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## The Noblest Gift: The National Association of the Deaf Motion Picture Committee Films

### Casey Hamilton

A black screen flickers to life in a dark room. Ivory letters appear from the darkness and they waver slightly on the screen as specks of dust and dirt obscure the projection and make the letters seem alive. "The preservation of the Sign Language by George M. Veditz," the cream letters proclaim, and the screen shifts. "Filmed in 1913 by the NAD, Reprinted in 1934." Then, there is a man. He stands on a stage, a dark curtain swoops to his left, and behind him is a dark and scrolling Victorian wallpaper. The man is tall and dignified as he steps forward and begins to sign an impassioned plea. "We must protect and preserve our beautiful signs as the noblest gift God has given deaf people," he proclaims.<sup>[1]</sup>

These were the films of the National Association of the Deaf (NAD), spearheaded by the very man emoting on the screen. George Veditz and other leaders of the Deaf community saw the way oral-only education was sweeping America, and did everything in their power to ensure that the vestiges of sign<sup>[2]</sup>, at least, would be around for posterity to resurrect. Twenty-two films were made in all between 1913 and 1920, featuring a group of select "Master Signers" considered the best of their age; an age rife with extreme uncertainty for the Deaf. <sup>[3]</sup>

A great communications debate had emerged in Deaf education. Was it better for Deaf people to speak and forgo sign, or was sign a vital part of Deaf education that could not be left out? Two factions arose: the Oralists who insisted that sign was detrimental for Deaf people, and the Manualists who felt that sign was vital to Deaf instruction. On the Manualist side were men such as the scrappy Veditz, and the staid Edward Miner Gallaudet who provided the words and ideas to the cause; as well as Oscar Regensburg and Roy J. Stewart who provided the drive and work ethic to spread the Manualist argument through the community. Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, was the strongest voice on the Oralist side. Bell had an enormous pulpit from which to proclaim his ideas about Deaf education and vast financial resources. The Manualists saw their educational freedom curtailed more and more, and felt they were also losing the fight to retain their beloved language. Desperate for a course of action, the NAD raised funds to make several films for the preservation of sign.<sup>[4]</sup>

The films were a community wide effort. The NAD sent a circular, a pamphlet asking for funds, around to all branches of the lesser NAD State organizations, and asked members to contribute ten cents to the film fund or more if they could spare it. Businesses in the Deaf community even offered prizes for the institutions giving the most to the Motion Picture fund, consisting of jeweled watches and livestock. Money was also collected at Deaf conventions throughout the United States and many who were not members of the NAD contributed to the fund because of its importance.<sup>[5]</sup>

Although the original purpose of the films was to save sign language for future generations, much thought went into the subject matter of these films. These were the images they purposefully crafted of themselves to hand down to future generations. As such, they were important indications of the things the Deaf community cared about and wished to preserve. The Motion Picture Committee (MPC) took suggestions for films from many different places, soliciting opinions from state leaders and carefully comparing and contrasting lists of suggestions to make films of those that had the most consensus. Far from just preserving the language, these films went so far as to preserve the culture. They represent the first coherent vision put forth by the Deaf community to explain their cultural mores:

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the urge to protect Deaf Culture through activism, the idea that Deaf are intellectuals, and the focus on American patriotism.<sup>[6]</sup>

The films were placed in storage, and then re-discovered in the Gallaudet basement in the 1970s. Until then, no scholarship existed on them. The field of Deaf history is quite new. American Sign Language was not recognized as a legitimate language until the 1970s, and it was not until the 1980s that Gallaudet University started offering classes on the history of Deaf America. The Motion Picture films were included in some of these earlier histories, but briefly.<sup>[7]</sup>

Carol Padden and Tom Humphries have studied the subject of the films more thoroughly than most. Two of their books, *Deaf In America: Voices from a Culture*, and *Inside Deaf Culture* each devoted an entire chapter to the films. The first book focused mostly on the Gallaudet film, *The Lorna Doone County of Devonshire England*. The second book delved into Veditz's film *The Preservation of the Sign Language*. Padden also authored several articles about Veditz as a historical figure. Although Padden and Humphries covered the two films in detail, they barely mentioned the rest of the collection. Also, Padden does not consider herself a historian, but a linguist, and thus covered the material from a more linguistic perspective.<sup>[8]</sup>

In her book *Signs of Resistance*, historian Susan Burch understood the films as part of a wider effort to organize the Deaf into a solid mass that could take on Oralism together. She was one of the few historians who delved into the topic. While the films were certainly part of that effort to solidify Deaf culture, Burch mostly credits Deaf athletic organizations, clubs, and the NAD itself for providing the necessary community structure to fight for Deaf rights.<sup>[9]</sup> Although the Motion Picture Committee films had been studied mostly by linguists, they represented an important part of Deaf history. The films were certainly made in an effort to preserve sign language at a time when its future was uncertain. Burch also suggests that the films can also be seen as an endeavor to bring the community together. However, this paper seeks to show that the films did more than just unite a community. They also defined what the mores of such a community should be. These films represent the best efforts of a community still finding its voice to articulate what it believed in and what it should care about. This is why the films are the key to understanding the early days of Deaf Culture in America.

## Oralism

The birth of the Motion Picture Committee films lay in the Great Communications Debate of the late 19th century; in the struggle of Oralists and Manualists to achieve the kind of Deaf education each group considered best.<sup>[10]</sup> The movement toward Oralism started in Europe in 1880 at the Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf, better known as the Milan Conference for its location. The advertised purpose of this congress was for Deaf educators to meet and discuss best practices. In reality, it was an attack against signs that culminated in eight resolutions. All resolutions banned the use of sign language and recommended Oral-only education. Both Edward Miner Gallaudet and his father Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet spoke out against Oral only education<sup>[11]</sup>, but could do nothing to change the minds of the congress. Oral only education swept throughout Europe in a few short years. The movement took longer to gain teeth in America.<sup>[12]</sup>

The arguments for Oralism seemed to make sense to a hearing community with no practical knowledge of Deafness. It was true that Deaf people had to live in a hearing society that expected people to speak and understand sound. Also true was the fact that Deaf people who did not speak well were often treated as if they had mental disabilities and faced job discrimination. Deaf people who spoke and read lips found it easier to make their way in the hearing world as equals. Oralists believed that they were doing the Deaf a favor by forcing them to learn a difficult skill that would benefit them later in life.<sup>[13]</sup>

Oralism, however, did not take into account the vast numbers of Deaf people who did not have enough residual hearing to be successful at speaking or lip-reading. It also did not take into consideration that even successful lip-readers understand about one third of a conversation. Deaf leaders also felt that Oral only education often had a

negative effect on self-esteem, since it focused only on speech and placed no emphasis on other skills that Deaf people were able to perform. If schools teaching sign language disappeared, there would be no place for those who were not Oral successes to go. Often these "Oral Failures" received no education at all. Even those who knew how to speak found sign language helpful, especially during events with public speaking. "A few words we might understand -- many more we might *pretend* to understand -- but the whole sermon -- *never!* It is a physical impossibility," said one Orally-educated woman in an NAD pamphlet [emphasis hers]. [14]

