child, their education, and their well-being. In response to this laser-like focus, Chapin Balis (1901, p. 143) wrote:

> I care not whether a deaf child is, or is not, taught to utter an intelligible word, if it but be so taught and trained as to enjoy reading when thrown upon its own resources…. An education that places within their reach the key to knowledge, places them upon an equality with their fellow men. The system or method by which they are given this ability is of small consequence if the result achieved is an education and the power to do.

Sheridan also discussed the importance of intellectual development that language enables. She also raised the point that a free exchange of communication should be the focus, rather than the mode. This latter point contrasts with the reality of oralism where it is all about the means of communication. To encourage oralists to broaden their thinking on the topic, Sheridan used examples from their own experiences they could relate to. She wrote:

> Is not the aim of all language, all art, all music to convey thought, sentiment, feeling, pleasure, so that the vehicle shall not be noticed, but the stamp of the thought be received? Think of a human mind receiving with delight a thought when trammeled by the painful uncertainties incident to the effort to read the lips! (A Semi-Deaf, 1908, p. 142).

Going back to a major deterrent impacting intellectual growth, Sheridan contrasted having a full concept of what is said as opposed to vague notions:

> … what shall we say when the sign language comes in to relieve that agony incident to the effort to read the lips when there is only slight ability to do it? Then it brings deliverance indeed, as the listener drops from the region of airy speculation as to what is being said to the solid ground of certainty, at least as to the leading thoughts, which the sign language and manual alphabet never fail to give with clearness and force (pp. 142-143).

Elaborating on the importance of having a full understanding of what is being said, Sheridan compared the hearing experience to that of the deaf experience, illustrating that the process was the same though the mode different:

> Now, dear oralist, you love words because they convey to you or from your ideas quickly and clearly, and the deaf-mute loves signs because they convey to him ideas quickly and clearly, while oralism forever tantalizes him with half-fulfilled promises of ideas, or with painfully received or communicated ideas. Do you love to talk? So do our deaf friends. What is the use of insisting that a deaf-mute shall ignore the fact of his deafness and spend the greater part of the precious time of his school-life in trying to get power to speak words, which after all are only a pathway to ideas? Before, during, and after this process let him get as many ideas as he can, since they are the main thing…. Wherever and whenever in his school life a few signs will help a deaf-mute more quickly to an idea, or to the explanation of a difficulty, or to save precious time, he has a right to them. And then hasn't he some right to happiness? (p. 146).

Sheridan further challenged this detour to educational attainment. In the quest to recreate a deaf child into a hearing, speaking one, there was no room left for developing the mind. She pointed out how this defeated the core purpose of an education:

> What is education for, if it is not to produce mental alertness and the possession of ideas? What is the ability to use colloquial language correctly, in comparison with the possession of a good stock of ideas that broaden the mental life and give an outlook on the world that sharpens the wits?

Oralism: Denying the Right to Sign Language

By presenting sign language as a right, it is elevated to a universal human right, not to be denied anyone. Sheridan made this passionate case, arguing:

> … the deaf have a right to the sign language for the forceful expression of all those important ideas…. Imagine a lawyer, or even a Demosthenes, pleading effectively with men upon paper. Free, ardent, easily understood expression is a necessary form of speech for both speaker and audience when men are to be convinced against their prejudices, or convicted of the need of the performance of difficult duty, or moved out of sluggishness and inertness to action. No other language but the sign language can ever so influence a deaf audience. It is their language; it appeals to them with force because they love it and because the eye has been doing for them double service all their lives…. where are we without the sign language in endeavoring to reach the minds and hearts of the deaf? (A Semi-Deaf, 1908, pp. 147-148).

Early deaf women condemned oralism, using several themes that resonated with deaf people as they sought to influence oral advocates. After all, these oralists were the ones making the shift regardless of what deaf people thought. While condemning oral only approaches, deaf women also pointed out the benefits of signing.

