

Minnesota Deaf Heritage Oral-Visual Interview with Douglas “Doug” Bahl

Background Information

Interview Information

This interview with Douglas “Doug” Bahl (DB) was incorporated into the Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind, and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans’ (MNCDHH) Oral-Visual History Project. This interview was originally produced by the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Metro Division (DHHSD) of the Minnesota Department of Human Services. This interview took place in 1997. The interviewer was Robert “Bob” Cook (BC).

Translation Notes

A note about translation of this interview: The interview was recorded in American Sign Language (ASL). The interviewer and interviewee used ASL as a first language, and the signed information was translated into vernacular or spoken English by interpreters.

This transcript and the open captions in the video are based on the spoken English information.

Actions are in brackets. Translation notes are in parentheses and italics (using the emphasis font), and they represent additional information and corrections about what was said.

Transcript of Interview with Douglas “Doug” Bahl

Key to names:

DB = Douglas “Doug” Bahl (signs in American Sign Language, voiced in English by interpreters)

BC = Robert “Bob” Cook (signs in American Sign Language, voiced in English by interpreters)

[Visual of title graphic “Minnesota Deaf Heritage: An Interview with Doug Bahl”]

[Robert “Bob” Cook is sitting with Douglas “Doug” Bahl for the interview.]

BC: Hi, my name is Bob Cook and my special guest today is Doug Bahl. Doug is the President of the Minnesota Association of Deaf Citizens, or MADC. It’s a pleasure to have you here today, Doug.

DB: Thank you.

BC: How are you today?

DB: I’m good, with the great weather we had yesterday. Today isn’t so good, but I don’t mind since I had to come into work anyway. I don’t mind giving up days when the weather’s bad. But, yesterday was great!

BC: I’d like to ask you five questions today. First, tell us about yourself - your experiences growing up, how you became Deaf and so on.

DB: Unfortunately, I was born hearing. I was born in west central Minnesota, near Montevideo. My parents were farmers. When I was 2½ years old I became sick and developed a high fever. My father was out in the fields plowing and my mother didn't know how to drive the truck because it was a standard and she didn't know how to shift the gears. All she could do was sit and worry until they could bring me to the doctor. At sundown my father finished work and came back to the house. By then, I was already in bed sleeping. They thought they'd see how I was in the morning and then bring me to the hospital. But that morning I seemed fine and was running around. They didn't realize that I had become Deaf overnight. Later, my mother suspected there was something wrong and so I was brought to several doctors. Finally, the University of Minnesota diagnosed my deafness, due to high fever - that was when I was 2½ years old. When I was four, almost five, I was enrolled at the school for the Deaf (***Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf – MSAD***). I remained there until I graduated. I then attended Gallaudet, graduated from there and returned to Minnesota, got married, raised two children, became a teacher at the Deaf school and now over at St. Paul Technical College, where I've been for some time.

BC: I'm wondering if your children are hearing or Deaf?

DB: My children are both hearing, so again, I didn't luck out.

BC: How did you meet your wife?

DB: We met while we were students at Gallaudet. My wife went to an oral school in Oklahoma and I'm from Minnesota, but Gallaudet is a famous meeting place for people to fall in love and get married.

BC: Interesting. OK, the next question is not related to your job. But, you are the president of MADC, director of the Miss Deaf America Pageant, on a board of trustees; the list goes on and on. Where do you find the time, enthusiasm and energy for all this? Tell us your secret.

DB: What's my secret? You could ask the same question of many other parents who find the time for sports, which I'm not really interested in. They may spend a small amount of time playing or watching sports. I prefer to use my time involved in community activities.

BC: What are your hobbies?

DB: My hobbies? My first love is traveling the world. My other hobby is collecting antiques.

BC: What kind of antiques, if I'm not being too nosy.

DB: I tend to go to various auctions looking for old furniture which matches what I already have. Some of mine was given to me by my grandparents and is made of oak. So when I find something at the auctions, I refinish it to match my own furniture. I have a Deaf man who does upholstery whose name is Wilford Lazarus. He's very good and can make some good matches, which I enjoy. Also, I love collecting postcards from different schools for the Deaf. So far I have about sixty postcards.

BC: I've heard that you are quite the history buff. I understand that you've traveled the world visiting various Deaf communities. Can you tell me more?

