1. The History of Deaf Education and ASL

An important part of learning a language is to learn about the culture and the people that are connected to that language (or really, connected through that language). The history of ASL really starts with the history of all Deaf people: their struggles, their triumphs, their identity, and their education.

2. Before Deaf Schools

For centuries, the education of Deaf people was simple: there wasn’t any. Many believed the deaf were incapable of learning anything. They lead very simple lives, which communication limited to home signs and gestures, no reading or writing or formal education. They were often mistaken for mentally retarded. However, any place where deaf people congregated, a form of sign language was established.

Pierre Desloges was deafened at the age of 7, but learned sign language from another deaf man 20 years later. He wrote a book about his experiences in 1779 – the first to ever be published by a Deaf person. After thousands of years of written history, this is the first Deaf perspective ever to make it on to a page and out into the world.

“At the beginning of my infirmity, and for as long as I was living apart from other deaf people... I was unaware of sign language. I used only scattered, isolated, and unconnected signs. I did not know the art of combining them to form distinct pictures with which one can represent various ideas, transmit them to one’s peers, and converse in logical discourse.” (Seeing Voices, pg. 18, quoting Pierre Desloges “Observations”)

Because they didn’t have any way of understanding what church rituals were really about, they weren’t able to participate in them. That included the sacraments of communion and marriage. This is a time when religion was pervasive, touching nearly every part of society, yet the Deaf could not be involved.

“The situation of the prelingually deaf, prior to 1750, was indeed a calamity: unable to acquire speech, hence “dumb” or “mute”; unable to enjoy free communication with even their parents and families; confined to a few rudimentary signs and gestures; cut off, except in large cities, even from the community of their own kind; deprived of literacy and education, all knowledge of the world; forced to do the most menial work; living alone, often close to destitution; treated by the law and society as little better than imbeciles – the lot of the deaf was manifestly dreadful.
But what was manifest was as nothing to the destitution inside – the destitution of knowledge and thought that prelingual deafness could bring, in the absence of any communication or remedial measures. The deplorable state of the deaf aroused both the curiosity and the compassion of the philosophes. Thus the Abbé Sicard asked:

*Why is the uneducated deaf person isolated in nature and unable to communicate with other men? Why is he reduced to this state of imbecility? Does his biological constitution differ from ours? Does he not have everything he needs for having sensations, acquiring ideas, and combining them to do everything that we do? Does he not get sensory impressions from objects as we do? Are these not, as with us, the occasion of the mind’s sensations and its acquired ideas? Why then does the deaf person remain stupid while we become intelligent?*

To ask this question – never really or clearly asked before – is to grasp its answer, to see that the answer lies in the use of symbols. [Sicard continues.] *It is because the deaf person has “no symbols for fixing the combining ideas... that there is a total communication-gap between him and other people.”* *(Seeing Voices, pg. 13-15)*

3. **1620: Juan Pablo Bonet**
Juan Pablo Bonet wrote a book around 1620 called *Simplification of the Alphabet and the Art of Teaching Mutes to Speak*. He recorded his observations of a young Deaf boy who was taught to speak. However, this was only 1 student, and Bonet himself didn’t teach him and hardly met him once at a party.

4. **Bonet’s book was important because...**
It proved to be valuable because it raised the interest of a great many European teachers who began considering the possibility of oral education for Deaf children.

It also introduced the manual alphabet to the world – the same one we use today. It was originally created by monks so that if someone were dying and unable to speak, they could sign the first letters of a prayer to tell the priest which prayer they wanted him to say over them.

5. **The Rise of Oralism**
There are (and always have been) two basic theories on how to teach deaf children: manualism, the use of signs, and oralism, the use of speech. The debate over which is better began at the beginning of history and it still rages on today.

It had already been observed that whenever a large enough group of deaf people lived in the same area, a form of sign language would grow up among them. It wasn’t
as full and developed as the ASL we learn today, but they could use it to communicate among themselves.

However, several factors made oralism, the use of speech, the preferred method. First was *progeniture*. The children of nobles could not inherit property unless they could speak enough to prove that they could reason and think. (No one wants a stupid or crazy person in charge.) Since sign language doesn't count, people want speech.

Another factor was a strict interpretation of a Bible passage, Romans 10:17, which says, “Consequently, faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” The clergy of the time took this literally, which meant the deaf couldn’t be saved unless they learned speech. Deafness was considered a curse to be eradicated.

**6. Humanism**

These days we work hard to celebrate diversity and like our individuality, but for centuries society was ruled by a desire for conformity. Society didn’t want a separate sub-population of the Deaf, they wanted them to be able to fit in with the norm.

