

CAROL PADDEN

## Translating Veditz

GEORGE VEDITZ writes in a letter to Roy Stewart, dated March 29, 1915, that he has just seen his own film, *The Preservation of the Sign Language*, and reports that it “[is] better than I thought it would be. I expected to look like a singed cat, but lo and behold, I could understand myself all right!” Though it was a popular film with deaf audiences at the turn of the century, within a few decades the film had faded from most people’s memory. To protect the fragile original film, copies were made and sent around the country for viewing, but over time, as deaf audiences discovered popular films and then the ubiquitous videotape, the old films were left in storage for safekeeping and then forgotten.

Some sixty-five years later, in 1977, Veditz’s film was retrieved and screened at the opening of a conference on the research and teaching of American Sign Language (ASL). Despite the age and the condition of the film, the screening held the audience spellbound. The figure of George Veditz was clear and sharp against the curtained background; indeed, the audience found that they too could understand Veditz all right! His message of preservation and respect for sign language rang clear and true for a generation many years removed from the events he describes in the film. Veditz signs as did the men and women of his generation; he uses almost no lip movement as he performs his lecture, and his large and grand signs appear formal and precise. When he begins his lecture, he appears rehearsed, but then he grows confident, and his signing becomes animated and forceful. The lecture builds to a final crescendo as he proclaims what many have now memorized sign for sign—that “I hope you all will love

---

Carol Padden is Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of California, San Diego.



FIGURE 1. Veditz signing DEAF.

and guard our beautiful sign language as the noblest gift God has given to deaf people.”

After the film was made in 1913, Veditz wrote his letter to Roy Stewart two years later, passing judgment not only on his own lecture, but also on the other films in the collection. As for a film made by a Mrs. Erd, in which she signs the poem “The Death of Minnehaha,” Veditz is derisive, complaining that she did not have a “film face” and that the film itself was a “failure.” Mrs. Erd had not used “the sign language,” but instead had used “gyrations.” He very much liked John B. Hotchkiss’s charming lecture about meeting Laurent Clerc when he was a student at the American School for the Deaf, no doubt because Hotchkiss was using “the sign language” as close as possible to how Clerc might have used it.

Tucked inside the letter was Veditz’s written version of the lecture “as well as I remember it.” The very existence of this letter was a surprise. No one seemed to know of either the letter or his written text of the film until last year, when they were found by accident in the possession of a relative of Roy Stewart. As a member of the NAD’s motion picture fund committee, Roy Stewart was intimately involved in the organization’s project to make and distribute sign language films to audiences across the country.<sup>1</sup> Charged with the responsibility of negotiating with film companies, arranging the actual shooting, and then making copies for distribution, the committee passed much of its work through Stewart in the form of letters,

bills, and other written communications, which, thanks to a fortuitous discovery, contained the Veditz correspondence and is revealed to us nearly a century later.

As Veditz explains in his letter to Stewart, he wrote his translation two years after the film was made and shortly after he had seen the film again. He apologizes for the possibility that he has misremembered the order of his lecture since “I could not very well ask to have [the film] repeated.” When his signed lecture is matched with his written address, there are indeed three out-of-sequence sections. In addition, the translation contains a few signs or signed segments that do not appear in his English version. Conversely, some of the English phrases and sentences are not literally represented in the signed version.

Some of these “omissions” were matters of translation. Describing him as a “brilliant man of letters” (Bjorlee 1937, 124), Veditz’s contemporaries said that “he had not an equal among the deaf. His style was clear, fluent, easy and forceful” (P. Peterson in Bjorlee 1937, 126). Veditz’s work shows that he thought carefully about how to present a speech in American Sign Language and also how to write a comparable one in English. Indeed, he is a powerful orator in both languages (Fernandes and Fernandes n.d.). Side by side, his two versions are strong, uncompromising, and unflinching, even if they are slightly different. When we compare the two versions with each other and then with modern rhetoric about ASL and deaf people, we see yet another dimension: how certain issues seem to endure over generations of deaf people and long spans of time.

