

**Parallel Difficulties in Latter-day Saint  
Community and Utah School for the Deaf,  
1962-1980**

**Compiled & Written by Jodi Becker Kinner  
Edited by Dan V. Mathis**

**2014**

## **Acknowledgement**

I wish to thank Kenneth Lee Kinner and Charles Roy Cochran, long time leaders of the Ogden Branch, for sharing the history of the Ogden Branch for the Deaf and its struggles.

I would like to thank Doug Stringham for coming up with a good title for this historical paper.

I want to thank Dan Mathis for editing the manuscript with great interest and respecting the mission of my paper.

I also want to thank Richard Snow, C. Roy Cochran, G. Leon Curtis, Cherie Carpenter Hodson and Kenneth L. Kinner for careful review of this manuscript for accuracy.

Ultimately, I would also like to express my appreciation and gratitude to Mark Erwin, Branch President of the Ogden Branch for allowing Duane and me to scan the records of the Ogden Branch for the Deaf for historical preservation before they were submitted to the Church History Library.

My sincere appreciation goes to Duane Kinner, my husband, and my children, Joshua and Danielle, for their support and patience while completing this project.

## Note

It is known that the questions and suspicions from non-members concerning the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and those who happen to be a member of this church, have an impact on Deaf Education at the national level. I think this document is an important issue for the Deaf LDS community to address and furthermore, clarify the role of the LDS church in Deaf Education.

Additionally, the version of the “Parallel Difficulties in the Latter-day Saints Community and Utah School for the Deaf: 1962-1980” history is not intended to be negative or critical towards the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It is intended to highlight Deaf LDS members’ fierce ongoing struggle to protect and preserve their language at the Ogden Branch for the Deaf. Moreover, the purpose of this site is to increase people’s awareness of this history and recognize the impact it has had on the Deaf LDS members.

Lastly, opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the entire LDS Deaf community. It is not intended to be critical of all members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints or particular parties, but rather to help give a clear picture of what happened historically from the eyes of many members of the Deaf community.

Jodi Becker Kinner

## Prologue

In writing this history, it is my sincere hope that the reader will come to understand the challenges that have faced the Deaf community since history has been recorded in Utah. It is my unending desire that the mistakes of the past will not be repeated in the future. We owe future generations the gift of communication, regardless of the choice pursued.

### **The First Building of the Latter-day Saints Chapel for Deaf Children**

The Ogden Branch for the Deaf was established in Ogden, Utah in 1917 with Max W. Woodbury, himself hard of hearing, named as branch president. The Ogden Branch for the Deaf was solely intended for Deaf members, especially the students who attended the Utah School for the Deaf (USD).

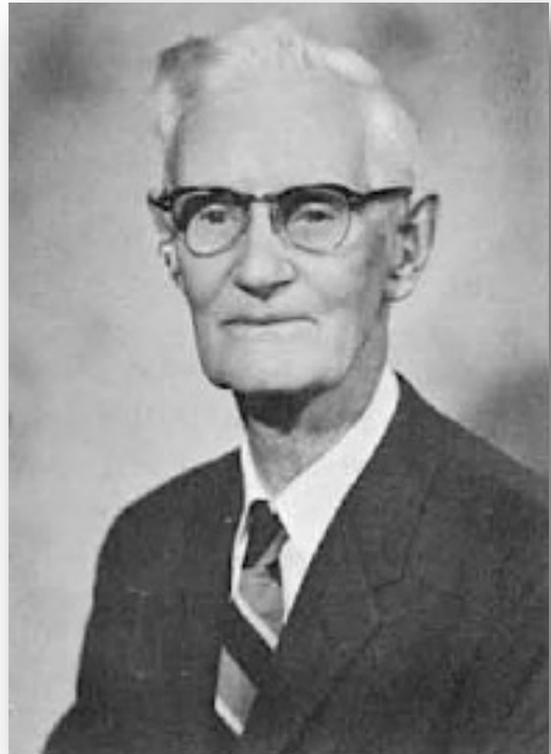
It was the first church building of their own.

Previously, Woodbury and Elsie M.

Christiansen, (Deaf) were instrumental in organizing Sunday School for Deaf members in the Ogden area.

Upon graduation from the University of Utah, Woodbury began his teaching career on September 1, 1902, at the Utah School for the Deaf. While teaching at the school, he was chosen as a Sunday School teacher for the Ogden 4<sup>th</sup> Ward located on Madison Avenue between 22<sup>nd</sup> and 23<sup>rd</sup> Street. At this time, it was very difficult to teach Sunday School in a building with one large room that was only divided into rooms by dark cotton curtains, that would be pulled to separate the different

Sunday School classes. While teaching a lesson, Brother Woodbury could hear teachers



**Max W. Woodbury**  
UAD Bulletin, Winter 1967

teaching the non-deaf children. He commented, “It was difficult to teach due to the noises of others teaching classes, children talking, persons laughing, babies crying and etc. There were a lot of disturbances and in winter how cold it was they had a big heating stove in the Center of the big room. They still couldn’t keep warm” (Ward Stake Historical Record Book #4. 1941 – 1945; History of the Ogden Branch for the Deaf, 1979; Historical Events and Persons Involved Branch for the Deaf, 1992).

In 1907, Woodbury was called to serve as assistant superintendent and Elsie M. Christiansen, USD alumni of 1907, was chosen secretary. Three years later, in 1911, Woodbury was called up to be superintendent, with Christiansen as 1<sup>st</sup> Assistant



**Elsie M. Christiansen**  
**The Utah Eagle, June 6, 1907**

(Woodbury, History of the Branch).

By 1912, they had about 80 members. With the growing number of Deaf members joining the Sunday School from USD, Woodbury felt one room was inconvenient because it only held five classes. Woodbury felt the Deaf members should have a building of their own to worship in (Woodbury, History of the Branch).

