The Problem of Voice

Some of the very first films made in America featured an elephant, two men eating pies, Italians eating macaroni—and a Deaf woman reciting the “Star Spangled Banner” in sign language. Dated 1902, the signing film was among a collection of short segments made by Thomas Edison to demonstrate the potential of “moving picture films.” Previously, film could only be viewed through a peephole device, or “kinetoscope,” which had among its drawbacks the limitation that only one person could view the film at a time. By 1896, a projection-type device called a “vitascope” was developed that allowed moving picture images to be displayed onto a screen, widening the audience for Edison’s new medium. It is easy to imagine why Edison chose a Deaf woman as one of his first subjects for projected images. Through sign language, Edison could show the potential of film to communicate and to show the body and hands in movement. The vitascope was immediately successful and within a year, over a hundred such projectors were in use throughout the country, featuring films for information and entertainment.

A scarce ten years after the invention of cinema, the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) undertook to make “moving picture films” of their own that would be used to advance the goals of the organization, to promote sign language, and to spread the voice of
Deaf people throughout the United States and around the world. By 1913, the NAD had made eighteen films. Not all of these films have survived; at least two are believed to be lost. But what remains is a remarkable set of images, not only of what sign language looked like at the turn of the century, but also of what Deaf people wanted — with much urgency — to say to each other and to others. The films ranged in length from as short as 125 feet to about 400 feet, running on the average about eight to nine minutes each. Many have suffered damage, no doubt because they were widely circulated throughout the United States, shipped from one location to another, and shown in halls and auditoriums from North Dakota to New York to California. Some films were damaged due to poor handling by inexperienced film projectionists, with repair often attempted by the Deaf people who rented the films. That so many have survived, and that they remain vivid after so many years, is a story in itself about the surprising durability of early film technology.

The enduring story of these films is the earnest efforts of the “Moving Picture Committee,” members of the National Association of the Deaf, to create films that would show that Deaf people have something to say and that they could say it in their own language. The committee debated among themselves about what and who should be the subjects of this costly endeavor, since they were limited to a fund of about $5,000 (about $88,000 dollars today). Some of the films are recitations of poetry and popularly known stories, but others are original texts.

The films reveal the struggle of “voice” at the turn of the century, how Deaf leaders envisioned communicating to Deaf people and to others, and what they would say. “Voice” has dual meaning, most obviously as the modality of expression in spoken language, but also as being heard. Without voice, one is mute and inexpressive, and crucially not heard. At the turn of the century, as more schools for the deaf turned to oral education, Deaf people struggled to make themselves heard above the clamor of the demand for speech and the banishment of sign language. The problem of voice facing Deaf people at the time was how to be heard on their own terms.

The years 1911–1913 were pivotal for the oral movement. In 1911, advocates of the speech-only movement had succeeded in persuading the Nebraska state legislature to require the oral method for all students admitted to the Nebraska School for the Deaf. Alarmed that the Nebraska example could spread to other states, the NAD campaigned hard to overturn the bill, failing to do so in 1913 and again in 1915. The NAD believed it had failed because it was up against powerful oral advocates, especially wealthy individuals like Alexander Graham Bell, who bankrolled the activities of an opposition organization, the American Association to Promote the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf. It is against this backdrop of fear and alarm that these films were made.

The films of the Moving Picture Committee were sign language films, made silently as were other films of that time. No captions, other than the names of signers and the titles of their lectures, were added to the films. They were made to illustrate sign language in its “purest” form, to communicate across distance not by the written word, but by signs. For the first time, ideas could be transported to places around the country in the original language of Deaf people.

