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Robert Panara

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The Deaf Writer in America
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PART I

Robert F. Panara, M.A., Rochester, N.Y.

The experience of the deaf writer in America from Colonial Times to the present has closely paralleled that of countless others who have followed the American dream of fulfillment through opportunity. The study of this representative pioneer is the story of his struggle with the realities of deafness, with the ever-changing milieu, and with his attempt to contribute to the cultural growth of America. And the struggle for recognition is increasing with the tempo of the times.

One of the more interesting movements in the socio-cultural revolution of our time is the tendency to provide "a place in the sun" to all those minority groups and disadvantaged peoples of today. Thus, the Negro is granted increasing opportunities to enjoy the rich cultural heritage of his race by pursuing research in Afro-American studies, and similar opportunities for "the pursuit of happiness" are available to those other minority groups whose interests lie in Amer-Indian, Latin-American, and Asian studies.

As the present cultural revolution should reveal by now, it is necessary for man to be creative, to share the limelight, to be appreciated by his peers if he is to "grow and blossom," to develop confidence and form positive attitudes toward life and society in general. The deaf are no exception — and it explains the phenomenal success of the National Theatre of the Deaf, which offers a real outlet to developing such values.

The attitude that deafness is something that one should try to conceal and gloss over no longer prevails. The deaf person identifying himself with the deaf professional on stage and television gets a psychological boost which serves to remove the stigma of deafness. Gradually, he finds himself cast in a new image, and the more he studies this image the stronger becomes his desire to seek other examples of deaf persons who have succeeded in areas other than the theatre arts. This important life-force and motivation acts as a catalyst which enables the deaf to ignore the aspersions commonly cast upon his "sub-culture" and strive instead to emulate the feats of those deaf persons who endeavored to climb the lofty heights of Mt. Parnassus.

This experience is nothing new to America and the American spirit. It was only about 150 years ago, during the early days of the Republic, that an English critic named Sydney Smith somewhat cynically remarked: "Whoever reads an American book?" It was at about this time, moreover, that the first school for the deaf was founded in America. As history now reveals, the American writer has transcended the seeming cultural poverty of his forebears such that, today, we might justifiably question: "Whoever enjoys a British novel or play?" Similarly, we have every reason to wonder why it is only in America that one can find the world's only colleges for the deaf — Gallaudet College and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. The significance of this achievement can best be appreciated when we consider that, up until 150 years ago, the deaf in America hardly even knew how to read, much less write a simple sentence unaided.

Keeping such thoughts in mind, I shall attempt to review some of the noteworthy achievements of the deaf writer in America during the past 150 years. At the same time, it is my intention to embrace only the work of those writers who have gravitated into our small silent world, which is to say the deaf as we regard them within our circle. After all, the deaf writer deserves this much recognition in consideration of the many obstacles he has had to overcome. It would be as wholly naive, for instance, to include the work of such renowned hard-of-hearing authors as...
Rupert Hughes, Carolyn Wells, and Earnest Elmo Calkins — to mention just a few — as it would be for us to boast of Thomas Edison and Bernard Baruch as being our most successful physicist and statesman, respectively.

Early National Writers (1820-1860)

Probably the earliest specimen of the deaf writer's work in America appeared in 1822. This was the publication of a volume of poems by James Nack (Fig. 1), entitled *The Legend of the Rock and Other Pieces*. Undoubtedly, this "literary-first" raised quite a few eyebrows among the literary intelligentsia of New York, for one of the leading reviews in 1827 was most lavish in praise of Nack, calling him "an intellectual wonder" and showing more promise as a teen-age poet than the similar efforts of Chatterton and Lord Byron.

James Nack, who became totally deaf at the age of nine, was plagued with ill health for the greater part of his life. In spite of such handicaps, however, Nack went on to publish three more volumes of poetry, entitled: *Earl Ruppert, and Other Poems* (1839); *The Immortal, A Dramatic Romance* (1850); and *The Romance of the Ring, and Other Poems* (1859). Apparently, however, the aging and harrassed poet had lost the fire and lyrical sublimity of his youth, for only passing mention is given to this latter work in the literary reviews of that time. Evidently, these were difficult times for one aspiring to earn his living by writing professionally. Our young nation was mainly pre-occupied with the practical needs of commerce and expansion, and it had very little time or interest to devote to cultural pursuits. This observation was often made by writers such as Philip Freneau and Edgar Allan Poe, who remarked that one had to be a person of means and enjoy the advantages of leisure in order to grow and prosper as a writer. No wonder that, in 1828, Sydney Smith somewhat cynically remarked, "Whoever reads an American book?"

However, although Nack was thwarted in the attempt to write for a living, he did creditable work at varying intervals as legal clerk, teacher of the deaf, and translator of French, German and Dutch writings.

