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The Silent Film Era: Silent Films, NAD Films, and the Deaf Community's Response

OLDER CITIZENS who are deaf or hard of hearing recall the years of silent films (1893–1929) as a “golden era” in the cultural history of the American Deaf community. It was golden for several reasons.

First, this period represents the one brief time that deaf and hard of hearing citizens had comparatively equal access to motion pictures—a cultural and popular medium that the United States and Hollywood have exported to the rest of the world. It was the only time that deaf and hard of hearing citizens could sit with a hearing audience in a darkened movie theater and enjoy the drama or comedy without the need for third-party interpreters, special captions, elaborate sound systems, or any other assistive devices. Throughout these years Deaf community publications routinely discussed the movies. When Hollywood abandoned silent films in 1929 and 1930 in favor of the new sound technology popularly known as the “talkies,” the movie industry also severely limited the ability of deaf and hard of hearing consumers to participate in the movie theater audience with persons who could hear.

The second reason this period was golden was that motion picture technology demonstrated a new tool for those deaf people who used sign language. Sign language depends on movement and facial and bodily expression. Before the development of motion pictures, deaf people could depict sign language only in static forms of communication: text, drawings, and photographs. As a result, it was very difficult

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for hearing people unfamiliar with sign language to grasp the power and beauty of what is today called American Sign Language (ASL). This was crucial because the era of silent films (1893–1929) happened at the same time as an intense campaign against sign language in America. The Deaf community perceived this attack as an assault on their right to exist as a linguistic minority. So-called oralists demeaned the use of sign language and in some instances supported legislation that banned its use in schools for deaf students. By the onset of the Great Depression in late 1929, those who opposed the use of sign language had significantly reduced the number of signing deaf people who were employed as teachers and administrators in deaf education in the United States. One of the ways that the Deaf community challenged this assault on its language was through the use of motion picture technology.

Created in 1880, the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) was the major U.S. consumer organization for the Deaf community that advocated the use of sign language. Armed with a tool that would allow it to demonstrate the beauty and complexity of sign language and to preserve it for future generations of deaf people, the NAD collected funds to produce a series of films. Utilizing the services of both Deaf and hearing masters of sign language, the association produced several films from 1913 to 1920 that featured poetry, lectures, memories, and stories told in ASL. Shot with 35 mm film and a stationary camera, the NAD rented these films throughout the United States, primarily to local Deaf community organizations and clubs. Subsequently, the films were converted to 16 mm safety film and deposited with the Library of Congress and Gallaudet University, where they may be seen today.

Although the NAD films represented the most widely used and recognized movies, members of the Deaf community produced other films as well. The invention of safety film and cameras designed for the amateur home film market enabled numerous Deaf persons to film important events in the Deaf community. The Eastman-Kodak company designed the Cine-Kodak 16 mm system in 1923, the Standard-8 system in 1932, and Kodachrome in 1935. Newspapers in the Deaf community regularly reported on and sometimes advertised these films. Football games between rival schools for deaf pupils were

a popular movie event shown at clubs for Deaf adults as well as other Deaf organizations. In addition to sports activities, some films featured events in the life of the Deaf community—local picnics, state or sometimes national meetings of Deaf organizations, as well as masquerade nights or plays at the local Deaf club. Today the best example of these films produced by amateur filmmakers are those by Charles Krauel, a Chicago Deaf man who filmed visits to schools for deaf students, conversations with deaf adults he met in various cities, as well as national meetings of the “Frat,” the national self-help insurance society for deaf people in the United States.¹ All of these films made by deaf home-movie buffs feature deaf people using sign language. Although unofficial and oftentimes lost, these films represent an important adjunct to the NAD films and furthered one of the NAD’s goals to film and conserve the linguistic heart of the Deaf community.

The third and final reason that older members of the Deaf community nostalgically view the silent film years as golden is the post-silent-film reaction: Amateur deaf filmmakers began to make sign-language entertainment films.