Support for Sign Language: Instinctive Knowledge

The rhetoric of early deaf women who passionately fought for the rights of deaf children in the United States is illustrative. Three concepts emerge that are reminiscent of today's knowledge base that: 1) sign language is a language; 2) deaf people are part of a cultural community; and 3) sign language is a critical element to developing English literacy.

Sign Language is a Language

Despite the lack of formal linguistic research, these early proponents of sign language instinctively knew it was a language. Without a research base, it was easy for oral only supporters to dismiss signing, branding it as a simplistic form of communication without the complexities of a formal language such as English. Countering such misconceptions was critical in elevating sign language to a level on a par to English and other languages. Presenting sign language as an advanced language, Tiegel Hanson (1900, p. 81) explained, "Few realize that a thorough mastery of the sign-language is a matter of study and concentration, the same as is entailed in the mastery of any other language." Reinforcing this, Chapin Balis (1905, p. 314) expanded:

> The sign language is capable of many degrees and shades of meaning. It has its place and its use. It would be as sensible to condemn the study of French, German, Gaelic, Russian, or any other foreign language because a knowledge of these languages may interfere with the acquisition of English.

A Cultural Entity

Tiegel Hanson also advanced the notion that signing was an integral part of the deaf community and made a case for the deaf community being a cultural entity long before it was recognized as such. While participating in a debate as a Gallaudet student, she raised the following points, arguing it was "impracticable" to expect depth in relationships between deaf and hearing people because "the hearing do not understand the deaf, and vice versa" (Taylor, 1892, p. 2). Tiegel Hanson went on, "Each has a world open to him, which is sealed to the other, and these worlds make perfect sympathy impossible" (p. 2) and argued signing for hearing people "will never be an easy and fluent means of expressing themselves" (p. 2) while communicating in spoken languages are daunting tasks for deaf people.

Though this depiction of deaf and hearing relationships reflected the sociopolitical climate of the century, relationships between deaf and hearing people have significantly advanced since then. There is much more awareness and support for ASL and Deaf culture in today's society. There are plentiful opportunities for hearing people to learn and master ASL. Even so, the significance of Tiegel Hanson's comments are that she recognized that deaf people are members of a cultural entity. With Chapin Balis, though she did not specifically mention signing, the notion that deaf people are drawn together based on communication ease even in settings where hearing people know sign language is discussed in her response to a paper presented at the 1890 CAID convention in New York City. She commented:

> You call us clannish; may I ask why we should not be? I have been placed in a very trying position by the thoughtlessness of the hearing, some of whom seem seldom to hesitate to interrupt a conversation between a deaf and hearing person; why should we not be clannish, if we find the pleasant companionship we desire among those who are also deaf. There is a sharp line drawn between the two, and I am sorry to say that even here we are apt to form into groups, the hearing with the hearing and the deaf with the deaf (Convention, 1890, p. 36).

Here Chapin Balis echoed Tiegel Hanson's argument that deaf people naturally congregate together due to communication ease. Though Chapin Balis made the claim that communication was the issue that separated deaf and hearing people at the convention, the important point here is that deaf people naturally congregated together. And today, even with greater numbers of hearing people who are fluent signers, deaf people still congregate together, though hearing signers are more apt to join in. Unlike Tiegel Hanson, who made her arguments to a mostly deaf audience, Chapin Balis was making her remarks at a convention with a majority hearing group. Being clannish was often used in derogatory terms to describe deaf community gatherings. Chapin Balis threw this term back at them and essentially defended it.

Developing English Literacy Through Sign Language

Modeling English through speaking and lipreading was a major rationale for oralism, based on the assumption that speaking and lipreading naturally transforms to English. By this token, signing was a deterrent to learning English. As such, the *mode* of communication was perceived as key. Deaf women had a different perspective. Rather, the key was to use what deaf children already knew—sign language—as the foundation to learn written English, which to them was a new language. With this premise, it thus followed that the process for learning English would be the same as learning a new language.