Veditz did not write his English version as a literal interpretation of his signed speech. He understood the power of the two languages and recognized that a sign-for-word, or word-for-sign, version would weaken the impact of his writing. He wrote while imagining large audiences and took care to write well. For example, in the signed sentence *BUT FOR THIRTY-THREE YEARS THEIR TEACHERS HAVE CAST THEM ASIDE AND REFUSED TO LISTEN TO THEIR PLEAS*, Veditz signs *CAST ASIDE* using the sign *GRAB-HOLD-FORCEFULLY-PUSH-DOWN*, moving the arm across the body to the side. In the English version of the same sentence, Veditz writes: “For thirty-three years their teachers have held them off *with a hand of steel*,” using imagery that

is at once both English and ASL. In another example Veditz explains that the European deaf view Americans as lucky to have sign language in their schools, signing: THEY LOOK UPON US AMERICANS LIKE A JAILED MAN CHAINED AT THE LEGS MIGHT LOOK UPON A MAN *FREE TO WANDER AT WILL*. In English Veditz writes: “They look upon us as prisoners bound in chains look upon those who walk about free *in God’s open air.*”<sup>2</sup>

Interestingly, Veditz seems to have added entire sentences to his written address that do not appear in his signed lecture, maybe because he could not resist adding still more fire to his message. (It is also possible that some sentences were lost when repairs were made to the film, but because the omissions tended to be entire sentences rather than words or fragments, this is unlikely.) Veditz was tightly controlled during the lecture, but his emotions were unmistakable.

In 1913 oralists (i.e., those who would ban sign languages) were gaining ground, having succeeded in passing a bill in the Nebraska legislature requiring the oral method for all students admitted to the Nebraska School for the Deaf. Alarmed that the Nebraska example could spread to other schools, Veditz campaigned hard with others in the NAD to overturn the bill, failing in two attempts in 1913 and again in 1915 (Van Cleve 1984; Van Cleve and Crouch 1989, 138). The failures must have been a bitter pill for Veditz because he spares no venom for his enemies, calling them “false prophets” and “pharaohs who knew not Joseph” in both the written and signed addresses. He adds another biting accusation that appears only in his written version—that deaf children were being sacrificed by “the oral Moloch that destroys the mind and the soul of the deaf.”

For maximum impact Veditz chose fiery biblical references for his speech. The “false prophets” who proclaim “that the American way of teaching the deaf is a mistake” comes from a fuller phrase, “Beware of the false prophets who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.” The “pharaohs who knew not Joseph” refers to the fate of Israelites who lost the protection of their former, more benevolent, rulers after Joseph died and found themselves facing slavery under the new pharaohs. Idolaters of the Semitic deity Moloch formed a cult that involved child sacrifice by fire and other atrocities. In all of the biblical references Veditz chose, the

## THE PRESERVATION OF THE SIGN LANGUAGE.

Friends and fellow-deaf-mutes:--The French deaf love de l'Espée. Yearly they celebrate his birthday with festivals, with banquets, or with pilgrimages to Versailles where they lay flowers and wreaths on his tomb. They love him as their first teacher, but they love him still more as the father and inventor of the manual alphabet and the sign language.

These French deaf have seen with tears and breaking hearts this language banished from their schools. For thirty-three years they have been fighting for its restoration. For thirty-three years their teachers have held them off with a hand of steel. These teachers listen not to this prayer of the deaf, but to the hard-hearted unjust demands of people who think that they know all about the deaf but who understand nothing of their spiritual or mental needs and cravings.

These teachers are sacrificing them to the oral Moloch that destroys the mind and soul of the deaf.

As it is with the French so it has been with the German deaf.

The French and German deaf look upon the American deaf with envious eyes. They look upon us as prisoners bound in chains look upon those who walk about free in God's open air. They confess that the American deaf are their superiors in mind, in spiritual development, in happiness, in material success. And they all say that it is because the language of signs is permitted in our schools. While they confess their inferiority, they place the blame on the oral method that forbids the sign language and permits speech alone.

But we are fast approaching a crisis in American deaf-mute education. False prophets have arisen who say that the American way of teaching the deaf is a mistake. They ignore the truth that the American deaf now lead the world and that this success is due to the Combined System. They deceive the public and try to make them believe that the oral method is the best when we know, as the French deaf know, as the German deaf know, that it is the poorest.

They would destroy the sign language. They wish to banish it from the school-room, from the chapel exercises, from the earth.

FIGURE 2. Veditz written text of his filmed speech.

Our beautiful sign language is beginning to show the effects of their work. The old masters of the language, the Peets, the Dudleys, the Elys, the Ballards, are rapidly disappearing. The deaf loved them because of this mastery. They could speak so the deaf could understand.