It has often been argued that deaf people, through their use of facial expression and their comfort with body language, are natural actors. During the silent-film era, a few deaf actors performed in various commercial films. Of these, Granville Redmond, the California landscape painter, was the best known. He performed in several Charlie Chaplin films including the first one produced and directed by the famed comedian—*A Dog’s Life* (1918). In addition, Chaplin provided studio space at the Chaplin film lot to his deaf artist friend. With one exception, *You’d Be Surprised* (1926), the deaf actors did not use sign language or portray deaf characters. Captioned silent films, unencumbered with the need for voice, allowed deaf actors simply to act. Chaplin himself never mouthed dialogue. Deaf actors did not need to do so either.

Moreover, there was no need for sign-language entertainment films. In 1929 and 1930 deaf people felt that they had equal access to the movies. The strength of this belief is exemplified in the history of the film *His Busy Hour* (1926). Director James Spearing and producer Bertha Heustis (both hearing) created the film, which features the

only all-deaf-cast silent film.² Filmmakers past and present often look for a gimmick that will further their creative and financial interests in the movie industry. Spearing and Heustis hoped that the use of the all-deaf cast would be such an angle; however, the film was never successfully distributed. It was shown to a deaf audience at the Lexington School for the Deaf in New York City. In an effort to convince deaf persons to invest in the film, the producers spoke of their desire to create a film company consisting of and run by deaf people. Accustomed to equal access at movie theaters throughout the nation and aware of the participation of a few deaf actors such as Granville Redmond, however, this 1926 generation of deaf movie consumers saw no need for such a film company.

Three years later, film technology had changed, and the Deaf community no longer had equal access. Deaf actors could no longer work in films. Despite a few protests and letters to newspaper editors, deaf people could not persuade movie producers to continue to create silent films.

However, deaf people now realized the need to act. There were very few, if any, immediate results, but the awareness of the value of motion picture technology in the silent film era convinced many in the Deaf community to explore alternatives. The reaction of the Deaf community in the post-silent-film era resulted in several activities: the use of captions, the continued training of deaf actors, and the creation of sign language films.

Initially, the Deaf community focused on the use of captions. Emerson Romero, a Deaf actor in silent films, pioneered the use of captions. Because of a lack of funds, an unsatisfactory captioning technique, and no support from the movie industry, the initial effort to create a national film library for deaf people failed. But others took on the task, and nearly forty years later the federal government funded a program that allowed deaf consumers to borrow a limited number of captioned films for private viewing. Videotape recorders with special “decoders” allowed wider viewing of films. Today most major film producers caption their works voluntarily. Although some progress has been made (limited show times of major films in a limited number of movie theaters), nationally it is still true that most deaf people cannot routinely go to the movies and expect to see captioned films.³ Denied equal access to entertainment at movie

theaters, deaf people purchase or rent videotaped or DVD copies of films for home viewing.

Another reaction to the demise of silent films was the increased attention given to theatrical performances by deaf actors who used sign language. Throughout the post-silent-film era (1930 to the late 1960s), Deaf communities organized amateur theatrical groups. The unpaid deaf actors performed for their special audiences throughout the United States. Eventually a federal grant enabled the creation of the National Theater of the Deaf, which paid deaf actors who received professional training and gained experience traveling throughout the world.

Until the late 1960s both the movie and television industries excluded the use of deaf actors in performances that featured a deaf character. The most notable example of this is Jane Wyman, a hearing actress who won an Oscar for her performance as an illiterate deaf woman in the film *Johnny Belinda* (1948). Most portrayals of deaf characters by hearing actors tended to be wooden in their use of body language and facial expressions. Their use of sign language was often abysmal and contrary to the hopes that NAD president George Veditz had expressed earlier that movies would preserve and demonstrate ASL.

