

Joseph B. Burnett

Compiled & Written by Jodi B. Kinner
2012

Joseph B. Burnett was born on January 8, 1913 in Farr West, Utah to James M. Burnett and Lizzie May Ball and was Deaf from birth. His mother, Lizzie died shortly after. His father married Ann who raised Joseph (Obituary of Joseph B. Burnett). He was known as “Joe.” He was exceptionally bright, and his father taught him to read at an early age. His father enrolled Joe at the Utah School for the Deaf when he was five years old, in 1918. After Joe passed the college entrance examination, he left for Gallaudet College in 1933, without completing his high school courses.

While attending college, he obtained a diploma from the Utah School for the Deaf (Obituary of Joseph B. Burnett; LaVerne Burnett, private interview with Valerie Kinney, January 28, 2009). In 1937, he graduated from Gallaudet College with a Bachelor of Arts degree (Gallaudet University Alumni Cards, 1866-1959).

While there, he excelled in all sports, and was named to the Gallaudet University Athletic Hall of Fame. He was a member of Kappa Gamma fraternity. While at Gallaudet, he participated in basketball and track and field. Joe broke a record in track that stood for 25 years (Obituary of Joseph B. Burnett; LaVerne Burnett, private interview with Valerie Kinney, January 28, 2009). As he quoted,

“The root of ambition is in every man; but it riseth not in all’ fear keepeth it down in some; in many it is suppressed by modesty.” – Unknown.



Joseph B. Burdett, an Industrial Engineer
The UAD Bulletin, Summer 1968

While at Gallaudet College, Joe explained in the *Utah Eagle*, the Utah School for the Deaf (USD) paper that he had a burning ambition to become a great track star. He wanted to break the world's record in the mile run. He ran hundreds of miles in practice and in competition (college track meets, regional Olympic track tryout), but it did not turn out that way. In the end, he found other ambitions of equal or greater worth (Burnett, *The Utah Eagle*, April 1955, p. 2).

Upon graduation, he returned to Ogden, Utah. Between 1937 and 1942 the pattern of his life was entangled with fanciful wishers, unattainable goals, disappointment, apparent alibis, monetary difficulties and fixed ideas about himself – the prevalent idea made by the “educators” of the deaf, advocates of oral methods and “psychologist” that the deaf can’t succeed in the



LaVern Petersen, Joseph's wife, 1943

professional fields other than teaching because of their inability to speak well and to read lips (Burnett, *The Utah Eagle*, April 1955, p. 2). Joe taught geography and history at the Utah School for the Deaf for two years from 1937 to 1939. He was also a Deaf boys' supervisor, photoengraving apprentice, printer, linotypist, fruit picker, farm hand and canning factory employee. He was also unemployed between these jobs. He did not know what he wanted to be (Burnett, *The Utah Eagle*, April 1955, 2).

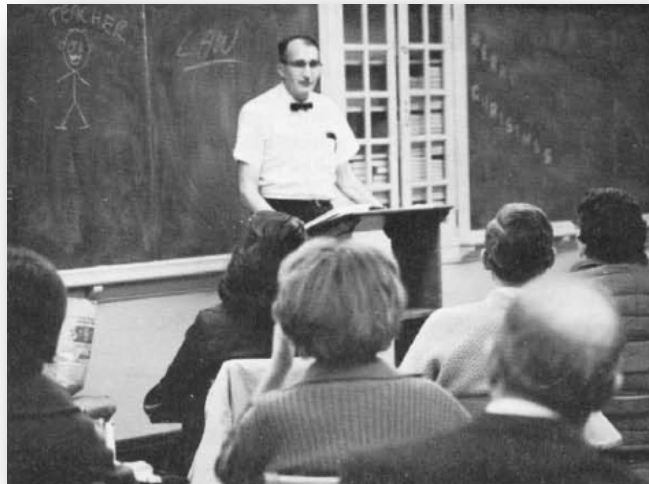
During the World War II in the spring of 1942, his first break came when he landed a position as a property and supply clerk at Hill Air Force Base with an “assist” from the Military Chief of the Supply Division, who had played in a football game with the Gallaudet College team in his younger days. He hired Joe on the spot after his application was turned down by the personnel officer. After a year as a clerk, he asked for reassignment as a draftsman and transferred to the Design and Drafting Section of the Maintenance Engineering Directorate, after convincing the placement advisor that he had taken a course in drafting at Gallaudet College as well as a refresher course at Weber College. There, he got promotion every six months until he

became a senior draftsman. He learned to associate with the draftsmen and engineers. Soon, he realized that he had an ambition to become an engineer (Burnett, *The Utah Eagle*, April 1955, p. 2).

