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The Rochester School for the Deaf

by Ruth Rosenberg-Naparsteck





Dr. Alexander Graham Bell with the students of The School for the Deaf, then The Western New York School for Deaf Mutes. Dr. Westervelt stands on the top of the stairs.

Cover: Perkins Hall, main buildings of The Rochester School for the Deaf

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Inside the door of the Rochester School for the Deaf, the grandfather clock ticks in a large foyer. Old portraits hang in antique frames, much like it must have been 125 years ago. The large wooden door which the School's first superintendent passed through a thousand times, still opens to let in new visitors.

Deaf Education in the Wilderness

Early in the 19th century there was no opportunity for deaf children in the wilderness of the Genesee Country. Many children were sent to the County Poor House or kept at home without any education, language or orientation to everyday life skills. The earliest record found of the education of a Rochester area deaf child was of Nancy Orr from Bath who enrolled in Hartford School in Hartford, Connecticut in 1817, the year Rochester became a village. A few years later, in 1822, Franklin Scovel opened a school for the deaf in Palmyra in association with the Presbytery of Geneva. The church's Rev. Joseph Penney and the Bishop Comfort Williams were names to become known later by Rochester's abolitionists. Palmyra was larger than Rochester

in 1822 because the Erie Canal created an economic and population boom. In 1822 when the school was opened in Palmyra, there were only three other schools for the Deaf in America. The American Asylum in Hartford, The New York School for the Deaf (Fanwood) which opened in 1818 and the Pennsylvania Institute for the Deaf in Philadelphia which opened in 1820



Carolyn Perkins

In August of 1844, Harvey Pindle Peet of the New York School (Fanwood) brought some of his students to Rochester where they held a performance in the Washington Street Church. Franklin Scovel's school no longer existed and a number of Rochester area children were sent away. Fanwood was the most accessible and at



Edmund Lyon

least five Rochester area deaf children attended there; Jane Simons and Mary Ann Smith, both orphans, Cornelia Lathrop and two unidentified children who died from fever in 1852.

Jane Simons sent a letter to John H. Thompson, who had taken her as an infant to the Monroe County Poor House. He later took her to Fanwood and by 1852 when she was fourteen, she told him in a letter she was doing well and asked him to

extend her best wishes to her friends and relatives in Rochester. The letter was published in the *Rochester Daily Democrat* January 28, 1852.

The Lathrops lived in Rochester and sent their daughter, Cornelia, to Fanwood where their family friend, Rev. Thomas Gallaudet taught the deaf along with Harvey Pindle Peet. Rev. Gallaudet was the oldest son of Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet. When Cornelia became gravely ill, her family moved to New York to be near her. Though Rev. Gallaudet informed Cornelia she would not survive her illness, she held to her faith. Her strength so inspired Rev. Gallaudet that he founded the first church for the deaf, St. Ann's Church in New York City, a few months after her death. Cornelia Lathrop is now buried at Mt. Hope Cemetery near the graves of Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass.



*Mrs. Edmund Lyon
(Carolyn Hamilton
Talcott Lyon)*

Sharing Education with Others

More than a century and a quarter ago Carolyn Erickson Perkins was born to Gilman and Caroline Perkins in Roch



Dr. Westervelt in his favorite study.

ester. She was still an infant when her parents realized that little Carolyn could not hear. Of course, she was not the first child born deaf in the city, but it was her birth on July 24th, 1868 that changed the history of western New York, the history of the deaf and the fortunes of thousands of children born or having acquired deafness. Carolyn's mother was the daughter of Aaron Erickson, founder of the Union Trust Company.

She had a reputation as a visionary and the willingness to confront challenges. Wanting an education for her daughter, she visited a school for the deaf in Frederick, Maryland while visiting relatives. While there she met a young teacher named Mary Hart Nodine. She recognized the warmth and talent of Miss Nodine and invited her to Rochester as a private teacher for Carolyn.