In October 1912, as the Ogden Deaf Sunday School group expanded, Woodbury and

Christiansen wrote a letter to President Joseph F. Smith of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, addressing the need for Deaf members to assemble in a more suitable environment. The conditions in which they were meeting for worship services were not conducive to their learning and growth. The letter also requested that the church erect a place of worship solely for Deaf members, enabling them to participate in church services in a manner most appropriate for their communication and fellowshiping needs. Another letter, with signatures of

many Deaf adult members, was sent to the church headquarters, expressing a profound desire for a meetinghouse of their own for worship services and social activities. Additionally, Woodbury and Christiansen scheduled two appointments to meet and discuss with the First Presidency of the Church (Ward Stake Historical Record Book #4. 1941 – 1945; Historical Events and Persons Involved Branch for the Deaf, 1992).

The First Presidency prayerfully deliberated on the situation with the Ogden Deaf group and approved the organization of a Deaf branch, including the building of a Deaf-friendly designed meetinghouse for the Deaf members in Ogden (Ward Stake Historical Record Book #4. 1941 – 1945; History of the Ogden Branch for the Deaf, 1979).

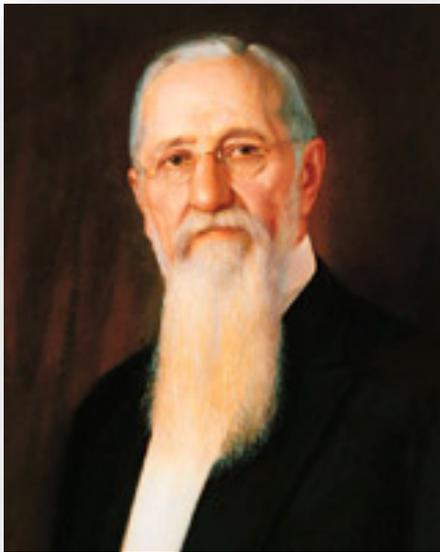
At last in November of 1916, a chapel for the Deaf was built at the cost of \$15,000.00. A beautiful building containing a Chapel, eight class rooms, a small library, two restrooms and a small drinking fountain, plus a furnace stoked by coal and a storage room for janitorial equipment (Woodbury, History of the Branch; Historical Events and Persons Involved Branch for the Deaf, 1992).



**Ogden Branch for the Deaf in Ogden, Utah  
Photo by Kenneth L. Kinner**

It was an eventful day when the Deaf members' prayers and hope were answered as President Smith came and dedicated the Ogden Branch for the Deaf, on January 14, 1917. The signing branch was officially organized and made into an independent branch of the Ogden Stake on February 4, 1917. A meeting was called by the Stake President, Thomas B. Evans of the Ogden Stake, for the purpose of dedicating this new building. Standing at the pulpit, President Joseph F. Smith, upon seeing the large number of people assembled, became overcome by emotion, and tears

filled his eyes. He then gave a most inspiring sermon and then offered the dedicatory prayer. He was so touched by the faith and sincerity shown by the Deaf members that tears rolled down his face. The following brethren then gave remarks: President Thomas B. Evans, Dr. Joseph Morrell, chairman of the building committee, (Dr. Morrell was the first High Councilman assigned to the Branch). More remarks were given by Leslie S. Hodgson, the building Architect, Apostle Hyrum Smith, Presiding Bishop David A.



**Joseph F. Smith, 6<sup>th</sup> President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. He dedicated the Ogden Branch building on February 4<sup>th</sup>, 1917**

Smith and President Anthon H. Lund of the First Presidency. President Max W. Woodbury then gave a talk on the history of the Sunday School for the Deaf (Historical Events and Persons Involved Branch for the Deaf, 1992).

After President Joseph F. Smith dedicated the Ogden Branch for the Deaf, which was built particularly for USD students, on February 4, 1917, the Ogden Branch for the Deaf was organized and made into an independent Branch of the Ogden Stake and it was located on the corner of 21<sup>st</sup> Street and Liberty Avenue. The chapel is one- and one-

half blocks from the former USD campus (Ward Stake Historical Record Book #4. 1941 – 1945; Woodbury, History of the Branch; Historical Events and Persons Involved Branch for the Deaf, 1992).

Because of the USD, a large number of Deaf residents lived in Ogden. By 1920, almost twenty-five percent of the pupils of Utah School for the Deaf were Latter-day Saints. With such a large number, it was necessary to have some place where they could have social gatherings as well as religious meetings (White, *The Silent Worker*, October 1920).

In 1946, the USD's Board of Trustees in their Biennial Report to the Utah

Governor, recognized the importance of the Ogden Branch for the Deaf to the pupils of the USD and stated the following statement:

The location of the school in Ogden has congregated a number of deaf and blind in that city, which together with the school population, make quite a colony. To provide for the religious training of those among them, who are Latter-day Saints, the authorities of that church have built a beautiful chapel, costing \$13,500 (\$15,000 is the correct amount), one and one-half blocks from the school. We have this is the first religious organization in the world to construct a place to worship for the exclusive use of the deaf and blind.

Although the Ogden Branch for the Deaf was not a part of the USD, it had contributed immensely to the lives of the children over a long period of years.

Students of various faiths were encouraged to participate in their church activities. A majority of the older Deaf students attended services on Sunday mornings and evenings. Mutual Improvement Association meetings (a young people's organization) were held Tuesday evenings. The



Ogden Branch for the Deaf, 1924

younger students began each school day with a short prayer and a Sunday School class was offered on the campus each Sunday afternoon by a regular member of the staff of the primary department (Pace, 1946).