In this vein, Chapin Balis (1905) posited that teachers of deaf children would be more effective in teaching English if they understood how people learn another language. She thus suggested that teachers of the deaf should learn another language, as "It would give them a faint idea of the disheartening difficulties English presents to the average deaf-mute" (p. 313). She explained that having a language foundation made it easier to learn another language. For deaf children, they needed sign language "to fall back upon." Chapin Balis went on: "Depriving them of their God-given means of expression is but increasing the difficulties in their path. A deaf child who is permitted to use gestures when English fails, will learn English twice as rapidly and far more understandingly" (pp. 313-314). In learning another language, she explained, new learners "inevitably return to it [one's native language] when our knowledge of a foreign language is insufficient for our need" (p. 314). Chapin Balis implored oralists to put themselves in the deaf child's place:

> Why cannot those who would rob these deaf children of their birthright, before they commit such an injustice, put themselves in their place? Let them imagine themselves among a people whose language is unknown to them; how much would they appreciate or enjoy the conversation going on around them? (p. 314).

With these arguments, Chapin Balis had presented a strong case for learning English as a second language, long before the concept was formally recognized in deaf education.

Activism

While early deaf women advocated for signing primarily through the avenues of writing, presenting, or commenting at public meetings and conventions, they also took action in other ways. Tiegel Hanson, for instance, was on the program committee for the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) convention in 1899 ensuring that husband Olof Hanson would address the convention urging the NAD to be proactive in battling oralism (Jankowski, 2020). Tiegel Hanson also took an active role in serving on the Executive committee that planned the sixth biennial Minnesota Association of the Deaf convention in 1901. At this convention, sweeping resolutions addressing concerns about the education of deaf children were passed. The one addressing "methods" read in part:

> There is no question more closely affecting the welfare of the deaf…than that of the method and methods by which they shall be educated and none have this matter so much at heart as the deaf themselves. Conventions of teachers of the deaf are held and radical resolutions are passed relative to methods of instruction which are opposed to the almost unanimous opinion and desire of the educated deaf. These resolutions are based almost wholly on theory. Those who pass them, not being deaf themselves, cannot feel the effects of this or that method of instruction. Their knowledge and observation of deaf children at school is limited…. The testimony of the deaf themselves relative to methods when it is adverse to the theories of these teachers—and it is usually overwhelmingly so,—is rejected with the declaration that the deaf are not qualified to pass judgment on a question that so vitally affects them. We protest against such an attitude as unreasonable, unjust, and contrary to the spirit of modern toleration of thought and opinion…. The enactment and execution of laws without the voice of the people whom these laws affect, is despotism…. We are opposed to the establishment of a single method of education for all the deaf, as we believe that thereby a considerable number will fail to obtain that degree of social, intellectual and moral development which would be possible under a different method…. We regard the sign language as an important factor in the broadest education of the deaf, and especially in their moral and social welfare after leaving school…. those favoring the oral methods exclusively, lean too much to the utilitarian side of the question and neglect the humanitarian side (Minnesota, 1901, pp. 2-3).

Always one to plead the cause for signing, Tiegel Hanson saw such an opportunity when she was in Pittsburgh caring for her ailing mother. In a letter to her husband, Tiegel Hanson (1919) wrote:

> You know all the deaf schools in Pa. are oral schools, made so by state laws. There is one here in Pgh. called the DePaul Institute, a Catholic school supported partly by the state and partly by the sisters of charity.

She had learned the bishop was "in favor of the Combined System" and it was her plan to meet with him "to talk with him about methods" and to "tell him what an educated deaf person thinks." Though oralism was required by law in the state, Tiegel Hanson saw an opportunity since not all of the funding was from the state, and she had news that the head of the school was supportive of signing. Tiegel Hanson made it her mission to reach out whenever she could, wherever possible. After her death, daughter Alice said as much in explaining to then Gallaudet President Elstad (third president of the university) how much of an advocate her parents were. She wrote:

> My mother and father both always felt strongly and never lost an opportunity to tell hearing friends that signs are to a deaf child what a crutch is to the lame and should never be forbidden to the deaf. They made the point that when the child is faced with a world about which he needs to learn so much, he needs every help he can get and signs, being so expressive, carry meaning much more quickly than the more tedious and uncertain lipreading (Jones, 1960, May 1).

