

10. The Decline of Deaf Clubs in the United States: A Treatise on the Problem of Place

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There are very few “places” Deaf people can call their own. For most of their history in the United States, they have occupied spaces built by others and largely controlled by others. Schools for deaf children are a prime example: from the time the first schools for the deaf were built in the early part of the nineteenth century, spaces were designed and organized exclusively for deaf children by their teachers and benefactors, but rarely if ever by Deaf people themselves. Records from some of the first deaf schools included discussions among their boards of directors about how to organize the lives of deaf children into built spaces.¹ Identified first by deafness, deaf children were typically further organized within these schools on other dimensions as well: gender, race (until as late as 1978), and educational method.²

Outside of deaf schools and within their local communities, Deaf people had some opportunity to organize their own spaces. Most notable are the associations they organized throughout the United States, beginning almost at the same time as the new deaf schools.³ These associations and the social clubs they supported provided the foundation for the enormously popular Deaf clubs of the 1940s and the 1950s. Many of these clubs were successful enough that they could buy their own buildings, or acquire long-term leases to accommodate their growing membership. As these clubs become more permanent in the sense of brick-and-mortar places, Deaf people designed and controlled what activities took place within their walls. But after a period of rapidly

expanding membership, Deaf clubs suddenly reversed their pattern and began a steep decline to where there are now very few such clubs left in the United States. Of the few that still remain, their membership is very small and very elderly.

William Leach in his book Country of Exiles worries that there are new social and economic forces that are leading to the disappearance of “place” in the United States – city centers, community parks, and other places where Americans can gather and meet on a regular basis.⁴ Leach argues that American civic life crucially depends on brick-and-mortar buildings, town-spaces, and other physically real spaces where people can meet face-to-face and interact. The much-heralded modern “spaces” – on the Internet, in bars and other “imagined spaces” – are poor substitutions because they are too temporary and too tenuous to serve the same functions as more physically stable places. If we continue to lose traditional places, Leach argues that we may find ourselves facing large-scale disengagement and social apathy.

Deaf clubs are a case study in the “problem of place” in American life. For most of their history, Deaf clubs were places where Deaf people could meet face-to-face and conduct social business with one another, but as with a number of American social organizations, many have since closed or declined. As we trace back their recent history, we can see a trajectory of change, of a rapid expansion followed by an almost equally rapid decline. What does the history of Deaf clubs tell us about the future of the Deaf community in the United States and, more generally, about the future of “place” in American life?

At their height of popularity, Deaf clubs could be found in nearly all major cities

in the United States. Ohio in the 1940s had at least one Deaf club in each of its cities, not only in Akron, where many Deaf men and women found employment in the rubber tire industry during World War II, but also in the cities of Toledo, Cincinnati, Columbus, Cleveland, Warren, and Dayton. New York City had at least twelve different Deaf clubs spread out throughout the boroughs. The Union League was the largest and most popular, open through the week and every weekend night.⁵ Some clubs in the city were organized around sports teams: the Naismith Club in Brooklyn (named after the inventor of basketball) often played against the District of Columbia Club for the Deaf, where my father played for a few years after he graduated from Gallaudet in 1945. Formed in opposition to the larger Union League and other sign language clubs, there were oral-only clubs whose membership was made up of oralists, or those who previously attended oral schools where sign language was prohibited, like the Laro Club (“oral” spelled backwards) and the Merry-Go-Rounders.

The clubs were also segregated by race and ethnicity; the black Deaf club in Cincinnati was separate from the white Deaf club, as were clubs in the rest of Ohio and throughout the country. The Lincoln Club, a black Deaf club in Chicago, had a powerful basketball team. The Imperials Club in New York City, also for black Deaf members, didn’t have a fixed location; instead meetings were held in a member’s home in Harlem.⁶ The Hebrew Association of the Deaf (HAD) had two clubs, one in Manhattan and another in Brooklyn, both organized for Deaf Jewish members. Bernard Bragg, the well-known Deaf actor, frequently attended the clubs in the shadow of his father, Wolf Bragg, who as director and producer, staged signed plays under the auspices of the

HAD.⁷

The few Deaf clubs that remain open today are mostly in the Midwest and the South. There is reportedly a club still remaining in Rochester, N.Y., where the local Deaf community says it is working hard to maintain the club and its traditions. One man reported that while visiting the Akron Club he had discovered he was the youngest person there – at age sixty-eight. In the major cities, New York, Washington, D.C., Los Angeles, or San Francisco, there are no clubs left.