President Woodbury presided over the Deaf Ogden Branch for fifty-one years. Under his leadership many Deaf members grew up and became teachers and leaders in their respective home areas. Ultimately, the branch was a model for organizing future

units for the Deaf, such as the Salt Lake Valley Deaf Ward, Los Angeles Deaf Branch, Portland Heights Deaf Branch, Fremont Deaf Branch, Gooding Deaf Branch and others around the world (Walker, 2006).

Today, Deaf branches and wards of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints have become a central place for worship and social activities where both Deaf and signing LDS and non-LDS gather to communicate in sign language.

### **Ogden Branch for the Deaf Faces Trials and Tribulations**

Since the establishment of the Ogden Branch for the Deaf in 1917, this branch has played a huge part in the Utah Deaf community and sign language was taught at this Branch. In 1961, the first seminary class was formed for Deaf members, who attended the

Utah School for the Deaf (USD). This opened the door of opportunity for Deaf missionaries serving all over the world.



**Dr. Grant B. Bitter**  
**The Utah Eagle, 1961**

Shortly thereafter, the Branch faced unexpected trials and tribulations from the oral advocates, particularly Dr. Grant B. Bitter, a coordinator of the Seminary Program of the Deaf under the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints in the State of Utah. In 1961, Boyd E. Packer, Chairman of the Church Educational Department, with Kenneth Sheffield over the Weber County area, organized the first seminary class for Deaf members in its

history (Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19, 2011). A seminary class was added to USD for the first time in history (Curtis, *The Utah Eagle*, October 1961). This first class was taught at the Ogden Branch for the Deaf and it was the first instruction designed for Deaf students of that faith and it was taught in sign language.

The class was held five days a week and they met every morning from 7:30 to 8:30 AM. Attendance was strictly on a voluntary basis (George, -). G. Leon Curtis was an instructor while Kenneth Kinner assisted. Thirty-two students were enrolled (Curtis, The Utah Eagle, October 1961). At the same time, both Leon and Kenneth worked nights at the Newspaper Agency Corps, and ‘didn’t get to bed until the wee hours.’ They were really walking the “second mile” to assist in this project’ (UAD Bulletin, Fall 1961). At the time, Curtis was the first Seminary Teacher for the deaf at the old Ogden Branch for the Deaf while Richard Snow, another Deaf individual, was the full-time Seminary principal at that location (Richard Snow, personal communication, December 21, 2014).

In 1968, Ogden Branch President Curtis became the first hard of hearing principal of the Deaf Seminary classes assisted by J. Wayne Noble and Stephen Mecham. Under the direction of President

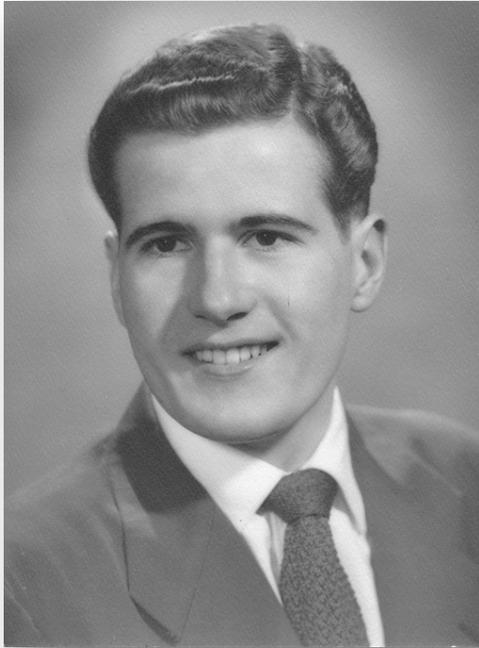


G. Leon Curtis

Curtis, the Gospel was taught in three different classes – oral, sign language, and Braille. About fifteen students enrolled in each class and the classes were still held at the Branch (George, -).

After Max W. Woodbury, President of the Ogden Branch for the Deaf, was released from the position which he served for 51 years, Leon was called as Branch President in 1968 with two counselors, Kenneth L. Kinner and William Ronald Johnston and clerk, Avrel H. Christensen (The Ogden Standard Examiner, February 4, 1967; UAD Bulletin, Winter 1967). President Woodbury cautioned Branch President Curtis and his 1<sup>st</sup> Counselor Kinner about the oral movement being implemented at USD and the possibility of it affecting the Branch as well (Ogden Branch for the Deaf: 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1917 – 2007 Film; Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19,

2011). When the “Y” system was formed at USD in 1962 requiring the Deaf students to initially enter the oral program, the members from that program still attended the Ogden



**Kenneth L. Kinner**

Branch as well as seminary to learn the Gospel in sign language (Ogden Branch for the Deaf: 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1917 – 2007 Film; Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19, 2011).

Eighteen months later, Branch President Curtis was released from his calling due to his decision to relocate in Arizona to complete his master’s degree. The Branch Presidency was reorganized on April 27, 1969. Kenneth L. Kinner was chosen as the first Deaf Branch President with a new 1<sup>st</sup> counselor, C. Roy Cochran (he was known as Roy). The 2<sup>nd</sup> counselor

remained the same (The Ogden Standard Examiner, February 4, 1967; UAD Bulletin,

Winter 1967). The

following year in April 1970, Boyd E. Packer, Chairman of the Church Educational Department, received a calling to become one of the twelve Apostles for the President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19,



**Members of the Ogden Branch for the Deaf, April 4, 1935**

2011; Boyd K. Packer, Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia).

Soon after the changes in the structure and reorganization of the church, President Kinner and 1<sup>st</sup> Counselor Cochran faced unexpected challenges and tribulations when Dr. Bitter became the coordinator for the Deaf Seminary, under the direction of William E. Berret, Administrator of Seminaries and Institutes of Religion in 1970 and 1971. Dr. Bitter called seven oral trained teachers from USD to teach seven oral seminary classes. J. Boyd Neilson, a coordinator of the Oral Department at USD, was appointed by Dr. Bitter as principal of the Deaf seminary classes. Only one sign language seminary class

was offered, and it was taught by a Deaf member, Iola Elizabeth Jensen, known as Beth and wife of a USD teacher, Don Jensen (Ogden Branch for the Deaf: 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1917 – 2007 Film; Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19, 2011).