This new race of Pharos that knew not Joseph is now in control of many of our schools. They are unfamiliar with the sign language. Because they do not know how to use it they say it is harmful or of little use. Enemies of this language, they are the enemies of the true welfare of the American deaf.

But we still have some of the masters of the language with us. Edward Miner Gallaudet is one of the very few men living who obtained it direct from Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc. With him stand Fay, Hotchkiss, McGregor and a few others. Many of us have learned the language from them. These men know the language in its finest form. We wish to preserve our sign language in the form in which these masters use it, for coming generations.

The only way in which this can be done is by means of moving picture films.

The U. A. D., the National Association of the Deaf, has collected a fund of \$8,000, called the Moving Picture Fund, for the purpose. We now have films of Gallaudet, of Fay, of Hotchkiss, of McGregor, and will have more until the five thousand dollars is spent. I am sorry that it is not \$20,000. We could use it all. We could then have plays in signs, sermons in signs, lectures in signs. Fifty years from now these films will be priceless. The U. A. D. has rendered the deaf an inestimable service in raising this fund. Not only we American deaf, but the deaf of England, of France, of Germany, of Italy will benefit from them. These films are destined to cross the ocean and bring happiness to the deaf of foreign lands.

As long as there are deaf mutes we shall have signs. As long as these films exist we shall preserve our beautiful language in its purity. I hope that you all will cherish and defend this beautiful language as the greatest gift that God has given us.

George William Veditz.



FIGURE 4. Veditz signing SIGN.

oralists are depicted as uncaring, deceitful, and ignorant of sign language and the rightful lives of deaf people.

As Douglas Baynton explains in his account of the rise of oralism at the turn of the century, the message the oralists spread was that teaching deaf children to speak represented a new age of rational and scientific approaches to human problems (1996). They believed that because adequate training programs for the teaching of speech had not yet been developed, many deaf children had lost an opportunity to acquire the skill. If the task of learning to speak could be accomplished by rational means, deaf children would overcome their handicap in time and be able to participate in the larger world around them. Oralists rejected—and indeed were contemptuous of—the familiar arguments about sign language (i.e., that it was natural or pre-ordained). They saw manualists’ invoking the deity as harkening to a primitive, misguided age that did not yet realize that science could overcome limitations and open up new possibilities. Baynton chronicles the attempts of deaf Americans like Veditz who combated the rising tide of oralism; he argues that the two sides spoke with not only a different modality—sign vs. speech—but also a different rhetoric, indeed, a different voice.

### Translating the Film

At the time Veditz’s speech was made in 1913, film had just recently been invented. At that time it was an entirely visual medium, and

the possibility of presenting English in speech or text was virtually nonexistent. Subtitles and intertitles (breaks in the film where text is shown in order to convey voice or mood) had not yet been incorporated, and neither had sound tracks (Harpole 1990). The only English used in the film was at the beginning when the title and the speaker were introduced in text. For the rest of the film Veditz signs against a dark background wearing a dark waistcoat. His hair is parted neatly in the middle, so his face can be clearly seen, and he is careful to sign precisely and in large gestures.

When copies of the films in the collection were sent to audiences around the country, it appears that at least some of the time “interpreters” were present for showings. In a letter to Roy Stewart, dated January 4, 1914, Anton Schroeder of St. Paul, Minnesota, places a request to rent five films, including Veditz’s film. He asks, “Will you send me a copy of each from which our interpreter may be able to read aloud for the benefit of the hearing audience?” After receiving a reply from Stewart a week later confirming the rental, Schroeder writes again and reminds him, “I expect to get an interpreter to read all papers. I hope you will not fail to send the papers to me.” Nevertheless, Veditz’s written version of his filmed speech did not reach Stewart until a year later, in March 1915, so we do not know how Veditz’s speech was translated in those early years as it made its way around the country to different churches and halls.

In the 1970s, when the films were taken out of storage, their value was immediately apparent as a window to forms of ASL used at the turn of the century. Using the NAD collection, Nancy Frishberg wrote a paper showing systematic phonological changes in ASL over generations of signers (1975). Signs that were more gestural in form became more arbitrary and less transparent over time; for example, JEALOUS was signed by Veditz as biting the finger. In the modern form it is signed with a contact and an arc movement on the lower cheek, losing the original transparency. Signs made near the periphery of the body moved inward to the center, for example, LOVE and HAPPY. Ted Supalla has studied morphological processes in the older films, including compounding, and has shown how compounds are simplified into single signs, for example, the simplification of THIEF

from the older, three-part compound THIEF + STEAL + BODY (this volume). In the film Veditz uses a compound, GREEN + WREATH, which today has been simplified as WREATH.