Deaf clubs in Europe have experienced decline as well, but not as dramatically. Most clubs in Finland are still operating, but as in the United States, they are increasingly populated by the older generation, with involvement of younger Deaf people more sporadic and fleeting. In southern Europe, Deaf clubs still maintain a strong presence in Spain and Italy, for example. In Spain, the Deaf clubs form the network of the community's political structure. Each province in Spain, from Galicia to Catalonia and in the capital city of Madrid, sends representatives from their clubs to the national organization. In the United States, there was once a similar structure that formed the basis of the state organizations and the national associations. Until the 1970s, the National Association of the Deaf and the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf drew its leaders from among club presidents: Fred Schreiber began his career as a community leader at the District of Columbia Club for the Deaf, and then moved up to become executive secretary of the National Association of the Deaf, a post he held for many years.

The Deaf clubs of the World War II years were very much brick-and-mortar

places: many clubs aspired to own their own buildings in order to have complete management of the activities within their walls. Income from selling alcohol and hosting card games, lotteries, and other forms of entertainment went toward the maintenance of club activities and their buildings. At their height, the largest Deaf clubs could count on steady attendance several days a week if not daily, and a steady income from money-making activities. At special events, their halls were teeming with members, many visiting from other cities in the country. Clubs were places of respite where Deaf people could find companionship away from the loneliness of the workplace where many Deaf people worked alone.

The decline of Deaf clubs is usually told as a story about the effects of technology. As new technologies began to be used in the community, Deaf people shifted their interest inward to the domestic sphere. Instead of partaking in Deaf club entertainment, Deaf people began staying at home more, preferring instead the entertainment of the close-captioned television or the captioned film. Or the text telephone is blamed, because Deaf people no longer needed to meet at the club to make arrangements for future events; they could simply call one another on the telephone.

However, the timing of the introduction of these technologies does not match the pattern of the clubs' decline. For example, captioned television did not become widely available until after 1978, a time when many clubs had already begun their steep decline. Text telephone machines grew slowly during this period: in 1968, there were only five hundred machines in use increasing to just seven thousand worldwide by 1974. In 1988, after many clubs had already closed, the number of machines reached five

hundred thousand.⁸ It is often argued that the closing of clubs led to a sharp increase in use of these technologies, as Deaf people turned to devices to carry out what had previously been done face-to-face. But the types of convenient technologies that are popular among Deaf people today for reaching friends and communicating with them – pagers, e-mail, voice relay – all were developed within the last five years, long after most clubs had already closed.

We have argued elsewhere that factors other than new technologies played a role in the decline of Deaf clubs.⁹ Deaf people's economic and work lives changed prior to the Second World War, and changed again following the war. When viewed historically, factors that contributed to the clubs' popularity in the first place in the years leading up to the Second World War ironically contributed to their demise as well in the years after.

The types of jobs that Deaf people had during the first part of the twentieth century were artisan-type jobs, where they worked in small shops doing specialized work. With the rise of industrial capacity during the Second World War and the great demand for factory-type labor, Deaf people found they could work in factories and large plants and earn more than they did before.¹⁰ Deaf men and women left their homes and relocated where there was likely to be work: Akron, Los Angeles, New York, and Baltimore.

