

## Ch. 2

### The Simpson Years



James Simpson, a deaf man, was born on Jan. 21, 1855, in Milford, Mich. It was not until he was 14 years of age that he attended school. He first attended the Michigan School for the Deaf (MSD) in Flint, Mich., where he studied under the tutorship of Thomas L. Brown. Both of Simpson's parents were dead when he entered MSD. He was the youngest of a family of six children. James had two sisters and three brothers. Two of his brothers, William and Delos, were also deaf. Simpson's mother encouraged him to use his voice all the time, and as a result, he was able to speak. Simpson also was a skilled lipreader.

He made rapid progress and had a great zest for learning. After four years at MSD, Simpson moved to live with a relative in New York. In the fall of 1873, he entered the Fanwood School for the Deaf (New York City), where he eventually reached the highest academic class within a mere three years. He studied under a well-known teacher, Oliver D. Cooke, and graduated with highest honors as valedictorian of his class at the age of 21.

After graduating from Fanwood, Simpson took up a jeweler's trade in Attica, N.Y. He was there for a year before returning to Michigan, where he worked on his cousin's farm. The time he graduated from Fanwood to the time he worked on the farm were confusing and trying years for the young Simpson. His opportunity came in a most unexpected manner; in fact, it was the turning point of his life. It was the time when his brother Delos, a recent graduate from the National College for the Deaf (Gallaudet University), was offered a teaching position

at the Iowa School for the Deaf (ISD) by Moses Folsom, superintendent. For some reason or another, the offer did not appeal to Delos. Instead of accepting the offer, Delos asked James if he would consider the position at ISD, should Superintendent Folsom accept him as a "substitute." James was more than willing to accept, and a letter of explanation to this effect was sent to Folsom. The Simpson brothers later received word that the ISD authorities approved having James as a full-fledged member of the teaching staff.

Simpson taught with much vigor and enthusiasm at ISD, where he was a leader of the faculty from 1878-1881. While serving as instructor at ISD, Simpson met Anna Laura Wright (a student) whom he later married. Incidentally, Laura was Jennie Wright's sister.

The Simpsons had four children — Howard (who later became the sixth superintendent of SDSD), Grant, Lawrence and Sarah. The Simpson children were born on the school campus, in the Simpson Building. Sarah lived only one month. The funeral service for her was held in the Simpson Building, and she was buried in Mt. Pleasant Cemetery in Sioux Falls.

Delos Simpson pursued other endeavors, including the founding of the Gallaudet School for the Deaf in St. Louis, Mo. His wife, Mary, taught at SDSD for a period of 36 years after he had passed away. Mary L. Simpson, a graduate of the Michigan School for the Deaf (MSD), died on Sept. 16, 1925. Mary taught two years at MSD and for one year at the Gallaudet school, prior to teaching at SDSD. Mary left her teaching position at SDSD in

June 1925 in poor health, with liver cancer. She died Sept. 16, 1925, at the home of her daughter, Harriet Ellison, in Sioux Falls. She was interred at the Woodlawn Cemetery in Sioux Falls.

The school (Dakota Territorial School) had been in existence less than one year when James Simpson took over as third superintendent in 1881, at the age of 26. He was a well-educated man by the time he came to Sioux Falls. He realized and understood the many difficulties that deaf people had to persevere in order to obtain a good education. He was the superintendent from 1881-1903 — the first superintendent to get paid for the position.



*The first building constructed on the School for the Deaf campus.*

The citizens of Sioux Falls were eager to come to the aid of Superintendent Simpson, for they knew in their hearts that the Territorial School for the Deaf was destined to become what is today a worthy institution. The first school building, a wooden structure, was erected on ten acres of land (this is the same land where SDSD is located today). The "second school year" opened on Oct. 19, 1881, under the leadership of Simpson. The first two or three years were trying ones for Simpson, as he experienced obstacles even as the school prospered. He acted as instructor, as well, and was assisted by his capable wife. He had a large heart and knew from the beginning that he was engaged in a challenging task that would sooner or later bring his reward.

