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MOTHER HICKS

By Suzan Zeder

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TWO VIEWS OF DEAFNESS IN AMERICA

Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet and Laurent Clerc



Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet

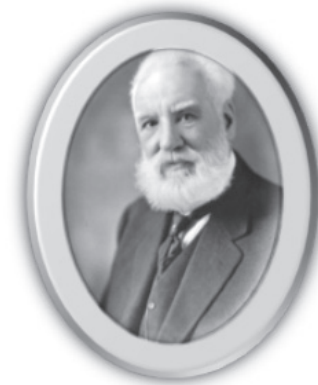
In 1935 American Sign Language, commonly referred to as “ASL,” was relatively new. Until the middle of the 19th century, the general public believed that deaf people were mentally impaired and couldn’t learn like hearing people could.

Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet stopped believing this after he met Alice Cogswell. Alice, who was deaf since she was two years old, was playing with Gallaudet’s younger siblings and was having trouble keeping up with her playmates because of her lack of language. Gallaudet called her over and wrote the word HAT in the dirt and pointed to his hat. After Alice understood the meaning, she immediately requested to be told her own name. This proved to Gallaudet that she was intelligent but just didn’t have a way to communicate her intelligence. This set him on a quest to find ways to teach language to deaf people (Nomeland 34).

The schools in England wouldn’t teach Gallaudet without him committing to work with them eleven hours every day for several years because they considered their teaching methods secrets. Fortunately for Gallaudet, Abbé Sicard happened to be in town as a refugee from Napoleon’s France. Sicard had succeeded Abbé de l’Epée as director of the National Institution for Deaf-Mutes. Sicard invited Gallaudet to a lecture series on the methods used to educate deaf children in France. Gallaudet attended the demonstrations and was impressed by the use of signs in addition to the speech and lip-reading methods (ibid).

Through Sicard, Gallaudet met Laurent Clerc and they became lifetime friends. Gallaudet convinced Clerc to come back to America with him and help him create a school to teach American children. They established their first school for deaf children in Hartford, Connecticut. Thus American Sign Language was born. This is why American Sign Language resembles French Sign Language more than it does English Sign Language.

Alexander Graham Bell



Alexander Graham Bell

While most people know Alexander Graham Bell as the inventor of the telephone, “in deaf education, Bell is one of the most notorious, if not the most recognized, supporters of the Oral method (Nomeland 46).” Melvia Nomeland, author of *The Deaf Community in America*, states:

“Although Bell worked in the field of deaf education his entire life, was the child of a deaf woman, and married a deaf woman, he seemed to consider deaf people defective. His main belief was that marriage between deaf people resulted in the birth of more deaf people. He advocated sterilization of deaf people and the prohibition of deaf people from becoming teachers, and he published several books and articles about prohibiting marriages between deaf persons (Nomeland 47).”

It was these extremely negative views about deaf people that tended to spread to the population in general.

How the Town People Treat Tuc in *Mother Hicks*

Tuc, a deaf character in *Mother Hicks*, grew up in the beginning of the 1900's when two conflicting ideas, represented by Gallaudet and Bell, were taking hold. Unfortunately for Tuc and other deaf people in America, Bell was much more famous and had a much larger platform to preach his cause. This made it difficult for people like Tuc who were growing up in a hearing world that encouraged prejudice against deaf people.

You will see this attitude in the way that people in the town of Ware treat Tuc. Some people are against signing, considering it a lower form of communication than spoken English. This is shown by Clovis' reaction to Tuc when he assumes Tuc is stealing from him. Clovis barks, "don't go wagging your fingers at me (Zeder 61)" when Tuc tries to sign his explanation.

Some people in the town are more accepting and may know a bit of sign. For example, Mother Hicks knows general signs and can understand most of what Tuc has to say.

For the most part, people are confused and don't know how to react to a deaf person. For example when Faye Cooper-Cole meets Tuc and realizes that he is deaf, she yells at him, thinking that will help him hear her. It doesn't help, of course. You can tell by the fact that Tuc carries a card with him that he gets this reaction a lot.

Deaf people, like many minorities, suffer from prejudice and distrust because of the ignorance of the majority. People in Ware were so ignorant of how someone becomes deaf that they thought that he must have lost his hearing because he was witched.

Fortunately, throughout the rest of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first, we have become more knowledgeable about deaf people and sign language and more accepting as a whole. We still have a long way to go, but it's better than it was in 1935 for Tuc.

How Spoken English Is Different from American Sign Language

In the playwright's script, it says:

My name is Tuc.
 I cannot speak. I cannot hear.
 I use my hands and words appear.
 I hang these words in the air for you
 To tell a story that I know is true;
 'Cause I heard every word with my eyes.
 It is deep in the early
 Just before dawn (Zeder 8)

In performance, the Deaf actor signs:

My name Tuc.
 I can't speak, I can't hear.
 I use hands ideas appear.
 I show you the past
 I tell you story you know truth.
 Why? I know all, I absorbed with my eyes.
 Now near morning.
 Sun rising.

American Sign Language Alphabet



Suzan Zeder's Ware Trilogy

Mother Hicks is part of a trilogy of plays written by Suzan Zeder over thirty years. *Mother Hicks*, which is set in the 1930's, was the first of the dramas to be written. The three plays, all set in the town of Ware, Illinois, are known collectively as *The Ware Trilogy*.

The playwright set the prequel, *The Taste of Sunrise*, in the 1920's. It explores the back-story of Tuc, who was sent to a state school for the deaf that required oral communication (lip-reading and voicing) and forbade signing. The play portrays the birth of Girl and how she was abandoned in Ware. It also shows how Tuc and Mother Hicks came to live together on Dug Hill.

Story elements that begin in *Mother Hicks* are continued in *The Edge of Peace*. The sequel is set in the 1940's, at the end of World War II. While *Mother Hicks* is no longer regarded as a witch by the townspeople, she is still ostracized, since she is suspected of being a German sympathizer. Rather than remaining an outsider, Tuc has become the center of communication as the town's postman. Ricky Ricks, who became a soldier in Europe, is missing in action and presumed killed, but his younger brother, Buddy, refuses to give him up for dead. Girl makes a surprise appearance, and while she has found her way in the world, she still hasn't found her name.

All three plays were commissioned by the Seattle Children's Theatre. As they were published, each play won the Distinguished Play Award from the American Alliance for Theatre and Education: *Mother Hicks* in 1987, *The Taste of Sunrise* in 2000, and *The Edge of Peace* in 2015.

Utah Valley University and Brigham Young University are collaborating to present *The Ware Trilogy* to Utah Valley audiences this year. BYU will present a full production of *The Taste of Sunrise* March 10 thru 26. On March 25 and 26, participants at the AATE Theatre in our Schools event will be able to see UVU's staged reading of *Mother Hicks*, BYU's performance of *The Taste of Sunrise*, and UVU's staged reading of *The Edge of Peace*. UVU will be presenting *The Edge of Peace* in May, directed by UVU student Daniel Bunker, who plays Hosiah Ward in *Mother Hicks*.

For more information about *The Ware Trilogy*, see the Noorda Center's blogsite, <http://noordatheatrecenter.com>.



CREDITS

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IMAGE CREDITS:

Portrait of Alexander Graham Bell:
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