Clearly, Alice not only had a good understanding of her parents' advocacy role but carried on the torch by expressing her concern to Elstad about a college in her area extolling the merits of oralism and denouncing signing. Given that Alice was a CODA (Child of Deaf Adults), she presented as a model for loyalty to sign language.

Total Abolishment of Sign Language

This section covers events at the 1908 CAID convention, even though there is little discourse from deaf women. The rhetoric at this convention provides the context for shifts in the oralism movement that illustrate the great obstacles deaf people of the era faced in battling the forces. Further tension was added to the ongoing battle over oralism versus sign language at this convention when it was proposed that signing be totally banned in the classroom and potentially outside the classroom as well. The igniting factor was the presentation about the teacher training program at Gallaudet. Professor Percival Hall who later succeeded Edward Miner Gallaudet as president of the college had suggested that even oral teachers should know sign language so they would have it at their disposal if it was ever needed.

This prompted a huge discussion after Hall's presentation, with several superintendents debating whether teachers should even use signing, fingerspelling, or gesture to supplement their teaching or whether signing should even be allowed outside the classroom. Aside from purely oral schools, most schools still allowed signing as a supplement in oral classes, outside of the classroom or in "manual" classes for students deemed "oral failures." The debate took a serious turn when William Walker declared, "I wish to stand here to-day and express the sentiment that the day has passed for any use of the sign language in the schoolroom" (Convention, 1908, p. 46). In what could be perceived as an irony is in Walker's statement that "the danger in the sign language lies in its abuse in the schoolroom. It is so easy to use it" (p. 46). This was exactly the point that sign language supporters had been making—that signing was easier to use and therefore a better vehicle for learning.

Superintendent Edward S. Tillinghast of the Oregon School for the Deaf then came forward and made a statement that again supported contentions from sign language advocates that signing allowed for a free flow of communication, a critical aspect in learning. Tillinghast stated:

> When I first began to teach I found my pupils wanted to start in and sign all the time. I soon came to the conclusion I should be doing wrong to allow this, and since that time I have tried to reduce the use of the sign language in my class rooms to a minimum, although I like signing and it is more natural for me to use signs than to speak. I heartily agree with Mr. Walker and say that in the class room we should abolish signs (Convention, 1908, p. 47).

Tillinghast was a CODA, and yet, he was among some of the staunchest advocates seeking to abolish signs in the classroom. In addition to Tillinghast and Walker, Frank Booth, also a CODA was another example. It must have appeared as a great irony that these men grew up among deaf people, becoming "authorities" with the knowledge and experience to grant them the greatest control over deaf children's destinies in a way that pitted them in direct opposition to the very community that made it easy for them to gain that power.

This is perhaps best illustrated in the opposing ideologies of Tillinghast who sought to abolish signing and his deaf father, David R. Tillinghast. In the same year, D. Tillinghast helped establish the North Carolina Association of the Deaf and was its first President. During his address to the membership focusing on the education of deaf children, he noted how staunch oralists were "extreme enthusiasts…[who] claim that all deaf children can acquire speech and speech-reading" (Taylor, 1908, p. 2). Although this was likely not his intent, he was essentially describing his son. As a further irony, while his son had claimed the highest position in a school for the deaf, D. Tillinghast himself was discharged from his teaching job after forty years because the school was shifting further toward oralism.

Back at the CAID convention, Walker invited deaf professionals to comment on his proposed idea to totally abolish signing from the classroom. Chapin Balis was absent from this convention so she was not able to comment as she most likely would have. However, respected deaf leader Joseph Schuyler Long stated in no uncertain terms:

> … people who prevent the sign language being used in the education of the deaf, both inside and outside of the class rooms, are denying to the deaf their free mental growth through natural expression of their ideas, and are in the same class as criminals (Convention, 1908, p. 48).

