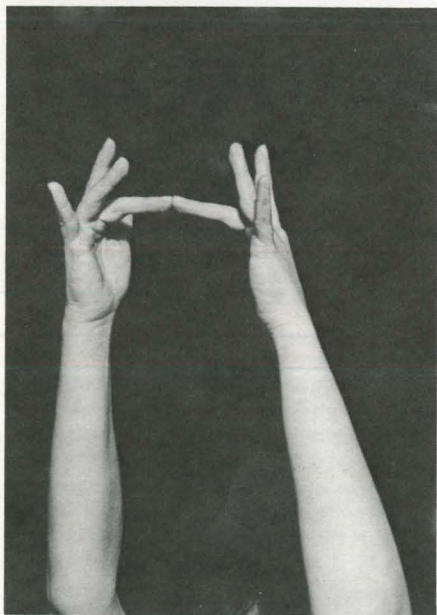


To Hear a Hand: Deaf Folklore and Deaf Culture By Jo Radner and Simon Carmel

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contact

This year at the Festival we celebrate the skills and traditions of a cultural minority who, despite their large numbers, frequently pass unnoticed: deaf and hearing-impaired Americans. Recent surveys have shown that nearly 14 million Americans have significant hearing loss. But it is not hearing impairment itself that makes the deaf a cultural group in their own right: it is language and social interaction – the heart of any community.

American Sign Language

*Your lightest word in hand
lifts like a butterfly, or folds
in liquid motion: each gesture holds
echoes of action or shape or reasoning.*
Dorothy Miles, "To a Deaf Child."

For most deaf people in the United States, American Sign Language, or ASL – created by the deaf for themselves – is the natural, most expressive, and most comfortable form of communication. Linguists' studies over the past two decades have shown that ASL is a true and separate language, not modeled on any spoken language, fully capable of communicating complex ideas and information. But ASL "speaks" to the eyes, not the ears: meaning, emphasis and syntax are conveyed by particular hand and arm shapes and movements, facial expressions, and body postures. Names, and some English loanwords, are fingerspelled with the manual alphabet.

Like every language, ASL has artistic as well as practical dimensions. ASL poems often employ single handshapes or patterned movements throughout, just as English poetry often derives its form from devices like meter and rhyme. And just as the hearing enjoy wordplay, the deaf take pleasure in "signplay" – puns and surprising compound signs, witty compressions of form and meaning, inventive name signs that caricature prominent personalities, even "finger-fumblers," the ASL analogue of tongue twisters. Many forms of "signlore" involve play with the manual alphabet. Sometimes fingerspelling and mime are joined together to give a kind of double identity to a concept, as when the fingers simultaneously dramatize and spell the word D-U-E-L. Other fingerspelling pastimes build on the fact that many signs employ handshapes similar to those of the manual letters and numbers. One very popular tradition is the contriving and performing of stories or scene descriptions using only signs made from the letters of the alphabet in A-to-Z sequence or from a sequence of numbers – for instance, 1 to 6 or 1 to 25. Even the subjects of these narratives tend to be traditional: Gothic murder mysteries, train robberies, auto-driving exploits (and racier topics) drug hallucinations, cowboys and Indians, and so forth. Like ASL itself, these folk performances highlight the most remarkable talents of the deaf: their visual acuity and dramatic expressiveness.

Deaf Culture

*You hold the Word in hand,
and offer the palm of friendship. . . .*
Dorothy Miles, "To a Deaf Child"

Despite recent developments in telecommunications – particularly the TTY, which makes it possible to transmit typed messages over the telephone – deaf



For deaf children, the most urgent problem is communication. More than 90% of deaf children are born into families whose members are all hearing. These children cannot acquire spoken language as other children do, in the normal course of growing up; for them, training in speech and lip reading will last throughout their school years. In the meantime, they may have no common language with their families. Many schools for the deaf, hoping to break the "silence barrier" during the crucial early learning years, now sponsor pre-school programs to train parents to sign with their small children.

people still rely chiefly on face-to-face communication. They are intensely gregarious; news and stories travel with lightning speed. As Leo Jacobs has said, even in a large metropolitan area the deaf community "maintains the warm, close-knit, and folksy atmosphere of a small town or village where everyone is acquainted with everybody else." Nearly 90% of deaf people's marriages are with deaf partners; deaf adults run and enthusiastically support their own social clubs, athletic clubs, theatrical groups, business and political organizations, church groups, newspapers, and magazines. Social ties in the deaf world often start very early in life, in special residential or day schools (though this pattern is slowly changing as "mainstreaming" becomes common) – and they last a lifetime. These are the places, these clubs, schools, and local social gatherings, where deaf folklore flourishes.

To be sure, some deaf people choose not to participate in Deaf Culture. These individuals never take up sign communication and mingle very little with deaf social groups, preferring to identify themselves more closely with hearing society. But the great majority of the profoundly deaf – at least 1½ million – use sign language with one another and cherish it, accept Deaf Culture and society as a positive value, and share with their fellows the stories, customs, and pastimes that proclaim that their way of life is something to be proud of.