The Akron Club for the Deaf was hugely popular in the war years, open seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day to accommodate Deaf workers ending their shifts at Goodyear Aircraft. GAC, as it was called by its Deaf workers, was built to assemble

in record time the fighter planes and other forms of transportation that were needed to support America abroad. In 1941, Goodyear Aircraft sent out a nationwide call for workers and hired men and women in large numbers, including Deaf people. If the person appeared reasonably able-bodied, they were hired, despite having no experience at all in the building of aircraft or in manufacturing operations. GAC was a typical World War II factory, designed to accommodate large groups of untrained workers, toiling long hours at specific tasks, managed by a small layer of highly skilled managers. John Bradley, a resident of Kent, Ohio, remembers that his parents heard from friends in New Jersey that Goodyear was hiring Deaf people and offering a decent wage, so they moved the family there. His father got a job as a riveter though he had no previous experience in the trade. His mother did assembly of small parts in another part of the factory. He remembers barely literate Deaf people being hired at GAC, but it didn't matter as there were so many jobs to be filled, including packing boxes and moving goods from one part of the operation to another. Buchanan estimates the number of Deaf people employed in Akron defense industries as approaching one thousand. The local club became a place to go after finishing one's shift, to unwind from the long hours of work. There were so many new Deaf people in the city, a virtual population boom, that the club became a good place to meet friends and for young Deaf men and women to seek out possible marriage partners.

The membership of the Union League and the Chicago Club for the Deaf were driven by a different trade – men and women who were members of the ITU, the International Typographical Union, and made good income as printers. Friday nights at

the club offered regular poker for printers who picked up their paychecks earlier that day. My grandfather, David Padden, was a staunch ITU man and a frequent habitué of the Chicago Club for the Deaf's poker games. Those wanting something other than poker games could find regular entertainment at the club. Home films of the Los Angeles Club for the Deaf in the 1940s show crowds of men and women drinking and socializing in the club halls. Deaf performances of all kinds appeared regularly in these films, from beauty pageants to skits, including objectionable blackface performances and men dressed in drag doing vaudeville. For family fare, there were picnics held in city parks.

When my father was offered a position at Gallaudet, my grandfather told him that the real money was not in teaching, but in printing. Printers could count on steady work and good job security, and if they wanted, they could work in almost any town. The privilege of being an ITU member is that they could work at any union shop in the country. If they had a yen for travel, they could move from shop to shop, substituting for regular members and earning as much as they needed. My father eventually took the job at Gallaudet, but he held onto his union membership, registering as NAT or "not at trade" status so he could work part-time on weekends at the Washington Post.

Club treasuries were supported by membership dues and admission for visiting nonmembers. More income came from poker games, selling food and drink, and the occasional raffle drive. Some clubs earned enough income to buy their own buildings, as did the Akron Club and Thompson Hall in St. Paul, Minnesota. Each club had a president and a management structure, from the treasurer to the person who worked

behind the bar selling drinks.

At the height of these clubs' popularity, they excluded black Deaf men and women from membership. This was active segregation in the Deaf community, carried over from a long history of separate schools for black and white deaf children in the southern states. A deep divide in job opportunities for black and white Deaf workers contributed as well. GAC did not hire many black workers; instead black Deaf workers migrating to Ohio found employment in the World Publishing Company, which printed Bibles. These workers would later open the Cincinnati Charter Club, a club for black Deaf men and women.

As the war ended, and GAC shut down production, a few Deaf workers at GAC found jobs making tires at the restructured factories of Goodyear or Firestone, but there were never as many jobs as there were during the war. In the decades to follow, Deaf workers moved into other occupations. Printing remained a good occupation until the 1970s when "cold type" and computerized forms of reproduction began to make inroads in the newspaper industry. The Government Printing Office, the Washington Post, and the Washington Evening Star were among the largest employers of Deaf printers in the Washington D.C. area. As the printing industry changed and "hot" linotype machines were replaced by computers, the numbers of workers in those industries began to decline. ITU lost its grip on the industry, and union membership dwindled. It is during this time that Deaf people once again moved into different kinds of work, away from the traditional "solitary trades" that characterized much of Deaf people's work lives in the 1940s and 1950s to professional and government-type jobs.

The federal government expanded during the 1960s, offering more programs, and they began hiring a new workforce: women, minorities – and Deaf people. Deaf people found employment in the professional sector, as civil servants, teachers, rehabilitation counselors, and in other types of advocacy jobs.

