

## **The Preservation of the Sign Language**

### **George W. Veditz**

*(National Association of the Deaf, 1913; Translated from the film by Carol A. Padden)*  
(Special Thanks to Carol Padden, Professor; University of California – San Diego, for granting permission for use of this translation)

Friends and fellow deaf-mutes:

The French deaf people loved de l'Epee. Every year on the occasion of his birthday, they gather together at banquets and festivities to show their appreciation that this man was born on this earth. They journey to his gravesite in Versailles and place flowers and green wreaths on his grave to show their respect for his memory.

They loved him because he was their first teacher. But they loved him more for being the father and inventor of their beautiful sign language.

For the last 33 years, with eyes filled with tears and hearts broken, the French deaf people have watched this beautiful language of signs snatched away from their schools.

For the last 33 years, they have strived and fought for the restitution of signs in the schools but for 33 years their teachers have cast them aside and refused to listen to their pleas. But their teachers would much rather listen to the worthless, cruel-hearted demands of people that think they know all about educating the deaf but know nothing about their thoughts and souls, their feelings, desires and needs.

It is like this in Germany also. The German deaf people and the French deaf people look up at us American deaf people with eyes of jealousy. They look upon us Americans as a jailed man chained at the legs might look upon a man free to wander at will.

They freely admit that the American deaf people are superior to them in matters of intelligence and spirituality, in their success in the world, in happiness. And they admit that this superiority can be credited to - what? To one thing, that we permit the use of signs in our schools. The French deaf people base their inferiority on one thing, the fact that oralism must be taught in their schools. They have eliminated fingerspelling; they have eliminated signs. But we American deaf are rapidly approaching some bad times for our schools. False prophets are now appearing with news to the people that our American means of teaching the deaf are all wrong. These men have tried to educate people and make people believe that the oral method is really the one best means of educating the deaf.

But we American deaf know, the French deaf know, the German deaf know that in truth, the oral method is the worst. Our beautiful sign language is now beginning to show the results of their attempts.

They have tried to banish signs from the schoolroom, from the churches and from the

earth. Yes, they have tried, so our sign language is deteriorating. From olden years, the masters of this sign language, the Peets, the Dudleys, the Elys, the Ballards, are rapidly disappearing. And we, in past years, loved these men. They had a precise command of sign language. They could communicate to us using only signs and we could understand them.

But fortunately, we have several masters of our sign language still with us. Edward Miner Gallaudet learned this sign language from his father, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet. There are several others, like Dr. John B. Hotchkiss, Dr. Edward Allen Fay, Robert P. MacGregor who are still with us. And we want to preserve the signs as these men now use them, to keep and pass on to coming generations. There are many men now alive who have learned their signs from men like these. Many have tried to preserve and pass on their signs. But there is one known means of passing this on, through the use of moving picture films.

Indeed, our National Association of the Deaf has raised a fund of \$5000 for this purpose. We have made a number of films. We have films of Edward Miner Gallaudet, of Edward Allen Fay, of John B. Hotchkiss and Robert MacGregor and many others. I regret that we do not have \$20,000, for we could have used it all. If we had this amount of money, we could have performances in sign language, sermons in sign language, lectures in sign language. And not only would we American deaf enjoy the benefits of this, but no -- deaf people in Germany, in England, in France, in Italy would also see these moving picture films. Fifty years from now, these moving picture films will be priceless.

"A new race of pharaohs that knew not Joseph" are taking over the land and many of our American schools. They do not understand signs for they cannot sign. They proclaim that signs are worthless and of no help to the deaf. Enemies of the sign language, they are enemies of the true welfare of the deaf. As long as we have deaf people on earth, we will have signs. It is my hope that we all will love and guard our beautiful sign language as the noblest gift God has given to deaf people.

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