George Veditz, a prolific writer and orator, was nearing the end of his term as president of the NAD when he was selected to give a lecture on “The Preservation of the Sign Language” for one of the films. Also selected was Edward Miner Gallaudet, the president of Gallaudet College and the son of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, a founder of the first school for deaf children in Hartford, Connecticut. Because Gallaudet was seventy-five years old at the time he made his film, the committee knew this might be their only opportunity to record his signing. John B. Hotchkiss, stooped with age,
was one of the few students still living who remembered Laurent Clerc, also a founder of the American School for the Deaf. His lecture, "Memories of Old Hartford," described an encounter with Clerc. Amos Draper, one of the first graduates of Gallaudet College, gave a lecture on the signing of the charter to authorize establishment of a college for deaf students. George Dougherty, a Deaf chemist, gave a brief lecture in front of a small audience on the invention of chloroform. Robert McGregor, the first president of the National Association of the Deaf, was filmed twice. First, he delivered a lay sermon, a sober exhortation to Deaf men and women to unite "as brothers and sisters under God." In his second appearance, "The Irishman and the Flea," he turned witty and ironic as he told of his search for a deaf person anywhere who suited the oralist ideal of someone who could speak without strain or effort. Invoking the racist story of an Irishman who could not catch an elusive flea on his body, McGregor said he rode trains and drove cars to try and track down deaf people who acted as if they were hearing, but no matter how far and wide he searched, such a person did not exist.

These films are precious. Written language can give clues to a language's history, but it changes far more slowly than speech. From descriptions of vocalizations of words, linguists can resurrect how spoken language sounded before voice recordings were invented. Likewise, sign linguists can study early sign language books from the nineteenth century with descriptions of signs to speculate how signs were made, but it is hard to capture a sense of the intonation, the flow, and the execution of a language from written records alone. The astonishing achievement of the NAD films is not only that they were made at all, or that they were made so early in the history of film, but also that there was such a range of signing preserved for the modern day, from older to younger signers, from hearing to Deaf, across many different topics. The window into the history of American Sign Language through these films is, fortunately for us, a wide one.

The NAD films have given linguists a treasure trove of examples of how signs have changed over time. Some signs are emblems of their era. The sign DOLLAR used by Veditz to explain how much money the committee wanted to raise involved a circular movement on his palm, to refer to the dollar coin. The modern sign for DOLLAR reflects the change to bills. In another example, McGregor uses a sign for TELEPHONE in which he holds two objects, one for the old speaker device and the other for the listening device.

Nancy Frishberg, one of the first linguists to study the films, found that a number of older signs were signed farther away from the body, at the sides, but over time, moved toward the center—for example, HELP in the older form was signed on the elbow, but now is signed on the hand. SORRY and LOVE were signed near the left side; today they are signed at the center of the body. Two-handed signs such as DEVIL are reduced to one-handed in modern forms. Historical change in signs involves moving them inward and simplifying them by reducing the number of hands to one. Indeed, to look at the signing orators of this era is to watch them appear to sign very grandly, in part following oratordial tradition at the time, but also because both hands were used and many signs were at the outer periphery of the body.

To the modern signer, Veditz, E. M. Gallaudet, and their contemporaries on film, though still intelligible, are dated. For one thing, in the films, the signers demonstrate no mouth movement throughout the lecture. Today signers tend to move their mouths more visibly, in what are called "mouth gestures." In the films, the body was kept stiff and solidly anchored to the floor. Signers performing today allow the body to move more flexibly in the performance space. When Veditz fingerspelled, which he did liberally through his lecture, he made each letter of the word slowly and deliberately, moving his hand sideways as though marking positions on an invisible floating page. Fingerspelling in ASL today is much more rapid, each handshape quickly replacing the next, and
the hand remains fixed in open space in front of the signer. There is a noticeable difference in the way the signs were articulated, in part because the signers were unsure of the capabilities of film, and wanted above all to be intelligible and clear for “future generations of signers.” As the signers in 1913 looked into the lens of the camera, they tried to imagine audiences of the present and the future, in America and elsewhere in the world. No doubt, these were ambitious filmmakers.