Leading the charge for the Oralist movement in the United States was Alexander Graham Bell, whose experiences with deafness gave his opinions weight. Bell grew up with a deaf mother and married a deaf woman who was a former pupil of his. He taught at the famous Hartford School for the Deaf in Connecticut, the first Deaf school ever founded in America. He was a colleague of many Manualists and, at one time, many considered him a friend. Bell's family trade was elocution. His father created Bell's Visible Speech in 1864, a set of phonetic mouth shapes designed to teach the deaf to speak easily. Bell's Visible Speech never worked as it was purported, and was dropped by the time Alexander Graham Bell reached adulthood. Still, the family name brought to mind successful speech for those who had trouble. [15]

Once Bell gained fame and fortune as an inventor, he used them both to set up his own school for the Deaf. The school was decisively Oral-only, and very well politicized. After setting up his own school, Bell began spreading Oral-only education throughout the country. He wrote and published extensively on the subject and gave many lectures. He was successful. One by one, states began to pass Oral-only laws despite Deaf protests. [16]

Bell's stance on Oral-only education was detrimental for the Deaf community, but his interest in Eugenics harmed them more. Although Bell himself did not support forced sterilization of people deemed genetically inferior, many Eugenic organizations did. Once his school was up and running, Bell launched a full-scale attack against the Deaf. He claimed they were trying to form their own race and that educators of the Deaf were contributing to the process by allowing the Deaf to socialize with each other and have organizations. To make his case he often relied on pseudo-scientific evidence, such as assuming children with the same last name were related to each other. He felt that under no circumstances should a Deaf person be allowed to marry another Deaf person. He also attacked sign language as being practically a foreign language and claimed that Deaf people were not real Americans at all. George Veditz, a prominent Deaf activist, said "It is evident that the one person upon whom we must cast the odium of having haled the deaf into this category [of those who should not marry] is Dr. Bell, whom his wealth has rendered the most powerful, and his hobby-riding propensity the most subtle, because he comes in the guise of a friend, and, therefore, the most to be feared, enemy of the American deaf, past or present." [17]

## Manualism

In order to fully comprehend the Manualist argument, it is first necessary to understand deafness as a medical condition. Deafness is defined as a condition where people cannot rely on their hearing to function in society. This does not always mean that deaf people cannot hear anything at all. In fact, many describe deafness as more a matter of degrees than a matter of total hearing loss. Unless a person's eardrum has been damaged through accident, most deaf people are able to hear some sounds. Those sounds may be at the decibel level of a jet engine, but this is still information Deaf people can use to interpret the world around them. [18]

Proponents of Manualism pointed to the fact that degrees of Deafness often did not allow everyone to learn to lip read and speak easily. Deaf people with more residual hearing tended to have a higher success rate when learning oral techniques. Those with little to no residual hearing tended to do very poorly in oral programs, and were often labeled "Oral Failures," by anti-sign schools. Often, if these Oral Failures could not complete their studies in an Oral program, they left school and spent most of their lives on the fringes of society, unable to read or obtain any but menial employment. This was a major argument the NAD put forth in its pamphlets in favor of Manualism. [19]

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Instead of classing a whole segment of the population as unteachable, the NAD and other Manualists advocated instruction in sign language first. With sign, everyone had access to a common language and could communicate with each other. Those who looked like they might have a lot of success learning to lip read and speak could pursue that education. Those who looked as if they wouldn't benefit from those teachings could be taught to read and write English from sign language, giving them literacy and a way to communicate with the outside world. Sign language schools also coupled academic classes with vocational education for their older students. This ensured that no one left school uneducated.[\[20\]](#)

Other arguments put forth by the NAD in favor of Manualism included the difficulty of lip reading in certain situations. One woman, educated at Bell's school, lamented that her lip reading skills and speech were considered expert by many, yet she still couldn't enjoy a public lecture. Often, she could not sit close enough to the podium to see the speaker's lips and therefore had no idea what was happening on stage. Many other Deaf people also cited how difficult it was to lip read in crowded situations. Often, it was hard for them to follow who was speaking. Modern studies have proven that even expert lip readers understand only thirty percent of a conversation. The number can go up to fifty percent if the lip reader and the speaker are very well known to each other, or if the situation has a predictable "script" such as a checkout counter. Although the NAD did not have scientific studies to back it up in 1910, it instinctively felt this inequality and tried to make others aware of it.[\[21\]](#)

For the Deaf, the crusade against sign language was more than just an attack against their favorite method of instruction. Deaf Schools were often the center of a vast community of Deaf people, and former pupils often settled permanently around the campus. Many alumni also sought jobs teaching at Deaf schools. Schools would often hold events and conferences in sign that were open to the public, creating an equal social experience that Deaf people were unlikely to have elsewhere. Oral-only schools stopped offering programs in sign language. They fired Deaf teachers because they could not teach children to speak. The Deaf saw Oralism not just as a poor method of instruction, but also as a threat to their way of life.[\[22\]](#)

The crusade for sign language was important from a cultural standpoint as well. Sign language faced many attacks from Oralists that were not based on instructional methods, but on their status as American citizens. Bell and others levied attacks against them, charging that American sign language was not English, and that Deaf people were not Americans as a result. The charge that sign language kept Deaf people apart from society was rampant. Deaf people felt the need to prove that their language was priceless and that they were still American citizens with the same cultural traditions of those with full hearing.[\[23\]](#)

The quest of the NAD to protect sign language was rooted in the heart of the Deaf Community's culture. The community faced fears from many different avenues. They feared that those who could not learn lip reading and speech would have no place to turn, that community events would end and weaken the community itself, and that eugenicists would claim they were not Americans and force them to undergo terrible medical procedures. The fight for Manualism was a fight for a way of life.

### The Making of the Films

Before the fight against Oralism emerged, the NAD was best known for its quest to refurbish the statue of Thomas Gallaudet on the college campus, and for a collection of funds to erect a statue of the Abbe De l'Epee, a French Deaf advocate in America. Rallying together to fight against oppression was a new idea for this organization. Oralism gave the Deaf community a reason to solidify quickly. By 1912, the NAD had printed thousands of circular pamphlets full of testimonials against Oral only methods. They were advertised as being written by "Educators of the Deaf, Orally Educated Deaf, and those competent to speak on the subject." The NAD also decided to collect money from "the deaf in the land," and would dedicate the money to a special fund used only to overthrow Oralists. It would use the fund specifically to print even more pamphlets, pay for their circulation, and also to lobby political candidates for support.[\[24\]](#)

The NAD launched a full scale effort to defeat Oralist ideals, but Deaf leaders worried that they had waited too long to fight back, especially as more and more states began to pass Oral-only laws. If sign language might go extinct, it seemed necessary to preserve samples of excellent and model signers. This way, future generations of less oppressed Deaf would have something upon which to resurrect their language. The new media of film seemed to be the very thing the NAD was looking for, almost made for recording a silent language. George Veditz, NAD President, suggested filming masters of the sign language at the National Convention of the NAD in 1910. The cause was immediately popular. The NAD's promises that sign language could be preserved, and that the Deaf community could have lectures of their own celebrities, spurred individuals to donate their own money to the Motion Picture fund. Over five thousand dollars were collected through ten cent donations of Deaf citizens, many of whom were not regular members of the NAD.[\[25\]](#)

As a national institution, the NAD operated largely through conventions. They would meet every few years and elect a new Executive Board. No president was allowed to serve more than one term from convention to convention. Veditz proposed the idea of the films at the 1910 convention, set up a committee to take charge of the effort, and then stepped down. Olof Hanson took up the mantle as President in 1910. Roy J. Stewart was elected business manager of the Film Committee, and Oscar Regensburg the treasurer. Between the three of them, these men saw the films through to their completion.[\[26\]](#)