As the films were shown to new audiences of sign language and Deaf culture students, they became valuable for yet another reason: They were also a window into how deaf people debated the issues of sign language with their audiences at the turn of the twentieth century and how they framed their existence as well as that of their sign language.

Several attempts were made to translate Veditz's speech into English for the purpose of making subtitles. Unaware until recently that Veditz had written his own version, the authors both independently wrote translations in the 1970s. Not surprisingly, our versions are very similar. Veditz is not hard to understand. Despite the deteriorated quality of the film, his signing is still clear. His intonation, phrasing, choice of vocabulary, and even his grammar are different from modern signing, yet they are still largely intelligible. Furthermore, Veditz often fingerspells entire phrases, particularly the biblical ones, so that those could be translated directly into English. As with his signing, his use of fingerspelling, while clear and intelligible, is different in form and function from modern fingerspelling.

### Translating across Time

When comparing the modern translations with Veditz's written version, we encounter a few surprises. First, one of Veditz's most memorable phrases is his final exhortation, which we translated as follows: I HOPE YOU ALL WILL LOVE AND PROTECT OUR BEAUTIFUL SIGN LANGUAGE AS THE NOBLEST GIFT GOD GAVE TO DEAF PEOPLE. The translation is a close one, especially since the underlined words were entirely fingerspelled, specifically the word *noblest*. Veditz's written version is as follows: "I hope that you all will cherish and defend this beautiful language as the *greatest* gift that God has given us." Instead of "noblest," Veditz writes "greatest." Instead of "our beautiful sign language," he writes "this beautiful language." He signs DEAF at the very end of the phrase but writes simply "us."

Compared side by side, at least for the conclusions, the signed lecture seems better. It builds steadily from a foundation of facts to

the situation in 1913, when oralists were making serious inroads in American deaf education. Veditz describes the vibrancy of the language and the earnest efforts of deaf people to defend it against those who would destroy it. As he approaches the end of the lecture, Veditz has prepared his audience for the most emotional argument of all—that AS LONG AS WE HAVE DEAF PEOPLE ON EARTH, WE WILL HAVE SIGN LANGUAGE. AS LONG AS WE HAVE OUR FILMS, WE CAN PRESERVE OUR BEAUTIFUL SIGN LANGUAGE IN ITS OLDEN PURITY. In a rising crescendo of indignation and emotion, Veditz concludes with his memorable final exhortation, bows slightly, and walks out of the frame. The emotion in the signed lecture is palpable, and viewers who understand Veditz’s emotion cannot fail to be moved by it.

Another surprise in the signed version occurs almost at the end, when Veditz says, A NEW RACE OF PHARAOHS THAT KNEW NOT JOSEPH ARE [sic] NOW TAKING OVER MANY OF OUR AMERICAN SCHOOLS. In the written lecture the same accusation appears, but it comes much earlier in the text, before he explains that the purpose of the films is to record the sign language of the masters of the language who are still alive. The biblical reference has more impact in the film, where he uses it near the end to build toward his conclusion. After making the accusation, he goes on to say: THEY DO NOT UNDERSTAND SIGN LANGUAGE BECAUSE THEY CANNOT SIGN. THEY PROCLAIM THAT SIGNS ARE WORTHLESS AND OF NO HELP TO THE DEAF. Then he fingerspells an entire sentence: ENEMIES OF THE SIGN LANGUAGE, THEY ARE ENEMIES OF THE TRUE WELFARE OF THE DEAF. A few sentences later he concludes his lecture. Did Veditz forget the exact sequence of his signed lecture when he was penning his written version? He might have. His letter to Roy Stewart states that he tried to write it down “as well as I remember it.”

Veditz may have used the opportunity of a written version to elaborate on the signed lecture. As a prolific writer of scathing columns and opinion pieces about the oral movement, Veditz surely could not have resisted inserting a few more sentences to drive home his point. His reference to “the oral Moloch that destroys the mind and soul of the deaf” appears only in the written version. It was certainly a powerful allusion—to compare oralists to cultists or idolaters—but it was not in the signed lecture.

