The Power of ASL

A Society Supporting Language, Literacy, and Performing Arts in the Signed Modality

Spring 2020 A Newsletter of the Society for American Sign Language Issue 17

American Sign Language and Deaf Folklife in Home Movies

By Ted Supalla and Matthew Malzkuhn

When thinking about the earliest films in the Deaf community, the ASL/Deaf Studies scholars will likely refer to George Veditz's widely acclaimed ASL oratory rendition of "Preservation of Sign Language" that was produced by the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) in the early 1910s. NAD raised substantial funds to produce a series of films during that time, which is over 100 years ago. However, we would like to state that there are other film types to consider for the ASL and Deaf Folklife research. Home movies are targeted for discussion in this article.

Some ASL/Deaf Studies scholars have complained about how little is known about Deaf people and their lives over the years. The NAD films are clearly precious, but more would be better. We need to respond to this. It is not because of a lack of materials but instead due to our monolithic bias for pedagogical value in sign language materials, thus overlooking the potential of the grassroots films made by Deaf individuals themselves. Such films are in the category of home-quality amateur films, ranging from family-based to local community productions. These are people that essentially are self-taught videographers or cinematographers who most likely picked it up as a hobby at the camera shop or from friends. So, even though you will see a difference in the quality of the footage created, it is still worth analysis.

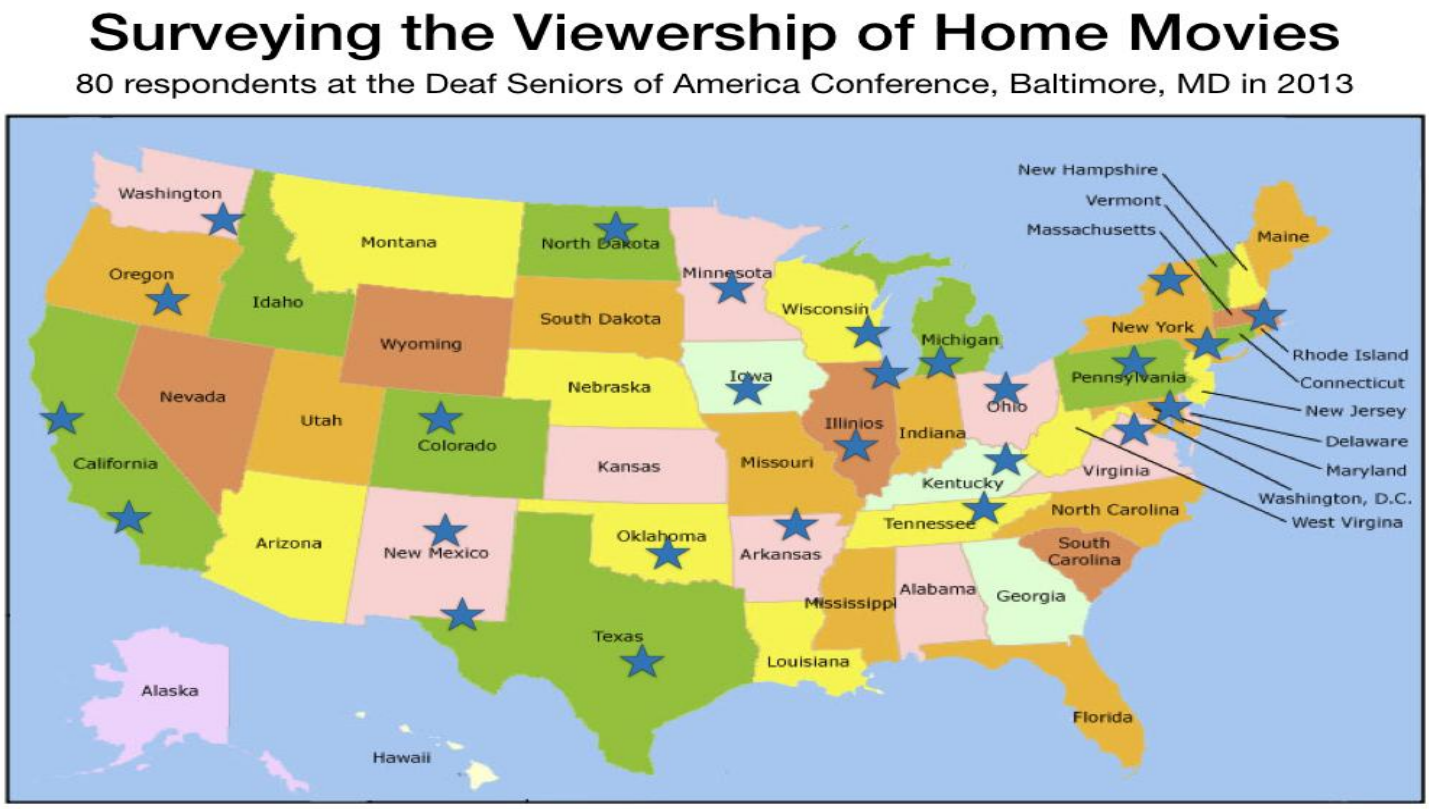
The research on the home movies in the Deaf community began with the first author of this article, Supalla, who is responsible for the Deaf Folklife Film Collection, based on his Sign Language Research Lab at Georgetown University. This collection has its start with a collaborative project that the first author had with the pioneering Deaf filmmaker Charles Krauel of Chicago, Illinois. Krauel had made home movies of the everyday events in the Deaf community from 1925 to 1940. Krauel's accomplishments inspired the first author to produce a documentary video that is currently distributed by DawnSignPress. The video includes the first author's 1980 interview with Krauel, who was 93 years old at the time. Many clips from Krauel's own work, as shown in the video, provide unprecedented and valuable insights on ASL and the Deaf folklife.

