

# Preservation of the Sign Language

By Christopher Shea

“Preservation of the Sign Language” (1913) features a 15-minute speech in American Sign Language by deaf activist and educator George W. Veditz (1861-1937). As simple as this film is, however, it is a landmark document in deaf culture. It was made at a critical time in deaf history, and the content of Veditz’s speech strikes directly at the heart of an issue that has cast a long shadow over the deaf community for centuries.

Since deaf education was first systematized in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it has seen an ongoing struggle between two schools of thought. The oralist method emphasizes learning spoken language and lipreading, and either minimizes the use of sign language or rejects it outright. The manualist method prefers to conduct instruction in sign language, and use sign as a bridge to acquiring other languages.

Which method a deaf person experiences as a child has a life-long influence on his or her language skills, socialization, and views on deafness. When given the choice, deaf people have overwhelmingly preferred manual education, and the manual method has dominated over the last few decades. However, this was not always the case. In 1880, deaf educators from around the world met at the Second International Congress on the Education of the Deaf in Milan, Italy, commonly known as the Congress of Milan or the Milan Conference.

The avowed intention of the Congress of Milan was to establish basic principles for the education of the deaf. In truth, the deck was stacked: the Congress had been organized by an oralist group and the majority of the delegates and speakers were hearing oralists. Only a few manualist delegates were invited, and only two of 164 delegates were deaf themselves. The Congress wasted no time in affirming the superiority of the oral method and rejecting the use of sign as “injuring articulation and lip-reading and the precision of ideas.”

Thirty years after the Congress of Milan, it seemed that sign was in danger of becoming a dead language. The Congress had been extremely influential through continental Europe. The authority of the



*Frames from the film show George W. Veditz signing his message.*

Congress’s pronouncements enabled oralist educators to push manualists out of their jobs and replace manualist or mixed curriculums with pure oral programs. In America, the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) was founded in response to what deaf people saw as a threat to their cultural existence.

George W. Veditz experienced both methods of education as a child. The son of German immigrants, he became deaf at the age of eight, after he had acquired spoken-language skills in English, German, and other languages. He attended private schools and had a tutor until age 14, when he enrolled in the manualist Maryland School for the Deaf, and then continued his education at Gallaudet College before returning to the Maryland School as a teacher. A well-known figure in the deaf community, Veditz was elected NAD president in 1904 and 1907, and in that position became famous as a fierce and eloquent critic of oralism and discrimination against the deaf and an evangelist for sign language.

Over the years, numerous schemes have been conceived for recording sign language in print, but they have all foundered on one basic problem: sign is dependent on motion, facial expression, and body language to convey tone and context. These factors are impossible to render in a static medium. But Veditz saw the possibilities a new and popular technology – film – offered deaf people. Film was visual and mobile, the perfect medium for a visual and mobile language. Under Veditz’s presidency, the NAD set up a Motion Picture Committee and solicited donations to create short films recording the most skilled signers of the day, both deaf and hearing, with the intention of preserving the best examples of sign language in the event that the oralists were able to suppress it entirely.

These films were shot between 1910 and 1921 with a single 35mm-film camera. The subjects recorded were diverse: travelogues, reminiscences, poems

and songs, jokes, a sermon, and even the Gettysburg Address translated into sign. These films were extremely popular in the deaf community, and were rented to clubs around the country. Many of the original prints were lost due to insufficient funding for preservation, but fourteen, now known as the Veditz Collection, were saved by the combined efforts of the NAD, Gallaudet University, and the Library of Congress and transferred to more stable 16mm and, later, digital formats.

“Preservation of the Sign Language” is different in tone from the other films of the Veditz Collection. It is not intended to be merely a historical recording of a talented signer. In this speech, Veditz both pays tribute to the history of sign and mounts a blistering attack on the post-Milan oralists. He opens with a reference to the Abbe de L’Epee, whose 18<sup>th</sup>-century Parisian school is generally believed to be the beginning of manualist education, before contemptuously comparing him to the “incompetent, hard-hearted” oral educators who were attempting to banish signs in Europe and America. He praises the skilled signers and manualist educators of his day (many of whom made films for the NAD as well), while dismissing oralist educators as “enemies of the true welfare of the deaf” who do not understand deaf people’s “thoughts, spirit, feelings, wants, and needs.”

The steady, measured pace of Veditz’s signs and the pauses to spell out important phrases serve a double purpose: they underscore the solemnity of what he is saying, and at the same time make it easier for the signs to be translated into spoken or written language. Veditz knew that one of the challenges manualists faced was that the mainstream hearing culture usually only heard and read the arguments of their fellow hearing people on in the oralist camp. “Preservation of the Sign Language” is the only film in the Veditz Collection that was captioned for non-

signers, an indication that Veditz hoped his arguments would reach beyond the deaf community and help persuade hearing viewers as well.

Veditz’s speech also serves as a refutation of another popular oralist claim: that sign was merely a pidgin language, only able to express itself in the crudest strokes and incapable of reproducing clarity, precision, and subtlety of thought. From the delicate, swooping signs that he uses to evoke the reverence the French feel for L’Epee as well as conjure the image of French and German deaf suffering under oral domination, to the harsher, dismissive signs he uses for his attacks on the oralists, Veditz demonstrates the full range and complexity of emotion that a skilled signer can express.

Although the threat to sign language has receded as oralism has declined in popularity, the memory is still fresh in the collective memory of deaf culture, and sign is one of the most important cultural touchstones the deaf have. The emotions Veditz expresses in his film when he speaks of sign being the “noblest gift that God gave to the deaf” are still widely shared among the deaf, and that is what keeps “Preservation of the Sign Language” important and relevant, even over a century after it was filmed.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*Christopher Shea is Archives Technician at the Gallaudet University Archives. Deaf since an early age, he attended public schools and then graduated from Gallaudet. After a decade of working in the publishing industry, he returned to school to get his library science degree from Queens College, and then worked as a solo archivist in several locations before being hired by Gallaudet.*