At first, all seemed to go smoothly. The committee used the funds to produce a film of Edward Miner Gallaudet, the most beloved celebrity of the Deaf community at the time. His father, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet had brought sign language, and therefore education, to the American Deaf Community. He did this by convincing the Deaf Frenchman, Laurent Clerc, to come from Paris to be their teacher, a story that Christopher Krentz deems the "*Deaf American Creation Story*." Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, Edward Miner's father, campaigned tirelessly for funds to support the first Deaf school, and was instrumental in setting up the Hartford School for the Deaf and Dumb in 1817. Edward Miner Gallaudet was the direct link to this past greatness. He had been the first president of Gallaudet College and an outspoken advocate for Manualism. He was also aging quickly, and therefore, the most important person to film.[\[27\]](#)

Gallaudet did not feel honored to be the first signer asked to pose for a film. "According to our Washington Representative," Regensburg told Hanson, "he was extremely sensitive to the prevailing belief that he was a very, very old man and fast approaching the grave and that the 'picture' was wanted pretty much as a death mask is wanted." Regensburg put pressure on Gallaudet to conform to their desires, and their offer to pay him eventually secured his agreement. He gave a lecture relating the story of the folk tale *Lorna Doone*, interweaving the story of the book with a description of his family vacation to England. The film lasted for just over sixteen minutes.[\[28\]](#)

Unfortunately, the amateur film company the NAD hired to make the film did not deliver on all of their promises. The final print showed light streaks flashing across the screen -- called "Forked Lightning" by the industry professionals the committee consulted later. The defect was in the negative itself and could not be fixed without re-filming the entire reel. Gallaudet was pleased with the results despite these problems and refused to re-take the film. "I must say that it seemed to me a very good representation of myself on the lecture platform, and I very much doubt whether a second attempt would secure a better picture," he told Roy J. Stewart in a letter. [\[29\]](#)

The film was well received by most. Regensburg's wife told him that the depiction was so lifelike, "the only thing Dr. Gallaudet failed to do was step off the platform and shake hands all around." In 1911, the NAD made another film of Presentation Day at Gallaudet College, and the two films were coupled together to create the impression that the viewer was attending Presentation Day and then sitting through a lecture.[\[30\]](#)

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Unfortunately, internal strife kept the NAD from making any more films for two years. Whereas Veditz was decisive, pushing through his agenda with an iron will, Hanson was obsessed with consensus. He would often delay votes for months in order to give everyone a chance to exchange letters and have their full say. When he was criticized for his behavior, he said "Veditz may have run things with amazing rapidity, but it is an open question whether he did not over-step his authority in many cases. I would rather not do any business at all than do it in an illegal manner." The two men did not like each other, and neither handled the transition of power well. [31]

Hanson was missing large chunks of information, especially about the Motion Picture Committee. The money was being held by several state treasurers, said a rumor that floated through the Executive Committee. These rumors also claimed that Veditz had set up a committee to disburse the money that would not answer to the NAD, but would spend the funds as it pleased. As the money had been collected by a circular letter printed on NAD letterhead, this did not sit well with Hanson nor with others on the executive board: "All moneys collected *in the name of the NAD* and especially when the official head is used, should be under the control of the Executive Committee of the Association; it is incorporated and is liable to be held responsible in any case," Hanson wrote [emphasis his].

Veditz was not sitting on the Executive Board at the time, and it appears he was not directly consulted about any of the NAD's problems. He was forced to have his say later via the *Deaf Mutes Journal*, the official newspaper of the NAD. Two proposals were put forward by those who were consulted. [32] Proposal number one appointed the committee picked by Veditz to disburse the money and make the films. In order for the NAD to have oversight, an additional member of the committee would be added; that member would be the NAD president. This option was not Hanson's favorite. He wrote to the committee "I do not desire to be a member of the committee and be burdened by details; but I do want to be informed as to what they decide on." [33]

Instead, Hanson had a different proposal. Since the members appointed to the original committee were all members of the NAD, the Executive Board could vote to make them a separate committee of their own, reporting to the Executive Board. This way they could do what they wanted, but the NAD would still have oversight and would still receive reports. [34]

*The Deaf Mute's Journal* published raging debates on this issue for over a year. There were nine people on the Executive Board who were all elected from across the country. It was more effective to send a letter to the printer than to type out nine copies of whatever correspondence they wished to send everyone, so official business was usually conducted through the journal in this way. Hanson, true to his character, wanted to make sure that everyone had their full say before a vote was called.

Both factions went on the warpath against each other, and Veditz attacked Hanson directly. "You have probably noted Mr. Veditz's attacks on me. I have refrained from replying to him because I think we can both be engaged in better business than quarreling. But I shall have something to say some day," Hanson told the Executive Committee. Although many on the board had hurt feelings, Oscar Regensburg especially felt that Hanson's unwillingness to approve the committee meant that he had a personal vendetta against Regensburg as treasurer. Regensburg felt as if he was being called up in front of the entire community for financial crimes he hadn't committed. [35]

The final vote was held in 1912 and Hanson's proposal passed by one vote. The fight had been so bitter that the members of the losing faction all sent in their resignations in a joint letter. Regensburg mailed the letter to the Executive Committee, although it had everyone's name on it. Hanson refused to accept the resignations. The letter was typewritten and did not contain signatures from all the men resigning. Hanson told Regensburg that is was impossible for him to accept anything without signatures, and that he would not accept resignations anyway unless



forced. These members, including Regensburg, were valuable to the work of the NAD. Hanson eventually assuaged all hurt feelings and convinced all members to stay.<sup>[36]</sup>

The fight took so long and encompassed so much that it had almost been two full years since the NAD recorded the Gallaudet and Presentation Day films. Roy J. Stewart, as manager, did the best he could during this time to have the two films screened in as many places as possible. Stewart felt that there was a clear demand for more films as fast as the NAD could produce them. With the question of funding now decided, the NAD set out to make as many films as possible in as short a time as possible.<sup>[37]</sup>

The Gallaudet film had been an expensive learning experience. It cost the committee \$700 for the print of the film and the damaged negative. Film companies charged by the foot to print film, so Hanson urged the committee to make shorter films to maximize their ever-shrinking budget. The Executive Board set a non-binding cap on the price for each film at five hundred dollars, negatives included. In a show of good faith, the Film Committee tried to keep the cost at around three hundred per film. The NAD also picked a different film company to work with: The Colonial Film Company. The company was still not a major name in the industry, but it had a good reputation for quality product. Although there was some criticism of its choice, the NAD countered with its argument "that the preference has been given to the Colonial Film Company because of its reasonable terms, the marked excellence of its work and also because its manager, Mr. B., uses the manual alphabet like a native and has become quite familiar with the sign language."<sup>[38]</sup>

The NAD made a vast amount of films -- eight in all -- in early 1913 before they realized that they could benefit from the Deaf convention happening in Cleveland, Ohio later in the year. Many of the Deaf masters they wished to capture would be congregating at the convention, which would save in travel expenses. In addition, the Colonial Film Company agreed to charge a low, flat rate to make as many films as the NAD wanted at the convention. The NAD would still have to pay printing costs individually, based on film length, but the savings for the NAD promised to be enormous as they would not have to hire someone to film each lecture individually.<sup>[39]</sup>

Each member of the Motion Picture Committee submitted a list of sign users they wished to see preserved on film. The lists were compared and contrasted, and the committee finally compiled them into a master list. Then, the committee sent out invitations to the men they wished to film and scheduled appointments between convention events.