Half a century after the films were made, they disappeared from popular use and were left in deep storage in the basement of the Gallaudet library. When sign language research began its ascent in the 1970s, the old films were remembered, retrieved, and shown again in restored form. Today they are widely available on video, and Veditz’s famous lecture in particular is often shown in sign language and Deaf culture classes as an example of the old style of signing and the depth of feeling about sign language that existed at that time. Nearly one hundred years later, images of George Veditz in tails and stiff collar, and Robert P. McGregor stretching his arms wide as he exhorted “brothers and sisters all over the land” to join together, still speak to Deaf people as powerfully as they did when they were first made.

Though the films were made nearly a hundred years after the first school for deaf children opened in 1817, many featured men and women who were young children or adults during the middle of the nineteenth century. John Hotchkiss was nearly eighty in his film, so his signing would still reflect what sign language probably looked like when he was a young adult, a tangible record of sign language form for modern-day linguists. Edward Miner Gallaudet, Amos Draper, and others were likewise filmed in their later years, preserving for the record, as the NAD wished, the sign language of their youth.

John Hotchkiss was a droll man, bouncing slightly at the knees, as he told of his encounter with Laurent Clerc while a pupil at the American School for the Deaf. Clerc, as Hotchkiss portrayed him, was by then an old man who used a cane, but he describes Clerc as full of warmth and good cheer. As he remembers him, Clerc was fond of aphorisms: first, that one should “eat to live, and NOT, live to eat!” Hotchkiss did a lively copy of Clerc himself, emphasizing in the first that one should “eat wisely” and in the second, not “gorge oneself.” As he concluded his short segment, Hotchkiss pronounced that it would not be “long, long, LONG!” as he signed from the arch of his foot up through his leg and his arm to his shoulder, “before we meet again.” The bit of humor, then as now, draws a smile because the sign LONG is normally signed only from the hand to the shoulder. Robert McGregor gave an accomplished sermon exhorting “all brothers and sisters to join as one nation under God.” He is deeply serious in the film, a bit unsmilng, and perhaps over-rehearsed, but his generously large signing, as if from a distant pulpit, has endured as an example of early signed sermons.

After the films were made, the most frequently requested by audiences around the country was Edward Miner Gallaudet’s “The Lorna Doone Country of Devonshire England.” As the son of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, Edward was an embodiment of the earliest history of American deaf education. Compared to the other films, though, Gallaudet’s is harder to follow. While the others are slower and careful, he almost rushes through his narrative. Instead of a personal narrative, Gallaudet chose to retell a popular fiction of his time, R. D. Blackmore’s Lorna Doone. His signing is more abrupt and jagged, and the committee realized later that they had positioned him against an overly ornate backdrop, making his signing difficult to see.

Edward Miner Gallaudet’s film was one of the first made by the committee, and they were disappointed in it. Veditz wrote to the chair of the Motion Picture Committee that the film “was made
when the art of making these films was still crude.” The committee had previously approached Gallaudet and suggested that they make a second film but Gallaudet replied expressing much reluctance, saying that he thought the film was adequate, and furthermore, that at a recent exhibition those who had seen the film “expressed themselves as highly pleased and did not criticize it at all.” Still, Veditz would proclaim Gallaudet’s film “the poorest in the lot.”

Of the NAD films, George Veditz’s “The Preservation of the Sign Language” is by far the most impassioned and memorable. His lecture was original—not derived as many of the other films were from a popular poem or story, nor was it pedantic and cautious. Whereas other signers were rendered stiff by the presence of a camera, Veditz grew more confident and animated as he signed toward his powerful conclusion. Today, Veditz’s film, not Gallaudet’s, is the most frequently viewed. Its true effect lies in the blend of his powerful delivery and the evocativeness of his message. Like the film of Martin Luther King delivering his “I Have a Dream” speech, Veditz’s film oratory has reached a kind of mystical plane. It is powerful enough to bring unexpected tears, and to call people to their feet cheering. For this accomplishment, captured on no longer than fourteen minutes of celluloid, George Veditz has become far more well-known than any of his contemporaries.