Mary Nodine was engaged to Zenas Freeman Westervelt, a teacher at the Frederick School and he often came to visit at the Perkins household. For years Professor Westervelt had been gathering names of deaf children in central and western New York who were not in school. He felt Rochester would be a good location for a new school because of the high number of deaf students and its accessibility by railroad. Mrs. Perkins became aware of Mr. Westervelt's project and proposed

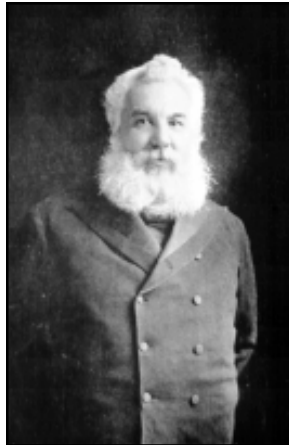


*Mary Westervelt
(Mary Nodine Westervelt)*

that after the marriage of Mary and Zenas they come to Rochester to open a private school supported by Mr. and Mrs. Perkins and other members of the community.

Professor Westervelt advised that the school should include deaf children without financial resources. Dr. Martin B. Anderson, President of the University of Rochester, and a member of the New York Board of Charities and Dr. Thomas Gallaudet, by then a member of the Board of Directors of the New York Institute, approved of the formation of the school, recognizing that the New York Institute at Fanwood was over crowded. At a meeting of citizens convened by the mayor, the Western New York Institution for Deaf Mutes was organized on February 3, 1876. By May 15, the School was recognized by the State of New York as a public school that under the State Board of Charities could operate as an independent corporation.

Mr. Westervelt noted that the number of deaf children in Western New York was about four hundred. By correspondence Mr. Westervelt was aware of 112 who had never attended school. Thirty others had grown to adulthood without formal education because there was no school to attend. The new school in Rochester could enroll 170 Western New York deaf students then attending Fanwood. Mr. Westervelt estimated that the school could open with as many as 200 students when the parents of other deaf children in the area became aware of the school. A Board was elected and on February 4, 1876 a constitution and by-



Alexander Graham Bell



Girls using Lyon's Phonetic Spelling in 1891.

laws were adopted. Committees were appointed and Mr. Westervelt was named superintendent. Mr. Westervelt was soon affectionately called Prof. (Professor) Westervelt by the faculty and students. The school opened on the corner of South St. Paul Street (today South Avenue) and Court Streets.

The First Location

The block of four houses on Court Street were used as living rooms by the older students and as classrooms by all students. A small wooden house was used for the kindergarten and a brick building in the back of the lot served as a hospital, laundry and servants' rooms. Across Court Street to the south was a vacant lot, which could be used as play space for the students. When the School opened its first year, there were twenty students, but by the time the year ended there were 87. More space was certainly needed. The following year the School leased, from the city, the former Children's Truant Home on St. Paul Street. The location offered good accessibility with 826 feet of frontage onto St. Paul Street. It was once owned by Caleb Lyon and his partners at the early settlement of Carthage. The property had a spectacular view of the Genesee River gorge, and fishing and canoeing became popular with the residents of the school. Included on the more than seven acres of property was a large brick building used by the city for truant children, another brick building, a barn and the old Railroad and Steamship House that once catered to weary steam



Anne Sullivan and Helen Keller

boat and stage travelers. The old tavern had been built on Ridge Road above the river in 1817, but when the railroad diverted traffic and the Landing was less frequented, the tavern was moved to St. Paul Street where it became a two-story home for the superintendent of the Truant Home. When the school relocated to St. Paul Street, Professor Westervelt used the building as living quarters for the domestic help and built a laundry in the basement.



Rosa H. Halpern

For a short time the older boys resided on St. Paul Street at "The Annex," as it was called, while the remainder of the students stayed at "Number 70" on Court Street. In 1878 the entire student body was moved to the new location. The new property worked well for the children who then had room to play in the open fields. Across the river in the gorge



Harriet E. Hamilton

was the summer hotel "Glen House" where steamers and a boat livery kept the river life active. The crashing of the falls was the only sound that broke through the tranquility of the river's edge at the end of the 19th century.