Although Chapin Balis was not there, another deaf woman, Lottie K. Clarke, ventured to comment. Clarke was a product of oral instruction and was herself an oral teacher. However, Tiegel Hanson (1913, p. 3) described her as "a beautiful sign-maker" and a supporter of signing. Her husband was superintendent of the Washington school. Participating in the discussion, Clarke stated:

> I want to say that I agree with Mr. Hall that the sign language is a valuable asset for any teacher of the deaf. I myself have trained 23 teachers, and I have found that those who obtained the best results were the ones who learned some signs, so that they could understand what the children were talking about. Last year I had a class of 11…. Not a day passed that they did not come to me with some news or a 'tale of woe.' Whenever it was possible I gave them the simple English for it, which they were proud to use. I would rather use de l'Epée's [referring to the founder of deaf education in France] signs than the gestures which most of the oral teachers use (Convention, 1908, p. 55).

Even as an oral teacher, she supported the use of signing when needed and she allowed students to sign to her, so they had the benefit of freely expressing themselves unlike in most orally taught classes.

This topic had brought on a very intense and prolonged discussion and continued to do so when Superintendent Frank Booth of the Nebraska School of the Deaf made a statement so polarizing to views held by most deaf people. Though a CODA, Booth stated, referring to signing,

> … an evil in one place, it is an evil in the other. The schoolroom measured by four walls is not the school, in the large and complete sense. As we know, the hearing child gets far the greater part and best part of his education outside the schoolroom. The world is his school. Likewise the world as it exists about him, in all its entirety, must be the school of the deaf child, but in order that it shall be so to the fullest extent-and for all its possible profit, the same spirit and the same rule of teaching and learning must prevail outside as obtain inside the schoolroom. That, of course, means no sign language anywhere (Convention, 1908, July 6, pp. 51-52).

With Chapin Balis not at this convention and Lottie Clarke having said her piece, the discussions quickly once again became dominated by hearing males as was the standard practice. The following discussions present a look at how the ideology was shifting further in favor of oralism and the increasing challenges the deaf community, and in particular deaf women faced in countering this trend. Staying on this same topic, several exchanges took place between Booth and William K. Argo, another superintendent from the Kentucky School for the Deaf. Argo kept asking Booth how he would handle a hypothetical situation where he needed a hoe and a deaf student was the only one who could get it, but the student repeatedly did not understand the spoken request. After some back and forth where Booth failed to give a satisfactory resolution, Booth gave this chilling response:

> Let the penalty fit the crime. Ignorance is the crime in this case, and the boy suffers humiliation for his ignorance, which is a very proper penalty and an effective one for the good that it is bound to do him (Convention, 1908, p. 52).

When Argo persisted, Booth went into a long diatribe on the same theme, that the student would say to himself, "'I do not understand. I am very dull.' He thus goes away, ashamed and disgusted with himself," (p. 52) and this would somehow teach the student a lesson. The student would learn after he saw Argo get the hoe, Booth explained and concluded:

> ... mark you, with the resolution strong in his mind and soul that he is going to learn to understand you hereafter, which, needless to say is a good resolution for the boy to take and a good state of mind for him to be in at the time (p. 52).

Apparently, Booth believed students feeling stupid and ashamed of themselves was the key to learning.

Proving that inviting deaf opinion was a token act, Walker proceeded to present a resolution: "to make our graduates as nearly normal as possible" and "the English language be made the sole medium of communication in the graded schoolroom by authority, if necessary; outside of the schoolroom by sentiment" (Convention, 1908, p. 209). Superintendent Thomas P. Clarke, the husband of Lottie Clarke who had earlier advocated for signing, then quoted several excerpts from the current CAID constitution. These excerpts emphasized the priority of speech and lipreading but allowed for other modes if all else failed. It also stated:

> … as an association to stand committed to no particular theory, method, or system, and adopting as its guide the following motto: 'Any method for good results; all methods, and wedded to none' (Convention, 1908, p. 209).

Clarke then indicated Walker's motion was "unconstitutional." Acting CAID President Goodwin concurred, though if the resolution had moved forward, there was not enough of a quorum to vote on it. And thus, a ruling that could have more firmly cemented oralism inside and outside the classroom had been averted, at least for the time being.

