

Chapter 1

History of the South Dakota School for the Deaf

The Founding of SDSD

At the time the first American school for the deaf opened in Hartford, Conn., on April 15, 1817, South Dakota was a part of the Louisiana Purchase. When the Lewis and Clark expedition took place (1804–06), only Native Americans occupied the land. Although fur traders were subsequently active, little settlement took place until 1874 when General George Custer confirmed that there was gold in the Black Hills.

The Dakota Territory — North Dakota, South Dakota and parts of Montana and Wyoming — was placed on the map in 1861 under the Organic Act, dated March 2, 1861. It was not until 1879 — 18 years after the establishment of the Dakota Territory — that provisions for the education of deaf children were made. The territorial government recognized the educational needs of deaf children within its jurisdiction and implemented a program specially designed to meet the needs of the target population. The territorial governor, William A. Howard, was authorized to enter into a contract with Iowa, Nebraska or Minnesota to provide education for deaf and blind children who resided in the Dakota Territory. Eventually, a contract was made with the Iowa School for the Deaf (ISD) at Council Bluffs, under the law of Feb. 28, 1879, whereby deaf children in the Dakota Territory would be admitted to ISD to obtain their education. The territorial government agreed to pay \$5 per week for each pupil taking advantage of this opportunity.

The 1879 Territorial Legislature — which convened in Yankton, Dakota Territory — further declared, "The institution of the state (Iowa) contracted with would be recognized

as the institution for the deaf, dumb or blind of the Dakota Territory." The county superintendent of the school and the county commissioners were expected to cooperate and follow this plan. The superintendent was responsible to report to the commissioners on any known deaf, dumb, or blind persons, ages five through 21. The commissioners had the responsibility of reporting the information to the governor. Each pupil was allowed five years of education at the expense of the territory, if parents were not able to pay. Otherwise, the parents had to shoulder the expenses, and the county commissioners were the judges of their ability to pay. However, records indicate Edith Ross of Sioux Falls was the only Dakota Territory deaf pupil who took advantage of this plan.

It was 120 years ago when the Rev. Thomas Berry took the initiative to address the educational needs unique to the deaf children in South Dakota. He had neither seen nor heard of any deaf children in Sioux Falls or the surrounding area at that time. With capable assistance from Jennie Wright, a pioneering teacher of the deaf, establishment of the school for the deaf took place when South Dakota was still part of the Dakota Territory. The school was founded in November 1880 — nine years before statehood — in Sioux Falls, with a single teacher and a small class. Incidentally, the year also witnessed the birth of the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) in Cincinnati, Ohio. At this inaugural national convention, Robert McGregor, the first NAD president, said in his election speech, "We have needs and interests unique to ourselves that can best be handled by ourselves."



*The Rev. Thomas B. Berry 1880-1881
Founder of the South Dakota School for the Deaf.*

Both Berry and Wright had a history of promoting education that was especially designed for deaf children. Berry, a clergyman from the East, moved to the area when he assumed rectorship of the Alvacy Calvary Church. Happily married to a deaf wife, he had a long association in the area of deafness as a teacher for the deaf in Maryland and New York. Berry was known as a person who took great interest in the happiness and welfare of deaf children. Wright became the first teacher at the school, although she didn't teach until December 1880. Teaching deaf children was nothing new to her when she came to the Dakota Territory, for she had taught primary grades at the Nebraska School for the Deaf (NSD) in Omaha, where she originally learned sign language. She also had a sister who was deaf. She resigned her teaching position at NSD in 1879 and moved to Sioux Falls, where she actively participated in the movement to start a school in the Dakota Territory through Berry.

