

Veditz Still Lives!

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Today I'd like to talk about a famous George – George W. Veditz. He was President of the NAD 1904 – 1910, a bit over 100 years ago. To prepare for this speech, I read Dr. Larry Newman's book "Sands of Time: NAD Presidents 1880-2003" a treasure of a book which you all should have in your home and public libraries.

Veditz is mostly known for his idea of using "moving pictures" to "protect, preserve and promote" American Sign Language, featuring some of the most prominent leaders and orators of that time. He raised \$5,000 for this project. Veditz in "Preservation of Sign Language" postulated that "As long as we have people on Earth, we will have Sign Language. Our beautiful Sign Language is the noblest gift God has given to Deaf People." Those priceless films can be seen online via the Gallaudet archives and are available at the United States Library of Congress. These films, which were thought lost, were found at California State University, Northridge by Dr. Larry Fleischer and Lou Fant.

Next year, 2013, will mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Veditz's films, vision and legacy.

Who was Veditz the man, the leader, the visionary?

Veditz, born in 1861, would have been 151 years old today. He was born in Maryland to German immigrants, and when he became deaf at 14, he enrolled at the Maryland Institute for the Deaf and Dumb (MIDD, now MSD). He was fluent in English and German, and handily acquired skills in sign language. No longer was he frustrated by communication barriers. He was a star pupil and was assigned the responsibility for handling the school fiscal bookkeeping and performing secretarial work for the school principal. In 1880, he entered Gallaudet – the same year of the infamous ICED Milan Doctrine and the establishment of the National Association of the Deaf.

Upon graduation from Gallaudet, he taught at MIDD for 4 years before moving to Colorado where he taught for 17 years. Whatever Veditz set to do, he mastered. Writing, poultry, horticulture, and chess. Veditz and his wife Bessie won many blue ribbons for their entries in state fairs. He was recognized as a respected authority and genius in many fields and he was a prolific writer for the journals related to his various interests. Dr. Merv Garretson was a young lad at the Colorado School for the Deaf when he first met the Veditzes; when he mowed their grass, he took great care not to chop off the beloved prize-winning dahlias and gladioli.

Veditz's pen was mightier than a sword, and much more sharper at times when he wrote articles and rebuttals when combating pure oralism in education.

In 1933, when Veditz was 72, he wrote "The Genesis of the National Association" in the *Deaf Mutes Journal* regarding NAD history and his perceptions. Following are some excerpts.

At the first NAD convention in Cincinnati in 1880, a resolution was passed "to accept your deafness as God's will and to not deride your fellow deaf for laboring – professional work is out of reach for us." Veditz wrote, 53 years later, such a motion would have been unthinkable in 1933.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> NAD convention, in New York in 1883, a paper “The Truth about the Pure Oral Method” was to be presented to show the benefits of oralism. Mr. Patterson of Ohio objected to the reading of this paper and declared it out of order. The chair ruled that the reading would proceed and again Mr. Patterson objected, so the chair put it to a floor vote, which upheld the chair’s decision. Many NAD members at that time were teachers and used the combined system or speech in schools to keep their jobs. The menacing head of the oralism serpent was beginning to become prevalent in school systems. Veditz wrote that this was “the first sign of revolt of adult American Deaf against oral propaganda.” He also noted that the more active or radical members were in their twenties (Side note: Just like the 1988 DPN Ducks.)

NAD at that time was called the National Deaf-Mute Association. Although Veditz could speak well, he was proud to be identified as a Deaf-Mute and to belong to the same community of people who experienced frustrations and discrimination. Veditz wrote, “If oral magicians who yank educational rabbits out of silk hats and pearls of speech out of those who never heard, choke over it (the Deaf-Mute term), why, bless them!” Veditz was not anti-speech, but objected to speech as the sole method in education.

Veditz condemned the ban on signs as “wicked and evil.” “That Bell appeared in the guise of a friend made him the most feared enemy of Deaf people, past and present.” Veditz pointed to Germany – a bastion of oralism since 1754 – as an educational failure since only 2 oral Germans were admitted to college, as contrasted with many Americans.

“The Deaf are what their education makes them to be – more than any other class of humans. They are *not* a theory but a condition – they are first, last and forever ‘the people of the eye’.” “Deaf people learn everything through sign language. Speech is sign language of the lips. Papers, books, writings, finger spelling are all forms of sign language. We are people of the eye.” Natural education (use of sign language and English) will lessen disadvantages in an increasingly hearing world, he wrote. Telephones and talking movies had become quite ubiquitous in the United States when he wrote this.