Lola Elizabeth Jensen

Most of Dr. Bitter's college work was done in religious education and he had been a veteran teacher in religious education in the state of Utah for eleven years, from 1951 to 1962. He taught at Sandy Junior High School, Latter Day Saints Department of Education (Davis Seminary Program), Granite Seminary program, and Sandy Seminary program. While employed at the Riley Extension School where his Deaf daughter, Colleen, attended, he also served as the seminary teacher in that area (The Utah Eagle, October 1962). Because of his Deaf daughter, Colleen and his seminar teaching experience, the Church Educational Department most likely hired him to coordinate for the Deaf Seminary for the State of Utah.

Over the years, Dr. Bitter had a lot of experience teaching religious education and coordinating the seminary program. From 1961-1971, he designed, implemented, and directed religious education for exceptional children/youth in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Bitter, *A Summary Report for Tenure*, March 15, 1985). As early as 1961, he was involved with piloting non-released religious instruction for Deaf children and youth. During the first four years, he spent fifty percent of his time teaching in an oral teacher training program, which was established in 1962 at the University of Utah and the other fifty percent with the Department of Institutes and Seminaries of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A year after the completion of his doctorate in 1967, Dr. Bitter was appointed to pilot/direct religious instruction in 1968, not only for the deaf, but for youth with mental retardation, youth who were blind and others with community-based criteria. During that year, he also assumed the role of coordinator of the teacher preparation program (Bitter, *A Summary Report for Tenure*, March 15, 1985).



**Cherie Carpenter Hodson, age 15**

In his own words, Dr. Bitter reported his exciting experience to inform and instruct on the “evils” of myths. From 1968-1970, he instituted “Annual Seminary Conferences for Exceptional Children and Youth” (Bitter, *A Summary Report for Tenure*,



C. Roy Cochran

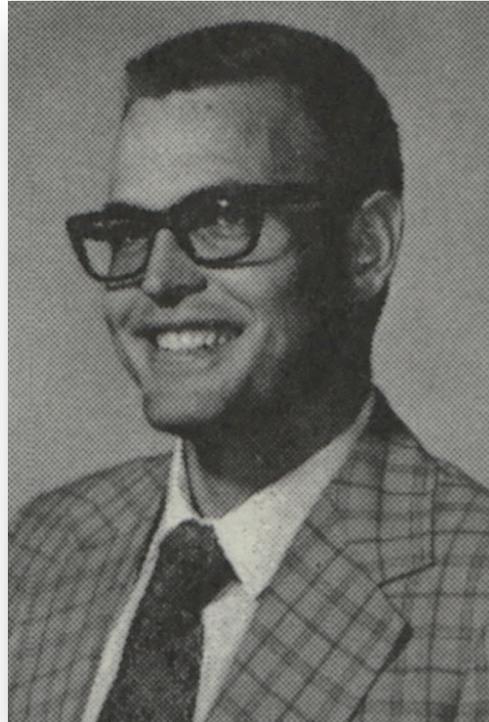
March 15, 1985). In May of 1970, Cherie Carpenter Hodson and her LDS Seminary class from the Arizona State School for the Deaf and the Blind in Tucson, traveled to Salt Lake City, Utah, for the Third Annual Seminary Conference for Exceptional Youth conducted and supervised by Dr. Bitter. At the conference, Dr. Bitter asked Cherie, who was 15 years old at that time, to speak on Economic Competence with her voice. As she approached the pulpit, she debated whether to use her voice or sign. As she looked into the middle of the audience,

she saw several oral interpreters seated every two rows for oralists and one signing interpreter on the right side of the audience for a whole group of signing students. Cherie impulsively decided to sign and called the signing interpreter to come up to speak while she signed. Dr. Bitter did not appear to be pleased with this behavior (Cherie Carpenter Hodson, personal communication, October 18, 2010). Apparently, because of the incident, the Annual Seminary Conferences for Exceptional Children and Youth discontinued after that.

C. Roy Cochran remembers observing Dr. Bitter’s desire to feel successful in the eyes of the church leaders (Roy Cochran, personal communication, April 19, 2012). For instance, in his numerous writings, Dr. Bitter notes that he was invited to a conference as a guest speaker with prominent civic and church notables such as: President Joseph Fielding Smith, President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and his wife,

Jessie Evans Smith; Alvin R. Dyer, and N. Eldon Tanner and Marion G. Romney of the First Presidency. Elders Marvin Ashton and Boyd K. Packer of the Council of Twelve and others (Bitter, *A Summary Report for Tenure*, March 15, 1985).

During 1968-1970, Dr. Bitter reported that the Deaf community was active in slandering him in the church programs as well as at the University of Utah. He stated they were actively pressuring the church to adopt total communication as the method of teaching religious concepts to all Deaf children as they had done in the educational systems of the nation. Over the years, Dr. Bitter had been very involved with church curriculum committees and the missionary programs of the church to prevent and/or minimize problem areas. He shared that Elder James E. Faust of the Quorum of Twelve represented his efforts to inform and to keep freedoms ever in mind. Dr. Bitter further stated that his work was on the “front line of human activity” (Bitter, *A Summary Report for Tenure*, March 15, 1985).