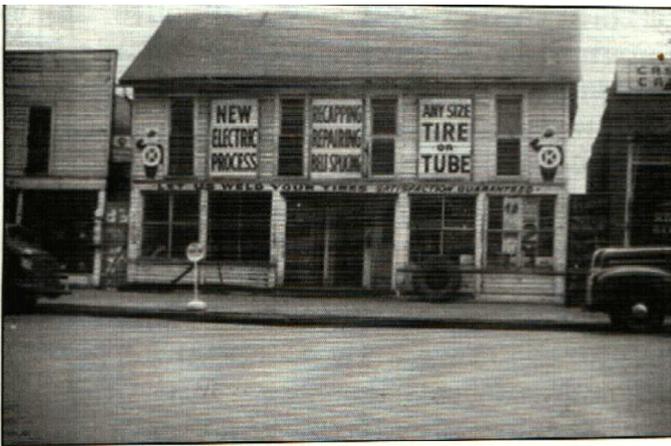
Once Berry realized that the educational needs of deaf children were not being met, he undertook the immense task of providing better means for them to obtain an education. ~~THE TIME WAS RIGHT~~ as a movement to develop educational institutes in the territory had begun, and Berry thought it would be an

opportune time to start a school for "Deaf Mutes." Berry had a conference on Aug. 17, 1880, with Territorial Gov. Nehemiah G. Ordway, concerning a movement to establish an institution for the purpose of educating the deaf. After getting support and approval from Gov. Ordway, the "Territorial School for Deaf Mutes" (now known as the South Dakota School for the Deaf) was officially founded on Nov. 9, 1880. Berry rented the Thomas Lodging House to be used as a classroom and sleeping quarters for the students. Thus, the first school for the deaf in the Dakota Territory had been created.



Miss Jennie Wright, first teacher at the "Territorial School for Deaf Mutes". She became the superintendent of the school after Berry left to return to the east.

The Thomas Lodging House was located on Main Avenue, just south of the Calvary Church and directly across the street to the east of the city high school, Washington High School (now the Washington Pavilion of Arts and Sciences). (Prior to the Thomas Lodging House days, the Rev. Berry gave instructions to a few deaf children living in and near Sioux Falls in his home. These instructions were not given on a regular basis.)



The Thomas Lodging House. The very first classrooms and sleeping quarters were upstairs.

It was the intention of Berry to open the school on Nov. 2, 1880, but due to the fact that there were no pupils, the opening of the school did not happen on this date. Steps were taken in advertising the opening of the school in various newspapers in Sioux Falls, Mitchell, Yankton, Eden, Canton, Bismarck and Fargo. On Nov. 8, 1880, Berry learned of a deaf boy, Willie H. Harley, who became Berry's very first student. Harley received instructions in Berry's home. Excerpts from Berry's diary tell of the school being moved from his home to the Thomas Lodging House when more students were admitted to the school. The Thomas Lodging House closed in June 1881, with the following pupils in attendance:

Hester Black of Sioux Falls

Harry and Lewis Garrison of Hanson County

Willie Hamilton of Sioux Falls

Andrew Sieverson from Dell Rapids

Unfortunately, the territorial government did not appropriate money for the school at that time. The school was basically established upon volunteer acts of the first superintendent (Berry) and the first teacher (Wright). They did not receive any compensation for their work. In fact, they contributed money and labor to the cause. Wright gave \$500 of her own money for advertising purposes alone — besides



Front row: Willie Hamilton, Hester Black, and Harry Garrison. Back row: L. E. Garrison, Jennie Wright (teacher) and Andrew Sieverson.

numerous other expenses during her first year. The school was funded entirely through donations of generous citizens of Sioux Falls and surrounding towns. Yet, these two pioneering spirits (Berry and Wright) opened the doors and were responsible for taking the first steps in ensuring those deaf children receive a formal education in the Dakota Territory.

It was not until January 1881 when the Territorial Legislature appropriated \$2,000 for a new school building — provided the citizens of Sioux Falls would contribute another \$1,000 — and the deed for 10 acres of land suitable for the school site. This legislative body provided expense money of \$5 per week per pupil to aid the school. However, the Territorial Legislature did not appropriate any money for salaries for the superintendent and the teacher. During the summer and fall of 1881, the 10 acres of land were obtained, and the citizens came up with the \$1,000. A building

was constructed on the land, contributed by E. A. Sherman, R. J. Pettigrew and L. T. Dunning, all of Sioux Falls, as well as Isaac Emmerson of Melrose, Mass. Sherman served as president of the school's first governing board, with Newton Edmunds from Yankton as vice president, E. G. Wright of Sioux Falls as secretary, and A. F. Shaw of Sioux Falls as treasurer. John Scobey of Brookings, Rev. Pennell of Deadwood; C. A. Lounsberry of Bismarck; C. K. Howard, Sioux Falls; V. P. Theilman, Parker; and O. S. Gifford, Canton, were the other Board members.