For a better understanding of home movies in the Deaf community, Supalla and the second author of this article, Malzkuhn, set up a booth in Baltimore during the 2013 convention hosted by the Deaf Seniors of America. Based on our survey of 80 people with a questionnaire related to their

(Continue on page 7)

Continued from page 1: **American Sign Language and Deaf Folklife in Home Movies**

direct or indirect experiences with home movies, we reconstructed a nice picture of the robustness of home moviemaking among Deaf people during the middle of the 20th century. Some survey participants recalled their own filmmaking experiences while the others mentioned viewing home movies through acquaintances who were the filmmakers in their communities. This allowed us to appreciate and understand the scope of our project, as we realized there are many more "artifacts" out there. Shown below is the U.S. map scattered with stars reflecting the scope of geography for the experience of seeing Deaf folklife and sign language in-home movies.



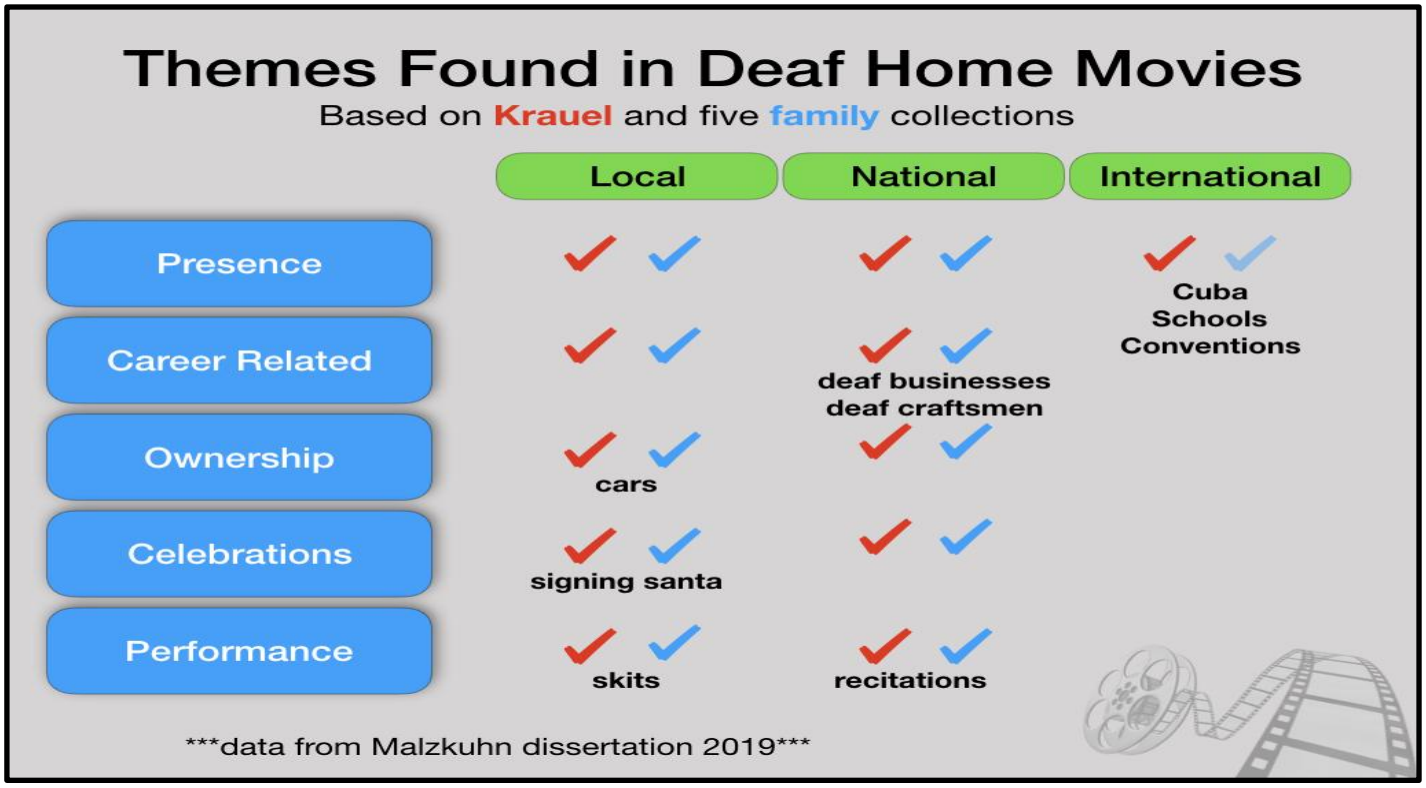
Another important outcome from this survey is the new relationships we cultivated, starting with the pool of survey respondents and then the nationwide advocacy movement devoted to preserving endangered home movies. The Deaf seniors shared a common concern about the trend of neglecting these home movies, and they expressed the desire for some assistance in preserving and converting them, especially when they are not familiar with new technology for digitization. This gave us some ideas for building a prototype for planning a home movie database.