In 1883, the legislature provided a board of trustees to govern the school. The first group consisted of five members, appointed by the governor for two years. The members were E. A.



*E. A. Sherman, the first board of trustees president that governed the territorial school (SDSD).*

Sherman of Sioux Falls, president; E. B. Dawson of Lodi, secretary; N. C. Nash of Canton, treasurer; William Van Eps of Sioux Falls; and Jonathan Dunham of Valley Springs.

As soon as Simpson took over the day-to-day operation of the school, it began to prosper. The foundation had been laid, and the work was in the hands of someone who really understood the needs and interests unique to deaf culture. The school attendance grew rapidly under the Simpson administration — from seven to 54 students. Physically, the school grew from one building to a well-equipped institution of six fine granite structures, as new buildings were needed to meet the demands of educating the student body. During the 1883 Dakota Territory legislative session, actions were taken which drastically changed and improved the school and campus. Appropriations totaled \$12,000 for the building of a new structure. This building, formerly known as the "Main Building," was completed in 1884, and in 1978, was formally named the Simpson Building. The new

structure housed classrooms and dormitory space, as well as living quarters for the superintendent and his family. This building was constructed of Sioux Falls granite and still stands today, although additions have been made to it. Today, the Simpson Building serves as the home of Communication Service for the Deaf Administrative Office. The old wooden structure was vacated in 1884 and sold for \$250. In 1887, the new owner moved it to a site about half a mile from the campus. When the Simpson Building was completed, the eight-foot basement ceiling was left unfinished until a later date.



*The "Main Building," now known as the Simpson Building, CSD's current headquarters.*

A boys' dormitory was constructed and completed in 1886, after another \$12,000 was appropriated in 1885. Bonds were issued to raise money for this building at the western half of the Old School Building (known today as the Olde Grinde Apartments) located on the northern part of the CSD campus. This dormitory was constructed with Sioux Falls granite and trimmed with red stone from the Pipestone quarry. All the floors were laid with two-inch Georgia pine, and the interior woodwork was of the same material. Years later, this dormitory had been remodeled into apartments for teachers and the school's art department.

Steam heating first came into use in the Simpson Building in 1885, and in 1887, the same system had been added to the boys' dormitory. In January 1890, the campus buildings, including the barn, were lit up with electricity for the first time.

In 1887, the legislature appropriated and raised — via bonds — \$23,000 for a new



*The old boys' dormitory — 1886*

vocational building and a number of other improvements at the school. In February 1887, \$1,750 was appropriated for the erection of a barn. Both the vocational building and barn were constructed of Sioux Falls granite. The roughly cut granite blocks were quarried in Sioux Falls and brought to the site by wagon. When the barn was constructed, there were only 20 acres of school land under cultivation and a fairly good size dairy herd was maintained. A hog house had been constructed in 1887. This original hog house had to be reconstructed and improved in later years. The vocational building stood on the campus for some 42 years, 1887-1929. History has it that it was removed from campus in 1929. The barn was sold when the entire set of farm buildings was auctioned off in 1949. More information regarding the history of the SDSA farm sale can be found under the Myklebust Years in this book.

Besides farming, printing was the first trade taught at SDSA. In May 1887, a small printing outfit was purchased and the birth of the publication called *The Advocate* came about. *The Advocate* started out as a simple leaflet that was published weekly under H. Hofstater, the first printing instructor. The leaflet underwent two name changes after its inception. First, it was called *The Dakota Advocate*, and after statehood, it became *The South Dakota Advocate*.

Although national, territorial and, later, state news items, were published, as well as SDSA news, it was considered as the school's official magazine. Shortly after the printing trade, the carpentry and tinner trades were added.