Another insertion in his written version is a reference to oralists who “ignore the truth that the American deaf now lead the world and that this success is due to the Combined System.” As Baynton explains, the Combined System was offered by Edward Miner Gallaudet as a compromise: Sign language should still be used in schools for deaf pupils if teachers found that speech training or speech communication were ineffective for deaf children (1996). Since the Combined System meant acknowledging oralism as having at least a place in deaf education, it is interesting that Veditz was willing to consider it. Baynton also says that the different sides of the debate could embrace the Combined System because it had so many different definitions. These ranged from some that entailed oralism in most contexts to those where speech only was used if it could be proved successful for a deaf child.

Later Veditz confidently writes that “these films are destined to cross the ocean and bring happiness to the deaf of foreign lands.” In his signed lecture he phrases it somewhat more modestly by saying that DEAF PEOPLE IN GERMANY, IN ENGLAND, IN FRANCE AND ITALY WILL SEE THESE FILMS. Then he makes a prediction that, surprisingly, he does not repeat in his written lecture but is one we know has turned out to be entirely prescient: FIFTY YEARS FROM NOW, THESE MOVING PICTURES WILL BE PRICELESS. How true!

### Translating Fingerspelling

In the signed lecture Veditz fingerspells ninety-three words. As one might expect, he fingerspells the names of persons and places: DE L'ÉPÉE, VERSAILLES, EDWARD MINER GALLAUDET, DR. JOHN B. HOTCHKISS, DR. EDWARD ALLEN FAY, and DR. ROBERT MACGREGOR. He fingerspells not only nouns, as would modern ASL (e.g., BANQUET, FILMS, FUNDS, and PURITY), but also verbs, adjectives, and articles (e.g., THE, COMING, PRICELESS, and PRESERVE), a less common practice in modern ASL (Padden and Clark, in press). Furthermore, Veditz often fingerspells entire phrases or sentences, especially when he wishes to emphasize a point or represent a biblical phrase exactly as it appears in written form. Modern signers are less likely to fingerspell phrases or sentences than single words, at least not as frequently as Veditz does in the film.

. . . FALSE PROPHETS . . .

. . . THE ORAL METHOD . . .

. . . RACE OF PHARAOHS THAT KNEW NOT JOSEPH . . .

ENEMIES OF THE SIGN LANGUAGE, THEY ARE ENEMIES OF THE TRUE  
WELFARE OF THE DEAF. . . SIGN LANGUAGE AS THE NOBLEST GIFT . . .

Other phrases are fingerspelled, yet their signed translations appear many times throughout the lecture: FELLOW DEAF MUTES, (or simply DEAF) and LANGUAGE OF SIGNS (or SIGN LANGUAGE). Why does he fingerspell instead of signing? For Veditz, fingerspelling is a way to convey meaning above and beyond the words themselves. Fingerspelled words and phrases carry a realm of meaning that goes beyond their representation of English alphabetic characters. They are not simply spelled-out English words; rather, fingerspelling lends focus and emphasis to key points in the lecture, especially when Veditz refers to ENEMIES OF THE WELFARE OF THE DEAF, or to THE NOBLEST GIFT. Some fingerspelled phrases are used to refer specifically to the Bible, not to what the phrases mean but how they are actually written: “false prophets” and “pharaohs that knew not Joseph,” thus lending legitimacy to the words. These are direct quotations from the Bible and are applied to convey religious urgency to Veditz’s message. He uses sign for full effect, and one can say that he uses fingerspelling for even fuller effect. He switches between the two languages in ways that modern signers do less frequently, teaching us yet another lesson about how ASL has changed since the turn of the twentieth century. Not only have individual signs and sign language grammar changed, but the usage of fingerspelling has changed as well.

For Veditz and his deaf contemporaries, it is also possible that fingerspelling was their reply to the oralist charge that sign language makes it difficult for deaf people to learn and use English. By fingerspelling, Veditz shows that he had equal rhetorical facility in both languages—without having to resort to spoken English. His use of fingerspelling also shows his command of the Bible and of the English language. In his written version Veditz praises de l’Épée equally

as “the father and inventor of the manual alphabet and the sign language,” though he does not mention fingerspelling in the signed version, saying only that, for French deaf people, de l’Épée was THE FATHER AND INVENTOR OF THEIR BEAUTIFUL SIGN LANGUAGE.