Television led the way when producers hired Audrey Norton, a deaf graduate of the National Theater of the Deaf, to appear as a deaf character in a 1968 episode of the popular detective series “Mannix.” More and more deaf actors gradually made their presence known in the entertainment industry and won Tony, Emmy, and Oscar awards. The movies were the last to cast a deaf actor in the role of a major deaf character. In 1986, when Marlee Matlin won an Oscar for her performance in the film *Children of a Lesser God*, the movie industry at last caught up with network television, which had made the change twenty years earlier. Late as it was, this represented a significant change. Today the overwhelming majority of deaf characters that appear in films and television are played by deaf actors, enabling hearing audiences to see a wide variety of sign language usage, including ASL.

The final post-silent-film reaction by the Deaf community was the creation of entertainment films designed specifically for deaf audiences. Combining the availability of motion picture cameras



FIGURE 1. Ernest Marshall at camera.

designed for the consumer and the existence of deaf actors with stage experience, deaf individuals created sign language films. Unlike the earlier NAD films, which featured masters of sign language, these films simply featured deaf actors who used signs but reflected a wide variety of dramatic training and skills.

The best known of these independent deaf filmmakers is Ernest Marshall. A lifelong resident of New York City as well as a third-generation member of a Deaf family, Marshall was recognized by Deaf community theater actors for his potential as both an actor and a sign language master. Upon graduation from the Fanwood school for deaf students in New York, Marshall performed in deaf theater groups. In the late 1930s he began to produce entertainment films. Unlike most Deaf home movie makers who recorded family events, and unlike Charles Krauel, who recorded Deaf community events, Marshall created “stories.” His association with Deaf stage actors (including the former silent movie actor Emerson Romero) convinced him that the most important element of filmmaking is the story. This, of course, was precisely what most audiences wanted—a good story.

Denied access to the movies since the demise of the silents, deaf audiences—like their hearing contemporaries—wanted good entertainment. This is what Marshall and the few other deaf filmmakers provided for their deaf audiences. Particularly between the 1930s and



FIGURE 2. Marshall circa 1964.

1960s, when uncaptioned movies were not understandable to most deaf people, these deaf filmmakers satisfied an unmet need for entertainment in the Deaf community.

Although Marshall and some of his actors were masters in the use of ASL, many of the deaf actors were not. According to Marshall, his most popular film was *A Cake of Soap* (1963). Yet most of the actors in the film either use Signed English or mouth and sign their dialogue. *A Cake of Soap* is a wonderful short story with a surprise ending—and despite the absence of masterful signing, it is fully understandable by deaf audiences.

Today deaf audiences have access to a variety of film entertainment. Through the use of closed-captioning technology, television is largely accessible to deaf people. Although access to movies in theaters continues to be limited, deaf people can now view most major films with captions by purchasing or renting videotapes and DVD a few months after their general release to the hearing public.

Moreover, most of the actors who portray deaf characters in film and television today are deaf themselves. For the most part these deaf actors are also skilled sign language users. The response of the film industry today to the needs of deaf audiences continues to be less than ideal; however, it is a significant improvement from that historic moment in 1929 and 1930 when the industry excluded deaf viewers

from America's major contribution to world popular culture. Much of the credit for these changes cannot be given to the film industry itself—which has fought change consistently and vigorously—but goes instead to deaf people who understood the importance and value of equal access to entertainment and who explored and created alternatives in the wake of the demise of silent films.

Notes

1. An edited version of Krauel's films, including a subsequent oral history interview of Krauel with Ted Supalla, is available through DawnSign Press.
2. When I wrote *Hollywood Speaks: Deafness and the Film Entertainment Industry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), I thought that *His Busy Hour* had been lost. Subsequently, deaf colleagues helped me locate the film. The deaf daughter of one of the deaf cast members agreed to donate a videotape copy of the film to the Gallaudet University archive, where it can be viewed today.
3. The scope of this article is films; however, it is true that much progress has been made with television. Because of the licensing requirements of the Federal Communications Commission (FCC), television producers have been more responsive to deaf viewers' need for captions. Initially, the FCC required that emergency notification warnings be captioned. Today all manufacturers of television sets with thirteen-inch screens or larger must include computer chips that allow the use of captioning technology. Sometimes there is a crossover between television programming and motion pictures, as in TV movies, for example.