

James Simpson Biography by Phil Axling

James Simpson Biography This biography appears on pages 1738-1741 in "History of South Dakota" by Doane Robinson, Vol. II (1904) and was scanned, OCR'd and edited by Maurice Krueger, mkrueger@iw.net. This file may be freely copied by individuals and non-profit organizations for their private use. Any other use, including publication, storage in a retrieval system, or transmission by electronic, mechanical, or other means requires the written approval of the file's author.

JAMES SIMPSON.—No history of the South Dakota School for Deaf Mutes can be complete without a sketch of the life of the one man who, through thick and thin, worked early and late to build up the institution. This man was the late James Simpson, virtually the founder and for twenty-three years the superintendent. He took up the work in the summer of 1880, one year after any attempt was made to educate the deaf of the then territory of Dakota, and he did not relinquish the work until the end of the twenty-fourth year of the school's existence, in June, 1903. His was a most remarkable career, the more so when one considers that Mr. Simpson was himself deaf, like the young people of the state of South Dakota who came to his school in quest of an education. Being possessed of a broad and thorough education himself and realizing the many difficulties that the deaf have to surmount in the attainment of an education, Mr. Simpson was early drawn to the cause of teaching the deaf and he expended his whole life in the work.

James Simpson was born in Milford county, Michigan, January 21, 1855, of sturdy Scotch stock. He was the youngest of a family of six children, two girls and four boys. Besides himself there were in the family two brothers who were deaf more or less. William, the second boy, was partially so, and Delos, the next youngest, was almost totally deaf. The deafness of James came on gradually and the exact cause is a mystery, though one of the physicians of the day attributed it to a throat trouble. The fact that he was losing his hearing was only fully apparent when he was about ten years old. His mother was a painstaking woman and encouraged him to use his vocal powers all the time, with the result that he was always able to speak. Being unable to hear, he came into the habit of watching the motions of the lips and in this way understood nearly all that was said to him. This accomplishment remained with him through life, and few persons, meeting and conversing with him for the first time, were aware that they were speaking to a man who could not hear a word of what was said to him. In nearly all matters of business intercourse Mr. Simpson relied on spoken words in carrying on conversations, thus facilitating matters and avoiding the tedious method of written conversation necessarily employed by those who are unable to use speech in their intercourse with the hearing people.

At the age of fourteen years, when both of his parents were dead, the subject of this sketch entered the Michigan School for the Deaf, at Flint. His brother William was acting as guardian to him and his other deaf brother, Delos. The last named, being older than James, had been attending the school at Flint for several years previous and was soon to graduate and enter the National College for the Deaf at Washington, D. C., the only institution of its kind in the world. At the Flint school James Simpson entered upon his studies with zest. He was naturally bright and absorbed learning readily. One of his ambitions was to graduate and enter the national college or one of the larger schools for the deaf in the east, to round out his education. For four years he studied hard under the tutorship of Prof. Thomas L. Brown, and made such rapid progress that he was soon in the highest class, having passed many a student who had been in the school any number of years. At the end of these four years young Simpson removed to New York state, making his home with an uncle or cousin. In the fall of the same year he entered the Fanwood School for the Deaf, in New York city. Here he again showed his propensity to outstrip the older students in the race for the head of the class. He entered the highest or academic class within three months after his entrance into the institution, and in so doing passed three or four classes of some twenty-five students each. The academic class consisted of about thirty students and was under the tutorship of Prof. Oliver D. Cooke, of whom there has seldom been an equal as a teacher of the deaf, and never as a disciplinarian. Prof. Cooke, previous to his appointment to the Fanwood school, was a teacher in the school for the deaf at Hartford, Connecticut, the original school of the kind in America, founded by Dr. Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, whose son, Dr. Edward M. Gallaudet, is president of the National College for the Deaf. Mr. Simpson spent three years in the Fanwood school and graduated with the highest honors. He devoted himself so assiduously to his studies that in a total of seven years he had completed a course which it takes most young men from ten to fourteen years to finish. He was the valedictorian of his class, and

delivered a masterly address at the graduating exercises, and received, with his sheepskin, honorary mention from the faculty for his particularly fine record throughout the three years he had spent at Fanwood.

Immediately upon graduation young Simpson went to Attica, New York, and took up the jeweler's trade. He spent about a year at this business, then went back to Michigan, where he secured employment on the farm of one of his cousins. He was young and his future in life had not then shaped itself definitely. He was determined, however, to make his mark in the battle of life and as he followed the plow he kept his mind active planning for the future. His chance, which was also the turning point in his life, came in a most unexpected manner. His brother Delos had graduated from the national college some time previous and his standing as a student had reached the ear of Moses Folsom, then superintendent of the Iowa School for the Deaf, at Council Bluffs. Mr. Folsom was looking for a number of bright and capable young men to become a part of his faculty. He wrote to Delos Simpson and offered him a position in the corps but the offer for some reason did not appeal to him. It occurred to him, however, that his brother James might be willing to accept the position were it agreeable to Superintendent Folsom to make the substitution. Accordingly he laid the proposition before James, who signified his willingness to accept, and a letter of explanation was dispatched to Superintendent Folsom. Word came back that it would be satisfactory to the school authorities to have James become a member of the teaching corps.

