

Minnesota Deaf Heritage – Deaf Culture: Series I

Background Information

Video Information

This video was originally produced by the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Services Metro Division (DHHS) of the Minnesota Department of Human Services in 1996. The presenter was Robert “Bob” Cook (BC).

Translation Notes

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

This transcript is based on the spoken English information.

Actions are in brackets.

Transcript of Deaf Culture: Series I

Key to names:

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

BC: Hello, I’d like to share with you some stories about how deaf people have become very adept at taking care of themselves in their lives. Waking up in the morning, or answering the doors or whatever have you. There are several areas and we’ll take these in times: preceding technology, the present, and what developments have happened in the future. First, if we’re to look at how deaf people wake up in the morning, we might wonder, “How might a deaf person get up?” Well, deaf people have taken their manual alarm clocks, put them under their pillow so that they feel the vibrations, and that wakes them up in the morning. Or, sometimes deaf people use the mechanics of a clock, hook it up to a door which is cantilevered above their head and when it gets to the right time, the latch comes unhooked, the door falls, and something like a pillow falls on the deaf person and wakes them. Now, if the deaf person sets their mind to it, they can get out of the way and be safe in time before something falls on their lap. Or other times for deaf people who live in apartments, they could oftentimes smell the breakfast being made in the next apartment, and wake up to that smell. For those deaf people who lived in the country, they would oftentimes set their house close to a railroad track where the daily passage of the 5:30 would shake their house, and they could arise to the vibrations of the train going by. Today we have many modern alarm clocks, some with flashing lights, or others that are hooked to vibrators under the bed or the pillow that will vibrate the individual and wake them up. Who knows where progress will take us, maybe in the future, deaf people will have chips surgically implanted in their brain to wake them up in the morning.

Next, I’d like to share some short stories about how deaf people have known when to answer their door. For years, we have had to rely on the visitors remembering to knock or kick the door loud enough to get

our attention. Another trick was to slide a piece of paper under the door, and move it around until it caught someone's eye. Or, the cat would notice and it would start to play with the piece of paper, or whatever, ultimately getting the individual's attention. A third option was to blow cigarette smoke through the keyhole, so the person inside would smell the smoke and know to answer the door. Another idea was to thread a string through the keyhole and into a light object inside the house. When someone came to visit, they would slowly pull the string, moving the object until the door was answered. Lastly, some visitors would flash a light outside until someone inside noticed it and came to the door. Today we have modern technology, which you simply press a doorbell and lamps inside the house flash, announcing that someone is at the door.

Now when deaf people used to visit each other in the old days you had to get in your car, drive twenty miles, just to find that the deaf person wasn't at home. At which point you would write a note, leave it at the door, saying, "Please come over to my house on Tuesday at 7:00." You would leave and head back home. And you might change your mind and go shopping and do something in between. When the party arrived at their home, they would see a note, "Oh, meet me Tuesday at 7:00," and they would think to themselves, "Oh, I can't meet them on Tuesday at 7:00, I'll just drive over to the house now and catch them." They would get in their car, drive over there, see you're not home, write a note, leave it for you saying, "Oh, Tuesday's no good for me, how about Wednesday?," and they would head home. After you finished your shopping, you would arrive home to see a note, you would open it up, seeing that they couldn't on Tuesday, but they could on Wednesday, and you're realizing, "I can't on Wednesday", so you get back in the car and pretty soon you have two people heading down the highway in opposite directions, back and forth, leaving notes for each other. Today, what we can do is we can call over TTYs and set up our times, when we need to meet, 7:30 or whatever. The only unfortunate loser in this whole scenario has been the gas companies, not getting the money for the gas for the trips required to go back and forth.

Next, I'd like to talk to you about hearing aids. Maybe some of you might remember the big headsets we used to use a long time ago at the schools for the deaf. As young children we'd put the headsets on, and then we'd turn the volume full blast. I remember the headsets would leave red marks on my head and around my ears. At that time, the most common headset brands were Maico or Zenith. The teacher would wear a microphone, and all the children would wear receivers, so they could hear what the teacher was saying. One day the teacher forgot to take her microphone off when she went to use the restroom. She walked into the restroom, sat down, did her business, and then of course flushed. Now all the students in the room could hear the flushing water, and we all started to laugh. The poor teacher was totally embarrassed. Nowadays, we have the little hearing aids that fit inside the ear, compared to the old systems that used to be body aids. They were huge, big systems, 12 volts, not at all like today. There's also a device today called a cochlear implant, which seems to work very well for some people. But, what does the future have for us? Only the future can tell.