During this time as science and innovation was increasing, humanism was on the rise as well. Humanists believe that an increase in knowledge and technology meant that humanity was capable of anything – including impossible tasks like teaching the deaf to talk.

**7. 1760: Abbe de l’Epée**

Then in the 1760s, while helping the poor in Paris, a priest named Charles Michel de l’Epée meant 2 deaf sisters who were about 15 years old.

Imagine the scene; a wretchedly poor quarter of Paris, a narrow winding street paved in cobblestones, a bleak courtyard with refuse piled against vestiges of the ancient walls, a steep, worn stair that leads to a small dimly lit room. The naked walls and ceilings are black with soot from the hearth; jagged scars show where they had shed flakes of whitewash applied by earlier generations long dead. A large rough-hewn table occupies most of the room; three pallets of straw have been pushed under it to clear a narrow passage around it. On the table, a basin and an extinguished candle. Beside it, two young women sit on stools. Some fifteen years old, they wear identical long dresses of solid-colored dark wool, [scarves], and frilly muslin bonnets. Their lips are still, their eyes averted, their faces haggard; two young deaf women, sisters in misfortune. Understand what this meant: the deaf cannot go to school; cannot read or write; have few friends. With hearing parents, conversation at home is sparse, kept to
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essentials. These women cannot have a real trade but neither can they marry; they are useless to themselves and a heavy burden to indigent parents. Sadly, they endure an idle and uniform existence, condemned to grow old in a long childhood. When the father dies, the family becomes poorer still; the two young women do needlepoint to put bread on the table. But if their lives are wretched, at least their souls will be saved: thanks to a kindly priest, Father Vanin, who comes from time to time with his engravings of the saints, they will soon take their first communion. And then the priest comes no more.

Now: enter the abbé de l’Epée in a flowing black [priest’s robe.] Rather patriarchal in manner, de l’Epée, in his late fifties, has a full round face, a penetrating regard. He smiles affably. “Good day, ladies.”

The young women do not hear him enter, continue sewing, do not respond. De l’Epée, so the legend has it, attributes this to an excess of feminine reserve and sits down to await their mother’s return. ...She explains everything. The crowning affliction is that her children will never take communion after all. De l’Epée tells us his response: “Believing these two children would live and die in ignorance of their religion if I do not attempt some means of instructing them, I told... the mother she might send them daily to my house.”

So began the education of the deaf worldwide; so began the long journey or repatriation for this class of outcasts, a journey that has not yet ended.” (When the Mind Hears, pg. 57-58)

These girls were his first students, but his school soon grew. “As de l'Epée worked with the students in his school, he recognized that they communicated with each other quite well through hand signals. The priest was intrigued by this communication, and began collecting the signs, to which he added some of his own [to give it the grammar of French].” (Idiot’s Guide, pg. 22)

“For what mattered was that the Abbé paid minute attention to his pupils, acquired their language (which had scarcely ever been done by the hearing before). And then, by associating signs with pictures and written words, he taught them to read; and with this, in one swoop, he opened to them the world’s learning and culture. De l'Epée’s system of “methodical” signs – a combination of their own Sign with signed French grammar – enabled deaf students to write down what was said to them through a signing interpreter, a method so successful that, for the first time, it enabled ordinary deaf pupils to read and write French, and thus acquire an education.” (Seeing Voices, pg. 17)

8. 1760: Abbé de l’Epée (con’t)
“Every deaf-mute sent to us already has a language,” de l’Epée wrote. “He is thoroughly in the habit of using it, and understands others who do. With it he expresses his needs, desires, doubts, pains, and so on, and makes no mistake when others express themselves likewise. We want to instruct him and therefore to teach him
French. What is the shortest and easiest method? Isn’t it to express ourselves in his language? By adopting his language and making it conform to clear rules [for example, the grammar of French] will we not be able to conduct his instruction as we wish?” (When the Mind Hears, pg. 59-60)

De l’Epée’s desire in teaching them was to bring salvation to the deaf. But many of his objectors brought up the version from Romans that said “faith comes through hearing...” But de l'Epée responded to these critics with the words of John, who wrote “But these [miraculous signs] were written down that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in His name.” John 20:31. Salvation and understanding were attainable through the written as well as the spoken word.

“The languageless deaf may indeed be as if imbecilic – and in a particularly cruel way, in that intelligence, though present and perhaps abundant, is locked up so long as the lack of language lasts. Thus the Abbé Sicard is right, as well as poetic, when he writes of the introduction of Sign as ‘opening up the doors of...intelligence for the first time.” (Seeing Voices, pg. 19)

What started as the two sisters coming to de l'Epée's home in about 1760 soon grew into the world's first school for the deaf. All students were welcome to study there even if they couldn't pay tuition, and deaf education was born.