It was the dark ages. The life-sucking tentacles of oralism had spread and became entrenched within the education system. Deaf teachers were laid off, fired or reassigned. Fewer students in oral schools were academically prepared for college. The *Silent Worker* was shut down by the superintendent of the New Jersey school for the Deaf. Schools were in danger of being closed. Alexander Graham Bell and his committee on eugenics were against schools for deaf students and deaf marriages. The government Civil Service Commission would not hire deaf workers. States did not want to license deaf drivers. Oppression of Deaf people and ASL was rampant. Veditz wanted to set up a NAD endowment to combat all this. He stated, “We need a war chest bigger than Bell/Volta’s.”

Most of the NAD members were teachers and cautious about combating oppression, discrimination and oralism. Signing in public brought on stigma and derision. Some deaf people even believed that deaf people should not marry each other, especially those from deaf families – why bring on more suffering for the children? Some believed that speech was a way to be saved. Conditioned from the cradle upwards to believe in those, dysfunctional consciousness repressed human rights. The NAD at that time, while fighting for civil rights, also practiced caution. Veditz had zero patience with those who “wouldn’t speak or act against oralism and advocate for the combined system of instruction.”

In his 1933 article, Veditz listed priorities for the NAD – 1) Education, bilingual education; 2) End discrimination in government employment and driving; 3) Publish and get information to people

everywhere; 4) Governance system should be changed from random representation to a federation of state representation, and 5) Endowment. (Side note: These remain issues, nearly 80 years later.)

Wrapping up this article, a dejected Veditz penned, “The Association has been drifting like a ship without a compass or rudder. Elect a man who will truly be a captain with his hand on the tiller. I don’t expect to figure on the program of any future NAD convention, and this is goodbye.”

Veditz sought the light and the truth; these were reflected in his writings. These writings did not sit well with the NAD leadership. Veditz was considered a maverick, a militant, a sometimes unwelcome gadfly, not well liked by some because of his “radical” views. However, when Veditz died in 1937 at 76, there was a flood of positive accolades written in many newspapers and professional journals, from many fields as well as from the Deaf community. Today he has legions of admirers.

Now let’s fast-forward 100 years to today. What are our gains? What are our issues? 90% of deaf students up the mainstream with only one ill-functioning oar. The ASL ban by doctors and specialists who promote speaking and listening only. The rise of Listening and Spoken Language (LSL) and Oral Only Option Schools, fueled by economic gain and fears. The LSL law which passed in Florida this year and now threatens several other states: California, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Delaware. EHDI and IDEA with misplaced focus on communications rather than language acquisition and accountability. Funding for biased information on early identification and intervention through the Center on Disease Control rather than the Department of Education. The United States Convention on Human Rights for Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) which explicitly states that sign language is a human right, still awaiting Congressional ratification. The neutral position assumed by some leaders and institutions.

What would Veditz have said about all this?

Veditz may be still alive and well in Paddy Ladd, whose dissertation, treatises and presentations on “Deafhood” are awakening us, initiating dialogues, and empowering us to act. Paddy states that it is clear that the 2<sup>nd</sup> wave of oralism is upon us. Waves will wash away our work, beliefs, accomplishments, unless we build a mountain to withstand this tsunami. Such a mountain is made of ourselves, our sign languages, arts, history, literature, successes, and human rights.

The NAD must work with various organizations which some of us may initially view as extreme or off-center. I am reminded of someone who took a strong stand for ASL early in the 70’s when Total Communication and simultaneous communication were beginning to be accepted in schools everywhere. I asked him why he had to be so extreme, with his “voice-off” position, and he said, “To enlighten other people and hopefully to move them nearer to accepting ASL as a separate language from English, and equally beneficial, for all of us.” We do need the Audism Free America, Deaf Bilingual Coalition, Deafhood Foundation, along with the different organizations representing women, people of color, and various sexual orientations and ethnicities. We share the same cause. The NAD needs them and should support them.

We have our work cut out for us with EHDI, IDEA, CRPD – keep our eye on Child First. And Jobs. Together, we can and we will.

What would Veditz say to us today at this NAD Conference? “Vote on the leadership and conference mandates needed to secure ASL and human rights for all. Hold NAD accountable. Be strong, be clear. Our children need you. Godspeed!” Veditz still lives – in each of us.