DB: It's been interesting for me, traveling the world, being involved in worldwide events for the Deaf communities. For example, my first experience was with the World Federation of the Deaf (**WFD**), which is similar to the National Association of the Deaf (**NAD**) at our national level, but it's at the international level. I went to Finland in 1987, which was my first experience at an international conference. The purpose was to learn about research on sign language. I was interested, so two of us went and that's where I really got hooked on the WFD. I've been attending their conferences ever since, which happen every four years. So far I've been to Finland, Japan, and Vienna, Austria, which was just last year. The next meeting will be held in Australia in 1999. I like going to WFD conferences. My first experience as a presenter was last year in Vienna, Austria. I really enjoyed the experience.

BC: You've also traveled to Sweden and Scotland, but that wasn't related to WFD. What were those trips about?

DB: Well, the Sweden trip was connected to the World Federation of the Deaf conference. I first went to the conference in Finland and afterwards went to visit some friends who live in Sweden. I really enjoy Sweden; in fact, I've been there three times. The first time I've already explained, the second time to attend a conference on bilingualism, and the third time was again after a WFD conference. I've enjoyed my three visits there. Scotland was for an international Deaf history conference, which was part of the international Deaf history symposium for which I was a presenter. Our sign for Scotland is to sketch a plaid pattern on the shoulder, but their sign is to move the arm in and out as if you were playing the bagpipes. I visited the school for the Deaf in Edinburgh. The building was beautiful, it looked like a castle. It was a landmark from the 1800s. Many of the Deaf schools in Europe were one to two hundred years old. I really appreciate the preservation of Thompson Hall which is eighty years old. I can explain more about that later.

BC: How do you see Deaf people being treated in other countries? Do they have the same rights and limitations as we do here?

DB: It really depends on which country you are talking about. For example, in Sweden, they are very progressive. The rights of Deaf people there far surpass those we have here in the U.S. We actually lag behind them. They are well known for being bilingual. That is, they first teach Swedish sign language and then spoken Swedish is taught as a second language. This method is easily accepted there whereas here, we're still fighting among proponents of oralism, sign language and bilingualism. Services are very progressive in Sweden where they have a socialist form of government. Deaf and hard of hearing students are not mainstreamed at first. They must attend the school for the Deaf and if they do well there, they may then be placed in the regular school. Only 1% of students from kindergarten to grade 12 are mainstreamed. Sweden believes they must first succeed in the schools for the Deaf before going on to regular classrooms. I wish we would adopt similar policies here. Many times parents here want to keep their kids close at hand and not send them away to schools for the Deaf. You have to remember that Sweden is a small country unlike the U.S. Sweden is about the size of California. As far as other countries in Europe go – Sweden is #1, then Denmark. The Third World countries are really lacking in services. Some of them still shoot people with handicaps. It's just too expensive to run the special schools so they just shoot them. It's sad to imagine that still goes on today.

BC: It's hard to believe that in the 90's they are still using those old methods. Does Sweden have a law similar to our law here – PL94-142 (**Public Law 94-142: Education of All Handicapped Children Act, also known as, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA**)? What kind of law do they have which requires Deaf and hard of hearing students to attend the schools for the Deaf?

DB: I'm not that familiar with Swedish law. But there was a major change in the law in 1985 which requires that Swedish sign language be taught as a first language. This happened because Queen Sylvia (**Silvia**) of Sweden was interested in sign language. One day she was speaking at a press conference and decided to stop speaking and use sign language only. She wanted to give the Swedish people a taste of what it's like for a Deaf person to watch TV without captioning; to see how they felt not understanding what she signed. That had a great impact on the people in Sweden and that was when they started to be more accepting and working towards the passage of legislation to officially recognize Swedish sign language as a first language. This happened in 1985.

BC: I'm still thinking about the difficulties we're experiencing convincing our legislators here. You said in Sweden they use Swedish Sign Language. Here we call it American Sign Language (**ASL**) but have English as well. Should we not call our sign language English Sign Language? I'm confused.

DB: You have to know that a high percentage of American Sign Language comes from French Sign Language. Old French signs make up about 60-70% of ASL with the remainder coming from local signs. And, each local area developed their own regional variations. For example, the word "Birthday" (**signs as in the word "promise"**). Research has shown there are thirty-two different regional signs such as these...birthday (**signs by ear**), birthday (**signs around face**), birthday (**signs as in the word "birth"**) and so on. A problem has been that there are too many regional signs. For example our sign in Minnesota for Minneapolis is this (**signs letter "D" on the shoulder**). Many people outside our area don't know the sign or produce it incorrectly such as other ways. People in the area know the proper sign but others don't and end up distorting it. Now remember, ASL is used throughout the fifty states and has itself changed over time by borrowing from signing Exact English and other modes. So, where do we stand on defining proper ASL? I don't know. It will depend on where you live.

