I first met the Hansons in the archives of the Gallaudet University Library nearly two decades ago. My research covered the oralist era, a time of suppression of sign language and linguistic oppression of the deaf, from the late nineteenth to mid-twentieth century. Olof Hanson (1862-1933) was of particular interest to me. In addition to being one of the first deaf architects in the United States, Olof was one of the first ordained deaf ministers. I was studying the role of religion in deaf history and pored over his letters. Agatha Tiegel Hanson (1873-1959), Olof’s wife, made many appearances, and it struck me how rarely I had encountered women’s names in my research.

Names like Laurent Clerc (1785-1869), Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet (1787-1851), Edward Miner Gallaudet (1837-1917), and Olof Hanson dominated the history of the signing deaf community of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and a few of them, such as the Gallaudets, were hearing. Of course, there is Helen Keller (1880-1968), who is possibly the most famous deaf, blind, and Deaf-Blind person in history, for better or for worse. She, however, aligned herself with the oralist movement and blind advocacy groups, keeping her distance from the signing deaf community. Why were so few women’s names in the annals of the signing deaf, especially during the women’s rights movement? Katherine Jankowski offers a few clues to the “woman question” in her biography, *Agatha Tiegel Hanson: Our Places in the Sun*.

One of Agatha’s earliest achievements was becoming the first woman to earn a bachelor of arts degree at Gallaudet University, then called the National College of the Deaf-Mutes, in 1893. In the book’s most interesting chapters, Jankowski’s meticulously researched history of coeducation at Gallaudet illustrates the unique obstacles facing deaf women.

By the late nineteenth century, coeducation of men and women in higher education had become increasingly commonplace due to changing social attitudes and federal land-grant policies. Gallaudet University, founded in 1864, was the first and still only liberal arts university for the deaf in the world, and by the 1880s, it was still all male. A few women had attended during the college’s early years, but they were prevented from continuing their studies by a purported lack of housing. The college’s president, Edward Miner Gallaudet, then claimed that too few women applied and closed admissions to them. This policy left deaf women with no options for university-level instruction in sign language, a major hurdle in an era that valued higher education for teachers and mothers.

It turns out that Gallaudet’s motivations for discouraging women’s admissions transcended
garden variety sexism. He, who was hearing and
had a deaf mother, believed that deaf people
should not intermarry because having hearing
spouses would improve their social, intellectual,
and domestic prospects and reduce the likelihood
of deaf offspring, a belief rooted in paternalism
and eugenics. Based on the premise that admitting
women would raise intermarriage rates, a
premise with some truth to it, Gallaudet tacitly
closed the gates to women. This is a surprising
revelation of a man often portrayed as an ally of
the deaf community and an advocate for sign lan‐
guage as a valid mode of communication. His be‐
liefs also paralleled those of Alexander Graham
Bell (1847-1922), a prominent oralist often posi‐
tioned as an enemy of the deaf. This shows that
such beliefs were commonplace among hearing
educators of that era, regardless their language
preference.

Meanwhile, a heated debate on coeducation
roiled the deaf community throughout the 1880s.
The detractors mostly held to run-of-the-mill sexist
beliefs about women’s intellectual inferiority and
about their place being in the home, not the
classroom. During this time, there was mounting
pressure from the federal government to coedu‐
cate. The board at Gallaudet approved an experi‐
ment in 1887—a two-year trial of women students.

The fifteen-year-old Agatha walked onto the
campus under these auspices in the fall of 1888,
one of eight women set to prove the merit of coeducation. It wasn’t smooth sailing: inconsistent housing, hostility from male students, and mul‐
tiple women dropping out due to health problems
or marriage. Despite this, Agatha thrived, taking
leadership positions in fledgling women’s organiza‐
tions and excelling academically. Narrowly miss‐
ing the valedictorian spot, Agatha capped off her
college years with a spirited graduation speech,
“The Intellect of Woman,” in which she demanded
“our places in the sun” (chap. 10).

In one way or another, marriage, specifically
deaf intermarriage, shaped much of Agatha’s life.

After graduation, she headed to Faribault, where
the Minnesota State Academy of the Deaf (MSAD)
then resided and where she taught for six years
before marrying Olof. Like many early women
graduates, Agatha became a doyenne, part of a
cadre of influential deaf couples. Agatha particip‐
ated in national and local deaf organizations, of‐
ten at Olof’s side. She also raised three children
and was a prolific writer, an editor, and an advoc‐
ate for sign language rights. She loved her domestic
duties to the point where she preferred it to the
vote: “I believe that a woman’s greatest glory is to
be a wife, mother, and home-maker. In that
sphere she can have no rival. And to be burdened
with the ballot is a hindrance and not help to her
work in the home” (chap. 18).

Agatha’s fierce defense of her womanly duties,
a somewhat typical attitude of her time, raises an
interesting question about gender roles in deaf
marriages. It is unclear whether Agatha’s opinion
was a personal idiosyncrasy or whether the atti‐
dude was prevalent among deaf women. It is also
possible that larger forces were at play, such as or‐
alism. The rise of oral education, which could only
be performed by hearing teachers due to its reli‐
ance on speech, drastically reduced the employ‐
ment of deaf teachers, which might have dispro‐
portionately affected women. Other possibilities
abound.

Jankowski relies heavily on letters, articles,
and speech excerpts to tell Agatha’s life story,
these making up a large chunk of the book’s 450
pages of primary materials. While beneficial to re‐
searchers and scholars interested in the era, this
approach might be less suited to a casual reader.
To fully appreciate Agatha’s community activities,
it would have helped to know more about the im‐
portance and impact of such activities within the
deaf community. A few key events are not ex‐
plained enough, such as why Agatha and Olof
broke up once, before marrying, and the larger
context of their financial difficulties. I was also
surprised to have so little discussion of Agatha and
Olof's religious beliefs and involvement in the church, which was a large part of their lives and something I gleaned from my long-ago research on the topic.

*Agatha Tiegel Hanson* aims to uplift a deaf woman to more prominence, and in doing so, it reveals many areas for further historical inquiry. By touching on the topics of coeducation, the gendered impact of paternalism and eugenics in the deaf community, and gender roles in deaf intermarriage, Jankowski reveals rich areas for more scholarly attention. The book also raises the question of the role of a biography in the history of a collectivist community. Paddy Ladd, in his *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood* (2003), emphasizes the collectivist values of the deaf community—shared identity, group orientation, and interdependence. Indeed, Agatha's life reflects collectivist values. Perhaps the best way of celebrating that is to have a biography of deaf women as a group instead of an individual.

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