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Growing Up Deaf in Appalachia: An Oral History of My Mother

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Masters of Arts in Reading

with a concentration in Storytelling

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by

Elizabeth “Libby” Shelton Tipton

December 2019

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Edward Dwyer, PhD

Keywords: Deaf, Deaf Culture, Appalachian, Oral History, Storytelling,  
Devil’s Fork, Flag Pond, Tennessee, Shelton Laurel, Madison County, North Carolina

## ABSTRACT

Growing up Deaf in Appalachia: An Oral History of My Mother

by

Elizabeth “Libby” Shelton Tipton

This study focuses on the life experiences of a rural, Deaf Appalachian woman, Jane Ann Shelton, a second generation Deaf child born to Deaf parents from the communities of Devil’s Fork (Flag Pond, Tennessee) and Shelton Laurel (Madison County, North Carolina). Over two hours of videotaped interviews were interpreted and transcribed, followed by various other communications to describe the life of a rural, Deaf Appalachian woman without a formal high school degree. As an advocate and a political lobbyist in Tennessee during the 1980s and 90s, she was unparalleled by her peers (deaf or hearing) in her efforts to “enhance the lives of ALL Deaf Tennesseans.” From these interactions and my firsthand knowledge, I crafted stories of her life experiences for the purpose of performing them for both Deaf and hearing audiences. Further studies should be done on rural Deaf Appalachia as precious little oral history has been collected.

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## DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to my mother, Jane Ann Shelton, who taught me how to embrace the Deaf community and inspired me to work with others for a better tomorrow.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**“Just as the acorn contains the mighty oak tree, the Self has everything it needs to fulfill its destiny. When the inner conditions are right, it naturally emerges.”**

**-Derek Rydall (2015), author of *Emergence***

So much of who I am is a result of being raised in a deaf family, with deaf relatives and deaf people, my extended family, right in the midst of a rural, Appalachian community. Through the years, while working as a sign language interpreter, it often felt as if I spoke three languages: English, ASL, and “Appalachian.” This required a lot of “code switching” to communicate as I transitioned back and forth into these three cultures. Many times, by default, I became the liaison, facilitating communication when these worlds intersected, sometimes not so successfully. The introduction of Storytelling gave me an avenue where I could share the intricate culture and nuances of my Deaf Appalachian heritage with others, for which I am grateful.

This thesis is a culmination of my graduate studies program which shows through my mother’s lens, a community of rural Deaf Appalachia during the time just preceding my birth and also the era which I grew up in. I would like to thank those who stood by me and offered their support during my academic journey:

- My storytelling colleagues who taught me so much: Marjorie Shaefer, David Claunch, Valerie Menard, Sandra Kelley, Cathy Metcalf, & Terry Arrington
- Dr. Joseph Sobol who first introduced me to the art of storytelling and fellow students along the way
- Peter Cook, who inspired me to tell my story and helped me to find my heritage

- Elizabeth Ellis, who made me aware I was capable of being a storyteller and remains a strong source of encouragement and knowledge
- Members of my thesis committee, Dr. Marc Fagelson and Dr. Edward Dwyer for their moral support
- Members of the Jonesborough Storytelling Guild who have shown me overwhelming kindness, encouragement & listening ears
- The Deaf Community of Upper East Tennessee- my family of families who have shaped the person I am today
- Dr. Delanna Reed, chair of my thesis committee, who stood by me and showed great patience
- My family, especially my children, who are my life. It is for them I tell stories- to perpetuate and preserve our heritage
- My parents, Glenn & Jane Ann Shelton, for it is their legacy I wish to share with the world
- And to those who search for their sense of belonging and identity within rural Deaf

Appalachia, I give you the words of Wendell Berry (1969) in *A Native Hill*:

And so, such history as my family has is the history of its life here. All that any of us may know of ourselves is to be known in relation to this place. And since I did most of my growing up here, and have had most of my most meaningful experiences here, the place and the history, for me, have been inseparable, and there is a sense in which my own life is inseparable from the history and the place. It is a complex inheritance, and I have been both enriched and bewildered by it (pp. 601-602).