Joe studied engineering at Weber College night school from 1942 until 1946 (*The Utah Eagle*, January 1954). At the close of the World War II, he was “bumped” from the job because of reduction in force (Burnett, *The Utah Eagle*, April 1955).

On September 13, 1944, he married LaVerne Petersen in the Logan Temple (Obituary of Joseph B. Burnett).

In the spring of 1946, he obtained employment with the Ogden City Engineering Department as a draftsman and learned about municipal engineering under the tutelage of Ned. C. Wheeler. He remained in this department until the fall of 1947 (Burnett, *The Utah Eagle*, April 1955, p 2).



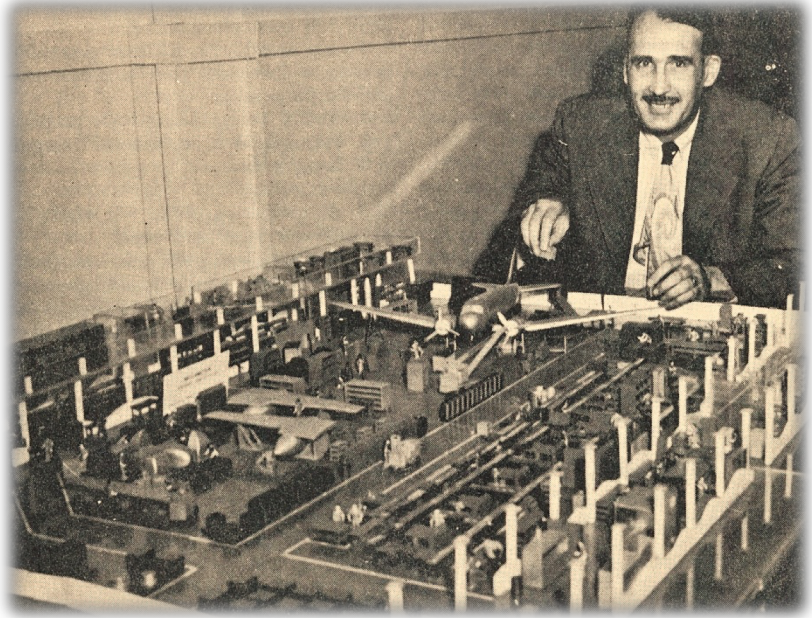
Joseph teaches a lesson in family legal problems. Attendance has averaged nearly 40, with many making the 80-mile round trip from Ogden each week to participate. Source: The UAD Bulletin, Winter 1964.

While at Hill Field Air Force Base, Joe studied engineering at the University of Utah for two years and received a certificate of completion in engineering.

Joe remembered his second and best break came when he received a telegram from the U.S. Bureau of Mines, Oil Shale Experimental Station, Rifle, Colorado, stating his application for a position as engineering draftsman had been accepted. His jaws dropped when he checked the atlas. The population of Rifle was only 2,000, and Rifle was 200 miles west of Denver out in the mountains. He thought, “What about social life?” He had a hunch that it would lead to something of a greater worth. He and his wife, LaVerne decided to pull up stakes, and they

moved to Rifle (Burnett, *The Utah Eagle*, April 1955, p. 2). While in Colorado he earned a State of Colorado certificate as professional engineer (LaVerne Burnett, private interview with Valerie Kinney, January 28, 2009).

Joe documented the “sink or swim” method enabled him to gain progressive experience in technical engineering which showed an understanding of engineering comparable to that which would have been gained through successful completion of a full four year college engineering curriculum. He finally attained his ambition when he was promoted to the position of mechanical engineer and was re-assigned to the Design Section. In that capacity he continued for more than two years (Burnett, *The Utah Eagle*, April 1955, p. 3).