The CAID discussion illustrates the widely held opinion by oralists that practicing speaking and lipreading in the classroom and elsewhere at the school would enable deaf children to become "nearly normal" adults who would interact successfully in the wider society. In opposing rhetoric, stories were related again and again about how this theory did not necessarily materialize into reality. A series of opinion pieces appearing in the *Association Review*, today the *Volta Review* published by the Alexander Graham Bell Association serves to illustrate. The periodical published an article from Daisy Way who criticized hearing people for their ignorance and thoughtless behavior to deaf individuals and scolded deaf people for signing. This was a deaf woman who exemplified the oralist ideal. She did not sign and used only speech and lipreading to communicate. And yet, Way's criticism of hearing people demonstrated that her success as an oralist in school did not transform her into an adult who mingled with hearing people without struggle. Moreover, her attitude toward society was decidedly negative. This contrasted with the oralist school of thought that after indoctrination in speech and lipreading, an oral graduate would more effectively socialize with hearing people and exhibit a more positive view of society at large. Though there were oralists who successfully interacted entirely with hearing people, as the deaf community often maintained, they were in the minority. In contrast to Way's negativity about hearing people, Chapin Balis and in turn, Tiegel Hanson projected more positive perspectives in their responses to Way. It is also notable that their responses were in a publication geared toward oral perspectives, which presented an opportunity to advocate for signing as well.

Responding to Way's negative comments about hearing people, Chapin Balis (1901, p. 144) wrote:

> We do not think hearing persons intentionally slight or inflict pain upon those who are deaf because they are deaf. They simply are completely at a loss, as a rule, how to communicate with them. If the deaf will meet hearing persons half way and try to be entertaining and interesting also, they will have little cause for complaint.

This response from Chapin Balis points to her having a healthy regard for associations with hearing people. Being a signer and a member of the deaf community did not promote a negative perception of hearing people, contrary to what oral advocates would expect. Optimizing the opportunity to put a plug in for signing in an oralist publication, Chapin Balis declared, "We are exceedingly thankful that it has been our good fortune to have gained a thorough knowledge of the sign-language and a familiarity with several forms of manual alphabets" (p. 142). Targeting the criticism from Way (and the readership) that deaf people should talk and lipread, Chapin Balis stated:

> Life is too short and time much too precious to waste in guessing at things that a gesture, a turn of the hand, or a few pencil marks will make clear. There are some persons who the best lip-readers living can never understand, and they are often good people….and [we] have struggled and strained and worn out nerves and

> temper in the process of trying to understand them. In the end we have secured about as much satisfaction from the proceedings as we would had we tried interviewing a Cheshire cat (p. 143).

Next in line was Tiegel Hanson with a response to Chapin Balis' article, explaining her own approach with ignorant hearing people. Like Chapin Balis, Tiegel Hanson depicted a positive perspective of her interactions with hearing people, capitalizing on opportunities to enlighten them. As Chapin Balis did, Tiegel Hanson presented a glorifying view of signing and the deaf community, likely for the benefit of the readership as well. Aiming to make Chapin Balis' "echo last as long as possible," Tiegel Hanson (1901, pp. 236-237) wrote:

> It has been my experience to meet occasionally a person who has never before come in contact with one deaf, and to see in her face pity and sympathy—a kind and generous feeling on that person's part, and one I never resent. It is my special delight to have free and unrestrained conversation with such a person. It is to her that I…explain the sign language and…[our] love for it…. I even go further, [to] explain…. the various methods of instructing the deaf, with a clincher in favor of the combined system. It is, I say seriously, my delight to do all this, and see that friend's pity vanish never again to return, as she comprehends what a happy and independent life a deaf person can lead. And I do this as much because I believe in educating the public on all these heads as for merely personal reasons. The beautiful sign language is one of our greatest blessings, and to meet other semi-mutes and converse by means of it is, perhaps, the most pleasant of all.