In a book about the explosive rise in purchases of home videocassette recorders, Mark Levy finds that videotape players were available in the mid-1960s, albeit expensive and difficult to operate, but few homes had them.¹¹ It was not until the late 1970s that home videocassette recorders became popular. Levy argues that the rapid growth in the technology coincided with a mass employment pattern shifting away from manufacturing jobs to service jobs. As workers found themselves required to accommodate employers' demands for "flex-time," and no longer following a predictable work schedule, workers were shifted off the normal network viewing schedule. They began to buy videocassette recorders in order to record programs for viewing at another time. (The other major use for videocassette recorders, rental of home videos, came later, once the technology was well established in the home.) According to Levy, the public did not suddenly discover that videocassette recorders were a good technology to own; rather they sought out the technology in order to satisfy changed circumstances in their lives. The technology was not popular in the 1960s, not because it was not expertly designed, but because the practical benefits of the technology did not become apparent until later.

I argue along similar lines about the rise of communication technology in the Deaf community. In another paper I wrote some years ago, I described the impact of the

professionalization of deaf education and the introduction of middle-class, professional-type work to the Deaf community.¹² By the early 1970s, many Deaf printers and factory workers made the transition to professional life, as did my father and a number of his friends. My father joined the faculty at Gallaudet in 1945, and for a number of years after he occasionally worked as a printer on weekends at the Washington Post for extra income. He stopped in 1960 as his salary increased. Fred Schreiber was a printer at the Washington Evening Star before he became executive secretary of the National Association of the Deaf.

As Deaf men and women moved to the professional class, the working class became less broad, and became divided between those who joined the professional class and those who remained in the trades. The split affected membership in clubs as well, as the professional class moved on to other kinds of associations. Instead of Deaf clubs, professional associations became popular: for teachers of the deaf, rehabilitation counselors, sign language teachers, and mental health professionals. New organizations recognizing gender, race, and ethnicity formed a different social dimension, moving from the local to the national level: the Black Deaf Advocates, the National Asian Deaf Congress, the Deaf Latino Conference, the Jewish Deaf Congress, and Deaf Women United. Now, some thirty years after Deaf clubs declined, the community no longer divides itself between rival basketball clubs, oralists and manualists, or the Hebrew Associations of Manhattan and Brooklyn; instead the principal dimensions are class, ethnicity, gender, and race. The Deaf club, designed for older kinds of social affiliations, did not seem able to accommodate the new social realities. For reasons that may have to

do with how closely Deaf clubs were linked to local working-class life, either in Akron or in New York City, Deaf clubs didn't change for the new social reality; instead they declined.

It could be argued that Deaf clubs metamorphosed into the Deaf advocacy centers that sprang into existence in the 1980s in large urban centers like Los Angeles and San Francisco. Funded by local and state agencies, these advocacy centers, including the Greater Los Angeles Association of the Deaf (GLAD) and Deaf Counseling, Advocacy and Referral Agency (DCARA), are decidedly more political than the Deaf clubs ever were. While Deaf clubs were largely self-funded, from membership dues, raffles, and food service, Deaf advocacy organizations lobbied for funding from the state to support direct services to Deaf clients: for interpreting, counseling, and job training. The ambitions of advocacy organizations have always been larger and more socially conscious than Deaf clubs ever were, but what advocacy organizations do not always provide is free unstructured social space.

Deaf clubs were first and foremost places to congregate, to meet after work on weekday and weekend nights. Deaf clubs organized cultural entertainment: skits, beauty pageants, storytelling, and other forms of narrative. Advocacy organizations can have a cultural agenda, but it is planned and infrequent. Deaf clubs invited drop-ins from anywhere around the country, even the world, but advocacy organizations are professional spaces first and foremost, and social spaces secondarily. Instead of selling beer on weekend nights, these organizations have bookstores and sell educational materials about Deaf people, their sign language, and their culture.