In July of 1881 a small fire at the school spread from a pile of wood shavings to the carpenter shop, destroying it along with the printing, paint and plumbing shops. It also destroyed the rear portion of the main building where the schoolrooms, large

dining hall and boys bedrooms were located. These buildings were all rebuilt during the summer and fall of 1881. Only half of the \$10,000 damage was covered by insurance although \$40,000 was spent for repairs and improvements. In 1882, a large two-story brick building was erected for the use of the kindergarten children. On the ground floor were



Perkins Hall, Rochester School for the Deaf's main building and the old Steamboat Tavern standing next to it.

Below is a close-up of the old Steamboat Tavern.



five large classrooms and two playrooms. On the second floor were two dormitories with the boys on one side and the girls on the other. Bathrooms and two rooms for the supervisors were located between the dormitories. The students went to the dining room in the main building for their meals with the senior pupils. Meals were served family style with older students at each table to help the younger children learn the rules and manners of eating with others. A building used for classes for older students was also built



The Girls' Dormitory

around 1882. This school building was not suitable for class work during severe cold weather however and after two years the carpenter

boys pulled off the siding, lined the walls with sheathing paper and put the siding back.

Mr. Diemer, school engineer, installed the heating system throughout the building. He later managed the farm on Norton Street. In 1888 the city bought much of the riverfront property where Maplewood and Seneca Parks are located today. The Western New York Institution for Deaf Mutes purchased the school property from the city in 1888. Around that time Prof. Westervelt also purchased a farm at the corner of Norton Street and Beach Street. The farm was close enough for the students to walk to and they especially enjoyed picking the grapes and other fruit. A group of boys called "the farm boys" were trained by Mr. Diemer in practical farming methods that they could use when they were no longer in school and working on other farms. Over the years asparagus, lima beans, lettuce, parsnips, beets, cabbage, apples, pears and crab apples were grown. One year 2300 lbs. of grapes were harvested. All of these products were put to good use in the kitchen and enjoyed at the three meals a day at the school. In addition there were beehives and a smokehouse for curing hams. The children learned to care for the cows, pigs, guinea hens and chickens on the farm. A house on the farm was used to isolate children with communicable diseases. There were also two rooms in the main building on St. Paul Street for use in cases of light ailments and injuries. As the city of Rochester grew, closing in the farm, it was sold.



Boys in the garden.

Communication

Most of the students arrived the first year from other schools where sign language was their primary communication. The Western New York Institution for Deaf Mutes felt strongly that every deaf child should learn to speak. The first annual report stated that "our teachers have an impression, amounting almost to a conviction, that of two young people, equal in mental ability, the one who has never spoken can be taught to speak more correctly than one who retains a partial and imperfect memory of language.