Politically moderate by nature, Gallaudet spoke out in support of sign language in education, but was not a fiery orator on the subject. Veditz, on the other hand, was an aggressive and impassioned advocate. His letters often had an acerbic edge to them when he wrote about his true feelings. In a letter to Roy Stewart, chair of the Moving Pictures Committee, Veditz wrote that he was quite unhappy with one of the recently completed films featuring superintendents of schools for the Deaf: “The galaxy of wooden Indians called by courtesy superintendents of our schools made me grunt. Why did not the critics use signs? ? ? ?” Veditz went on to insult each superintendent by name: “Why did not Harris Taylor instead of jabbering like a monkey at big-chin Bowles, sling a few signs that you an’ me and the rest of the clan could understand? The only human being in the lot was Ray of North Carolina . . . 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.”

Veditz was a man of large ambitions and he carried out most of them. He lost his hearing from scarlet fever at the age of nine, and shortly after enrolled in Maryland School for the Deaf. Upon his graduation, he lacked funds to enter Gallaudet, so he worked for two years in the school’s printing department, learning firsthand the trade he would later enter as writer and editor. He trained his deaf students for jobs in major newspapers and in printing houses around the area. After he entered Gallaudet he did so well that he graduated in 1884 with the highest record ever of any student at the college. He returned to Maryland School as a teacher and later moved to Colorado, where he became the editor of the Silent Courier, a Deaf newsletter. A restless curiosity man, he took up poultry farming, raised squabs, and dabbled with growing dahlias and gladiolas. Even while editor of his own newspaper, he regularly contributed pieces for other publications, including the Silent Worker, the official publication of the National Association of the Deaf, and the Maryland Bulletin, the Maryland School’s newspaper. He also took on the editorships of Western Poultry World and the Western Pigeon Journal. Upon his death, the Maryland Bulletin published short memorials from his students and colleagues. Many referred to his “vitreous pen,” and described him as a “relentless opponent.”

Today Gallaudet’s stiff rendition of the story of Lorna Doone seems antiquated. As a retelling of a novel that has faded from
popular memory, his lecture has little effect today other than the opportunity to see his sign language. Veditz, however, has managed to make his film timeless. In his crisp and forceful style, Veditz willed himself to speak out to Deaf people around the world and into future generations. And at that, he succeeded.

There have been several written translations of Veditz’s signed lecture, including one by Carol Padden and another by Eric Malzkuhn, which were used to caption the film for modern use. Generally Veditz is not difficult to understand. Because the style at the time was to fingerspell not only single words but also entire phrases, particularly for oratorical emphasis, Veditz left precise clues for the English translations of some of the more emotional points in his speech. But in places, his sign phrasing is ambiguous, leading the translator to wonder whether Veditz intended one or two sentences, or a particular emphasis on one or another sign. Sign intonation in 1913 is significantly different from that used today, in part because of diachronic change in American Sign Language, and in part because of general style differences spanning nearly a century.

Through a wholly accidental and fortuitous discovery, a written version of Veditz’s speech was recently found. Mike Olson, an archivist at Gallaudet University, was browsing through an antique shop in Maryland when he came across old postcards addressed to Roy Stewart. Recognizing the name, Olson contacted the dealer and discovered the dealer was a grandnephew of Stewart, and remarkably, had in his possession Stewart’s entire collection of letters and records about the NAD film project. Included in the collection was a letter from George Veditz to Roy Stewart in which he complains about the superintendents’ signing, and privately worries that in his own film, he looked like a “singed cat.” Tucked inside his letter was his speech—typewritten by Veditz himself in English.13

The discovery of the lost records has opened up the NAD films to new interpretation. The deliberations of the film committee are brought to life again. Roy Stewart comes across as an able leader, shepherding the complicated project through to completion.14 After years of soliciting contributions, the Moving Picture Committee succeeded in raising nearly $5,000. In later years, as more films made by other organizations were contributed to the committee, they worked to make those available for distribution as well. Stewart received numerous letters from Deaf leaders around the country, asking how to rent the films, and then later how to return them. After the first experiment in distribution, Stewart insisted that admission be charged for each showing, and that funds be used by the committee to make new prints from the negatives, to replace ones worn from repeated showings. Stewart also stipulated that groups desiring to rent the films had to hire an “experienced operator” who knew how to thread the film into the notoriously balky machines.17 In one letter, the films were returned with complaints that the “tin boxes they are in are abominable. Sure you ought to get the right size, so they will fit in.”18 The letters represent a slice of film history just a decade after the medium was invented, showing how ordinary people interacted with the new technology.