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## PROLOGUE

As a student working on my undergraduate degree at East Tennessee State University, I took several independent study courses in the Storytelling Graduate Program. Over a span of 15 years, I told various genres of stories. My personal stories were predominantly about my father, Glenn Shelton. Many friends of the family wanted to hear more stories about my mother, Jane Ann. She herself had asked me on a few occasions when I would present stories about her life. In addition, I was encouraged to document my mother's stories by Betty Lawson, a former school teacher at the Tennessee School for the Deaf in Knoxville where my mother attended. Betty and her husband, Robert Lawson (a former teacher of Jane Ann), were a huge source of support to my mother in her young adult life. In fact, my mother states that Robert encouraged her to run for the presidency of Tennessee Association of the Deaf in 1975 (Personal Communication, March 10, 2019). It could easily be argued that this beginning step into the public eye was a culmination of her life's goals which ultimately changed her life as well as others within deaf communities across Tennessee and Texas. Her strength of character, commitment and dedication impacted me both personally and professionally. In addition Jane Ann's tenacity has influenced my own political involvement, as well as made me more independent and able to stand alone.

## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

When I was a young adult, back in the 1980s and 90s, I sometimes would interpret for my mother who is deaf. People often asked her why she was a political lobbyist in the Tennessee legislature and she would respond, “to enhance the lives of all deaf Tennesseans.” Who better to speak for individuals who are deaf than a deaf person herself? You see, my mother, Jane Ann Shelton, is deaf and so was my father, Glenn. In fact, deafness is prevalent on my mother’s side of the family. She had deaf parents, as well as two maternal uncles and several first cousins who were all deaf. Their congenital deafness was a result of Ushers Syndrome, a disease which also causes Retinitis Pigmentosa, a degenerative eye disease that results in limited peripheral vision and/or blindness. Jane Ann still has a limited field of vision at age 76 unlike some of her relatives who were totally blind by their mid-twenties or early thirties.

What makes Jane Ann unique as a spokesperson for the Deaf community are her life experiences. She was born in a small, rural Appalachian community in Flag Pond, Tennessee. Like some other young Appalachian women, Jane Ann did not finish high school due to marrying at a young age and starting a family. Capable of a college degree, she was not able to attend once she became a mother. She had three children, (two still living) and now has ten grandchildren, as well as eight great-grandchildren. In addition to being a mother and a political lobbyist, Jane Ann has held a variety of job titles including seamstress, quality control inspector, director of a communication center for deaf individuals, sign language instructor and college lab teacher for an interpreter-training program. In addition, my mother was president of Tennessee Association of the Deaf for ten years and is currently the president of the board for Jean Massieu Foundation (JMF) which oversees Jean Massieu Academy, an open enrollment charter school

serving deaf children and other students in Arlington, Texas. JMF is responsible for a budget having liabilities and net assets over 2.5 million dollars (Jean Massieu Foundation, 2018). These experiences are not what one would expect out of someone who did not finish high school. In fact, her vita is quite impressive (Appendix A).

I remember when I was growing up, people continually asked me if my parents held jobs, knew how to drive an automobile, or could read and write. Some referred to my parents as “the deaf and dumb couple” in my presence. Meador (2005) describes this as an ongoing issue where deaf and hard of hearing people are seen as having “inferior intelligence” (p. 221). In spite of these derogative perspectives, I viewed our family as being the same as other traditional families within our community. The biggest difference was how we communicated. We used American Sign Language (ASL) to talk with one another.

My family consisted of four people, two parents and two children, who led very “typical” lives for the most part just like our neighbors. Both my parents had jobs, paid taxes, and were raising a family. Deafness did not prevent either of my parents from contributing to the support of our family. My father was a unique person as well, having retired from Micro-Switch, (a previous division of Honeywell), as a supervisor. He was also an elected constable in the 1<sup>st</sup> district of Unicoi County, Tennessee (the first deaf constable noted in America) from 1980 until his death in 1997.