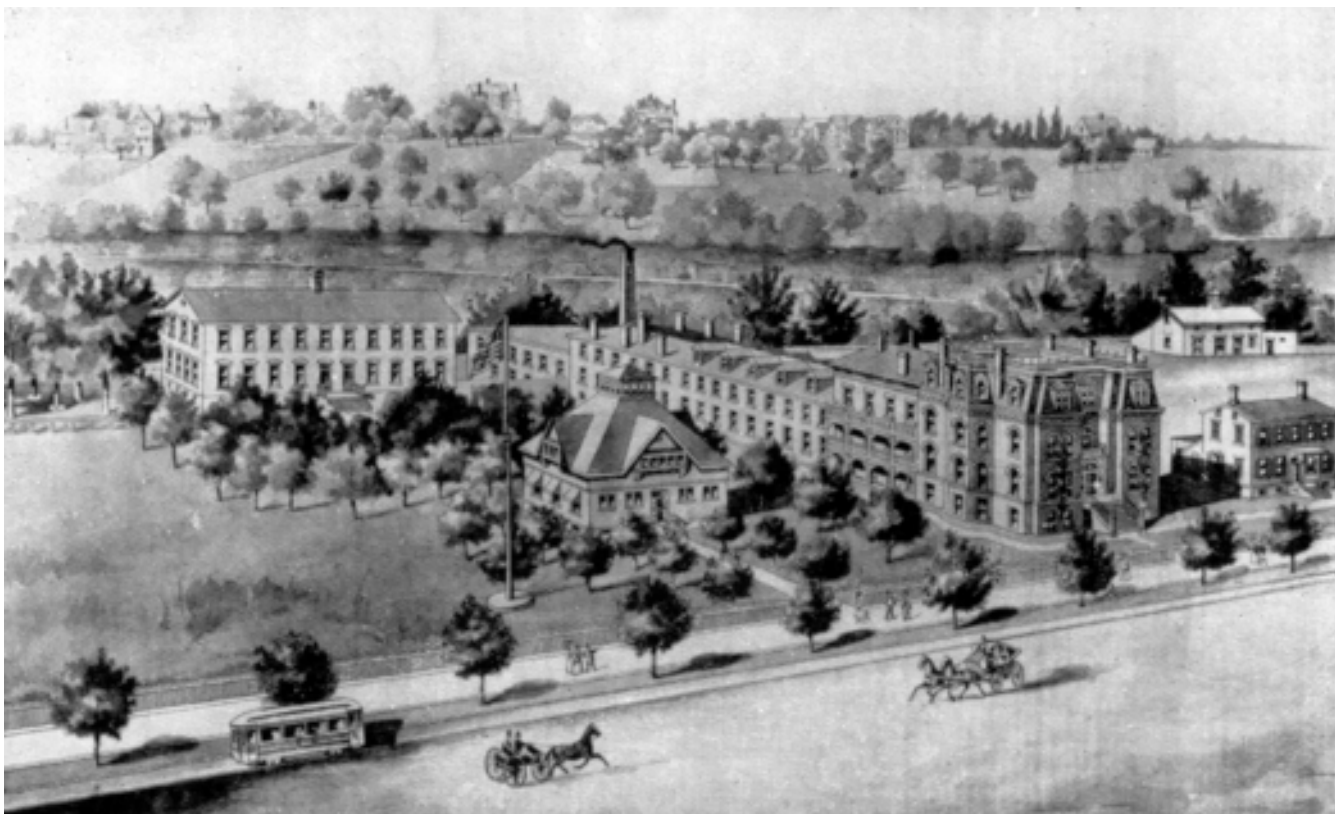
"Because signing was the best method with which to teach, the School adopted and taught signing and lip reading as the Combined Method. The School adopted the De l'Épée gesture language combining speech and the signed words. In 1878 at the Convention of Educators of the Deaf

at Columbus Ohio, Dr. Isaac Lewis Peet, Principal of the New York Institute presented a paper in which he suggested the elimination of gesture signs from family life. All school classes were to use instead manually spelled English. This was the first time that gesture was to be eliminated from instruction.

Teaching spoken English to the deaf was a grand experiment. Prof. Westervelt adopted it at the School. Dr. Peet wished Prof.

Westervelt God-speed in his attempt to elevate the level of language of all deaf-mutes through new methods. Knowing Prof. Westervelt personally, he expressed confidence that his attempt would either be successful or in a reasonable time, he would report the results and return to the old methods.

The conviction was a bold one. Prof. Westervelt reasoned that if access to the mind could be achieved, the deaf students could reach new levels of accomplishment. Eight years later, in 1886, Prof. Westervelt presented the results of the experiment at the convention in California. He reported that only finger spelling and speech were used at the school. Only students who habitually used gestures were called to the Superintendent's office to be shown how to say the same sentences using finger spelling as required. New students had fewer gestures to unlearn so they rapidly adapted to



The Rochester School for the Deaf, present location on St. Paul Street.