The centerpiece of the recently recovered records is Veditz’s written version of his own speech. We now can determine that for the most part, modern translations have followed much of Veditz’s intent. As we place the English versions side by side, the modern translations and the Veditz original, even more evidence of language change in ASL is revealed. Recently Ted Supalla has been analyzing the old films for morphological change, or how signs change their internal word structure over time. He finds that many modern signs were historically phrases, where two or more signs were used; today a single sign remains. The modern sign SON was formerly a phrase, MALE ROCK-BABY, as signed by Edward Miller Gallaudet in his “Lorna Doone” narrative. Supalla argues...
that in diachronic change, phrases first become compounds, and later single signs in a process he calls “grammaticalization.” In this case, the two signs changed into a single sign, SON. In another example, the modern sign SUNDAY was formerly two signs, JESUS (or HANDS-RAISED) and DAY.19

In Veditz’s speech, we see the older version of the modern sign WREATH, signed as GREEN WREATH. Today WREATH is signed alone without the color unless one wanted to make special note of the color, as in a “white wreath” or a “gold wreath.” We also see that the superlative suffix in ASL, translated as “-est” in English, appeared first as a separate two-handed sign, MOST. Veditz uses two signs, POOR MOST, but translates it in his English version as a single word, “poorest.” Modern ASL has a productive superlative suffix that can be added to many adjectives: for example, SMART-EST, “smartest,” EASY-EST, “easiest.” Furthermore, these examples are one-handed signs with suffixes, unlike Veditz’s versions, which were two-handed as well as being two separate signs.

Stepping back, and viewing Veditz’s English text as a whole, there is yet more to be seen. First, Veditz writes to Stewart that he is enclosing his copy of the speech, which he wrote after the film was made: “I have written down my address as well as I remember it . . . I think I got the main points in very near the order in which they were filmed.”20 Not surprisingly, the written version of the speech is slightly out of order with the actual speech in the film. His unforgettable biblical warning, “A new race of Pharaohs that knew not Joseph are now taking over the land and many of our American schools” appears near the end of his signed speech, but earlier in his written version. It is clearly better to use the powerful phrase at the end, as the speech builds to his final thundering proclamation: “We will all love and guard our beautiful sign language as the noblest gift God has given to Deaf people.” Veditz also adds entire sentences to his written version that do not appear in the film, perhaps because he cannot resist improving on himself:

“These teachers are sacrificing them [deaf children] to the oral Moloch that destroys the mind and soul of the deaf.” Later in his text he writes of his European friends, “These films are destined to cross the ocean and bring happiness to the deaf of foreign lands,” but this sentence doesn’t appear in the film either.

He takes further liberties with his written version. Some phrases in the original speech are given more elaborate versions in English. When he describes the envious eyes of the French and German Deaf people who see that Deaf Americans still have use of their sign language in some schools, he writes: “They look upon us as prisoners bound in chains look upon those who walk about free in God’s open air.” The last phrase, “in God’s open air,” is not said directly in the signed version. Later, Veditz describes oral teachers as refusing to listen to the pleas of Deaf people; instead they “cast them aside.” In the written version, Veditz adds a flourish: “Their teachers have held them off with a hand of steel.”

Written after the film was made, Veditz’s “transcript from memory” may show that there was not an intent among Veditz and the committee to “translate” the films into English or to have an English interpretation of it accompany the film when it was distributed. In Veditz’s time, there was more of a sense of separation between sign language and written English. To the early twentieth-century Deaf, the two languages were equally expressive, but it did not mean that they saw them as structurally equivalent. The idea to study signed speeches in detail and render close translations for them into speech or English is a recent development. Certainly the technology that exists today, which allows one to pause on a videotape or a DVD and study a single frame, permits the close comparison of ASL and English. But it would not have occurred to Veditz or his colleagues to try and match the two languages closely by phrase or sentence because they believed that not only did the languages differ, but their worlds of meaning were distinct, too.