It was with vigor and enthusiasm that he entered upon the work of teaching the deaf. His methods were eminently those employed by Prof. O. D. Cooke at the Fanwood school and by Prof. T. L. Brown at the Michigan school. It was a coincidence that Mr. Simpson had had in Prof. Brown an instructor who had been a pupil of Prof. Cooke's at Hartford. To this fact undoubtedly was due the peculiar success attained by Mr. Simpson in his educational work, coupled with his natural aptitude for the work. His every procedure was logical and his explanation of subjects clear. He realized that to attain the best results the student should understand fully the subject in hand. Thorough and intelligent work on the part of the pupil was made the watchword—and results fully attested to the wisdom of such a course. At the Iowa school he was a leader among the faculty, ever holding out for modern and logical methods, tempered with conservatism. He remained in this position for three years, during which time he was married to Miss A. Laura Wright, a student of the Iowa school and sister of the matron. In the summer of 1880 Mr. Simpson, finding himself in poor health, sought rest and recreation at the home of his brother-in-law, Attorney E. G. Wright, at Sioux Falls, South Dakota: Another sister of Mrs. Simpson had been in Sioux Falls the previous twelve months, teaching a class of seven deaf children. She had found the work rather trying and was not sure that she would want to continue it indefinitely. When Mr. Simpson came among the people of Sioux Falls the suggestion was made that he was the proper person to take up and carry on the work. He immediately put the suggestion into effect. Citizens of Sioux Falls came to his aid promptly, for they realized that such an institution in their midst was bound to grow and prove a worthy institution. Money was raised for the erection of a suitable building and to provide for the maintenance of the school until such time as the territory should come to its aid with territorial funds. A tract of ten acres of land was donated by a few public-spirited citizens and a large building erected thereon. The school was opened under most auspicious circumstances on October 21, 1880, with James Simpson at the head. The attendance was eight pupils on the opening day. The ninth pupil came one month later, and by the beginning of the year 1881 there were ten pupils. Since its establishment this school had had at least two hundred and fifty pupils at one time or another within its walls.

Superintendent Simpson acted as instructor, assisted by his wife. The first two or three years were trying ones, but Mr. Simpson had a stout heart and knew he was engaged in a worthy work that would bring him his reward. He overcame numerous obstacles and the school prospered. The attendance grew rapidly and new buildings had to be provided. After the lapse of twenty years there were six fine stone structures, grouped in such manner that a fire threatening one would not affect the others. Thirty acres of land additional was purchased, deciduous and evergreen trees were set out and the grounds were beautified with driveways and lawns. From the nucleus of eight pupils on the opening day there were nearly fifty in 1889, when the territory of Dakota was divided into the states of North and South Dakota. A new school was soon established in the northern commonwealth and between fifteen and twenty pupils at Sioux Falls were transferred. A few years later the attendance at the South Dakota school was again at the former number, three or four teachers were regularly employed, and one of South Dakota's most worthy institutions was doing a noble and necessary work. Her graduates are scattered to the four winds, and they are self-supporting and valuable citizens.

Most of them, in addition to obtaining an intellectual education, learned some branch of the trades, by which they are able to hold their own with hearing people. Mr. Simpson was a careful manager and watched every detail of the institution closely. His expenditures were always within the annual allowances made by the state. The health of the children in his charge was so carefully looked after that seldom was there a case of serious sickness. The moral and spiritual welfare of the children also came for most careful attention. In his personality Mr. Simpson possessed a most attractive quality and he made friends easily. To know this man and to enjoy his confidence were an honor. He was devoted to his family, of whom he had three boys, all of whom survive him, and one girl, who passed away in infancy. His wife also survives him. He was a good business man and made judicious investments of his earnings, thus leaving his family in good circumstances at his death. His property holdings consisted of a large farm in Iowa and two in South Dakota, besides numerous head of live stock and other property. The pernicious practice of permitting politics to enter into the affairs of state institutions is responsible for Mr. Simpson finally relinquishing the superintendency of the school he had so long guided. In the spring of 1903 the board of charities and corrections, pleading a desire to make a record in economical management of the institutions under their charge, reduced his salary nearly one-half. Under the circumstances Mr. Simpson could not accept the reduction and still retain his self-respect, so he promptly handed in his resignation. This step had been anticipated by the board, and they were not slow in accepting the resignation, seeing that it was their chance of driving in the wedge that was to open the way to using the school for deaf mutes for political purposes. For twenty-three years no preceding board had dared go contrary to public sentiment by removing the efficient head of the school. This action of the board in the spring of 1903 was condemned by every citizen of the state who wanted to see efficiency placed above politics. At the time he handed in his resignation Mr. Simpson's health was poor and the action of the board only hastened a step he had considered for some time previous. He immediately sought recuperation of his health in the Black Hills, but there was no appreciable improvement. He returned to Sioux Falls to settle down in a home of his own, hoping that complete rest would restore him to health. But on the way he was stricken down and in a very short time breathed his last at the home of his brother-in-law, J. T. Gilbert, in Sioux Falls, surrounded by his entire family. His death occurred on November 16, 1903, and on the 19th his mortal remains were consigned to their last resting place in Mount Pleasant cemetery. The services at the house were private, but at the grave the Benevolent and Protective Order of Elks had charge of the exercises, the deceased having been an honored member of the order. The services, both at the house and at the grave, were largely attended and the floral tributes were many. In the demise of James Simpson the state of South Dakota lost a valuable citizen and the deaf a warm friend. There can be no nobler monument to his memory than the South Dakota school for the deaf. PHIL L. AXLING.