finger spelling. Every faculty member and employee was expected to use English – spelled, spoken and written. When Prof. Westervelt's own four year old adopted son was kept from his kindergarten class in the city one harsh winter, he quickly learned to communicate with the deaf children at the school, showing that deaf and hearing students could integrate quite well with finger spelling. The manual alphabet helped students

learn the written language more quickly. It also provided an incentive for young students to read the School's daily paper called "*Daily Paper for Our Little People*". Students could read about each other and themselves. Publications in the library informed the students about the world outside of the School. Teachers did not only instruct the students in the classroom, they also went for walks in the neighborhood and parks. Older students traveled in pairs on streetcars to shop downtown or to attend museums. As much as a third of the classroom instruction was speech and lip reading. A few students resisted learning speech so much that after years, their speech instruction was discontinued. Most, however, learned that speech was the most beneficial communication between hearing and deaf students.



Students in class.

Buoyed by the success of a female student, whose speech and lip reading were so good that she graduated to a female

seminary with hearing students, the School launched an experiment to teach primary grades by speech alone. Progress was slower than for those taught using the manual alphabet so the all-speech method was abandoned. Consistent with the failure of this experiment was the report of the student who returned from the female seminary to say that she succeeded in early studies; but found lessons increasingly difficult with unfamiliar material. The manual alphabet proved to be a better method, particularly for under



Outdoor drawing class.



A speech class.

standing new vocabulary and subjects. The University of Rochester, in 1895, conferred upon Mr. Westervelt the degree of Doctor of Laws, in recognition of his high attainments and service along educational lines.

The Lyon Phonetic Method

Edmund Lyon, a friend of the Perkins family, was intensely interested in promoting the teaching of speech to the deaf. He worked for months on a method of symbolizing speech sounds by hand movements. If sounds could be communicated to a deaf person by means of a phonetic hand alphabet, the student would be able to vocalize more accurately, and their speech would improve. The hand position would indicate what lip and tongue movements were required to produce a sound. Dr. Westervelt encouraged Mr. Lyon to test his method in the classroom at the school. Though there were over a hundred different positions Mr. Lyon worked to complete his manual in time to teach the School's students in the Fall of 1890.

Harriet Hamilton, one of the first four teachers at the school, reported that after several months of instruction, the students were speaking from his manual too quickly for



Preparing Thanksgiving Dinner with some of the school's own harvest.

Mr. Lyon himself to follow their conversation. In the winter of 1891 Mr. Lyon met Alexander Graham Bell, whose invention of the telephone was an effort to help his deaf wife. Dr. Westervelt invited Mr. Lyon and Dr. Bell to the School. Dr. Bell told Mr. Lyon he should present his Lyon Phonetic Method at the American Association To Promote the Teaching of Speech to the Deaf at their next meeting in New York City. The 150 Association members applauded and requested copies of the manual. Alexander Graham Bell told the audience that several people had attempted to create a manual alphabet of visible speech, including his father and himself. He said Lyon's system was ingenious - a deaf child could see his incorrect sounds just like a hearing child could hear mispronounced words. Students were taught sounds to join together to create words and sentences. Students became confident and graceful in their language and entertained audiences with music and recitations. In what might be the first introduction of the electronic hearing aid, Stromberg-Carlson developed an auditory stimulator, similar to a telephone, and used it in the Rochester School classrooms in 1906.

Helen Keller, possibly the most well-known deaf person in America, came to Rochester with Alexander Graham Bell

and visited the school in March of 1893. Anne Sullivan, Helen's companion and teacher, was eager to meet Harriet Hamilton whom Dr. Bell had said "as a teacher of



Playing games.

articulation, and one rooted in the science of phonetics and the psychology of speech, ranked among the very first". Miss Keller also visited the school in 1926 and again on May 26, 1941 to attend the dedication of a new academic building on the campus.

New Leadership

After forty-two years as superintendent, Zenas Westervelt died on February 17, 1918. At his funeral, Rev. J.W.A. Stewart said that anyone who attended the Western New York Institution for Deaf Mutes felt it was more of a home than an institution. "Dr. Westervelt made it home; he was the center, the inspirer of it all," he said. He created an atmosphere of happiness that has stayed with the School. A

century and a quarter later, his observation is still true.

