



# Captioned Films for the Deaf

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*A paper given at the twenty-second Meeting of the Conferences of Executives of American Schools for the Deaf in Colorado Springs, Colorado, October, 1950.*

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*EDITOR'S NOTE: This article originally appeared in the American Annals of the Deaf, Vol. 96 No. 3, pages 346-352. It is re-typed here in its entirety for historical and archival purposes.*

Since their inception, moving pictures have been a tremendously potent medium for entertainment and for information, and in more recent years have become a very powerful means of actually teaching innumerable skills and techniques. During the past war the Armed Forces and industrial concerns found them of great value and made intensive use of this highly effective approach to their instructional problems. It is, therefore, indeed surprising to contemplate to what a limited degree educators of the deaf have availed themselves of this great medium of entertainment and of instruction. Especially is this true, when one considers that we must rely almost entirely on unusual means of teaching the deaf child. The complexity of our teaching problems is so great that I believe we will all agree that we need every possible aid in teaching; in developing reading and language skills and in imparting information, generally. It is also apparent that wholesome feature films, which the deaf child can understand, are greatly needed for their entertainment value.

One would think that there would be no doubt in the mind of anyone that properly captioned movies offer great advantages in instructing the deaf. However, I have found certain individuals who felt that because they were showing once a week a program of sound films that they were covering the subject adequately. Nothing, in my estimation, could be further from the fact, for while the deaf derived great enjoyment from the old silent films, they are not able to follow the action in a sound film advantageously enough to give them real pleasure or satisfaction. It is true that children will go to see any moving picture because they are fascinated by the action that takes place. Many deaf adults, however, do not care to see moving pictures unless they have previously read the plot so that the film offers a logical and understandable sequence of action. In large cities such as New York, the deaf avail themselves quite often of the foreign films. However these are not available in sufficient quantity, nor are they of proper subject matter to help us very much in our overall problem.

As far as the deaf child is concerned, I have often wondered as to whether sound films were not more harmful than beneficial. In all too many instances, from infancy, he comes to accept all sorts of, to him, strange and unexplainable happenings as perfectly natural. He does not tend to develop as does the

hearing child a critical evaluation of everything that goes on about him, nor does he acquire the habit of applying his own mental measuring rods to everyday situations with the requirement that they meet the test of reasonability. This habit of accepting a bizarre world, where all sorts of strange happenings might occur without any rhyme or reason, is certainly not a good one. In fact, it is one of our great problems in teaching the deaf. It is probably accentuated by sound films where the children see what must seem to them the most unexplainable happenings, for in most films the greater part of the plot is carried in the dialogue. One can only imagine what a deaf child thinks when he sees, for example, two men sitting peacefully at a table suddenly without warning leap up, draw swords and start to finish one another off. Yet this is the kind of happening that he learns to take for granted and without question as he sees an unexplained sound film.

Many educational films are now dependent entirely for their instructional effectiveness upon an unseen narrator whose voice comes over the sound track. Such films are little value but could have very high instructional value for the deaf child if they were properly captioned. In addition, every time that a child viewed a captioned film, either entertainment or educational, he would be getting a painless reading lesson which would also tend to improve his language. I believe we will all agree that we can stand all the help that we can get in any one of these respects, that is, information, reading ability and language improvement. Even if the films did nothing but give wholesome and understandable entertainment to the children they would be of great value.

Let us now look at the situation and see what problems are involved in developing suitable films for the deaf and as well as why we have not been able to do so up until the present time. In the latter case I believe the greatest reason is that no outcry has been made for captioned films for the deaf and reason is that the deaf child is not articulate and he does not know what he is missing if he has never seen it. Furthermore, superintendents of individual schools most generally have as much as they can do to run the school from day to day without taking on additional problems. This is where the Conference of Executives of American Schools for the Deaf should come in. Some, of course, may feel that since they are showing sound films from time to time that they have the film problem adequately provided for.

The adult deaf realize their need for suitable captioned films and find at least in one instance a strong effort has been made to devise a plan to furnish recreational films to school for the deaf as well as to clubs and organizations of the adult deaf. I refer to the work carried on by Emerson Romero within the last few years and his attempt to secure films and have them suitably captioned and set up a distribution arrangement that would circulate them among various schools and organizations. I am rather familiar with the work of Emerson Romero and I believe very strongly that he is entitled to a great deal of credit for his fore-sightedness and for his untiring efforts to make this project a success. The project has not been very successful for a variety of reasons which I will discuss here. In addition to Emerson Romero's efforts I read just recently of the efforts by the British deaf to achieve the same results. *The Silent World* carries an account of a film "Dawn Departure" which the deaf of England with the cooperation of the J. Arthur Rank Corporation managed to caption by the use of glass slides. When

this captioned film had its premiere showing in London there were several hundred deaf people lined up waiting to gain entrance to the theater. This should give us some idea of how much the deaf really need and desire suitable captioned entertainment films and certainly the educational films are equally needful and desirable. Although the method of captioning was cumbersome, and necessitated the operator following cues in order to show the captions at the right time, it was felt that progress had been made.