However, we wonder if other minority groups share similar experiences with home movies and concerns about the endangerment of these treasures. This led us to search online, and this was how we found a worldwide movement of people devoted to preserving old home movies, which they consider as orphan films since many were often found at flea markets or estate sales. This national network has its own Center for Home Movies, as described on this website (http://www.centerforhomemovies.org/). The organization invited us to co-present a symposium covering the diversity of community involvement in making home movies at New York University's Orphan Films Festival in 2018. This allowed us to provide to the broad audience a direct look into the way of life with sign language among Deaf people in the 20th century. The popularity of this topic

(Continue on the next page)

is evident from follow-up invitations, first from the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in the springtime of 2019 and then the Association of Moving Image Archivists and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Moving Image Archives.

For these presentations, we shared information on the results of the comparative analysis done by Malzkuhn, the second author of this article on a sample of Deaf-made family movies for his 2019 dissertation project entitled *Preservation, Revitalization, and Validity of Home Movies: Deaf Folklife Films as a Case Study*. The most appealing information based on the reaction from the audiences was the data chart showing the parallels in the distribution of cultural themes cataloged and identified in home films from widely dispersed families across the country as compared to those captured in Krauel's films (see table below).



As you can imagine in many of the home movies we observed were celebrations such as weddings, picnic parties, and even signing Santa. Of course, while we share a lot of the national and international holidays with hearing people, the Deaf community has its own cultural take on it as a Deaf person would be dressed up as Santa Claus. We added our own twists to the common traditions. We also observed a number of sign language rich performances, skits, and recitations, primarily happening at local and national Deaf events. It creates a sense of presence and documenting that they were there, physically, in these places. In some ways, they are considered to be early versions of social media, specifically designed for social entertainment within their community, not intended for distribution to the outside world.

As evident with the home movies, Deaf filmmakers were dedicated to empowering other members of their own community to lead normal and productive lives in society. Car ownership among Deaf people demonstrate their capacity to work and pay for them. Cars also represent mobility that Deaf people could travel just as people without disabilities. The fact that Deaf people traveled out of the country demonstrates their independence. Deaf conventions as filmed inform the

(Continue on the next page)

Deaf community about the importance of attending such events for socialization and political purposes. Finally, the demonstration of business ownership and craftsmanship reinforces Deaf people's capacity as well functioning citizens of society and that other members in the Deaf community should follow suit.

We now would like to talk about the newest development with our Deaf Folklife in Films project. The Community Archiving Workshop (CAV), a project of the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) in collaboration with the Mid-Atlantic Regional Moving Image Archives (MARMIA) invited us to be a workshop partner in hosting a pre-conference hands-on workshop for AMIA Conference attendees at the Baltimore Museum of Industry in Baltimore, Maryland on November 13, 2019. This collaborative effort provided a unique opportunity for us to visualize new approaches to community-based archiving. We had an excellent opportunity to observe how volunteer archivists utilized tools and methodology to catalog the endangered moving image collections and assess the conditions of various media ranging from 16mm, regular 8mm and Super 8mm films to analog video formats (VHS, Beta, and Hi8). One of many accomplishments from this community-based experiment is a detailed inventory of the private family media collections that we brought to this workshop for processing.

We are excited at seeing the potential of further collaboration with such professional organizations to provide regional workshops that will empower traditional Deaf school archivists and independent Deaf community members with networking resources and cataloging tools for preserving endangered sign language films and videos. We imagine that many of you have recollections of such materials. If you do not, we recommend you dig through your attics or basements, and you will be surprised at what you may uncover. By finding more source material, we gain more access into the unique nature of home movies, which serve as a window into the activities and interests of Deaf people in the past.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Deaf Folklife Films project is the result of the support over a number of years from various organizations, including Gallaudet University Alumni Association. The HSLDB project is funded by a grant from the National Science Foundation (NSF Research Grant BCS1455756 to Ted Supalla) and from fellowships to Ted Supalla from the National Endowment for the Humanities. We would like to thank Stephen Holland, Sam Supalla, and Andrew Byrne for their assistance with editing this article. Finally, we want to express sincere appreciation to the families who share their home movie collections as part of the Deaf Folklife Films research project.

To the subscribers of SASL, your contribution of a piece to be printed in the newsletter is welcome. The content should be related to ASL and the number of words is between 500 – 1000. The same is true for you to keep an eye out for the ASL-related pieces that are already printed, but need to be reprinted in the SASL newsletter. Please consult with the newsletter editor at saslnewsletteredtior@gmail.com