The following statement was taken from the Report from the Secretary of the Board of Directors of the Deaf Mute School, Sioux Falls, S.D. It included the receipts and disbursement of the building fund of the Deaf Mute School.

Credit—Amount Received from:
 Territory of Dakota, warrant.....\$2,000
 Village of Sioux Falls, cash.....1,000
Total.....\$3,000

Debtor—Amount paid to:
 Anderson Bros., original contract..\$2,500
 Anderson Bros., changes, extra.....255.70
 Cistern.....74.50
 Thomas Kane & Co., furniture.....128.50
 C. C. Geiger, plans, specifications.....25
 E. O. Kimberly, advertising proposals...3
 Caldwell & Stabl, advertising.....5
 John Bippus, legal services.....7.90
 Exchange warrant......40
Total.....\$3,000

To qualify for the appropriation of the \$2,000 from the Territory, the board had to show a school building valued at \$3,500, 10 acres of land within the corporate limits of Sioux Falls, a choice location valued at \$2,000, or a school building and site worth \$5,500.

During the 1881 vacation months, a building was erected on the land, donated by the public-spirited citizens. This building was occupied on Oct. 19, 1881. It was a simple two-story frame structure — 36 x 40 feet with

a 16 x 24 foot wing, containing 14 rooms capable of accommodating 25 students. The building also had a cellar under the main part. By that time, Wright served both as superintendent and teacher, and the school opened its second year with seven students in attendance — the same five previously mentioned along with Sarah Collins of Sioux Falls and Willie Richmond of Bon Homme County. Berry left the school in the fall of 1881 after his wife passed away on June 18 of that year, due to typhoid fever. Wright became the superintendent after Berry moved back to Buffalo, N.Y., with his three children to continue as a clergyman. Berry remained out East until his death. He died peacefully at his home in Geneva, N.Y. on May 12, 1918, after being ill for a considerable time. He was buried in Mailius, N.Y.

Wright's career as superintendent was short-lived. She resigned from her job to marry Daniel Mingus on Oct. 29, 1881, at the school — in the presence of her beloved students, a few close friends and the new superintendent, professor James Simpson. She eventually moved to San Diego, Calif., where she lived the rest of her life. After her husband's death, she married again, which did not work out. Wright died a sick, lonely woman on March 25, 1926.

Both Berry and Wright worked very hard and gave unselfishly to get the school on its own feet. If it were not for these two pioneers, the school would not have been founded until years later. To quote the *The Daily Argus Leader*, Sioux Falls, S.D., Saturday, Jan. 26, 1907, "**The names of Rev. Berry and Miss Jennie Wright should ever be revered by the deaf mutes of South Dakota, and some suitable tablet or something in that order should be installed at the school to give the just credit to whom it is due.**" South Dakota has memorials, monuments, historical markers, statues, etc., of people who have contributed to this state. To this day, there has been nothing greater than the contributions of these two people.

When Berry and Wright established SDSA, they could not have foreseen the impact of education of deaf and hard of hearing children, or the changes it would eventually create in the lives of people in

South Dakota and in the nation. Little did they realize when they founded SDSD, that it was going to be a "childhood home" to generations of deaf and hard of hearing children from all parts of South Dakota and to a group of students from southwestern Minnesota. If only Berry and Wright could witness how vitally important their insights have turned out 120 years later. They would be proud to know that SDSD is on an attractive campus, offering a comprehensive educational program germane to the immediate and particular needs and interest of deaf and hard of hearing children. They would also enjoy knowing that the school serves students on and off campus, including pre-schoolers. An outreach program also provides services to parents of deaf and hard

of hearing children, birth to three years of age, as well as services to local school districts throughout the state. They would realize that the school, over the years, has served hundreds of deaf and hard of hearing children, as a result of their mission, vision and dedication.

For 120 years, the mission of the school has been that all deaf and hard of hearing children can learn ideals specific to their birthright of independent living and self-determinism. Given that belief, SDSD — in cooperation with mainstreamed programs and the stewardship of the Board of Regents — provides a challenging learning environment, which prepares each child for a meaningful and productive life in an ever-changing world.