On the recommendation of Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Carlaw Forrester was



Recreation on the Genesee River.

hired as Superintendent. He served from 1918 to 1942 Dr. Forrester had twenty-five years of experience teaching at schools for the deaf in Scotland, Ireland, Canada and the United States. He was the Superintendent of the Maryland School for the Deaf prior to coming to Rochester. His experience as accountant and manager with a West India Company gave him the skills he needed to guide the School, renamed the Rochester School for the Deaf in 1920, through the tight financial years following World I and the Great Depression.

During Forrester's tenure new buildings were constructed. On June 12, 1931 a residence for the older boys was built. Robert Willis, a neighbor of a member of the RSD Board of Directors, Judge Arthur Sutherland, asked Judge Sutherland if he knew of a worthy institution to receive a bequest. Judge Sutherland suggested the School and Mr. Willis later named RSD in his will. Asked that a dormitory be built as a memorial to his parents, Isaac Willis and Mary Hicks Seaman Willis. Despite the Depression, Carolyn Hamilton Talcott Lyon, who had been a former teacher and secretary to Dr. Westervelt, donated the money for a girls residence as a memorial to her husband, Dr. Edmund Lyon and Aunt, Miss Harriet Hamilton, one of the original teachers at the school. In later years, Dr. Alexander Graham Bell referred to Miss Hamilton as "a leading authority in the teaching of speech to the deaf". The 1931 building was furnished by Mr. & Mrs. Lyon's daughters, Mrs. John VanVoorhis, Mrs. Francis Remington, and Mrs. J. Howard Kidd, all of whom were RSD Board members. In the basement of Lyon Hall, Mrs. Lyon's sister, Mrs. W. Chapin, donated a domestic science department completely equipped with new stoves, domestic science utensils and dishes for the cooking classes to use in serving luncheons.

Mr. & Mrs. Lyon held their wedding reception at the school and went to visit the children in the dining room where wedding cake was served to all the students. On that occasion Mrs. Lyon stated "We shall stand by the school as long as there is a school to stand by". More than a century later Founding Families like Allis (Mrs. Louis) D'Amanda, Gilman Perkins and his daughter Rebecca Wilson, still

support and serve on the Board. A new wing was added to the primary building in 1937 and the academic building with an auditorium and gymnasium was finished in 1941. Dr. Forrester retired to Canada in 1943 where he died in 1945.

On Dr. Forrester's retirement, James H. Galloway, a teacher Dr. Forrester had hired himself at the beginning of the Depression, succeeded him. He trained in music at the University of Rochester and the Eastman School of Music; but finding it difficult to obtain a position, he accepted a job offered by Dr. Forrester. Committed to the field of deaf education, he left the School in Rochester to do graduate work at Gallaudet College in Washington, D.C., Niagara University, the University of Rochester and Louisiana State University. He worked at the New Jersey School for the Deaf and the Louisiana State School for the Deaf before being called on to succeed the man who redirected his career from music to deaf education. Dr. Galloway reviewed the Rochester School's structure following wartime scarcities and determined the needs of each department, gave them greater independence, and hired additional staff including a future superintendent, Leonard G. Zwick.

In 1952 Dr. Galloway and the Rochester School for the Deaf Board determined that the School required expansion to accommodate the increasing number of students. A long range building plan was developed including a preschool building erected in 1962. A former board member, Mrs. Gormly left a bequest for a building in memory of her parents, Mr. & Mrs. Nehemiah Denton. The preschool was named Denton Hall. A vocational wing was added to the education building. Dr. Galloway organized the New York State Association of Educators of the Deaf (NYSAED). He played a major role in the selection of Dr. Ralph L. Hoag who became the School's fourth superintendent in 1966 when Dr. Galloway retired.