Her approach here is twofold. One, she demonstrated to oralist readers that deaf people can and do interact in a positive manner with hearing people while also putting sign language and the community in a positive light. Second, though a more difficult feat, Tiegel Hanson who "believed in educating the public" was likely striving to educate oral supporters as well. The message was that despite all efforts to "normalize" deaf people, they were likely to gravitate to the signing community and be happy about it.

Reaching the Heart: The Sole Exception?

Pure oralists expected oral only communication in the classroom, with variations in the supplemental use of signing, gestures, or fingerspelling. Whether or not oral only communication was imposed outside the classroom varied by school. There was, however, one exception that some pure oralists were willing to make. Many schools for the deaf held religious sermons in chapels on campus that were attended by deaf students of various ages. During these years, the teaching of morality and religion was often the highest priority, even superseding the classroom. While oral instruction to "normalize" deaf children was perceived as critical by oralists, it was considered even more important that morality and religion be taught and *understood*. Thus, some oral advocates were willing to make an exception and allow signing during sermons to ensure deaf children easily understood what was said or taught during these lessons. As such, this seemed to be an admission that signing would be more effective in reaching deaf children than speaking and lipreading. Walker, who wanted to abolish signs in the classroom was one who made an exception, passionately declaring:

> When it comes to the spiritual work with a deaf child I use signs, for I would do anything on the face of the earth to reach his heart. I will write to him, talk to him, sign to him; I will do anything and everything to arouse him and touch his heart (Convention, 1905, p. 49).

Chapin Balis (1905, pp. 314-315) explained why signing was especially well-suited for chapel services:

> … no single one of those methods of communication can equal the sign language in addressing the audiences…. It can be adapted to the mental caliber of all grades, with a facility unknown to the other methods. It is a wonderful language with powers for infinite good. It casts light where before was darkness, it teaches right and wrong, it arouses to laughter or moves to tears. To the deaf, its grace takes the place of the rhythm of music; most especially is this fact exemplified when a hymn or poem is recited by that means.

However, there were others who were willing to bet that oralism could still reach deaf children in chapel services. Chapin Balis (1905) took notice of this: "Some teachers are advocating the abolishment of signs in the conducting of chapel exercises, and the substitution of manual spelling or speech" (p. 311). This topic resulted in an intense discussion at the CAID convention in 1905 after Superintendent Albert L. E. Crouter of the Pennsylvania School for the Deaf presented a demonstration of how oralism could be applied to chapel services. It had involved deaf people and was well presented, inviting favorable responses. That is, until Chapin Balis came forward and spoke up. She told them in no uncertain terms that without the interpreters at the presentation, she would not have understood a word by lipreading. She went on:

> You, who can hear, cannot realize what it is…. Suppose you were obliged to sit here and watch a man, immovable and expressionless, steadily and automatically opening and shutting his mouth without emitting a sound. You'd soon tire of it…. We deaf people have been through the mill and know whereof we speak. Make life happy for these children; do not spoil all their future; the time will come when they will be your judges. I would not take anything for the ability I have to speak, but I also assure you I would not give up the sign language, which has given me so much pleasure. It is a most beautiful and expressive language. I have seen children deeply moved by an address in sign language (Convention, 1905, pp. 69-70).

Prior to Chapin Balis' passionate commentary, no other deaf person in attendance had stood in defense of signing. It took someone like Chapin Balis, a deaf woman at that, to stand up before others were willing to tread the contentious waters. Several deaf people then came forward to support the importance of signing in understanding sermons. And two other deaf women ventured to comment as well. One of them was Clarke. Clarke (1905) asked the presenter if there was "any record kept after graduation of those of your pupils who attend oral services," and she noted: "I have had many good pupils; I am a teacher of long experience, but I never have had one who could thoroughly enjoy oral services" (Convention, 1905, p. 73). Crouter responded to the effect that he had no such records and explained that most oral graduates went to services with their families. He also pointed out that signing students did not understand oral sermons. He apparently did not consider independence as a factor if all oral graduates only had the option of attending church services with their families. In addition, he also did not consider that many deaf adults attended signing services, so there was not really a question of them not understanding sermons.