Yet, because of an unfortunate string of events, (and some prejudice), both parents never finished their formal education. In retrospect, I understand that in spite of a lack of higher formal education, Jane Ann’s political career and many awards received for service to the deaf community within the state of Tennessee signified the tremendous contribution one lone deaf woman made while overcoming barriers presented by main-stream society. My desire is to study

her life and document her life stories of growing up deaf in a rural Appalachian community with the intent to search for reasons of her successes in spite of the perceptions and limitations placed upon her.

Living with society's bias and lack of understanding of deaf people put me on a path at an early age to advocate and educate those around me. When I was young, I didn't fully comprehend the gross lack of awareness about deaf people or their culture. In fact, I didn't even know what culture was at that time in my life. However, I took on the responsibility of educating others about my parents' capabilities. Once, when I was about eight years old, my mother and I sat in a doctor's office waiting for my turn with the doctor. As we conversed in sign language, perusing a magazine together, I overheard one lady say to another, "I want you to look at that deaf and dumb lady waving her hands to her deaf and dumb child." The other lady responded, "I know it. They ort [ought] not let them kind have children. Now look...There's two of them deaf and dumb ones!" This is my first memory of an ethical dilemma. Should I tell my mother what was said or do I say nothing? It had already been instilled in me at that young age to ensure communication was facilitated when there were deaf and hearing people present in the same room. At that moment my name was called by the nurse, which I conveyed to my mother. While I was still struggling with what to do, my mother got up and started to the door. Then, the answer was clear. As I passed by the two women, I handed them the magazine and said, "Here you go. My mother said there were some interesting articles in this magazine and you might like to read them as well," leaving them sitting there with their mouths gaping.

### **Statement of Purpose**

In 2017, I interviewed six rural Appalachian women from Flag Pond for a qualitative research class. In those interviews, I asked about cultural traditions and values, as well as the

roles of women and children of various ages. The goal at that time was to document any changes to the culture as influenced by technology and cultural changes in the nation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. However, in researching topics related to Appalachia, I did not see any studies on the lives of deaf individuals in rural areas. This observation led to my current research of documenting oral histories from my own Deaf Appalachian community. The interviews conducted for my class at that time influenced my focus in developing a framework for analyzing and researching my mother's life.

My mother, Jane Ann, is a Caucasian with English/Irish ancestry, age 76, and a native of the rural Devil's Fork Community of Flag Pond, Tennessee. She also spent part of her childhood in the Shelton Laurel Community (Big Creek) located in Madison County, North Carolina. Today, she splits her time between her homes in Flag Pond and Garland, Texas. Because of her role in a rural, Deaf Appalachian community, her natural ability to communicate in her native language (ASL) fluently and her willingness to share what it was like growing up in that community, the data collected will be invaluable to qualitative research in the fields of Deafness and Appalachia.

In addition, Appalachia changes more every day. With the effects of modernization and the impact on rural Appalachia, it is imperative that the collected oral histories from my mother are documented. Lewis & Billings (1997) cite modernization as causing social, economic and social changes as far back as the 1960s and 1970s (p. 4). In addition, S. Keefe (1988b) argued that the Appalachian region was experiencing change through "urbanization, culture contact and conflict, and acculturation" (p. 243). In 2012, Lichter & Cimbaluk also contend that there have been changes in Appalachian family structure, namely with individuals retreating from marriage, (p. 82), which in turn, has caused a change in family poverty (p. 101). Thus, it is important to

document stories of those deaf individuals that are aging or passing away. Otherwise, they leave no trace of their contribution or lifestyle within Appalachia.