A total of six films were made at the convention. The committee originally planned to make eight films, but two of the lecturers proved impossible to find. Members of the committee suggested that one man was extremely shy, and the other suffered from eye problems which made him unwilling to appear on film for posterity. Even without those two films, the plan could well be deemed a rousing success. The crowning glory was the film *Address at the Tomb of Garfield*. The entire convention came out to stand behind the speaker and present a wreath to the fallen president. Members of the Deaf community who had supported the films monetarily were now subjects of the films themselves.<sup>[40]</sup>

The NAD was worried that its funds were not enough to make as many films as it would like. It decided not only to make its own films, but to purchase films featuring sign language that others had made. By the time the Motion Picture committee made its report at the Cleveland Convention, the NAD also owned four films that were purchased from private parties. Although this did not allow them to craft their message and take images of the most respected men of their time, it did provide the NAD with another source of films featuring exemplary sign. The committee also purchased the films for much less than it would have cost to make the films themselves. One of the films, featuring the Lord's Prayer, was donated at no cost to the NAD.<sup>[41]</sup>

In 1913, the force behind the Motion Picture Committee began to fall apart. At the convention, the NAD elected a new president and Hanson's term was over. In 1914, Oscar Regensburg died. This threw the Motion Picture



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committee into chaos. Regensburg was the backbone of the committee, but he had also given the financial books over to Stewart without anyone knowing about it. Regensburg's widow spent several weeks frantically searching for the books before Stewart realized what was happening and notified the committee that he had the records. Of the four men who championed the films and forced them through, only Stewart was left. Stewart was immediately elected as Regensburg's successor. Now he was not only in charge of managing and distributing the films, but of keeping the financial accounts as well.<sup>[42]</sup>

Stewart, Veditz, and Hanson were deeply affected by Regensburg's death. Veditz wrote, "We ought by all means to preserve everything we have in film shape to remind us of Reggy. I regret that he was not asked to pose in regular address. He was too modest to put himself forward." Stewart addressed the National Convention in 1915, saying "I wish to say that the presence of our former chairman, treasurer, and friend Dr. Oscar H. Regensburg - is greatly missed... His enthusiasm inspired enthusiasm in those connected with him on the Moving Picture Committee... the worry attending it very likely had a detrimental effect on his health."<sup>[43]</sup>

The convention of 1915 marked the beginning of the end for the films. Although two new films were made in 1915, the deaf community did not feel that it was as imperative to make new films as they had five years earlier. War raged in Europe, where the Oralists had all but won the fight over Deaf education. Films were expensive and it seemed frivolous to spend so much money on entertainment when money was needed in the trenches to fight Oralism. Briefly, the committee discussed making several cheaper landscape films of Deaf monuments instead, but that was deemed a dishonest use of funds. The money had been collected for the purpose of "taking and preserving, in motion pictures, Addresses and Lectures delivered in the sign language of the Deaf by famous Educators of the Deaf," with the stipulation that any money left over would go to an endowment fund to fight Oralism. Landscape films were not mentioned in the original request for money.<sup>[44]</sup>

The NAD voted to turn over the majority of the Motion Picture fund to the Endowment fund. By the end of the convention, Stewart was left with a few hundred dollars to make reprints if needed. Although the committee would not make any new films, they were not disbanded. That way they could continue to ensure proper storage of the films and make reprints as needed.<sup>[45]</sup>

By 1916, the films had traveled to almost every corner of the United States. Demand for them began to fall. In 1920, the last film was included in the collection. It had been a long time since the collection boasted any new films, but the NAD felt they wanted to celebrate Armistice Day, the end of World War I, in some fashion. They filmed a rendition of *Yankee Doodle* and the committee voted to include it in the collection with the other NAD films for preservation purposes. This film is the only film of the collection that was not circulated, but put into storage almost immediately.<sup>[46]</sup>

After Stewart turned over the money to the Endowment Fund, he realized that preservation would now become the committee's number one priority. Stewart wrote to Eastman Kodak in 1915 for information on how best to store film so it would last a hundred years or more. They told him, "...the motion picture business is only about fifteen years old. We cannot therefore tell from actual experience whether it will be possible to preserve the negatives so that good prints can be made fifty or one hundred years from now. So far as we know, negatives... should keep indefinitely if they are wrapped carefully and stored in a moderately cool, dry place." Stewart launched one last collection effort to provide re-prints of all the films. The new copies were placed in the cool, dry basement at Gallaudet College.<sup>[47]</sup>

## The Films

The subject matter of the films was the most important indication of cultural values. This was the first time the Deaf had launched such a large effort to record stories and cultural figures that meant something. In the wide-scale distribution of the films, the NAD also managed to disseminate the cohesive idea of Deaf cultural mores to the wider community. The films fall into one of three main categories: the urge to protect Deaf Culture through activism, the

idea that Deaf are as intellectual as hearing people, and the focus on American patriotism to prove that the Deaf belong in American society.

### Deaf Culture

Many of the films promoted Deaf Activism, and this was obvious subject matter. After all, the reason the films were made was to preserve the language amid what looked to be sure extinction. Many Deaf community leaders were embroiled in this fight to their elbows, and often these leaders were the people the Motion Picture Committee wished to preserve on film. Films in this category varied widely, however. While there were some strong and rousing calls to fight for the preservation of sign language, all the films harken back to what Christopher Krentz calls the *Deaf American Creation Story*.<sup>[48]</sup>

The story of the *Deaf American Creation Story* centered on Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and his quest to bring a teacher to America to educate his Deaf neighbor, a beautiful and intelligent little girl named Alice. Surely Alice was not the only brilliant Deaf person in America hungering for education, her father thought. He financed Gallaudet's trip to Europe to see if they could establish a school in the states. Gallaudet eventually convinced a Deaf man, Laurent Clerc, to come over from France and establish a school with him. The two are credited with bringing the light of both book learning and Christianity to the American Deaf. All of the films referenced this fable of idealistic beginnings.<sup>[49]</sup> The earliest film made to engender Deaf Activism was Robert P. McGregor's tirade against Oralism, *The Irishman and The Flea, and The Lady and The Cake*. Although this film did not reference the *Deaf American Creation Story* directly, it linked to it subtly. The fine lady, with her "let them eat cake" attitude, is clearly based on Marie Antoinette. By linking his story to French history, McGregor is linking to sign language's own French origins. Hanson was not excited about the subject matter, saying he "would leave choice of subject to Mac and his friends who have seen [McGregor's] delivery. Should think Paris impressions preferable to the flea speech." Still, this film was one of the most popular in the set. McGregor is also the only subject who was filmed more than once, recording a film called *A Lay Sermon* at the 1913 convention later that year.<sup>[50]</sup>

*The Irishman and The Flea* was a satirical story of a quest to find a "perfect oral success," a Deaf person whose speech was indistinguishable from a hearing person. Just like the Irishman who could not catch an elusive flea on his body, so society could never catch the perfect oral success. McGregor stood in a dark suit on a dark background, and his hands danced as he tried to catch the flea. His hands rumbled like a train as the audience traveled from Boston to New York to Chicago, only to be told that this oral success had moved. He was impossible to catch.<sup>[51]</sup> This film is damaged, and only a short segment of McGregor's next story survives. It was the quest of a starving girl to explain to a fine lady why she needed bread and not cake. McGregor likened bread to sign language, and cake to Oralism. The film cut off abruptly in mid-sentence.<sup>[52]</sup>