While James Nack was struggling to earn some measure of national recognition for the deaf writer, two young literary enthusiasts joined in the crusade and soon began to attract attention of the general public in the 1830's who, up until then, believed it impossible for the deaf to learn to master the "3 R's," let alone scale the lofty heights of Mt. Parnassus. These two gentlemen were John R. Burnet of New Jersey, and John Carlin (Fig. 2), the son of a poor Pennsylvania cobbler.

In 1833, at the age of 25, Burnet helped his uncle edit *The People's Friend*, a newspaper published in Philadelphia, thus proving his ability as a journalist. Two years later, he published a book: *Tales of the Deaf and Dumb, with Miscellaneous Poems*. This opus must have been of high literary merit insofar as it earned its author a neat sum of money, in addition to a budding reputation. Burnet soon embarked on a long and prolific career as a writer. From 1833-1867 he wrote numerous articles for various publications, including *The North American Review*, *The Biblical Repository*, and *The American Annals of the Deaf*. All during this time, he continued to write extensively for various newspapers in Pennsylvania and New Jersey, particularly for the Newark Daily Advertiser.

Much as Burnet was doing to ease the path for the deaf writer, there was even greater reason to laud the achievements of John Carlin. Although Carlin was outstanding as a portrait painter, he wrote a considerable number of poems. Many of these were widely...
copied in various newspapers between the years 1850-1884, and at one time his poems elicited the commendation of William Cullen Bryant, the celebrated poet-editor of the New York Evening Post. He never quite attained the prominence of Nack and Burnet as a writer, it is true, yet what made his readers marvel all the more was the fact that John Carlin had been born deaf, and, as such, had never heard the natural rhythms of the spoken language, the song of the skylark, or the lilting music of the hurdy-gurdy. In short, he was the first and only deaf mute poet the world had ever known, and in consideration of his achievements as a poet and artist, he was granted the honorary degree of Master of Arts by Gallaudet College in 1865, the first such presentation ever granted a deaf person by the world's only college for the deaf.

Similar recognition came to John Burnet in 1871 at the first commencement exercises of Gallaudet College, which was then known as the National Deaf-Mute College, being established by act of Congress in 1864.

**The Civil War Correspondent and Poet (1860-1880)**

By this time it was apparent that the deaf writer was being given full opportunity to break into print in the various newspapers and magazines of America, commensurate with his talent. The interesting question as to just how far the gifted deaf journalist might be able to go, granted all opportunity, was soon answered during the Civil War when a young lady from the "Show Me State" of Missouri, writing under the pen name of "Howard Glyndon," was sent to Washington, D. C., to serve as correspondent for the Republican, a St. Louis newspaper. Her real name was Laura C. Redden, (Fig. 3) and she was totally deaf from early childhood. Obviously, she must have possessed great spirit, as well as a keen eye for details, since it is well-known that very few normal hearing women were covering the newsbeat in those days, the prevailing opinion still advocating that a "woman's place is in the home."

Howard Glyndon was not only the Dorothy Parker and the Marguerite Higgins of the Deaf, but she was also an accomplished poet. Many of her verses, showing her reaction to the vagaries of war, were conspicuously evident in quite a few daily and weekly newspapers. Subsequently, these poems were collected and published under hard covers, entitled *Idylls of Battle* (1865). Her patrons in this maiden literary endeavor were some of the most important men in the country, among
them being President Lincoln, General Grant and General Garfield. During this period, she wrote an article, “Notable Men of the House of Representatives,” which attracted considerable interest in Washington and elsewhere.

After the Civil War, Howard Glyndon went on a long tour of Europe from 1865-1870, during which time she continued to serve as foreign correspondent for the St. Louis Republican, and also for the New York Times. On her return to America, she settled in New York and for many years thereafter her facile pen produced a steady flow of literary compositions, ranging in form from poetry to prose, and finding expression in such leading magazines and newspapers of New York as Galaxy, Harpers, The Evening Mail and the Tribune. One of the poems, “The Hills of Santa Cruz,” won praise from the famous American poet, John Greenleaf Whittier, who said: “Fine in conception, and felicitous in expression, it will cling to the Santa Cruz mountains forever.” In 1873, she published another book of collected poems, Sounds from Secret Chambers, and later followed this with an autobiographical novel, Echoes of Other Days (1878). It is of particular interest to note that this spirited deaf woman, besides being in the field of women’s journalism, also did most of her work by method of pad and pencil communication. She had studied speech and lip-reading under Professor Alexander Graham Bell in Boston, and developed a clear and pleasant speaking voice, but she never became an accomplished lip-reader.

Pioneering Journalists (1870-1905)

Much as one would love to continue with a step by step account of the many deaf writers who were successful at breaking into print in the years following, it is necessary to curtail the list at this point, due to limitations of space. However, it should be noted that the deaf writer has been most prolific in the field of expository writing, for it is here that he has reaped his largest harvest of fame and fortune. Among those who have passed the acid test with regard to this requirement, two names stand out in particular — George H. Allen and William L. Hill — both of whom made newspaper writing their sole means of livelihood.