Dr. Hoag completed building projects begun under Dr. Galloway including a dormitory with smaller, more personalized living units for preschool children, later named Galloway Hall. Dr. Hoag came to Rochester after experience as Course Director at the School For the Deaf in Rome, NY; Principal of the School for the Deaf and Blind in Tucson,

Arizona; administrator of a program for training teachers of the deaf for the U.S. Office of Education and Staff Director and Executive Secretary to the National Advisory Board that established the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) in Rochester. Continuing the long range building plans, Dr. Hoag oversaw a three story addition to the school building, including a learning resource center, an auditorium and a swimming pool. Completed in 1976, the building was then dedicated as Westervelt Hall. A dining hall/infirmarary building was also built in 1976 and named Forrester Hall. Dr. Hoag instituted an occupational training program in cooperation with BOCES to prepare students for occupations not being taught on campus. Students studied carpentry, food service, electronics, car repair, machine tool work, drafting, mechanical drawing, commercial art, clothing design or business machines. He and Principal Zwick developed Advanced Placement courses off campus for senior students. Dr. Hoag left the School in 1974 to become the Superintendent of the Arizona School for the Deaf and Blind in Tucson.

Leonard G. Zwick succeeded Dr. Hoag in 1974. He had worked for seventeen years as teacher, guidance counselor, the school's first audiologist and Principal. He did his

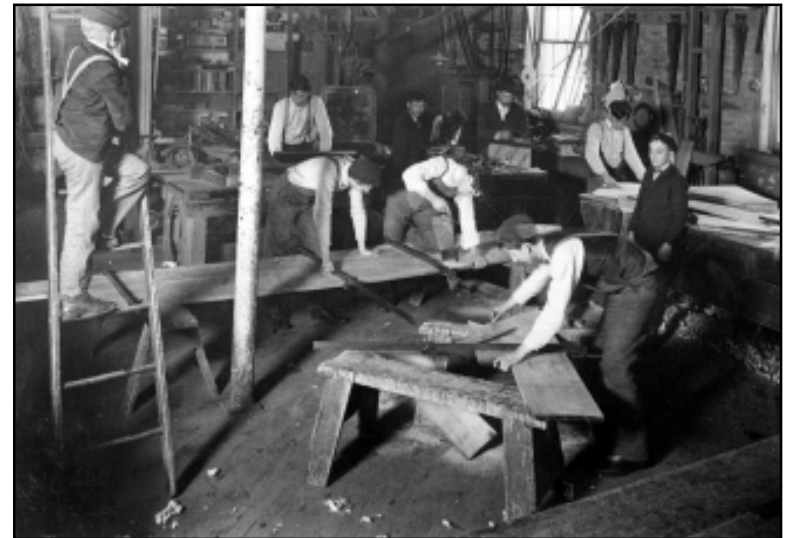


Children playing in the yard. Note the faces pressed to the window and the little drummer boy on the right.



Studying the planets in science class.

undergraduate work at State University College at Buffalo after serving in the U.S. Navy Air Corps. Earning a Masters degree in education from the University of Buffalo, he studied at Northwestern University and earned an M.A. in administration and supervision at California State University at Northridge, California. Superintendent Zwick worked with the University of Rochester to develop career



In carpentry class.

guidance materials for deaf high school students. He and Dr. Hoag worked with the State University at Geneseo to develop training programs for teachers of deaf students. Mr. Zwick was influential in bringing many new projects and programs to the school such as the Center for Communication Research, the National Captioned Films for the Deaf Selection Program, a Day Care program for the children of staff and others, and a joint program with the Hillside Children's Center for those deaf children with very special needs. This program continues to be a model today.

Mr. Zwick retired in 1990, but he and his wife, Pat, continue to work with the School as volunteers. In 1990 Dr. Harold Mowl became the sixth superintendent of the school and its first deaf leader. His challenges included the new technologies that have changed the way deaf children communicate; including e-mail and computerized light and sound labs that help students to speak and identify sounds as well as medical advances that allow cochlear implants.



Thomas Carlaw



Dr. Ralph L. Hoag



Leonard G. Zwick



Dr. Harold Mowl



A speech lesson in the 1960's.

Back Cover: "No. 70," corner of South Avenue and Court Street, the school's original location from 1876 to 1878.

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