The second film, made just before the 1913 convention, is by far the most famous of the NAD's film collection. This was the film made by Veditz himself. Veditz started by telling the audience of the Milan Conference of 1880, and how it made Oral only instruction mandatory throughout Europe. He then showed how earnestly the Deaf of Europe longed to be in a place like America. "They look upon us Americans as a jailed man chained at the legs might look upon a man free to wander at will," Veditz said. The difference is that American Deaf still had sign language and were allowed to use it, he claimed. Still, the language was slowly being taken away, and had already shown signs of damage from suppression. It was everyone's duty to "Protect and preserve our beautiful sign language as the noblest gift God has given Deaf people." Veditz's use of poignant sign and facial expressions ensures that this plea stirs the hearts of all who see his lecture and inspires them to act against Oralism.<sup>[53]</sup>

Veditz, too, tied his film in with the *Deaf American Creation Story*. He cited the beautiful gift of sign language that Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc brought to the American Deaf community, and claimed that this was the reason American Deaf were venerated by their European counterparts. It is because of the education and religion Gallaudet and Clerc gave the Deaf that they were able to live free of oppression, a state that was changing quickly.

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Two other films were made at the 1913 convention, only days apart. The first film was entitled *Memories of Old Hartford*. Hartford, Connecticut, was where Gallaudet and Clerc set up the first school for the Deaf. Hotchkiss, the signer, was one of the oldest people filmed by the Motion Picture Committee. He had clear memories of his days at the school. He was also taught in part by Laurent Clerc, and had many interactions with him.<sup>[54]</sup>

He told two stories of Laurent Clerc. One story detailed the experiences of a lazy boy who forgot to bring Clerc firewood and played instead. The boy felt Clerc's wrath when he was embarrassed in front of all his friends. He became remorseful, and finally brought Clerc firewood. The second story Hotchkiss told is of a guest lecture Clerc gave to the class. Clerc had long been retired and did not keep a regular teaching schedule, but his excellent sign was considered the model for all the rest. He performed guest lectures frequently. The lecture Hotchkiss related was about the importance of reading and writing correctly ordered English sentences. Clerc showed the importance by comparing and contrasting the terms "Live to Eat," and "Eat to Live." The last bit of the film recounted a sermon by another teacher at the school.<sup>[55]</sup>

This film is the most linked to the *Deaf American Creation Story*. It is about the lives of those at the Hartford school, and reiterates the importance of certain Deaf historical figures, such as Clerc. The film directly showed Clerc teaching lessons, and passed the memory of his benevolence down to future generations. The film was also about preserving sign from the generation before Hotchkiss. Hotchkiss used the normal storytelling techniques of American sign language to step into the shoes of Clerc and other teachers at the school. He related their speeches as near as he could remember to their actual lectures, effectually becoming them for the short time he was speaking. By using their signs to tell the story, he was preserving whatever sign the community still retained from that first generation of signers.<sup>[56]</sup>

The last film is a film called *A Plea for a Statue of De l'Epee in America*. De l'Epee was a French priest, Laurent Clerc's original teacher, and the pioneer of the manual alphabet which is so important to sign language even today. The film was unusual, as it was the only film to feature both a speaker and a signer in a time before sound technology was possible. The two men, Rev. Dr. Cloud and Rev. Father McCarthy, stood on a dark stage in dark suits and related their message at the same time. Why they would choose to have a speaker on a silent film is unknown, although it could be an attempt to make a powerful case for Manualism. In this silent medium, the signed version of the speech was much more intelligible than the spoken version.<sup>[57]</sup>

Both men told the story of the Abbe De l'Epee and how he brought education to the Deaf in France: "departed from the beaten path of glory and made a new path, more glorious still, to be followed, in later years, by Sicard, by Clerc, by the Gallaudets, and by all who have been, and by all who are yet to be, the true friends, teachers, and benefactors of the deaf." They showed his importance not just to the Deaf community in France, but also to the Deaf community in America by extension. A fund should be set up, they argued, to have a statue erected to a great man.<sup>[58]</sup>

The Abbe De l'Epee was a figure that was also tied to the *Deaf American Creation Story*. He ran the Deaf school in France where Gallaudet originally met Clerc. Because he was a famous teacher of the Deaf and a teacher of Clerc himself, by extension he was seen as being a link in the chain of Deaf history. If the Abbe De l'Epee had not been a champion of sign language, Clerc may not have been available to found sign language education in America.

All four films spoke to different issues within the Deaf community, but all were linked by the common theme of empowering Deaf people and preserving the story they told of themselves for future generations through the *Deaf American Creation Story*. Although the films may have seemed to feature wildly different subjects, they were all similar in the way they intended to protect Deaf cultural mores for future generations. Both Veditz and McGregor wished to preserve sign language, and Hotchkiss, Cloud and McCarthy all wished to preserve the community's connection to important historical figures. Although their methods and overall messages were different, their goals were the same. These films placed Deaf culture and the preservation of it above all other aims.

### The Deaf Are Intelligent

Before the Hartford school was created by Clerc and Gallaudet, many in America thought that Deaf people could not think or reason and were mentally inferior to hearing people. The community of Deaf people making these films was a few scant generations away from these ideas. In addition, the community faced attacks from Alexander Graham Bell and other eugenicists who lumped them into a category of people who had true learning disabilities. The NAD was eager to prove that they were not mentally disabled, and many of the films gave evidence of strong Deaf intelligence. All of the films featured college educated signers, but these four films went farther. The subject matter of the films themselves attempt to show that the Deaf had mastered American intellectualism.<sup>[59]</sup>

The first film ever made, that of Edward Miner Gallaudet, certainly fell into this category. The title is *The Lorna Doone County of Devonshire, England*. Gallaudet recounted the story of Lorna Doone, a woman who married a man from the family of her nemesis and then drowned. Gallaudet wove his story together with the personal story of his own family trip to the Lorna Doone County.<sup>[60]</sup>

Although other films have become grainy through age, this film is the only one the NAD considered flawed at the outset. The movie screen flashed from light to dark in a "Forked Lightning" effect. In addition, Gallaudet stood in front of a light background featuring a country landscape. This made his hands very hard to see. Gallaudet refused to retake the film or make others, since he was very ill when asked the second time.<sup>[61]</sup>

Gallaudet's choice of subject matter was noteworthy. His choice of a well-known story showed that the Deaf had an appreciation of literature, and that they also understood folk tales from other countries. The complex narrative of the piece also spoke to intellectualism, as Gallaudet entwined the fictional legend in with the story of his own vacation. The film proved that the Deaf understood literature and desired to travel. They were not house-bound by their inability to hear, but instead were cosmopolitan.