BC: That brings up a question about the sign we use here for Minneapolis. Many Deaf people have asked me why we use a handshape for the letter "D" signed on the shoulder. I've never known the full story behind it. We're lucky to have you here to shed some light on how that sign was invented.

DB: The sign is taken from the sign used for a man named Dean, who attended the school for the Deaf in the 1870's. The school opened in 1863 and he attended through 1870 or so. At that time all of the students came from the surrounding countryside except for one boy who was from Minneapolis. That was a long name to spell each time, so instead, the kids would refer to it as Dean's home town, which was easy to sign. After Dean left the school many of the younger children didn't know who Dean was so the part about his home town ended up being dropped. But the sign used for Dean's name continued to be affiliated with the city of Minneapolis. So, historically the sign came from that used for "Dean's home town" and was changed over time to the one we use today. It all began with a boy named Dean.

BC: Interesting. Thanks for filling us in. Now, for my last question... from all of your experiences traveling to different countries and as the president of the Minnesota Association of Deaf Citizens, when you think about Deaf peoples' lives in the past as compared with today, the way that Deaf and hearing people view each other- what do you see?

DB: Wow! When I look back at all the great Presidents of MADC and NAD, I think they had to go through the same struggles we do today. Many of the same views are still held today. But, I think more hearing people are accepting the use of sign language now. In the past there was resistance to using sign language. We were locked in a struggle with the proponents of the oral method. But I think more people now accept sign language than in the past. Again, we have to go through struggles to contend with, our own issues. For example, the concept of Total Communication. Technology is constantly changing and we have to keep up with those changes and not forget about access. We have to stay involved with the fight to keep attention focused on our issues. To help hearing people understand that we do not yet have full access such as captioning, that computers with auditory output are not accessible for us. When we point this out we're told computers are visual, don't worry about it. But we want 100% access and that's one of the biggest issues we are facing. We must continue to educate hearing people. I know in the past hearing people held very ignorant views of Deaf people and today that ignorance still exists in some ways. We have to keep on educating them as time goes on.

BC: You are also planning to testify at the legislature about recognizing and accepting ASL as a language and also on Quality Assurance (**QA**) laws for sign language interpreters. How do you think legislators will view these initiatives?

DB: You mean the new issues which have come up? I hope legislators will continue to support us. But I am concerned about the divisions within our stakeholders. I don't want legislators to be uncertain who they should listen to. We must present a unified front and work for what's best for Deaf children and adults. Legislators are now wanting to hear directly from Deaf people instead of hearing people on behalf of Deaf people. More Deaf people are going to the legislature which is appreciated by their legislators. I hope more Deaf people will meet with their own legislators rather than MADC trying to speak to all legislators for all Deaf people. We need Deaf people to go and see legislators in their home districts, so they can hear from their own constituents.

BC: Thank you. I have to add one more question regarding certification of interpreters. You are involved with the National Association of the Deaf Interpreter Assessment Program (**IAP**). Can you explain the difference between the certifications offered by NAD and the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (**RID**)?

DB: The NAD IAP, that's certification through the National Association for the Deaf, which was started last year. Prior to that, RID was the only certifying body. Some interpreters were concerned that they were repeatedly failing the RID screening. So the NAD screening was established to give interpreters options. The NAD screening has five levels. When we talk about Quality Assurance for educational interpreters, it means they must have passed the NAD screening at a level 3 or higher. So people have the choice of being certified by either RID or NAD. With NAD the interpreter knows where their skill

level stands as they are told the level at which they passed. If they know they passed at a level 3 or more, they can better prepare to take the RID screening later. RID and NAD have established a joint task force to look at how future screenings can be improved and how the two organizations can work together. So maybe in the future we will see the two screening systems merged into one. What that will look like I don't know. It won't happen for a few years.

BC: Thank you for sharing all of this valuable information with us. I want to thank Doug Bahl, president of the Minnesota Association of Deaf Citizens, for spending this time with us today.