We remain romantic about Deaf clubs because they seem more like real “places” compared to the more fluid and porous meeting places that exist today in the United States. In San Diego, young Deaf people meet at a local coffee house every Friday, borrowing a corner of the commercial space for social interaction. In other towns, shopping malls attract Deaf youth, but by the time they find a regular place to meet, security officers ask them to keep moving to avoid loitering. There seems to be no dedicated “place” for impromptu social gatherings. The Deaf clubs of the 1940s and 1950s met in buildings that were rented or owned by Deaf people. They had budgets, though small, but there was autonomy and entrepreneurship (and sometimes a little embezzling, as in Bernard Bragg and Eugene Bergman’s fictional Deaf club in their play Tales from a Clubroom).¹³ Much of the popular American Sign Language (ASL) literature that can be found in sign language books – fingerspelled alphabet stories, popular narratives, even styles of performance – can be traced back to Deaf club performances.

Leach’s worries notwithstanding, American Deaf clubs were places for a certain kind of time and economy, and that era has passed. Deaf clubs were fiercely segregated spaces, such that few white Deaf people today remember or know very little, if anything, about black Deaf clubs in their cities, even as they mourn the passing of their favorite Deaf clubs. The clubs of the 1940s and 1950s mapped onto a social dimension that is changed today; instead of oralists and manualists, black and white, athletes and nonathletes, poker players and entertainers, we have black Deaf advocates and Latino Deaf advocates, Deaf academics and mental health professionals, interpreter program

trainers and ASL teachers. These identities exist along dimensions of civil rights, citizenship, and professions, which are very much of the twenty-first century.¹⁴ It may be that the new “places,” such as advocacy organizations, are more fluid and porous because they are more accommodating of these different social dimensions. A few advocacy groups have built their own centers; for example, GLAD recently opened a home office built with donated funds, returning perhaps to the brick-and-mortar ambitions of older Deaf clubs, although with a different social mission.

The story about American Deaf clubs is often told as a story about technology and how it rendered social spaces irrelevant, as Deaf people found new and efficient means of carrying out social interaction. But in this case, the timing of a particular technology, the captioned television or the text telephone, did not take place before social change; instead the technology was adopted after their social lives had changed, and after Deaf people realized that their social circumstances were ideal for a new technology. The story about American Deaf clubs should be told as a narrative about how Deaf people’s work lives changed, and how their relationships with each other changed, introducing new tensions of class, race, gender, and ethnicity, in the end rendering the Deaf club irrelevant to the new social realities. Now if one visits one of the few remaining Deaf clubs, it feels as if traveling back in time: the elderly sitting in meeting halls, playing cards perhaps, and gossiping about friends. Whatever “place” is, it cannot be about resurrecting the old, but must be about reinnovating and regenerating new kinds of spaces. From her study of a church in Los Angeles with a Deaf congregation, Rayman finds that the Deaf members shared a remarkable tolerance

for temporary and borrowed spaces.¹⁵ The hearing members, on the other hand, became distressed when the space began to fluctuate during a period of relocation, and many left the church. Rayman argues that Deaf people in the United States are accustomed to “instabilities of place” because of their particular history in this country. As her fieldwork with the congregation neared an end, the church’s fortunes shifted, and a new permanent space was located for the two congregations to share. Given even a tolerance for temporary spaces, Deaf people eventually do seek to make their spaces more physically permanent.

Returning to the question that opened this essay: does the disappearance of Deaf clubs signal a different future – perhaps a declining one – for the Deaf community? It is too soon to tell, or maybe Deaf clubs aren’t the right kind of evidence of decline of a community. They were designed for a certain time and type of workforce that has long passed. They rose in popularity because they suited the structure of the factory workday – the isolation Deaf people experienced while working in a factory and their need for social gathering at the end of the workday. When Deaf people moved into different kinds of jobs, Deaf clubs no longer suited their lives, and they began their long decline. In their place are other kinds of associations, more fluid in their locations but not entirely. What we need to understand is how in the midst of change, communities rebuild and redesign their spaces.

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