From the collection of Roy Stewart’s letters, it appears that the
groups sponsoring the film exhibitions were almost always Deaf people: alumni associations, local Deaf clubs, Deaf churches. This does not mean that there were no hearing people in the audiences. In a letter to Roy Stewart, a Deaf man planning an exhibition of the films in his local community asks that Stewart send “papers” for the films so that they can be read aloud by a hearing person during the film, which suggests that the films were voiced into spoken English translation at least some of the time.\textsuperscript{21} It is not clear who the voiced translations benefited exactly. Possibly hearing friends or relatives, but there is little mention of them in the letters. When Veditz rails in one film against “a new race of pharaohs who . . . do not understand signs for they cannot sign,” it is hard to imagine a significant number of such “pharaohs” coming to see the films.

But at least one did just that. J. Schuyler Long gossiped in a letter to Roy Stewart that Frank Booth, the superintendent of the Nebraska School for the Deaf, showed up at a film exhibition in Omaha. A hearing son of Deaf parents, Booth became an ardent oralist and was widely despised by Deaf people for his rejection of sign language.\textsuperscript{22} Long told Stewart: “You did not tell me that McGregor’s flea story was on that film . . . And right there under Booth’s nose those films were thrown on the screen and the oral method got it hard right in an oral hot bed . . . Of course I had to assure Booth that we were not trying to steal a march on him but since they were shown there without my knowledge in advance the joke was too good and we could not help but enjoy it.”\textsuperscript{23} Because he had Deaf parents, Booth knew sign language, and would have understood the films anyway.

As were all of the early films, these were silent films. Unlike silent films for hearing people, however, apparently no background music or sound effects were prepared to accompany them. Some silent films for the general public contained English text, but the only English text in any of the NAD films were the titles that intro-
duced the subject of the film and the name of the signer, as in “The Preservation of the Sign Language, by George Wm. Veditz.” There were no intertitles, or small signs representing dialogue inserted between film scenes, that later became popular in silent films. There were no subtitles; indeed subtitles as a way to represent language would not appear until much later, after talking films were developed. The signed speeches were presented in full body, from above the tops of signers’ heads to below their feet. There were no close-ups, no changes in camera angle. All the speeches were signed without interruption, though it seems the films were spliced together in places, probably from breakage, causing brief “blips” in the film image.

Gallaudet gave his Lorna Doone narrative standing on the stage at Chapel Hall, one of the oldest buildings on the Gallaudet campus, and one with a great deal of symbolic meaning for alumni of the college. There can be no doubt that the films were meant for Deaf people, as Veditz says several times in his speech, as well as for their Deaf brothers and sisters elsewhere in the world who have “watched, with tear-filled eyes and broken hearts, this beautiful language of signs snatched away from their schools.” What is notable about the intended audience for these films is that they were not speaking to hearing people who might, with a little knowledge and proselytizing, become converted to their cause, nor to those who were the objects of Veditz’s fiercest condemnations. It was taken for granted that it would be difficult if not impossible to communicate to them through the language of signs, so their primary audience was each other, or those who knew the language.

The distance between Deaf people and their community of signers (which did include hearing signers like Edward Miner Gallaudet and Edward Allen Fay) on the one hand, and hearing nonsigners on the other, was deep and wide. Written language was often the medium of communication between the two groups, but not sign language. Self-expression to hearing people who did not
already know sign language could not be imagined; instead the written language was used to communicate. Veditz railed against the school superintendents who failed to sign when in the presence of a Deaf audience, rendering their speech unintelligible. In effect, Deaf people felt themselves silenced by the difference between languages and by the fact that even hearing people who could sign would fail to acknowledge sign language at all, as did Edmund Booth and the school superintendents.