Veditz despised the unseemly use of speech and mouth movement in place of dignified sign language, which he believed should move gracefully with the mouth at rest. In his letter to Roy Stewart, Veditz bitterly complains about the signing of Harris Taylor, the superintendent of the Kentucky School for the Deaf, in a 1914 film: “Why did not Harris Taylor instead of jabbering like a monkey at big-chin Bowles [the superintendent of the Virginia School for the Deaf] sling a few signs that you an’ me and the rest of the clan could understand?” By fingerspelling, a signer could avoid having to use speech or mouth movements to represent English words. Today, of course, modern signers use mouth movements as part of the grammar, as accompaniment to signs, for adverbial meaning, or to add special markers. By Veditz’s standards, modern signers might be accused of “jabbering” like Harris Taylor, but Veditz would surely thank modern signers for preserving not only sign language but fingerspelling as well and for using the latter nearly as frequently as he did.

### Translating Oratorical Style

The intonation and phrasing of Veditz’s signing style strikes modern signers as formal and reminiscent of the style used by deaf, signing religious leaders. His signs are made large, as though in a lecture hall. Much of his signing is precise, in that the signs are crisply made and the movements exactly drawn. At the start of his signed lecture, he explains: EVERY YEAR, ON THE OCCASION OF HIS BIRTHDAY, THEY GATHER TOGETHER AT BANQUETS AND FESTIVITIES TO SHOW THEIR APPRECIATION THAT THIS MAN WAS BORN ON THIS EARTH. Every sign has a clear start and ending and is clearly enunciated. There is no wavering or uncertainty in Veditz’s resolve to tell the story of how the sign language came into being.

He carefully plans his use of signing space for rhetorical effect. When he compares European deaf people to chained prisoners, his eyes look downward as he signs that oralists have cast them aside and



FIGURE 5. Veditz signing SHOW.

consider them inferior. Then he role-shifts to the prisoners, whose eyes look upward as they plead for the return of their language. Later, when he explains that these films should be used to PROTECT AND PASS ON OUR BEAUTIFUL SIGN LANGUAGE AS WE HAVE IT NOW, he shifts his body to the side to show the passing on of the language to the next, and then the next, generation of signers.

When making a list of qualities or traits, Veditz signs smoothly down the list, making each movement economically: THEY KNOW ALL ABOUT EDUCATING THE DEAF BUT KNOW NOTHING ABOUT THEIR THOUGHTS AND SOULS, THEIR FEELINGS, DESIRES, AND NEEDS. In a later sentence he uses the same economy of movement: BUT WE AMERICAN DEAF KNOW, THE FRENCH DEAF KNOW, THE GERMAN DEAF KNOW THAT IN TRUTH, THE ORAL METHOD IS THE POOREST. This rhythmic efficiency is carried over from words to phrases. Near the start of the lecture he introduces three consecutive sentences with the same phrase, FOR THIRTY-THREE YEARS, using repetition to drive home the disastrous effects of the oralist-controlled Milan conference in 1880, which called for abolishing sign language in deaf education:

FOR THE LAST THIRTY-THREE YEARS THE FRENCH DEAF PEOPLE HAVE WATCHED, WITH TEAR-FILLED EYES AND BROKEN HEARTS, THIS BEAUTIFUL LANGUAGE OF SIGNS SNATCHED AWAY FROM THEIR SCHOOLS; FOR THIRTY-THREE YEARS, THEY HAVE STRIVED AND FOUGHT FOR THE RESTITUTION OF SIGNS IN THEIR SCHOOLS; BUT FOR THIRTY-THREE YEARS, THEIR TEACHERS HAVE CAST THEM ASIDE AND REFUSED TO LISTEN TO THEIR PLEAS.

As he nears the conclusion, he returns to repetition, this time using fingerspelling instead of signing:

AS LONG AS WE HAVE DEAF PEOPLE ON EARTH, WE WILL HAVE SIGNS.  
AND AS LONG AS WE HAVE OUR FILMS, WE CAN PRESERVE OUR BEAUTIFUL SIGN LANGUAGE IN ITS ORIGINAL PURITY.