**J. Boyd Neilsen**

Since 1917, the Branch was operating peacefully under the direction of Branch President Woodbury and the young Deaf members were given an opportunity to obtain leadership in their church callings. Just as Branch President Woodbury anticipated, soon after his release from his calling, the Branch Presidency faced a resistance to regular procedures and harmony in the Ogden Branch. They were battling with the oral advocates’ attempt at planting a predominately oral influence in the Ogden Branch. While promoting oralism, Dr. Bitter, J. Boyd Neilsen, and the oral teachers wouldn’t

yield to the possibility of another communication system. It raised conflict among the two parties over communication methodology as well as philosophy and taking control of the Branch and the Seminary classes (Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19, 2011).

Dr. Bitter, J. Boyd Neilsen, and the oral teachers frowned at members from the USD's oral program who attended the Ogden Branch's services as well as activities. They attempted to gain control of the Ogden Branch and to ban sign language, especially



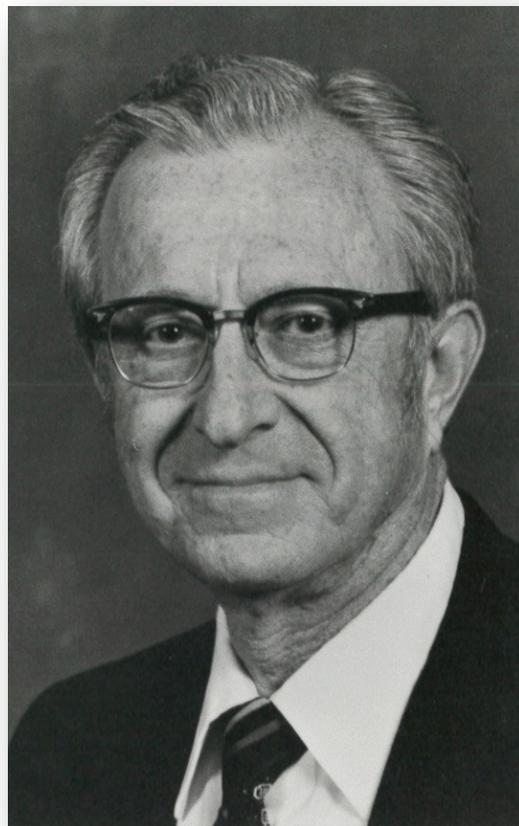
Members of the Ogden Branch for the Deaf, 1952

in the seminary classes. They even tried to prevent the oral Deaf members from participating in the Branch's mutual activities known as the Young Men's Mutual Improvement Association and Young Ladies' Mutual Improvement Association. Social

gatherings were an important aspect of the Ogden Branch. When the oral seminary classes were invited to participate in the Ogden Branch's regular activities, the oral teachers flatly refused for fear that the oral Deaf students would learn to sign. Two separate activities were provided for oral and sign, similar to what happened on the USD campus (Ogden Branch for the Deaf: 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1917 – 2007 Film; Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19, 2011). Subsequently, President Kinner and 1<sup>st</sup> Counselor Cochran found a decrease in the number of children participating in the Ogden Branch and seminary classes taught in sign language (Ogden Branch for the Deaf: 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1917 – 2007 Film).

During seminary class, every Wednesday morning before school started, the members had a testimony meeting about what they had learned in the class. It was reported that the signing members stood on the stage to bear testimony in sign language. All the oral members unexpectedly followed and bore testimony in sign language. They were filled with joy. However, it greatly disturbed the oral teachers. The next month, the oral teachers decided to stand on the step before the pulpit. When the oral members approached the pulpit, they would remind them not to sign. Sharing testimony eventually dwindled away (Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19, 2011).

Recall that in 1917, the Branch was dedicated by President Joseph F. Smith honoring the current and future attendance of the USD students. For instance, a small water fountain was originally built designated for children and most Deaf children who attended USD went to that church (Ogden Branch for the Deaf: 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1917 – 2007 Film). Dr. Bitter, J. Boyd Neilson, and the oral teachers felt the Branch isolated itself from the hearing world. They had a vision of a purely oral education at USD and the church leading to a greater assimilation of the Deaf population into the majority, hearing population. Furthermore, they wished for



**Dr. Robert G. Sanderson**  
Photo courtesy of the Gallaudet University Archives

them to attend their local hearing family's wards. One Sunday evening, J. Boyd Neilson called all local bishops to attend the Ogden Branch for training in preparation for the oral Deaf memberships being transferred to their home ward. Their goal was for the local church to provide an oral interpreter in the services. The training continued, but no

evidence of success. They remained at the Ogden Branch (Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19, 2011).

A non-LDS member, Dr. Robert G. Sanderson, had continuing controversial encounters over Dr. Bitter's Deaf Education philosophy, which was unrelenting with respect to all things related to the Ogden Branch and Seminary. Dr. Sanderson secretly wrote a letter to Stake President Gunn McKay, on behalf of the Branch Presidency,



Lloyd H. Perkins

expressing his concerns about the interference with the Ogden Branch as well as the Seminary and he asked for intervention. He handed the letter to President Kinner and asked that his name not be shared. President Kinner then submitted the letter to Stake President McKay. Dr. Sanderson's letter got his attention. He empathized with the Branch's battle and was on their side (Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19, 2011; Roy Cochran, personal communication, April 19, 2012). A meeting was called where Branch President Kinner, with his interpreter, Lucy Greenwood, Dr. Bitter,

and J. Boyd Neilsen gathered to resolve the continuing issues. However, the meeting was cut short as Stake President McKay had another meeting to attend. He could have helped solve the problems, but he won his election to congress and moved to Washington, D.C. Stake President Keith Jensen replaced Gunn McKay and was aware of the Branch's struggle, but he did not know what to do (Ogden Branch for the Deaf: 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1917 – 2007 Film; Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19, 2011). As a result, the Ogden Stake presidency made the decision for the oral children to attend the

hearing wards and the signing Deaf were to attend the Ogden Branch (Roy Cochran, personal communication, April 19, 2012).

