

The History of American Sign Language (ASL) and Deaf Culture

Posted on September 15, 2018

Charles Krauel and the History of Deaf Culture

In the history of deaf culture, many famous deaf people have worked for the deaf community and deaf culture, raising awareness about deaf people. Charles Krauel was renowned in the [history of American Sign Language \(ASL\)](#) and deaf culture.

He was born in Ohio in the year 1880. He is one of the renowned deaf filmmakers who made films regarding the US deaf social life, and his work mainly focused on how deaf people lived their lives from 1925 to 1940. He was the filmmaker at a time when no one else was able to document the idea, and also when digital filmmaking or the concept of filmmaking did not exist. He and his friend, Chas Yanzito, are known as pioneers of deaf filmmaking and provide a rich history of ASL evidence (D, 2013). At that time, when the concept of ASL and other deaf issues did not exist, Krauel had the foresight to see the importance of introducing deafness and the social life of deaf people living in the United States. In his time, there was no informal training for deaf people available, so he became a smooth signer through his own efforts and learning. It all started when he bought his first camera in 1925 and started shooting deaf people. His work was mostly about the rare films of get-togethers and small parties of deaf people in the early 20th century. He took several trips across America, interviewing deaf people during his travels (Burch, 2004). He also performed at several events and filmed the performances of deaf people.

Documentation of Deaf Life Through Film

His tales usually consist of the lives of deaf people living during the period of 1925 to 1940. He used to work with one of his closest friends, Chas Yanzito, on filmmaking. According to Supalla, the work of Krauel has been a great addition to the history of deaf culture and the richest collection of movies and clips on the deaf community ("Rare, Old Films Show Lively Deaf Culture, Linguist Says," 1995). The tales fit into the documentary genre as Krauel's work mainly consists of short films and other events of daily life, documenting the activities. The themes of deaf people, deaf culture, and their activities were usually incorporated into the films, and through this, Krauel has made an effort to preserve the history of deaf culture in the early 20th century. He often interviewed couples, friends, and people across America, conversing happily in sign language (Burch, 2004). One of the major themes in Krauel's work and films is deaf entertainment and performances, such as club performances, picnic events, and high school graduations. His work also recognized the successful deaf people, such as

deaf businessmen, who were less known and unappreciated (Burch, 2004). If the work of Krauel had not been there, then the work on deaf culture would not have been this advanced. Krauel, the teller, aimed to make the community aware of the deaf culture and how they can live a life being deaf. The get-togethers and events indicate that deaf people enjoy life and have a normal life, which people with proper hearing might think is impossible. Also, his primary motive was to tell the story of the American deaf community through his work, as the subject had not been widely discussed in the early 20th century, and he wanted to reach out to people through his films ("Rare, Old Films Show Lively Deaf Culture, Linguist Says," 1995).

Audience and Public Awareness

The audience Krauel was comprised of people from all walks of life, especially those without deafness. His work was about the deaf community, but for the people beyond the deaf community. His work can also be distributed among students and vocational rehabilitation centers working on the lives of deaf people and in the ASL programs to enlighten people about the history of deaf people. Through his work, he wanted to reach out to people other than the deaf community to dispel the myths about deaf people and their daily lives. The work will be useful for students, researchers, and adults, both deaf and hearing, because it is about the early deaf community ("Deaf Filmmakers," n.d.). Because of technological advancement, various devices have been devised to ease the lives of deaf people. Hearing aids have improved the lives of deaf people, and the awareness among people regarding deafness has increased. Also, the emphasis on sign language education has changed the lives of deaf people and their culture. In an interview in 1990, Krauel said the life of deaf people and even the sign language differed from what is being practiced today (Padden & Humphries, 1990). He added that his signs were better and simpler, like shortcuts, whereas the signs taught to children these days are long and difficult to draw. He received feedback for his work, but most of the feedback was positive and appreciated his work. His work focused on awakening people to the lives of deaf people and preserving the history of sign language. He adjusted the constructive criticism of the people in his movies with a focus on more positive lives of deaf people and the evolution of ASL.

Challenging Myths About Deaf Culture

The myths about deaf culture have been around since earlier times, and Krauel has combated the myth by documenting the lives of deaf people. He has documented the activities from school events to get-togethers and weddings. His work comprises people happily communicating in sign language on the streets. The art performances that are documented signify that the myths about deaf people being at a disadvantage and having miserable lives are dispelled. The myth that not talking is an issue, but the use of sign language and people communicating through sign language has easily combated the myth of deaf people. The focus on education and the positive aspects of the deaf community has shown the way Krauel has combated the myths about deaf people. His work on the lives and daily lives of deaf people in the American community is a real treat for history makers,

students, and deaf people.

References

Burch, S. (2004). *Signs of Resistance: American Deaf Cultural History, 1900 to World War II*. NYU Press. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com.pk/books?id=k9sVCgAAQBAJ>

D, J. E. P. (2013). *Music in American Life: An Encyclopedia of the Songs, Styles, Stars, and Stories that Shaped our Culture [4 volumes]: An Encyclopedia of the Songs, Styles, Stars, and Stories That Shaped Our Culture*. ABC-CLIO. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com.pk/books?id=TQPXAQAAQBAJ>

Deaf Filmmakers. (n.d.). Retrieved March 9, 2018, from <https://www.ntid.rit.edu/deaffilm-films>

Padden, C. A., & Humphries, T. (1990). *Deaf in America*. Harvard University Press. Retrieved from <https://books.google.com.pk/books?id=FLdCuk0YekgC>

Rare, Old Films Show Lively Deaf Culture, Linguist Says. (1995). Retrieved March 9, 2018, from <http%3A%2F%2Fwww.rochester.edu%2Fnews%2Fshow.php%3Fid%3D337>