George Allen first made a name for himself by serving as editor of the Sioux City, S. D. Daily Tribune for almost ten years. As his reputation grew, he moved to Arizona, where he served on the editorial staff of two Arizona newspapers, the Bisbee Review and the Arizona Gazette, at different intervals. Because of his interest in public questions, Allen soon attracted the attention of some of the most distinguished public officials, including the Governor of Arizona. They learned to respect the forceful power and high integrity of his editorials, which often had great influence on the political affairs of state. Moreover, he was unswerving in principle, for at the time when the Gazette was bought out by opposing political factions, Allen chose to be retired from editorial work rather than accept an offer to remain on the staff and adopt the new party platform. Shortly afterward, this loyalty to ideal and principle paid handsome dividends to Allen. The Governor, a staunch friend and admirer appointed him Secretary of the Sheep Sanitation Commission in acknowledgement of Allen’s sympathetic interest in the welfare of sheep and cattle. Several years later, when George Allen died, the offices of the State Capital were closed and the flag hung at half-mast in tribute to his outstanding achievement as a public servant and a writer of great ability.

Probably the ideal place for the deaf journalist would be in a small town where, as “country editor” of the only newspaper, he would be in the position to enjoy the friendship of almost everyone and at the same time command their admiration and respect. This was the happy fortune of William L. Hill, (Fig. 4) who both published and edited The Transcript, a weekly independent newspaper of Athol, Mass., in the years between 1870-1905. In this position, Hill was able to add further respect and dignity to the status of the deaf — as a certain congressman from Massachusetts once learned.

To paraphrase the story, as told by Dr. Edward Miner Gallaudet, President of Gallaudet College at the time, it so happened one day that the said Congressman, who had once been the president of a New England college, was visiting Gallaudet so as to learn something about the work being done in the education of the deaf. Although the gentleman from Congress was most impressed by the fact that the deaf were quite capable of doing work on the college level, he was rather skeptical of their ability to put this learning
to practical use after graduation. Taking this golden opportunity to do the deaf a good turn, Dr. Gallaudet wondered aloud whether his guest had heard of The Athol Transcript. The New Englander nodded his head in assent, admitting that it was a commendable newspaper, even though it had opposed his re-election to Congress. Imagine his complete surprise and chagrin when Dr. Gallaudet humorously observed that the Athol Transcript was published and edited by William L. Hill, a graduate of Gallaudet College.

Editors and Columnists of the “LPF” (1875-1950)

Stories such as the foregoing may be found upon diligent searching in the long chain of publications of the deaf, aptly nick-named “The Little Paper Family.” It is one of the most thriving and useful syndicates in the whole world of printed literature and it is unfortunate that only passing mention can be given in this article to all those who have served “The Little Paper Family” with loyalty and distinction. Who can forget such men as Edwin A. Hodgson, editor of the Deaf-Mutes Journal from 1878-1931; or George S. Porter, that stalwart who guided The Silent Worker through 35 tumultuous years? And how can we possibly belittle the work of the Reverend Gilbert Braddock whose biographical vignettes, entitled “Notable Deaf Persons,” ran through many issues of The Frat and have since proved a gold mine of information for the research worker? These men, together with such titans as George M. McClure, J. Schyler Long and James H. Cloud — to mention just a few — were vigorous champions of the truth and eternally vigilant of the hard-won rights and equities enjoyed by the deaf in America.

The tradition and example set by these men was continued into “The Lost Generation” and in a form of literary expression which, fittingly enough, matched the spirited and racy style employed by the normal-hearing editorial writer and newspaper columnist. One of these writers was James F. (Jimmy) Meagher, who could be called the H. L. Mencken of the deaf. Representative of the “hammer and tongs” brand of journalistic writing that flourished in the 1920’s, Meagher vigorously attacked all false assumption and popular misconception which constantly threatened to jeopardize the welfare of the deaf, denying them their rightful claim to “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness,” while writing regularly each month for both The Frat and The Silent Worker.

Similarly, in the 1950’s Byron B. Burnes, former editor of The Silent Worker, took up where Meagher last left off. However, Burnes’ style of writing conformed more to the middle-of-the-road school of journalistic writing in vogue today. He made a staunch stand in advocating the simultaneous method of instruction in our schools for the deaf, in an effort to combat the mounting wave of “pure oral” adherents who would favor speech and lipreading as the sole means of communication between teacher and pupil in the school room. He also campaigned against peddlers, and imposters posing as deaf peddlers, in trying to preserve the dignity and individuality of the deaf man who takes pride in the knowledge that he is a self-supporting, first citizen of the land.

References