As you will recall, the Conference of Executives of American Schools for the Deaf created a committee to study the problem of providing films for the deaf about three years ago. This committee consists of Charles Bradford, Chairman, Dr. Clarence O'Connor and myself. The committee has done a considerable amount of work, although it may not seem so. I might say here that it seemed to the committee in the beginning that it should be reasonably simple to make some arrangement whereby films could be secured, some method whereby they could be properly titled, and then plan for a suitable arrangement for their distribution. As we got into the problem we found a great many more difficulties. The problem falls into two parts: first, the recreational films, and second, the educational films. In connection with the recreational films we found that our main difficulties were as follows:

1. A source of securing suitable films. One might think that it would be relatively easy to make arrangements with some of the producers to purchase prints of some of their action films of not too recent a vintage for this purpose, but we have not as yet been able to find a way to secure these prints from the major producers direct. However, we are finding quite a number of sources among film distribution agencies, and I think we can get enough films to start with and later we hope to make arrangements with some of the major producers.
2. The captioning of the films. We have, I think, found a good solution for this. A new process has been developed whereby captions may be superimposed upon existing print. This is not cutting and inserting captions. Under this procedure the captions would appear at the bottom of the picture on the screen and the film would go on without interruption. We have prices from a New York firm to prepare the films in this manner. This is vastly superior to the glass slide procedure.
3. The third problem is securing money to purchase films to get the thing started. We figure we can adapt a print of regulation length program for about \$50. This will depend, however, on how much we have to pay for the print. I am trying to get the Junior League of Hartford to take this on as their major project next fall and I have considerable hope that they will do so.
4. The fourth problem is the handling and distribution of the films. We thought that we would start the library here and continue until it was well established and then turn it over to the Conference of Executives of American Schools for the Deaf to be operated on a profitless but self-maintaining basis.

Educational films offer a considerably more favorable prospect than the recreational films. In the first place there are numerous prints put out by manufacturers which I believe can be secured for little or no cost. These films can be captioned rather inexpensively, and in some cases we can get company films and get the manufacturer to caption them for us. For example, Mr. Roy Wilcox, Executive Vice President of international Silver Company has presented me with a film, "A Century of Silver." He told us that if we supplied him with captions he would pay for having the captions superimposed on the film. This is being done at the present time. I feel confident that if International Silver Company is willing to cooperate with us in this matter that we will find many other manufacturers equally generous. Our second great prospect is educational films such as the films produced by the Encyclopedia Britannica. This company has films on several hundred subjects to which they are adding some 70 odd films a year. While the majority of these films are sound and the explanatory remarks carried by a narrator, quite a few are captioned already, although most of these would have to be recaptioned. Through Governor Bowles office our efforts were brought to the attention of Senator Benton. He immediately wrote to Encyclopedia Britannica Films and had them send a representative to see me, and since that time they have presented me with two films as samples so that we may all see how we can adapt them to our program. The representative of the Encyclopedia Britannica Films also called to my attention something I had not known of before and something that is evidently very new. This is the production of 25 silent films "Language in Action" for the teaching of the deaf children. These films are made by Gateway Productions of San Francisco and the making of these films open up all sorts of interesting possibilities as to the adaption of films directly to the technique of teaching language to the deaf. No doubt numerous other sources of films will be discovered as we proceed with this project.

All in all, I believe that we have already found a great deal of material to work into our program; and that there is no reason why with hard work and some money we cannot devise an effective film library for use in schools for the deaf throughout the country. Such a program can and should be self-sustaining by charging reasonable rental fees for the film program. It is very probable that at least three distribution points should be established eventually.

Of course we have many problems yet to solve. One of the main ones is that we have not yet found a way to get the major producers to sell us prints of films direct. However, I feel that a way can eventually be found. Captioning films still offers real problems both as to the time and skill necessary to devise suitable captions, but also in the actual mechanical inscribing of the captions on the film. I believe we are well on the way of a solution of this particular problem however.

*We must have the support of the great majority of all the schools for the deaf in the country and their participation in this program after we have secured suitable films for them. With this cooperation and with the continuing effort of all of us I am confident that we can arrange a film program that will be of inestimable value in the teaching of the deaf child ...*

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Of course, getting money for such a project is always going to be something of a problem, but I am sure wide interest can be attracted if we explain this program properly to the right people. Hundreds of thousands of dollars have been contributed generously by the public to provide Braille books for the blind because their need has been made plain and I feel we can attract a similar generous response. The Junior League of Hartford has advised me that they will meet at our school on the 15<sup>th</sup> of November, at which time they will take a direct vote as to whether they will sponsor this project or not. I believe they are considering putting up \$5,000.00 to arrange at least 10 recreational film programs. If we secure this support from the Hartford Junior League Organizations I think it quite probable that we could secure support from other Junior League Organizations in other cities as well as other interested persons. The distribution of the films will be a continuous problem and one that should be handled by an agency such as this Conference. I see no reason whatever why it cannot be done efficiently in a similar way to that which we are now providing for the publication of the American Annals of the Deaf. The last great problem is one of cooperation and the solution of this depends entirely upon the superintendents of the schools. We must get full cooperation and support from the various schools if we are to make this program a success. One school cannot make it a success, nor can five or six. We must have the support of the great majority of all the schools for the deaf in the country and their participation in this program after we have secured suitable films for them. With this cooperation and with the continuing effort of all of us I am confident that we can arrange a film program that will be of inestimable value in the teaching of the deaf child as well as one which will afford him a wonderful medium of entertainment and information.