The deaf are – and see themselves as – resourceful and inventive people. There have been some prominent inventors among them (one was John R. Gregg, the Scottish inventor of shorthand), but to list only the famous is to overlook every deaf person's day-to-day inventiveness needed to survive in the alien world of invisible sound. Coping strategies are celebrated in countless stories and reflected in customs. How, for instance, did deaf people manage to wake up on time in the morning before modern technology provided flashing-light alarm clocks? They taught one another to rig up marvelous (and truly "alarming") devices, some even more bizarre than the one a widely known tale attributes to



Deaf people are very sensitive to strong vibrations – felt through a wooden floor, through the air, through their bodies. They use this sensitivity in ingenious ways. At Gallaudet College, for instance, a large bass drum is used to send percussive signals to the deaf football team during games. Deaf football has produced other ingenious innovations, too: the huddle, for instance, was devised in 1890 to enable the deaf team to hide its sign-language conferences from its opponents.

a long-ago deaf miner in Montana:

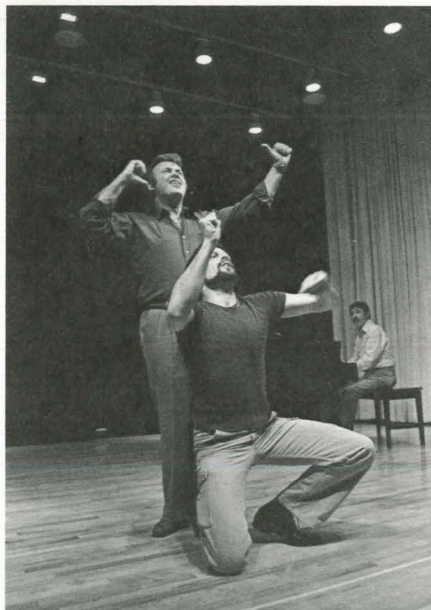
This deaf miner used a string-and-pulley arrangement which suspended an old, heavy flatiron near the ceiling of his bedroom during the night. When morning came, the winding stem of his alarm clock would trip a release, permitting the iron to fall to the floor with an impact that would waken anyone. As time went on, the deaf man's alarm clock became a tradition in the mining town, and all the miners came to depend on its reliable BOOM to start them off to work. Then there came a day when the deaf miner got married, and he and his bride took off for a three-day honeymoon. What did they find when they returned to the town? No work had been done in the mines for three days. All the miners were blissfully snoring away, awaiting the flatiron's fall!

No matter where they live or what jobs they hold, no matter what their race, religion, age, or gender, deaf people share similar outlooks and problems living in a hearing world whose messages are garbled and invisible, trying to speak a language never heard, contending daily with stereotypes of the deaf as irrational simpletons to be avoided or, worse yet, to be paternalistically protected. Tales like that of the miner, passed from hand to hand in the community, powerfully contradict the outside stereotypes. In such stories – and there is a vast repertoire of them – the deaf assert to each other their own strength and resourcefulness and achievements, laugh at situations in which the *hearing* turn out to be dependent, misunderstanding bumbling, and share rueful chuckles at the “hazards of deafness.” Other stories insist that deaf culture be recognized and respected. In one, a deaf tree, its trunk chopped through, stubbornly refuses to topple when the logger shouts “Timber!” It finally cooperates only when a properly-trained tree doctor is summoned to diagnose the “handicap” and finger-spells “T-I-M-B-E-R!” in the tree’s own language.

In recognition of the International Year of Disabled Persons, the 1981 Festival of American Folklife will feature a program presenting the folklore and folklife of the deaf. Every day during the Festival, deaf participants will perform their signlore, tell stories and jokes that emerge from Deaf Culture, and discuss their experiences growing up deaf. American Sign Language will be taught in workshops to Festival visitors. Working models of the homemade devices deaf people have invented to substitute for alarm clocks and doorbells will be demonstrated, along with the special technology of deaf culture such as a TTY, a machine that allows deaf people to make phone calls.

A special area for collecting deaf folklore on videotape will be available to all deaf visitors to the Festival, so if you are deaf, and know any jokes, riddles, stories, or puns, please come to the Deaf Folklore and Folklife Area and share them with us.

Deafness brings a theatrical gift. In addition to their informal sign language storytelling and performances of skits at many social occasions (banquets, conventions, school gatherings, social or athletic clubs), deaf people enjoy and perform plays in American Sign Language in local community theaters for the deaf. If audiences include hearing people unfamiliar with ASL, voice interpreters are provided.



Suggested Reading

American Sign Language

Baker, Charlotte, and Robbin Battison. *Sign Language and the Deaf Community*. Silver Spring, Md.: National Association of the Deaf, 1980.

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"My eyes are my ears," says a deaf person. American Sign Language, the third most widely used non-English language in the United States, "speaks" to the eyes alone. Each of these photographs shows a frozen moment in an ASL sign, and through these we may get some idea of the complexity of sign communication. It's not a matter of hand shape and gesture alone; the entire body communicates — by posture, by degree of tension, by direction of movement, and, especially, by facial expression.

love



crying



embarrassment



pride