Now, you may be wondering about deaf people and movies. In the olden days, deaf people depended a lot on the action of the movie, and they'd make up their own stories. Deaf people would go to the movies and then they would go home and they would share what they saw in the movie. And in fact, people would make up stories, and have different deaf people in the room take on the characters that

they saw portrayed in the movies. Then the advent of captioning came out. And the first 16mm movies were offered. People would invite other individuals over to their home, they would hook up the 16mm reel and show the captioned movie. People could take their breaks whenever they wanted so folks could go to the bathroom or smoke a cigarette or what have you. It would also allow enough time to change reels. There used to be an opportunity to subscribe to the 16mm movies directly from the talking movie section in Washington D.C. They would come in big bound boxes and later they developed to come into small little disks and video units. Now a person could sit at home, put a tape in their VCR, and watch their movie. So what has the future for us? Only that time will tell.

Other technological advancements have given us captioning decoders, decoders built right in to new TVs, and emergency warning systems that can be captioned. We also use media in different ways to let us know what is happening around the country. In the past, there were many newspapers that were available to the deaf community about deaf people. One of the most famous ones was The Silent Worker that was available throughout the United States and subscribed to by many deaf people. In Minnesota, we have something called the Charles Thompson Newsletter. Today, there are thousands of newsletters. We have the NAD Broadcaster, we have Deaf Life, we have Deaf Nation, the SHHH Newsletter, so on and so forth, the list just continues. We can see our future today is leading towards e-mail and bulletin boards and electronic and other technological communication systems that have yet to be discovered. During emergencies, in the past, if a deaf person cut off their arm or something and they were living out in the farmland it might take ten or fifteen minutes for them to somehow get a hold of their neighbor living down the way. Deaf people suffered for years, unable to get needed medical attention right away. Today we have 9-1-1 throughout the country. However, some deaf people have had bad experiences when trying to use 9-1-1 services, as it isn't completely accessible to us yet. But, they are still working on it. So, I don't think emergency services are what they should be yet.

Now, if we move on to sign language, in the past, deaf people used to use signs which were very large. For example, the sign for help used to be lifting the elbow. How it has evolved, to lifting of the fist. Similarly, the signs for horse and cow used to be used with two hands, and now they are signed with just one. So signs have been abbreviated. There is also much less fingerspelling used today as compared to in the past. For example, the word pizza is now spelled with two z's signed as one letter. Historically, deaf people didn't have professional interpreters. Instead they depended on signers such as clergy or hearing friends to interpret for them. Obviously, it wasn't formal interpretation, but is better than nothing. Today we have professional interpreters who are certified and very skilled. We can call them to request an interpreter, which makes our lives more comfortable. How far have we come? Well, there's still disagreement in the community. Some deaf people prefer ASL, others want Signed English, or Cued Speech or tactile. But, it still seems better than in the past. And we are still progressing, albeit slowly. In the past many hearing people would take sign classes. It's great to see deaf and hearing people chatting and socializing at bars and other gathering places. One change, which deaf people have not called progress in that, is that in the old days if a deaf person was pulled over for speeding, they were oftentimes released with simply a warning. Today, police officers are trained to sign, and you see a lot more deaf people getting tickets. Is this progress? Now, deaf people have their own language, called American Sign Language, but it is not the only language, or sign system. There is also the Rochester

Method, there's fingerspelling, there's Signed Exact English and Seeing Essential English and as well as Total Communication and a myriad of other methods. Many people have begun using these other modes of communication, and now we have a real "Tower of Babel" situation. Again, is this progress? Deaf education certainly has seen a lot of change. In the past, terms were used such as "state institutions" or "asylums," "Deaf-Mute," "Deaf and Dumb," and state schools for the deaf. Today, we've seen things like not having state schools for the deaf, but having other mainstream programs. We've had the advent of laws like Public Law 94-142, or LRE - the Least Restrictive Environment. This has caused a great growth in mainstream programs, locating throughout the state. In the past, we had one deaf university for deaf people, and it was like individuals all got on the same train and headed towards Washington, D.C. Now, you have a choice of going to any university. You can go to the National Technical Institute for the Deaf, California State University at Northridge, so we have made a lot of progress.