Gallaudet was one of the main champions against Oralism for the Deaf, yet he chose not to give a more rousing speech about Deaf rights. Gallaudet had retired just before the filming, however, and perhaps he felt that his job as a spokesperson was over. His contribution to the message of Deaf intellectualism was highly valued by the NAD.<sup>[62]</sup> *The Discovery of Chloroform*, made in 1913, was another film that touted intellectualism. This film was one of the films made at the 1913 convention. It differed slightly from the established form of dark background with a signer wearing dark clothes. In this film, three men in dark suits sat at a table on a stage. One of the three men was Oscar Regensburg. He introduced the speaker, Dr. G. T. Dougherty, a Deaf scientist. Dougherty stood up and told the story of how chloroform was invented.<sup>[63]</sup>

The story started with the birth of the inventor, and how his mother suffered more than usually in the pangs of childbirth. This left the inventor determined to invent a cure and ease the pain of mothers everywhere. In the quest for the right drug, however, the inventor and the men in his labs suffered much persecution. Not wishing to harm others, they tested the drugs on themselves to find out what worked. Other scientists saw them staggering around, intoxicated, and did not take them seriously. Still, science prevailed, and chloroform was invented. Queen Victoria used chloroform during the birth of several of her children, and the drug became popular. The inventor was lauded for easing the lives of mothers everywhere.<sup>[64]</sup>

The message of the film was rooted in that of science and scientific experimentation. It was also a message of perseverance despite ridicule. Important pursuits required people to push through ridicule and misunderstanding to achieve scientific greatness. This film not only showed that Deaf people understood the stories of scientific discovery, but also the methods behind such discovery, and the trials and tribulations that many have faced in the pursuit of truth.

Another film made at the 1913 convention was *Dom Pedro's Visit to Gallaudet College*. This film is thoroughly damaged, and only a small sliver of the beginning is comprehensible. Its end has been lost to time. Because of the damage, the story is short -- one of the shortest in the collection. The film told the story of an impromptu visit made

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by the president of Spain to Gallaudet College. President Gallaudet was busy in meetings, and had to be interrupted to meet with the president.[\[65\]](#)

This film showed the international importance of Gallaudet College, and by extension any signing Deaf in America. By showing others that the Deaf had international importance and that they were valued for their sign language, the films show that Deaf ideas mattered. By showing Don Pedro's interests in humanitarianism, they also showed that he understood their struggle for equality and wished to support their efforts.[\[66\]](#)

The last film in this section, also filmed at the convention, was entitled *A Lay Sermon*, and was the second film featuring Robert P. McGregor. McGregor was a favorite of the Deaf community, and was the only person asked to be the subject of more than one film. Unlike his other film, McGregor stood stately behind a podium with his white beard dripping from his chin. McGregor gave a solemn sermon as befits the seriousness of religion.[\[67\]](#)

McGregor chose the topic "The Universal Brotherhood of Man." He claimed that, because Jesus was everyone's brother and because God was everyone's father, all human beings on this earth were brothers of each other and should behave accordingly. McGregor also claimed that, because of the way the world was structured in Jesus' time, it was much easier to keep the tenets of brotherhood with all people. In the modern age of transportation where it was fairly easy to travel around the world, it was ever more important to be brothers to the world. "Our Father," is the most important saying in the bible, McGregor claimed, because He is everyone's father whether they are Deaf or hearing.[\[68\]](#)

The original argument on the importance of Deaf education was centered in religion. Deaf people who understood the bible could be saved and go to heaven. McGregor showed the results of these teachings in his sermon, and that they worked. By delivering the lecture in signs, and in the humanitarian message behind his sermon, he also relayed the message that current educational methods were working, and the Deaf should be allowed to continue using their favored method.[\[69\]](#)

Because it was long thought that the Deaf could not think or reason, it was necessary for them to make a case for intellectualism. These four films proclaimed the intelligence of Deaf people in varied ways, but they all arrived at the same message: Deaf people are important, they are smart, they are doing fine on their own, and should be allowed to continue their education however they see fit. They made a compelling case for how vast and deep the minds of the Deaf community had become through the short generation between the establishing of the Hartford School and the group who made the films. By exhibiting this success, the Deaf were making an argument that education did not need the kind of revolution proposed by Oralism. Manualists were doing just fine on their own.[\[70\]](#)

### American Patriotism

As the years wore on, there was a shift in the subject matter of the films. They no longer featured rallying cries for the preservation of sign, and films where men lectured on smart subjects became scarce. Instead, lectures on patriotic subjects became the new vogue. The fad started at the end of 1913, when convention organizers invited the entire community to join them on camera for an address at the tomb of President Garfield. By 1915, the NAD was making all of their films in this fashion. The two films made in 1915 featured Abraham Lincoln as the main protagonist. The switch in subject matter may at first appear illogical, but there were two reasons for it. The first was the outbreak of war in Europe, and the second was a new round of attacks levied at the community by Bell and his supporters.[\[71\]](#)

World War 1 started in June, 1914. The Deaf community was affected by the European war deeply, and the NAD considered cancelling the 1915 convention as they were unsure if anyone would feel like traveling. The thoughts of the community were with the turmoil overseas. It was no surprise that the community would choose to make films steeped in the American spirit. Only two films were made in 1915, and both were on patriotic subjects. In addition,

those two films both featured President Abraham Lincoln, harkening back to the last war Americans remembered, the Civil War. [\[72\]](#)

Another reason the Deaf community sought to make patriotic films was because of people like Bell who claimed that sign language was practically a foreign language, and therefore Deaf people were hardly Americans at all. Deaf Americans were eager to show that they were true US citizens who understood traditional American values. The outbreak of the war made this assertion more important for the community to put forth. They were worried not just about the threat of Oralism, but also about attacks to their very place in the framework of the country. There were four films within this section, each detailing a different aspect of American Patriotism. [\[73\]](#)

The first film in this section, *Address at the Tomb of Garfield*, was made at the end of the 1913 NAD convention. Organizers invited everyone at the convention to caravan to the former President's burial site and appear on film themselves. Many at the convention obliged, and the back of the film was filled with men in suits wearing bowler hats. Women in white dresses stood next to them, the volume of their puffed sleeves only outdone by the broad brims of their hats. An unknown man introduced Willis Hubbard and then joined the crowd again. Hubbard stepped forward and delivered an address about Garfield's commitment to education and his efforts to help the Deaf establish Gallaudet University. He described the heartache of all Americans, and told how "the entire nation was anxiously awaiting, their hearts daily swinging as with a pendulum between Hope and Fear." [\[74\]](#)

By describing the grief at President Garfield's death as shared experience among all Americans, Hubbard was folding in Deafness with the mainstream American experience. He was forging a connection between the two, and telling the world that Deaf and hearing people were not so different. They all reacted to the same cultural tragedies in similar ways. They were all Americans.

The two films detailing American patriotism made in 1915 depicted scenes from the life of Abraham Lincoln. The first film was entitled *Lincoln's Gettysburg Address*, by the Reverend A. D. Bryant. The two parts were obviously filmed separately and then spliced together. The film opened up on an old man in a meadow. In his black suit, he stood before a tall, white statue that was obscured by the frame of the projector. He explained that this was the field of Gettysburg, where Lincoln gave his famous address. The monument behind him marked the spot where Lincoln stood and spoke so long ago. One by one, black cards flashed onto the screen with the names of various monuments, followed by a film of the monument itself. When the monuments were finished, the film shifted to a black stage. A different man in a black suit, his face round and whiskered, speculated on Lincoln's opinion of his own speech and then gives the Gettysburg Address in sign. [\[75\]](#)

The second Lincoln film, *The Signing of the Gallaudet Charter*, also made in 1915, told about Lincoln and his decision to sign the Gallaudet College charter to endow higher education for the Deaf. In the story, Lincoln asked advice about whether to allow the school to be established, consulting both Congress and Deaf leaders. Instead of trusting his own preconceived notions of Deafness, the Lincoln in this tale relied on credible authorities to make the decision for him. The makers of the film were showing the world that Lincoln consulted the correct professionals before passing legislation impacting the lives of the Deaf, and implied that others should do the same. [\[76\]](#)

Lincoln is one of the most recognized figures in presidential history. By creating a concept of Lincoln as a historical figure for the Deaf community as well as the hearing, the filmmakers were able to make a connection with mainstream American patriotism. The first film proclaimed that the Deaf understood Lincoln and the Civil War, and the second film showed that Lincoln understood the Deaf and looked out for their interests.