*Vocational Building — 1887-1929*

On Nov. 2, 1889, the Dakota Territory was divided, and the states of North and South Dakota were admitted to the Union. "Each state assumed ownership of the territorial or state institutions falling within its border. South Dakota received nine out of twelve such institutions, including the School for Deaf Mutes. South Dakota was required to pay North Dakota a proportionate sum for the advantage thus acquired." The school for the deaf remained in Sioux Falls. One year after statehood, North Dakota established its own school for the deaf in Devils Lake. On April 19, 1900, Simpson and the school received orders from South Dakota Gov. Arthur Mellette to dismiss North Dakota students from the school. Those students took their departure on April 29, 1900. A good 15 to 20 students at the school in Sioux Falls were transferred to the North Dakota school. This left the school with a total enrollment of 34 at the end of the 1899-1900 school year. Then, in 1890, an act of the state constitution was passed by the S.D. State Legislature to establish a Board of Charities and Corrections to govern the state penal or charitable institutions. Thus, the Board of Charities and Corrections replaced the board of trustees in governing SDS. In March 1890, the First State Legislature of South Dakota appropriated \$14,800 for the operation of the School for Deaf Mutes.

One of the things James Simpson reported in his first message to the new Board of

Charities and Corrections was that SDS owned 30 acres of land, including 22 which were under cultivation. During the Simpson era, a number of deciduous and evergreen trees were planted around the school grounds amid the driveways and lawns, which beautified the campus. According to historical records, one could easily say that the school made history in May 1892, when the school built the first concrete silo in the Dakotas, the first institution for the deaf in the U.S. to have one.



*The first concrete silo in South Dakota.*

Constructed with the help of the older boys attending the school, the silo was able to hold a capacity of approximately 90 tons of fodder. A new boiler house was built in 1900, and funds were appropriated for a new hospital building. However, due to poor planning and the deletion of appropriated funds, the hospital was finally completed in 1906. The hospital later was converted into the girls' dormitory and kitchen area, which became French Hall in 1978.

Unfortunately, there was a sobering side to Simpson's superintendency. In the spring of 1903, the school was used for political purposes, when the Board of Charities and Corrections pleaded to make changes in the management of the state institutions, for economic reasons. One of the changes made was reducing Simpson's salary by nearly a half. As a result, Simpson could not accept the reduction and maintain his self-respect at the same time, which led to his resignation. **"This action of the board was condemned**



*The girls' dormitory, formerly connected to the Simpson Building.*

**by every citizen of the state who wanted to see efficiency placed above politics.** (*History of South Dakota, page 1741*). Dora Donald succeeded him on April 1, 1903.

Due to poor health at the time of his resignation, Simpson decided to settle in the Black Hills to recuperate. Apparently, there were no results and soon Simpson moved back to Sioux Falls in his own home where he lived for a short time. He died at his brother-in-law, J. T. Gilbert's home, on Nov. 16, 1903. He was buried at Mt. Pleasant cemetery in Sioux Falls. No one should ever question James Simpson's contributions to deaf and hard of hearing people (and the general public) of South Dakota. Phil L. Axling wrote in 1904, "**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.**"

James Simpson had a reputation of being an astute administrator and was known to watch every detail of the school very closely. He managed the expenditures within the annual budget allocated by the state. He cared a great deal about the students' health and

saw to it that they remained healthy while attending the school. The moral and spiritual welfare of the students was extremely important to Simpson. He was also known to be a shrewd businessman. He invested his money wisely into a large farm near Corning, Iowa, and two in South Dakota, along with numerous livestock and other property. One of his South Dakota farms was a ranch six miles south of Wessington Springs, where a number of deaf people worked for him. He left his wife and children in a comfortable condition at the time of his death. He had, indeed, been a good husband and father, having three boys and a girl. (The girl passed away in infancy.)

In the book, *History of South Dakota*, Phil L. Axling best describes James Simpson and his career at SDSD. "**No history of the South Dakota School for Deaf Mutes can be complete without a sketch of the life of 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 more than twenty-three years the superintendent.**" (Page 1738)

After the death of her husband in 1903, Laura Simpson remained in Sioux Falls for a number of years. She later married a deaf man, Thomas Jewell, in 1909, and together they moved to Kansas City. In her old age she lived with her son, Howard, after outliving her second husband in Wichita. Following Howard's death, she stayed with his widow, Stella, and died in her home in October 1937. Laura was buried beside James Simpson in Mt. Pleasant Cemetery in Sioux Falls.