The suppression of minority languages through compulsory public schooling in the majority language is regarded as a culture crime today but was universally practiced in this country against the Deaf minority for some seventy years. "The Preservation of the Sign Language" was delivered in American Sign Language on film in 1913 for the project of the same name, sponsored by the National Association of the Deaf. Intended as a sample of the "signs in their old purity" as used by the "old time masters," Vedite's language (and that of the other men filmed by this project) is not immediately comprehensible to native signers today.

The Preservation of the Sign Language

George W. Vedite
translated by Carol A. Padden and Eric Malkeuhn
1913

Friends and fellow deaf-mutes,

The French deaf people love de l'Epée. Every year on the occasion of his birthday, they gather for festive banquets to show their appreciation that this man was born on this earth. They journey to his gravesite in Versailles and put flowers and wreaths on his grave to show their respect for his memory. They love him because he was their first teacher. But they love him even more for being the father and inventor of their beautiful signs.

For the past thirty-three years, with broken hearts and eyes full of tears, the French deaf people have watched as this beautiful language of signs has been snatched away from their schools. And for thirty-three years, they have striven, struggled, and fought for its restitution. But for these thirty-three years, their teachers have spurned them, refusing to listen to their pleas. Their teachers prefer instead to listen to the hard-hearted demands of people who think they know all about educating the deaf, but who know nothing about their thoughts, souls, feelings, desires, needs.

It is like this in Germany, too. The German deaf and the French deaf look up at us American deaf with eyes of envy, as a shackled prisoner might regard someone free to wander at will. They freely admit that the American deaf are superior in matters of intelligence, spirituality, worldly success, and happiness, and they admit
that this superiority can be credited to—what? To one thing, that we may use signs in our schools. The French deaf people base their inferiority on one thing, the fact that the oral method must be used for teaching in their schools. They have eliminated fingerspelling; they have eliminated signs.

But we American deaf are now facing bad times for our schools. False prophets are now appearing, announcing to the public that our American means of teaching the deaf are all wrong. These men have tried to educate the public and make them believe that the oral method is really the one best means of educating the deaf. But we American deaf know, the French deaf know, the German deaf know that in truth, the oral method is the worst.

Our beautiful signs are now beginning to show the results of these efforts. These men are trying to remove signs from the schoolroom, from the church—from the earth. Our sign language is deteriorating. Old-time masters of sign such as the Peets, the Dudleys, the Elys, the Ballards are rapidly disappearing. In past years, we loved these men, the masters of sign. When they signed to us, we could understand them.

Fortunately, we have several masters of our sign language still with us. Edward Miner Gallaudet, who learned his signs from his father, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, and several others like Dr. John B. Hotchkiss, Dr. Edward Allen Fay, and Robert P. MacGregor are still with us. We want to preserve the signs as these men now use them, preserve them and pass them on to future generations. There are many now alive who have learned their signs from men like these. Many have tried to preserve and pass on the through the use of mowin'

Indeed, our National dollars for this purpose. Miner Gallaudet, Edwar many others. I regret th have used it all. If we h sign, sermon in sign, let the benefits, but deaf per these moving-picture film priceless.

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indeed, our national association of the deaf has raised a fund of five thousand dollars for this purpose. we have made a number of films. we have films of edward miner gallaudet, edward allen fay, john b. hotchkiss, robert p. macgregor, and many others. i regret that we do not have twenty thousand dollars, for we could have used it all. if we had this amount of money, we could have performances in sign, sermons in sign, lectures in sign. and not only would the american deaf enjoy the benefits, but deaf people in germany, england, france, and italy would also see these moving-picture films. fifty years from now, these moving-picture films will be priceless.

a new race of pharaohs that knew not joseph is taking over the land and many of our american schools. they do not understand signs for they cannot sign. they proclaim that signs are worthless and of no help to the deaf. enemies of the sign language, they are enemies of the true welfare of the deaf. we must use our films to pass on the beauty of the signs we have now. as long as we have deaf people on earth, we will have signs. and as long as we have our films, we can preserve signs in their old purity. it is my hope that we will all love and guard our beautiful sign language as the noblest gift god has given to deaf people.

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