When he fingerspells, he moves the hand and the body to the side for each letter, as if sketching the written word in space. For the long sentence ENEMIES OF THE SIGN LANGUAGE, THEY ARE ENEMIES OF THE TRUE WELFARE OF THE DEAF, he again moves to the side but pauses briefly after the introductory phrase. Then he returns the hand to its original position in order to begin a new clause and fingerspells with the hand again moving to the side with each letter. Signers today—unless they wish to be very formal and show an older style of rhetoric—do not move the hand to the side while fingerspelling. Each letter is executed one after the other in the same space in front of the body. Yet as Veditz fingerspells each word, he couches them in sign language grammar, using the intonation of the language: He tilts the body slightly, and the head nods a little at each juncture.

We have evidence that Veditz was fully aware of these techniques because he repeats them in his written version. The lists of traits and the repetition of phrases also appear in his writing, for example: “As long as there are deaf mutes we shall have signs. As long as these films exist we shall preserve our beautiful language in its purity” (Fernandes and Fernandes n.d.).

### Translating Veditz

When George Veditz died in March 1937, deaf people knew they had lost a powerful orator. A month after his death, his alma mater, the Maryland School for the Deaf, published a special memorial to him with testimonials from friends and colleagues (Bjorlee 1937). Each remembered him as an fiery and principled spokesman and as a man who did not shy away from confrontation. Rose Harris writes, “His vigorous pen, wielded in [deaf people’s] behalf did as valiant service as ever thrusting lance of crusading knight.” Another observes that “Some may have objected to his biting sarcasm, his sharp-edged

replies to hecklers, and his hatred for sham and dishonesty. But, in the main, all these will now admit that a squarer man than George William Veditz never lived, or a truer friend, or a more relentless opponent.” Writing for the *Deaf Mutes’ Journal*, Thomas Francis Fox acknowledges Veditz’s prowess as a writer: “Mr. Veditz possessed a rare ability as a writer, a keen and effective pen, which he used without stint to correct what he considered unfair treatment of the deaf.” Frederick Meagher even compares him to the muckrakers of his time: “His vitriolic style was a relic of the Dana-Watterson-Steffens era.” His unremitting, sharp-edged rhetoric is amply represented in the two languages he used with equal ease. In neither one did he mince words or signs, and to the end of his life, he did not waver in his cause. Adding to others’ testimonials, Roy B. Conkling writes for the *American Deaf Citizen* that “A great and useful life is ended. The tired worker rests.”

The tributes recognize Veditz’s role in raising funds for the moving picture committee but oddly do not mention his film. He is praised for his oratorical style and his “vigorous pen,” but not for what would turn out to be his most enduring legacy—his filmed lecture.

Veditz writes in his 1915 letter to Roy Stewart that his film “was better than I thought it would be.” Then he adds that he was flattered that his friend “Argo paid me the compliment of saying it was the best and clearest film of the lot he had yet seen.” Ninety years and three to four generations of signers later, we would have to agree that George Veditz’s *Preservation of the Sign Language* is the finest piece of film that deaf people can call their own.

## Notes

1. Letter from Roy J. Stewart to Oscar Regensberg, August 2, 1914.
2. These segments are from translations of the film by Eric Malzkuhn and Carol Padden and are a composite of their individual renditions. Quoted segments are from Veditz’s own written version of his speech included in his March 29, 1915, letter to Roy Stewart. The small caps indicate glosses of individual signs in Veditz’s signed lecture. Fingerspelled words, phrases, or sentences are underlined. Italics are used to highlight signs and written words for purposes of comparison or discussion.

## References

- Baynton, D. C. 1996. *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign against Sign Language*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Bjorlee, I. 1937. Tributes: George William Veditz. *The Maryland Bulletin* 57 (7): 121–26.
- Fernandes, J., and J. Fernandes. In press. *Signs of Eloquence: Foundations of Deaf American Public Address*. San Diego: DawnSign Press.
- Frishberg, N. 1975. Arbitrariness and Iconicity: Historical Change in American Sign Language. *Language* 51:696–719.
- Harpole, C. 1990. *History of the American Cinema*. New York: Scribner.
- Padden, C., and D. Clark. 2003. How the Alphabet Came to Be Used in a Sign Language. *Sign Language Studies* 4 (1): 10–33.
- Supalla, T. 2004. *The Validity of the Gallaudet Lecture Films*. *Sign Language Studies* 4 (3): 261–92.
- Van Cleve, J. V. 1984. Nebraska's Oral Law of 1911 and the Deaf Community. *Nebraska History* 65:195–220.
- Van Cleve, J. V., and B. Crouch. 1989. *A Place of Their Own: Creating the Deaf Community in America*. Washington, D.C.: Gallaudet University Press.