Another place the NAD sought to prove their connection to patriotism was in the 1920 rendering of Yankee Doodle. The film was made to celebrate the end of World War I. Although the NAD was no longer making films at this time, the Executive Committee voted to include it with the rest of the films for preservation purposes. At the start of the film, two well-dressed soldiers in 1776 uniforms stepped out of a copse of trees. They marched in disciplined order and then the screen faded out. Instead of handsome and disciplined patriots in uniform, the film showed a fat and



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bumbling man in a felt bucket hat and waistcoat in front of the same copse of trees. Rolling and dipping on the screen, as if he was dancing, he signed the song of Yankee Doodle.<sup>[77]</sup>

Although he was working from a static text, his rendition was much more colorful than the song most Americans remember. The signer used his hands to signify the troops moving past him as Yankee Doodle struggled, concern on his face, to "keep it up." He indicated a bonnet and skirt before he grabbed an imaginary lady and whirled her gleefully across the grass. The élan of this depiction served to show not just that the Deaf were attempting to understand American patriotism, but that they did understand it and were able to build upon that understanding and breathe new life into it.<sup>[78]</sup>

Making a connection to American patriotism was important to the Deaf community at this time. Not only were they eager to provide support to their country in a volatile time when Europe was at war, but attacks on the Deaf community as a whole made that support seem even more necessary. These films were a way for the Deaf to form the perception that their cultural experiences were the same as mainstream hearing culture, and that sign language-users were as American as the most patriotic English-speaker.

### Films that No Longer Exist

Many films from the NAD did not survive the heavy screening process. Oddly, some of the films that were screened the most survived, and others that were screened less often did not. Letters from Roy J. Stewart, however, make the reasoning behind this process understandable. Stewart, in charge of the final reprints, chose to preserve those films most lauded by the community, not those least damaged. Films that were not reprinted include films purchased but not made by the NAD, landscape films where little signing took place, and films that were not considered a good likeness of the person signing.<sup>[79]</sup>

Not all the films collected by the NAD were filmed by them originally. In 1914, with the Executive Committee upset about costs, Stewart offered to buy good quality films from private sources to add to the collection. He purchased three films; however they were not very popular and did not circulate through the community as had the other NAD films. With a limited budget to reprint films, Stewart decided that they were not worth the price to preserve.<sup>[80]</sup>

The other set of films that were not saved were films of landscapes containing very little signing. These films were much cheaper to make than films of straight lectures, and the NAD made two or three on the pretext of screening them with lectures and making the presentation more dynamic. Examples of this include scenes of Grendal Green at Gallaudet University on Presentation Day, filmed to accompany Edward Miner Gallaudet's lecture on *The Lorna Doone County of Devonshire England*. A video of the Deaf having a picnic at one of the conventions has also been lost to time. The committee also made a film of superintendents from twelve of the top Deaf Schools in the country accepting an award at Gallaudet College. Most of them chose to speak when accepting their award, and Veditz wrote to Stewart: "Next time tell them that these films are to be SIGN LANGUAGE films and that they are expected to speak in our deafandum vernacular. If they kick, they can stay out." None of these films was considered worth the cost of reprinting. The only landscape film that still exists, probably because it also contained a lecture beforehand, is that of the Gettysburg battlefield.<sup>[81]</sup>

Only two films of actual lectures were not saved. Both lectures were considered poor representations of the lecture style of the men who were the subject of the films. One of the films featured a man named Dr. Fox, who was suffering from severe eye trouble when the film was made. The second film was a lecture by a Mr. Hodgeson, who was shy. He was so nervous when filming that he had to be retaken several times. By the time Stewart was looking into preserving the films, the community had come to think of them more as a way to honor and preserve likenesses of the best men of their age. Because these two films did not accurately represent these men, they were not deemed important enough to save.<sup>[82]</sup>



Although content was the main consideration in which films to preserve, damages did play a part in how much of the films could be preserved. Many of the films that were reprinted were missing large sections or ended abruptly in mid-sentence. Stewart decided that, despite the condition of the films, pieces of great works were still worth preserving.<sup>[83]</sup>

Although the NAD did not treat the films as well as they could have, it was ultimately not the condition of the films but the content of the films that decided their fate. Films that were important to the Deaf community and films that contained a lot of sign language were given priority over films that were less successful. Because of this, the films that are left today are the films that were most important to the Deaf community of the time. This makes them even more valuable to the study of early cultural mores than if all the films had survived the ages.

### Screenings

Edward Miner Gallaudet's film was the first, and therefore it was the first to travel around the country. Gallaudet was such a famous figure in the community that Deaf organizations demanded the film without seeing it first. Coupled with the landscape film showing Gallaudet University on Presentation Day, the two films traveled the United States. The NAD suggested that the films be screened together to give audiences the impression that they were attending Presentation Day and then being treated to a lecture during the festivities.<sup>[84]</sup>

For two years, these were the only films the NAD had to offer the community. This is partially why the Gallaudet film is considered by some scholars to be the favorite of the past Deaf community. Stewart, heartened by the success of the films with Deaf audiences, even tried to screen the two films to non-signing hearing audiences. He noted that the moviegoers seemed to lose interest in the Gallaudet film after a while, as they could not understand the signing, but that the landscape film had gone over well. Stewart did not consider the reception enough to recommend screening the films regularly, however. Movie houses of the time usually screened films every few hours, with vignettes on a constant loop. Stewart worried that sending the films through the projector that often would damage them too quickly, and that the NAD would not be financially able to provide ready replacements that fast.<sup>[85]</sup>

In 1913, the NAD made the majority of their films. The movies were instantly popular and beloved, probably due to the high regard the community felt for the Gallaudet picture. "As this was the first time the deaf of this state had ever seen the films you can imagine what they thought of them," one screener wrote. Another said, "when they appeared the roof nearly came down -- there was so much stomping and clapping."<sup>[86]</sup>

The NAD leased the films to every corner of America. State branches of the NAD still exhibited the films, but demand also grew among other organizations. Schools often exhibited the films, and there were often special screenings organized around Deaf conventions. Either the convention grounds would host the screenings, or a movie house near the convention grounds would agree to show the films for a short time.<sup>[87]</sup>

Screenings were usually held in one of three places: a local movie house, a rented hall, or the auditorium of a Deaf school. The event organizer would contact Stewart with a list of the films they wished to exhibit. Stewart would either ship the films from Washington D. C. where he lived and worked, or would ensure that whoever had the films currently would mail them to the next location. Rent for the films was set at five dollars plus the cost of shipping. Often, Stewart would try to couple together screenings in similar parts of the country. For example, the films might move from Utah to Los Angeles, to San Francisco, to Seattle, before being sent back to Washington D. C. again. This way, screeners saved on postage. The five-dollar fee was placed in the NAD's Motion Picture Account so money would be available for reprints when needed.<sup>[88]</sup>

Organizations screening the films usually coupled several of the short vignettes together, making an evening-long event out of the process. Although some events were simply and informally a group of people gathered in a school auditorium, events could also be more glamorous. On one occasion, a Deaf club in San Francisco hosted a screening

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as a fund raiser. It was a gala event hosted in a ballroom, with fancy attire and all. The event took in a fair amount of money. By 1920, there was hardly a Deaf person in America who had not seen at least some of the films.<sup>[89]</sup>

With heavy screening, many of the films began to sustain damage. Although the NAD stipulated that operators should be trained professionals, there was no one to enforce that rule. Reels were sent through the mail with little concern for the bumps and bruises they might obtain on the way, and the NAD was not careful about packaging the films correctly for shipment. When films broke, they were simply spliced back together with tape.

