

United Utah Organizations of the Deaf

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Before 1930, the deaf community enjoyed watching the silent movies and some movies with captions. When the non-talking movies were replaced with the talking films in 1930s, deaf people had been at a disadvantage ever since (Walker, 2006).

For 30 years, captions were no longer added to films. Deaf people were left out in the cold (Sanderson, 2004). It was not until June 30, 1960 when the Captioned Films for the Deaf was available under the direction of Dr. Malcolm J. Norwood who was deaf and known as a “Father of Closed Captioning.” As the director working for the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, Dr. Norwood, known as “Mac,” persuaded top level administrators of the need of deaf people for education through films with captions” (Sanderson, 2004).

Upon approval, Mac developed a nationwide program of captioned films for deaf people (Sanderson, 2004). It created much excitement in the deaf community. Thousands of deaf people rented or purchased 16 mm projectors to show the films from the film library supplied by the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare in Washington, D.C. (Sanderson, 2004).



Dr. Malcolm J. Norwood

In July 1960, the United Utah Organizations of the Deaf was established to cooperate with the local organizations such as the Utah Association of the Deaf, Utah Athletic Club of the Deaf, Salt Lake Frats, Ogden Frats, Salt Lake Valley Branch for the Deaf, Ogden Branch for the Deaf, and any other organizations among the deaf in Utah to primarily coordinate dates for each group’s activities to avoid any overlapping of meetings so that everyone can enjoy watching the films together (Walker, 2006).

Under this organization, known as U.O. for short, six members coordinated coordinating each committeeman who represented each organization. The first appointed members were:

Chairman UAD – Ned C. Wheeler
Member UAD – Robert J. Welsh
Member UACD – Rodney Walker
Member Salt Lake Valley Branch for the Deaf- G. Leon Curtis
Member Salt Lake Frat Division No. 56 – Verl W. Thorup
Member Ogden Frat Division No. 127 – Donald Jensen (Walker, 2006)

From then on, each organization took its turn with the other organizations watching a film. There was no admission charge for the movies. After renting the 16 mm projectors, the U.O. wished to purchase its own projector and screen (Walker 2006). In 1960, they hosted a party as a fundraiser to purchase the screen and projector (UAD Bulletin, Fall 1960; Walker, 2006). A \$3 donation from deaf attendees was solicited to pay for the new projector and screen (UAD Bulletin, Fall 1960). Later, they received some donations from fund raising. However, they were short of their goal to raise the total funds. UAD was kind enough to loan to U.O. of \$256.00 to help achieve the goals. Finally, the U.O. was able to purchase the necessary equipment (Walker, 2006). The scheduling dates and showing the captioned films continued to work out quite well.

Since the deaf community enjoyed watching the captioned films, the Utah Association for the Deaf invited Dr. Norwood to Utah on February 22 and 23, 1963. While in Ogden, he spoke to a sizable and appreciative audience at the Utah School for the Deaf. The Captioned Films program was explained in detailed, from both the educational and recreational viewpoints. He also answered many questions from the audience, and then exhibited two short films, “Motor Mania,” on safety, featuring an old Walt Disney favorite, Goofy, and “Electromagnet,” an educational feature. These films had tremendous impact on the audience. At the time, the deaf community hoped the captioned films would represent a significant breakthrough in education that would permit deaf children to increase their rate of learning and overcome their disadvantage accessing literacy. They were deeply indebted to Mac for taking the time to stop in Utah and showed what was in store for them (UAD Bulletin, Spring 1963).

Through the passing years, the membership of the U.O. continued to increase and eventually, the number of organizations belonging to the U.O. had reached thirteen. The fee for

membership was ten dollars per year. The organization met twice a year to verify dates for activities for the following six months (Walker, 2006).

Deaf people watched old movies and captioned movies in the Cultural Hall at the Ogden Branch for the Deaf. The event was more enjoyable when the sisters contributed the candy, cookies, fudge, popcorn balls and etc (Remember the Events).

Eventually, the Salt Lake City Division No. 56 (Frat) took over scheduling the captioned films as well as using the projector and screen for their monthly meetings (Walker, 2009). They enjoyed having meetings and movies for a few more years at different available places.

In the 1980s, the Utah Community Center for the Deaf in Bountiful was available to show films during Frat meetings. Unfortunately, the screen in the building was in no condition to show movies (Walker, 2006).

During the 1970s and 1980s, Dr. Norwood's persistence paid off with the creation of the captioning industry that we know today (Feldman, 2008). At the time, TV shows with closed captions became popular, and "this attracted deaf people away from the captioned film showings at the Frat meetings" (Walker, 2006). The Frat continued to hold their meetings, but showing the captioned films gradually stopped.

During the meeting on May 1, 2004, representatives of various organizations voted to dissolve the United Organizations for the Deaf (UAD Bulletin, June 2004). Rodney W. Walker, a prominent Utah deaf person stated, "it might be interesting to note that the original objective of the U.O. was to deal with the captioned films and the projection equipment for the organizations to use, but the purpose was changed through time to focus on coordination and scheduling for various activities" (Walker, 2006).

Under federal law, captions are being displayed on TV shows and wide-release movies. Today, deaf people have the privilege of enjoying watching TV shows and/or movies with captions. Moreover, with advanced technology available, more and more ASL films are

produced and directed by deaf directors/producers. Our local Utah film producers are Lance Pickett (R.E.M. Films) and Julio Diaz, Bobby Giles and Jim Harper (Eye-Sign Media).

In order to support the ASL film business, the Utah Association of the Deaf hosts ASL films at the Robert G. Sanderson Community Center where the deaf community can enjoy watching movies in ASL with captions.

Bibliography

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