The battle continued. Branch President Kinner and his 1<sup>st</sup> Counselor Cochran were still concerned about the interference with religious services and activities. Bishop Lloyd H. Perkins of the Salt Lake Valley Ward for the Deaf learned about the Branch's battle with Dr. Bitter over his attempting to take control of the Branch and Seminar. President Perkins reported that those oral Deaf members, who were former students of Dr. Bitter's seminary class, attended his ward and told him that Dr. Bitter preached to them not to attend the Deaf branch or ward, as sign language was "terrible." Being alerted, Bishop Perkins assisted Branch President Kinner in getting the controversial situation resolved (Ogden Branch for the Deaf: 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1917 – 2007 Film; Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19, 2011).

### **A Seminary Building for the Deaf Becomes a Reality**

Ultimately, the constant bickering between oral and sign language advocates resulted in affecting the life of the Church as well as church functions and activities. The Deaf LDS leaders asked for intervention by visiting Neal Maxwell, chairman of the Church Educational

Department with Mr. Bradshaw, an assistant. For a few months, Mr. Bradshaw visited and met with the local church leadership to solve the problems. Upon completing his research of the



**A Seminary Building for the Deaf**

ongoing challenges, he reported back to the Church Department where they made a final

decision to purchase a plot on the USD campus and erect a Seminary building on the south end of 20<sup>th</sup> Street in 1974 (Ogden Branch for the Deaf: 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1917 – 2007 Film; Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19, 2011).

For this reason, the Church Educational Department had decided to reorganize the Deaf seminary program. Dr. Bitter was given a choice to either give up his coordinating position at the University of Utah or his coordinating position at the Deaf Seminary. He chose to resign his position as a seminar coordinator. By the time the new Seminary building was established, J. Boyd Nielson was removed as the principal of the seminary classes and oral teachers from Utah School for the Deaf were no longer teaching the seminary classes. A wall of geographical separation between USD and the Ogden Branch was created (Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19, 2011).



**Richard Snow**

In October 1976, a dream became a reality when the Ogden Seminary for the Deaf claimed its own building adjacent to the Utah School for the Deaf campus. An open house was held in early October to welcome all visitors to the new facility. Edward Fisher, a principal who was a fluent signer, and Kyle Jaussi, a teacher, were hired to teach the class (UAD Bulletin, October 1976). When Leon Curtis became a seminary instructor in 1961, he shared that, “We are looking forward when the time will come that a Seminary building will be added to our lovely campus” (Utah Eagle, October 1961, p. 12). Fifteen years later, his dream had finally come true.

At the time, Edward was the first full-time principal of the Ogden Seminary for the Deaf while Richard Snow was the full-time principal at the Salt Lake Seminary for the Deaf (Richard Snow, personal communication, December 21, 2014).



Van De Graff

After Edward Fisher moved to Alaska, Richard Snow became the 2<sup>nd</sup> full time principal of the Deaf seminary in Ogden (Richard Snow, personal communication, December 21, 2014). Sister Lucy Greenwood interpreted for him at most of his seminary meetings in Ogden. After USD moved to 7<sup>th</sup> street in 1994, there was no space on campus for him to teach as the majority of Deaf students were mainstreamed. He then moved back to Salt Lake City where he became principal for the Deaf, taught sign language seminary for the Deaf at Skyline High, Bonneville Jr. High, Churchill Jr. High. He also taught Institute of Religion classes at Salt Lake Community College and University of Utah to both the Deaf and hearing signing students, and eventually taught a Seminary class at Jean Massieu School for the Deaf in Salt Lake City. He also taught classes for the Deaf on the videophone in New York, the Indiana School for the Deaf, and Arizona. One girl, Tahnee (Brinks) Woodbury, at the Indiana School for the Deaf was the first videophone seminary student to graduate from seminary. She married Max Woodbury III, a descendant of Max Woodbury, in the Nauvoo Temple. Upon Richard's retirement in 2008, after working as a principal and teacher for 34 years, Nate Van De Graff, another Deaf individual, became the principal and seminary teacher for the Salt Lake area (Richard Snow, personal communication, February 9, 2012).

Shortly after Edward Fisher was hired, the Branch had finally triumphed over trials and tribulations. However, they experienced a decline in membership among the members from the oral program. Stake President Jensen received a pile of letters from parents and called a meeting with Branch President Kinner. He told him that parents insisted that their oral Deaf children attend a hearing ward around the corner. Apparently, the parents were displeased with the Branch Presidency's intervention with the oral seminary classes. Branch President Kinner and sign language interpreter, Lucy Greenwood were disheartened (Ogden Branch for the Deaf: 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1917 – 2007 Film; Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19, 2011). Per request from parents, Stake President Jensen allowed the oral Deaf children to attend the 31<sup>st</sup> ward with Bishop Tanner. The Ogden Branch for the Deaf faced a new kind of challenge with a lack of leadership among the members and poor mutual activities due to a small number of members (Ogden Branch for the Deaf: 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1917 – 2007 Film; Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19, 2011).



Lucy Greenwood

In that case, Ron Nelson, a former oral Deaf individual being raised in a Latter-day Saint family, shared his observation and opinion about the parents' choice of raising a Deaf child by stating, "Due to Utah's strong Latter-day Saint population, a difficult situation existed for LDS families who had a Deaf child. The Mormons strongly believe their families should be "together." However when they have a Deaf child, they sometimes didn't know how to achieve and maintain "family togetherness," when it became obvious the Deaf child cannot join in all of the family's daily activities. One option that was sometimes selected by struggling parents was to enroll their child in an

oral program at school in an attempt to make their child “normal” and thus achieve “family togetherness.” Another solution which might be perceived as being much better



**Ron Nelson**

for the Deaf child would be for the parents and the siblings to learn American Sign Language (ASL, formerly known as total communication) and use that as the primary mode of communication when the Deaf child was present. I think those parents who learn ASL will achieve a greater degree of family togetherness than those who select the oral method” (Nelson, *UAD Bulletin*, October 1988, p. 4).