Joseph as an industrial engineer at Hill Air Force Base, 1955
The Utah Eagle, April 1955

In the spring of 1952, Joe sent in his application for a promotion as well as transfer. Fortunately he got both and returned to his old stomping grounds – Hill Air Force Base. While at Hill Air Force Base, he worked as an industrial engineer in the Plant Engineering Division (Burnett, *The Utah Eagle*, April 1955, p. 3).

Joe said that a few jobs can be challenging to the ability of those who hear, but he explained that his deafness did not stop him from doing his job. He felt he did it exceptionally well. He applied common sense and sharp drawing board work to his problems as an industrial engineer in the Layout and Facilities Branch, Industrial Engineering Division of Maintenance at Hill Air Force Base, Utah (*The Utah Eagle*, January 1954). Joe did not speak well and was not adept at lipreading. His policy was to let them know that he was Deaf and to place a pencil and memo pad into their hands. The more he associated with them, the better they understood him.

He got all the facts on paper and even kept some of them in his file to prevent any misunderstanding that might come up later (Burnett, *The Utah Eagle*, April 1955).

Joe's second best method of communication was a "sketching method." He acknowledged he was an amateur cartoonist as well as illustrator. He was also adept at making quick sketches. A sketch could convey to the foremen, designers, draftsmen and maintenance people a picture of an idea or group of correlated ideas, from which they were able to grasp the main idea. A well-worded treatise and verbal or written conversation might convey the idea or part of it but the people might have difficulty in interpreting the phraseology. He said, "A picture is worth a thousand words." Most people understand the language of pictures and sketches and to use this medium of engineering reduced the probability of misunderstanding (Burnett, *The Utah Eagle*, April 1955, p. 4).



Joseph, 62
UAD Bulletin, June 1975

Joe was a quiet, ambitious leader (Dr. Robert Sanderson & Valerie Kinney, personal communication, July 8, 2011). He was a member of Utah Association for the Deaf for many years, and served as its president twice from 1940 - 1944 and again from 1954 - 1956. During his youth, he played basketball for the Ogden Branch for the Deaf and was also a coach; his club played in the annual NorthWest Athletic Association for the Deaf tournaments. He was named an old timer to the NWAAD Hall of Fame in 1980. A Golden Key Award was presented to Joe in 1976 (LaVerne Burnett, private interview with Valerie Kinney, January 28, 2009).

After a successful surgery, it is believed he was also the first person in Utah to get cochlear implant. The University of Utah Biomedical Center and the House Hearing Institute of California partnered to begin the cochlear implant program (Nelson, *The Salt Lake Tribune*, April 27, 1975; UAD Bulletin, June 1975; LaVerne Burnett, private interview with Valerie Kinney, January 28, 2009).

Joe passed away on March 24, 1989. He is survived by his widow, LaVerne Burnett of Ogden, and two sons, Michael and Byron. A son, Vern, is buried next to his father (LaVerne Burnett, private interview with Valerie Kinney, January 28, 2009).

Lastly, Joe stated, “Let us remember that it is not deafness but one’s attitude towards it that can limit out success in work and our enjoyment of life (Burnett, *The Utah Eagle*, April 1955, p. 4).

Notes

LaVern Burnett, private interview with Valerie Kinney, January 28, 2009.

Robert Sanderson & Valerie Kinney, e-mail message to Jodi B. Kinner, July 8, 2011.

Bibliography

Burnett, J. "Speaking as a Deaf Engineer." *The Utah Eagle: Special Alumni Issue* (April 1955): 2-4.

"Commendation Letter Received by Maintenance Industrial Engineer." *The Utah Eagle*, vol. 65, no. 4 (January 1954): 6-7.

Joseph Burnett: B.A., 1937. [Gallaudet University Alumni Cards, 1866-1957.](http://dspace.wrlc.org/view/ImgViewer?url=http://dspace.wrlc.org/doc/manifest/2041/47271)
<http://dspace.wrlc.org/view/ImgViewer?url=http://dspace.wrlc.org/doc/manifest/2041/47271>

"Joe, '62, hears first time sound by 'plugging into' a U. computer." *UAD Bulletin*, Vol. 10, No 2 (June 1975): 4.

Nelson, A. "Joe' 62, hears his first sound by 'plugging into' a U. computer." *The Salt Lake Tribune*, April 25, 1975.

Obituary: Joseph B. Burnett.