Then Fitzgerald joined the discussion. She shared that it was not until after she learned to sign that "I began…to understand the chapel exercises. I attended Sunday school and church regularly from childhood, and even though I was said to be a fairly good lip reader, I got practically nothing from the pulpit" (Convention, 1905, p. 74). Fitzgerald explained that when she had a signing interpreter for the first time for church services: "I heard the first real sermon of my life….and I have learned more during these last two years through signs than I learned in all my life through lip reading" (p. 74). She declared she agreed "most emphatically" with Chapin Balis that even the best lipreaders would tire after a while. She went on to say:

> I firmly believe that children brought up under the pure oral method have no more idea of what a sermon is—or a prayer or lecture, either—than had I before I learned signs.…why thus stunt their growth rather than let them have the real thing through signs?

This topic was confronted head on six years later at the 1911 CAID convention. Oklahoma School for the Deaf Principal Tunis V. Archer was leading a session about lipreading in teaching. Among the questions addressed was "Can moral instruction be imparted as well through speech reading as by other means?" (Convention, 1911, p. 157). In responding to that question, Archer indicated that his orally presented sermons were understood both by oral and signing students, even though oral students seemed to understand more. When asked how he knew whether they understood, Archer replied he was able to tell from

> … the interest manifested by the pupils as they sat and looked at me. I have never found it difficult to tell whether a pupil understood what I said or not. The conduct of the pupils, the expressions they made, their conversation with me about these things afterwards.

After some discussion, Chapin Balis came forward and declared:

> I have sat right over there and I have not understood one word that has been said, and if I, with forty years' experience, cannot get one word, how can a child of five or six without language, get the meaning? You claim too much; it is not right. I have looked around in oral schools where they say their pupils understand and I am positive they do not. If I, after forty years' experience in all countries, with all people, and when I know the subject under discussion, still can not understand what is being said, how can you expect a child to do it? I beg you do not claim so much. It is wrong. Will all the deaf present who have read Mr. Archer's lips please stand up. None rise, I see. (Convention, 1911, p. 157).

Booth then defended Archer by explaining, "I simply want to call attention to the fact that Mr. Archer has not been addressing deaf pupils. He has not been producing the speech as one does in a deaf school, more or less, to his audience" (Convention, 1911, p. 158).

Chapin Balis had bravely taken the bold step of directly challenging the claims that had been made repeatedly that deaf children understood everything that was spoken to them. She had confronted the claim and called it what it was, a false claim. Chapin Balis' act of courage was applauded by deaf leader James H. Cloud (1912, p. 140) who wrote that she:

> … took the wind completely out of the sails of the ultra-oralists at Delavan. Her manner of doing it was one of the features of the Convention. One cannot help admiring the spunk and gumption she displayed on that and similiar [sic] occasions.

Cloud (p. 140) also pointed to the irony in Booth's comment,

> In seeking to pave the way for an orderly retreat for Mr. Archer, after his encounter with Mrs. Balis. Mr. Booth did not help matters much by saying that Mr. Archer had not been talking 'as one does in a deaf school.' One of the claims of the ultra-oralists and others who follow in their wake is that the oral method restores the deaf to society. Mr. Archer had been talking as people in 'society' do and Mrs. Balis, try as she might and expert lip-reader that she was, had not been able to understand a word he said…. 'Society' does not talk to the deaf 'as one does in a deaf school.' 'Society' is not composed of scientifically trained oral teachers.

Despite all the logical arguments deaf people made in support of signing in schools and as a human right in general, oralism in schools prevailed into the 1960's. Historical deaf women fought courageously to stem the influence of pure oralism whenever and wherever they could. Did they make a difference? There is no way to know, however, despite all efforts to suppress, squash and abolish the beautiful and graceful language of the deaf community, American Sign Language continues to thrive. Today ASL is recognized and widely supported as a vibrant language, visible on television, in movies and the public arena. Gratitude is owed to deaf women of yesterday who truly cared and dared.

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