The problem of voice that Veditz and the committee struggled with was an old one. Deaf people knew from long experience that hearing people were unresponsive to Deaf people’s expression of their “needs, wants, and desires,” as Veditz pronounced. Indeed, using the reference to “pharaohs that knew not Joseph,” Veditz despised hearing people who listened more carefully to others speaking on behalf of the Deaf but not to Deaf people themselves. To surmount the vast chasm that divided Deaf people and those who had control of their schools, the Moving Picture Committee mounted an offensive to collect oratory in their own language, but at first, this offensive could only be addressed to other Deaf people.

It was not by sign language but by written language that Deaf people believed they could communicate with hearing others. Veditz knew the power of the pen, and he wrote as often and as widely as he could. Olof Hanson, elected president of the NAD after Veditz finished his term, was also a prolific writer and an aggressive advocate of Deaf causes. Yet both understood the limitation of the written word in reaching out to Deaf people. The 1913 films were an opportunity to convey voice directly in the language of the community, and project it onto screens around the country, multiplying its effect many times over. Veditz and the Moving Picture Committee could imagine new audiences, broader and more far-reaching than they had known, who would see sign language in its “original purity.” The language of signs had finally become the medium as well as the message. Now what remained was what to say and how to say it.

In his lecture, Veditz leans heavily on romantic and religious imagery. Teachers of the deaf refuse to listen to the “prayer of the deaf” in Europe, leading them to view with envious eyes Americans who still can sign as walking “about free in God’s open air.” And at the end of the film, Veditz raises his hands high above his head as he proclaims sign language as “the noblest gift God has given Deaf people.” Having invoked an authority no less than God, Veditz brings his speech to a conclusion, bows reverentially, and leaves the stage.

Baynton describes the new generation of teachers of the deaf as unmoved by such sentiment; indeed, they dismissed such rhetoric as antiquated. They believed that the teaching of speech was needed in order to help the next generation of deaf children not only to communicate in spoken language, but also to leave behind the shackles of a primitive life, and the “clannishness” that results from Deaf people spending time together because they know only sign language. Veditz’s appeals to God only reinforced the view of sign language as a holdback to a time when emotion, not reason, prevailed. His speech most likely struck the “progressive” oralist educators as quaint and excessively emotional, even desperate.

For the most part, it appeared that the NAD films had no discernible effect. Oralism continued its relentless march through schools for the deaf. By 1920, the American Annals of the Deaf reported that 80 percent of all schools for the deaf listed the oral method as their primary method of instruction. Baynton finds that except for some sign language speeches that were spoken into English by hearing colleagues as they were delivered at conventions of teachers of the deaf, Deaf people and their organizations, including the National Association of the Deaf, were largely excluded from these discussions. Hearing teachers who supported
the manual approach were not effective advocates either: they often discouraged Deaf people from speaking before their colleagues, or did not invite them to places where they could speak on their own behalf. Deaf people were left to communicate their opposition almost entirely by writing.

If the films did not change the course of the oral movement at the beginning of the century, what did they accomplish? They introduced Deaf people to the possibility of self-expression, by visual means and through film. They made their language observable to themselves, available for critique, and critique it they did. Many letters to and from Roy Stewart and the Moving Picture Committee were about the content of the films, whether the signing was clear and how to improve the presentation. The voice of Deaf people, in its original form, brought about a new appreciation for the language. Very quickly Deaf people grew to appreciate the power of their own language on film. What remained was for them to persuade others of the communicative power of sign language and that Deaf people had something to communicate. This would take another half century to accomplish.

Signers today understand the Veditz speech not only because they recognize the signs, but also because they recognize the oratory. Veditz’s speech is entirely familiar, even when transported in time nearly a hundred years. He is angry about the same things, and rails against the same people. He is passionate about the one thing that Deaf people cherish—their language. Not only his vocabulary and his sentence structure survive in modern ASL, but also his manner of making clear cultural themes and arguments.