In 1975, the Stake Presidency was under reorganization. One day, Apostle Mark E. Petersen met with Branch President Kinner and asked for recommendations on who would be good for a Stake President position.

Apostle Petersen then asked him a question about why the Branch was unable to perform the mutual youth activities. Branch President Kinner explained what happened as stated earlier (Ogden Branch for the Deaf: 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1917 – 2007 Film; Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19, 2011). The next morning at the Stake Conference, Apostle Mark E. Petersen reported the Stake Presidency business and at his closing talk, he called to the audience, “Attention, Attention. Please help the Ogden Branch for the Deaf build a Kingdom of God on Earth” (Ogden Branch for the Deaf: 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1917 – 2007 Film; Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19, 2011).

The new Stake President, Glenn F. Holley, released Branch President Kinner and called C. Roy Cochran as the new Branch President. They continued to work together to solve the Branch's internal difficulties. Stake President Holley talked with USD staff members and asked why they separated oral and signing children from youth activities. They told him about the school policy. Stake President Holley then said, "We are the children of God" and asked them to leave the Branch alone (Ogden Branch for the Deaf: 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1917 –

2007 Film; Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19, 2011).

As time went by, former Branch President Kinner noticed things were starting to improve a little. The Ogden Branch continued to preserve sign language and utilized it when

teaching. Those oral deaf students who graduated from USD later joined the Ogden Branch and learned to sign. The membership grew steadily. Although it created a great burden to operate the Ogden Branch with a small number of members, they were extremely attached to it due to the memories of President Woodbury and his efforts to establish a church solely for Deaf members (Ogden Branch for the Deaf: 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1917 – 2007 Film; Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19, 2011).



**Ogden Branch for the Deaf, Painted by a Deaf artist, Benjamin Davis for Lucy Greenwood**

## **The Deaf Community's Perception of the LDS Church and Its Role on National-Level Deaf Education Politics**

With this in mind, Dr. Bitter may have succeeded somewhat in accomplishing his oral and mainstreaming goals in the State of Utah. Despite his effort to the contrary, ASL continues to survive in the LDS church of today. Dan Mathis, who was raised LDS and returned missionary stated, "The positive side about the LDS church is that they recognize the membership of Deaf origins in the establishment of Deaf units all over, mostly in the United States" (Dan Mathis, personal communication, April 24, 2012). As of today, the LDS church as a whole does support ASL and Deaf culture in many different ways. For instance, the ASL Seminary and Institute classes are done through the videophone taught by Deaf teachers. The church has growing video production that has been translated in ASL for the audience that gladly benefits from it. They publish important messages in the Church magazines and church classes are translated into ASL every month by Deaf translators.

Notably, a Missionary Training Program (MTC) is also taught in ASL. Deaf adults who go on a signing mission are usually "saved" by learning ASL and interacting in Deaf Culture much more than when they grew up. Their understanding and testimony for the church increased because of this service...getting out of the home environment

where most of them didn't learn ASL and never had contact with the Deaf World (Dan Mathis, personal communication, April 24, 2012). There's a rumor among the Utah Deaf community that Dr. Bitter attempted to prevent the Church Presidency's decision for allowing ASL be taught in MTC. Regarding this rumor, we may never know for sure.



**Dan V. Mathis**

Unfortunately, there are still some individuals in the LDS church today that have their own beliefs and agenda, whose ideology contrasts with the ASL/English bilingual population (Replaced with the Total Communication). For years, the Deaf community has had been fighting for Deaf children and their parents who support ASL (Dan Mathis, personal communication, April 24, 2012). The Deaf community believes that two of them are Dr. Karl White and Steven Noyce.



**Dr. Karl White**

Dr. White, founder and director of the National Center for Hearing Assessment and Management (NCHAM) at Utah State University, aimed to use Early Hearing Detection and Intervention (EHDI) programs in the United States and internationally as a way to build an international database of causes of hearing loss and increase genetic services by training of medical professionals (Clark and Riker, 2010). Under his NCHAM direction, his promotion in Listening and Spoken Language and cochlear implants could have a direct impact on the

availability of sign language learning as well as state schools for the Deaf nationally and internationally. His “Eugenic-Style” Bills in California and Indiana created an uproar among the Deaf community at large. The more the Deaf activists at the national level learned about Dr. White, the more they discovered that he was from Utah and that he was an active member of the LDS Church (He was a stake president of his local stake ward at the time). This redefined the Deaf community’s perception as well as made them suspicious of the LDS Church and its influence on national-level Deaf Education politics. The Deaf activists questioned his religious belief and his role as an LDS member on his medical practice against the humanity of and choices for Deaf babies.

On the other hand, Steven Noyce, a former superintendent of the Utah Schools for the Deaf and the Blind, is no stranger to Utah. Several members of the Deaf community are aware that he is a former student of the Oral Training Program at the University of Utah during the early 1970s, under the guidance of Dr. Grant B. Bitter (Steven W. Noyce's letter, December 2, 1971). When he was hired as a superintendent in 2009, the local Deaf community feared that Mr. Noyce, as a new superintendent, would try and carry on Dr. Bitter's legacy. In addition, some LDS members, who were Deaf, were bothered at the idea of him being a member of the LDS Church while he was opposed to the Deaf community's linguistic and cultural values. Fortunately, the Utah Deaf Education Core Group was able to "Rise Up" against any possible prejudice and he only served as superintendent for 4 years while Dr. Bitter was in 'power' for 25 years from 1962 to 1987.