In defense of the NAD on its treatment of the films, it did everything they could to ensure that qualified, trained operators were running the machines. They could not fly to every state all the time to make sure their instructions were carried out. Also, because of the newness of the film industry, no one knew how film should be treated. It did seem as if, when the spool of film broke, it could just be put back together without any trouble. The Executive Committee looked down on buying expensive equipment such as shipping boxes or reels, which might have protected the film better. They felt that any expenditures to mail the films would take away from the Motion Picture Committee's ability to make more films. In the late 1930s, the poor condition of the films put them in jeopardy of disappearing forever. Stewart made a last effort to reprint everything he could afford to.<sup>[90]</sup>

The Motion Picture Committee Films represented an enormous effort on the part of the Deaf community during a very tumultuous time. The community, their beloved language, even their way of life was under sudden attack, and they were not fully equipped to fight Oralism. Bell was too great a force and had too much fame for the early Deaf community to counteract. Olof Hanson, when he resigned his presidency in 1914, said: "I believe the NAD will in time be a force with some power, though it is slow work to get the deaf to understand it and pull together."<sup>[91]</sup>

By 1915, the Deaf had pulled together. The NAD understood that fighting Oralism was the most important thing they could do, and that film funding was needed to contribute to this struggle. It was these very movies that allowed this to happen, that contributed to the shift in Deaf ideas. Although these cultural mores existed in the Deaf community, the NAD films were the first time the Deaf had made a record of their mores and shared them throughout the community nationwide. It was these films that showed Deaf people the full extent of their rich culture, and empowered them to fight for it. In 1910, Oralism was a tragic movement sprouting up throughout Southern America. By 1915, it was a movement which the Deaf were fully committed to defeating, using all their resources to do so. The films put forth by the National Association of Deaf were the reason for so dramatic a shift. It is remarkable is how quickly and vehemently the Deaf community embraced the films.<sup>[92]</sup>

Through these films, the Deaf disseminated a culture to the wider population that had not existed before as part of a group consciousness. It is possible to see the vestiges of this created value system in Deaf Culture today. There is still a perceived need to protect American sign language, the same people are venerated as being the founders of Deaf education in America, and there is still a consciousness of the community that they are first and foremost American citizens. The culture the NAD created and communicated to working class Deaf America was adopted so deeply as to reach across the ages.<sup>[93]</sup>

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[1] *The Preservation of the Sign Language*, performed by George W. Veditz (1913, The National Association of the Deaf, Web Video) Sign Language Research Center, NAD Films Database

<http://www.rochester.edu/College/slrc/projects/films.html> (Accessed 3 December, 2012)

[2] How to treat the terms "Sign" and "Sign Language" posed a conundrum in this paper. Sign Language was not recognized as an official, capital letter language until almost sixty years after the Motion Picture Committee films were produced. It is always uncapitalized in works prior to the 1970s. As this is a history paper, I have chosen to adopt historical terminology and leave instances of "sign" and "sign language" lower case.

- [3] The term Deaf with a capital D is often used in the Deaf community to denote a person that is culturally deaf instead of just physically so. This serves to separate those suffering from age related hearing loss and the like from those who genuinely understand and participate in Deaf Culture as a whole. For more information, see Carol Padden and Tom Humphries *Deaf in America: Voices From A Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1988) pp. 39-44; Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Inside Deaf Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005) pp. 57-77
- [4] Richard Winefield, *Never The Twain Shall Meet: Bell, Gallaudet, and the Communications Debate*, (Washington: Gallaudet University Press, 1987) pp. 1-8; Padden and Humphries, *Inside Deaf Culture*, pp. 57-77,
- [5] Moving Picture Fund Final Report Bulletin #10, 14 June, 1911, Folder 20, Box 4, NAD 1910-1913 Correspondence of the Motion Picture Committee, Merrill Learning Center, Gallaudet University (Washington D. C.)
- [6] Letter from Olof Hanson to Oscar Regensburg, 30 October, 1912, Folder 14, Box 4 NAD 1910-1913 Correspondence: Hanson to Regensburg, Merrill Learning Center, Gallaudet University (Washington D. C.);
- [7] John V. Van Cleve and Barry A. Crouch, *A Place of Their Own*, (Gallaudet University Press: Washington DC, 1989); H. Dirksen et al, *Signing the Body Poetic: Essays on American Sign Language Literature*, (University of California Press: Berkley, 2002)
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- [13] Winefield, *Never The Twain Shall Meet*
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- [44] Letter from George M. Veditz to Oscar Regensburg, 10 September 1914, Folder 11, Box 1, MSS 123: Roy J. Stewart, Merrill Learning Center, Gallaudet University (Washington D. C.); Letter from Olof Hanson to Oscar Regensburg, undated, Folder 14, Box 4, NAD 1910-1913 Correspondence: Hanson to Regensburg, Merrill Learning Center, Gallaudet University (Washington D. C.); Ibid; National Association of the Deaf, President's Office, 22 February 1912, Folder 20, Box 4, NAD 1910-1913 Correspondence of the Motion Picture Committee, Merrill Learning Center, Gallaudet University (Washington D. C.);
- [45] *Proceedings of the Eleventh Convention*
- [46] Letter from Oscar Regensburg to Olof Hanson, signed by Roy J. Stewart, 29 November 1912, Folder 14, Box 4 NAD 1910-1913 Correspondence: Hanson to Regensburg, Merrill Learning Center, Gallaudet University (Washington D. C.);
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- [49] Ibid; although the myth is certainly romanticized, especially the notion that Gallaudet was Alice's only teacher and the only one to realize her ability to reason, its basic elements are true. Alice's father did pay for Gallaudet to study methods of educating the Deaf in Europe, and Alice was a pupil in the first class at the Hartford school.
- [50] *The Irishman and the Flea*, performed by Robert P. McGregor, (1913, The National Association of the Deaf, Web Video) Sign Language Research Center, NAD Films Database <http://www.rochester.edu/College/slrc/projects/films.html> (Accessed 3 December, 2012); Letter from Olof Hanson to Oscar Regensburg, 30 October, 1912, Folder 14, Box 4, NAD 1910-1913 Correspondence: Hanson to Regensburg, Merrill Learning Center, Gallaudet University (Washington D. C.); *A Lay Sermon*, performed by Robert P. McGregor, (1913, The National Association of the Deaf, Web Video) Sign Language Research Center, NAD Films Database <http://www.rochester.edu/College/slrc/projects/films.html> (Accessed 3 December, 2012).
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- [53] Carol Padden and Tom Humphries *Deaf in America: Voices From A Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1988) pp. 39-44; Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Inside Deaf Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), pp 23; *The Preservation of the Sign Language*, performed by George W. Veditz (1913, The National Association of the Deaf, Web Video) Sign Language Research Center, NAD Films Database <http://www.rochester.edu/College/slrc/projects/films.html> (Accessed 3 December, 2012)
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[60] *The Lorna Doone County of Devonshire England*, performed by Edward Miner Gallaudet (1910, The National Association of the Deaf, Web Video) Sign Language Research Center, NAD Films Database.

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