The themes in George Veditz’s “The Preservation of the Sign Language” continue to resonate in the twenty-first century. The alarm that Veditz sounded as he called for the use of film to preserve sign language for future generations still seems real today.

One could argue though that Veditz worried needlessly—after all, sign language survived another ninety years after his dire warnings, and today shows a surprising robustness. Interest in sign language exploded in the 1970s and 1980s, with many colleges and universities today offering classes in American Sign Language. Indeed ASL is often the second most popularly enrolled language after Spanish on university campuses. Sign language has even been used in families that have no concern with deafness; some hearing parents are beginning to teach their infants basic sign vocabulary as a means of communicating with them before the onset of spoken language. By any measure, sign language is not the oddity or the novelty it once was; it seems to have entered popular culture in a way that Veditz could hardly have imagined. Schools, too, appear to have turned back the oral tide. In a recent survey of schools and programs for deaf children, nearly all public or state-supported programs offer deaf children education in sign language. Whereas oral curricula used to dominate state-supported and publicly funded schools, parents now can find sign language education for their children in a public school district or a special school.

Yet Veditz’s warnings strike a chord in the Deaf community. When he rails about the “worthless, cruel-hearted demands of people that think they know all about educating the deaf but know nothing about their thoughts and souls, their feelings, desires, and needs,” Deaf people cheer. Though Deaf people today are unlikely to recognize the religious reference to “a new race of pharaohs,” when Veditz explains that “they do not understand signs for they cannot sign,” Deaf people nod knowingly. When the film reaches its conclusion, Veditz signs a line many have memorized, that “we will all love and guard our beautiful sign language as the noblest gift God has given to Deaf people.” It is remarkable, even astonishing, that Veditz could speak so directly and meaningfully to Deaf people today.
The film resonates because Deaf people still feel, deeply and with conviction, that their language is under threat. Genetic engineering has as its goal not the preservation of sign language, but the elimination of deafness so that no child will be consigned to using sign language. The popular media continue to write stories about children with cochlear implants who achieve the ability to hear and use speech, implying directly or indirectly that the child does not need sign language anymore because he or she has the possibility of speech.39 Ironically, sign language is increasingly taught to hearing children in public schools at all levels as an option for foreign language instruction.30 For ASL to be acceptable for hearing children, even beneficial to their early development as some have claimed, yet at the same time viewed as detrimental to the development of deaf children, is one of the oddest contradictions of our age.

Today as in 1913, Deaf people struggle with the problem of voice, how to make themselves heard over a powerful other voice of hearing people who define them and their needs differently. How can Deaf people explain why deafness and sign language should exist in an age of scientific advancement? How can they explain why sign language is necessary for young deaf children? Even today, sign language has a tinge of the romantic about it—the marvel of communicating not with voice but with the face, hands, and body—but that same romanticism can resign it to irrelevance. How can Deaf people make sign language relevant in the age of the genome and the microchip?

Sign language is relevant because it is a supreme human achievement, accomplished over a long history that has accumulated in time and in people, the collective genius of countless human beings. Deep in its structure are clues to the workings of the human brain and the wisdom of social groups that work together to make meaning and find a purpose for living. That Deaf people can preserve a sign language despite attempts to keep them apart from one another, and efforts to banish the use of the language from their schools, is testimony to why sign languages exist in the first place—as uniquely human inventions for the problem of how to transcend the individual and form social contact with others. Sign languages show what humans can do if they do not hear speech, and they show what signers can do even if they hear speech; they make and use language. We strive to make meaning in as many different ways and forms as we can. To express is divine.

In one of Veditz’s last lines, he says: “as long as we have Deaf people on earth, we will have signs.” It is an expression of hope and determination. Veditz fought against the prospect that there might be a time when there will be deaf people but no sign language. But his statement also implies that there may be a time when we will not have deaf people. Or that we will have a sign language but without Deaf people. Veditz’s speech enlivens and guides Deaf people, for within his signs and in his written words, Veditz is very much the Deaf person his predecessors were, and very much the Deaf person we are today.