While battling with the Oral Only Option Schools Group, a new grassroots organization influenced by the Alexander Graham Bell Association, in California, Indiana, Delaware and other states, a requested meeting by the Deaf activists, Ella Mae Lentz, Judy Gough, Ruthie Jordan, Patti Durr a few others from the Deafhood Foundation and Deaf Bilingual Coalition, was held during the "2012 Deaf Studies Today!" Conference at Utah Valley University. Dan Mathis, chair of the Education Committee, under the auspices of the Utah Association of the Deaf and a few LDS colleagues, Dr. J. King Freeman, Dr. Bryan Eldridge, Dr. Curtis Radford and James Smith had the opportunity to talk with some of the Deaf activists about the role of the LDS Church in Deaf Education, including in Utah. He observed that they weren't quite familiar with the religion and how the hierarchy works in the priesthood



Steven W. Noyce

leadership. Some thought it was paid and you had to move up in the ranks by how you performed in your profession and how many "deeds" you have done in your life (Dan Mathis, personal communication, April 24, 2012).

The LDS colleagues explained to the Deaf activists that the LDS church is separate from individual's professional life and that the church headquarters has NO role in Deaf education. And that leadership is voluntary and is called upon by a higher level. Dan explained that the LDS religion encourages members to do good works and be involved in the community to improve the quality of life. Unfortunately, the fact remains that sometimes well-intentioned members bring principles into their endeavors which they think are good or right, but in reality, do harm to others, like Dr. White and Mr. Noyce and their intentions for the Deaf community. The Deaf activists seemed to be receptive to this discussion and appreciative of what the LDS colleagues told them the volunteer nature of the Church of Latter-day Saints. (Dan Mathis, personal communication, April 24, 2012).

In fact, many ASL advocates who happen to be LDS are fearful that Dr. Bitter and Dr. White's motives, however intended, could affect their linguistic and cultural values. Dan Mathis stated, "This needs to be known to the wider church membership all over the world. Leaders and notable LDS individuals should embrace this fact and encourage for better awareness of the deaf minority who is an ethnically cultural and linguistic group everywhere. This is what I hope to see happen in the future" (Dan Mathis, personal communication, April 24, 2012).

Minnie Mae Wilding-Diaz, a Book of Mormon translator and co-founder of Jean Massieu School of the Deaf emphasized that, "Even though a church as a whole is good and has great leaders, there are always individuals with ideas that don't seem congruent with ideals espoused by the church. We believe in free agency, after all" (Minnie Mae Wilding-Diaz, personal communication, April 15, 2012).

In the final analysis, the quest for the appropriate communication methodology continues on today. The history of the Deaf in Utah demonstrates the historic challenges that have impacted Deaf individuals, their education as well as their religious belief



**Minnie Mae Wilding-Diaz**

system. Perhaps it is time that all well-intentioned individuals come to the table and recognize that since all learners are different, there is a need for diversity in learning as well -- ASL, oral, total communication. Perhaps there is room for all.

## Notes

Cherie Carpenter Hodson, personal communication, October 18, 2010.

Dan Mathis, personal communication, April 24, 2012.

Kenneth L. Kinner, personal communication, June 19, 2011.

Minnie Mae Wilding-Diaz, personal communication, April 15, 2012.

Richard Snow, personal communication, February 9, 2012.

Richard Snow, personal communication, December 21, 2014.

Roy Cochran, personal communication, April 19, 2012.

Steven Noyce, personal communication, December 2, 1971.

## Bibliography

Bell, Mabel. "The Deaf Eye." *UAD Bulletin*, vol. 12, no. 6 (October 1988): 4.

Bitter, Grant. "A Summary Report for Tenure." *Grant B. Dr. Bitter Papers*, Accn #1072. Manuscripts Division, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, Utah, March 15, 1985.

"Boyd K. Packer." (*Wikipedia*) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boyd\\_K.\\_Packer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Boyd_K._Packer)

Clark, K. & Riker, T. (2010, June 7). "Mendoza Against the Deaf: Tony Mendoza California Eugenics-Style Bill Creates Uproar Among the Deaf Community." <http://www.thecuttingedgenews.com/index.php?article=12260&pageid=&pagename=>

Christiansen, E. (1918). "The YLMIA of the Branch for the Deaf." Copied from the Young Women's Journal, Vol. 29.

Curtis, G. Leon. "With Our Alumni." *The Utah Eagle* (October 1961): 12.

George, S.L (-).

Giles, Bobby. *Ogden Branch for the Deaf: 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary 1917 – 2007 Film*.

Grant B. Bitter. *The Utah Eagle*, vol. 74, no. 1 (October 1962): 11.

*Historical Events and Persons Involved Branch for the Deaf* - Compiled February 11, 1992.

*History of the Ogden Branch for the Deaf*, 1979.

"New seminary at USD." *UAD Bulletin*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (October 1976): 3.

Pace, Irma Acord. "A History of the Utah School for the Deaf." *The Utah Eagle*, vol. 58, no. 1 (May 18, 1946): 1-33.

"Seminary Class Stared At School for Deaf." (1961, Fall). *The UAD Bulletin*, vol. 2, no. 4 (Fall 1961): 3.

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints: Branch for the Deaf, Ogden. Ward Stake Historical Record Book #4. 1941 – 1945.

"Two Events Will Honor Deaf Branch President." *Ogden Standard-Examiner*, February 4, 1967.

"Unveiling Ceremony at Ogden Branch." *UAD Bulletin*, vol. 11, no. 3 (October 1976): 2.

White, Bob. (1920, October). *Ogden's social and religious Center*. The Silent Worker  
vol. 33 no. 1, p. 32.  
<http://dspace.wrlc.org/view/ImgViewer?url=http://dspace.wrlc.org/doc/manifest/2041/38209>

Woodbury, Max.W. History of the Branch.