As I grew older, I experienced first-hand the nuances of “Deaf culture” and the “Deaf community.” Before I can go any further, I need to define these two terms. First, there are typically two models to describe individuals with varying degrees of hearing: the pathological model versus the sociocultural model. The pathological (or medical) model refers to individuals who have a hearing loss and are viewed as needing remediation. These people have a medical condition and cannot hear. They are referred to as “little d deaf.” The socio-cultural model includes individuals with varying degrees of deafness who identify with a strong sense of culture and community. They use American Sign Language (ASL) and are referred to as “big D Deaf” (Baker-Shenk & Cokely, 1980, p. 54; Benedict, et al., 2015, p.18-2; Cokely & Baker-Shenk, 1980b, p. 16; Munoz-Baell & Ruiz, 2000, p.40; Stebnicki & Coeling, p. 350; Wilson, 2017, p.2).

According to Padden & Humphries (1988), someone who has an “audiological condition of not hearing” is usually referred to as simply “deaf” with a lowercase “d” (p. 2). These individuals typically do not associate with others who cannot hear and view themselves as having a medical condition. They do not identify with the culture of Deafness. This is not to say that these individuals will never interact with the Deaf community. They may later immerse themselves in Deaf culture and become members of the Deaf community. Glickman (1996) describes these individuals in the Deaf community as having a “social, rather than an audiological meaning” as opposed to hearing individuals seeing deafness as a “tragic medical disability” (p. 127).

Deaf community is described by Padden (1980) as follows:

A deaf community is a group of people who live in a particular location, share the common goals of its members and in various ways, and work toward achieving these goals. A deaf community may include persons who are not themselves Deaf, but who actively support the goals of the community and work with Deaf people to achieve them (p. 92).

This would not only include deaf individuals but also interpreters, professionals, hearing children of deaf parents (often called CODAs), and other hearing relatives or friends. Throughout this study, I will use the distinction of “capital D” or “Big D Deaf” to refer to those identifying with the cultural Deaf community.

The identity as “Big D deaf” is extremely cherished and guarded with pride within the Deaf community. Hearing people (except for CODAs) are not considered to be part of the “inner core” of this cultural group as they have not experienced the cultural ties that bind the Deaf community such as attending a deaf residential school and being a native signer of ASL. According to Lane (1992), Deaf people view themselves as one big family regardless of age, class, sex, or ethnicity (p. 17). They typically have attended a residential school for the deaf, marry other “big D deaf” people and exist in a subculture having a tight sense of community similar to other minority groups. However, they do have smaller groups within the Deaf community based on interests, address, work, etc. While Deaf individuals assimilate into mainstream society for purposes of work and other avenues such as higher education, it has been my experience that they spend their leisure or recreational time among others with similar Deaf cultural values.

Growing up, I didn't truly recognize the significance of my parents' ingenuity and strength to overcome society's limited perception of their functional abilities, especially within



Appalachia. Many considered my parents incompetent and viewed their deafness as a disability. In fact, there are laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 (that govern the rights of individuals with disabilities) which list deafness as a disability (Department of Justice, 2010; U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2017).

However, big “D” Deaf individuals do not consider themselves disabled, handicapped, hearing-impaired or feel they have a hearing loss, especially within their own community (Holcomb, 2013; Munoz-Baell & Ruiz, 2000; Wilson, 2017). Instead of saying “hearing loss,” many are using the words, “Deaf Gain,” coined by H.-Dirksen Bauman and J. Murray (2014), to describe those who cannot hear. As quoted here and in several of their publications, the authors’ state:

The biological, social, and cultural implications of being deaf are not automatically defined simply by loss but could also be defined by difference, and, in some significant instances, as gain...to counter the frame of hearing loss as it refers to the unique cognitive, creative and cultural gains manifested through deaf ways of being in the world. (Bauman & Murray, p. xv).

Deaf individuals within this “classification” of the Deaf community usually have no desire to ever be able to hear. My own mother expressed displeasure once years ago when I was discussing a sermon about “Deaf people being able to hear in Heaven.” She emphatically told me she just wouldn’t go to Heaven, if that was the case, because she was very content being deaf.

### **Limited Literature Available**

When I was working on my undergraduate degree which included a minor in Appalachian studies, I was acutely aware of the lack of research material available concerning

rural Deaf Appalachian communities. One reason could be explained by Carol Padden, who is a noted deaf linguist and author within the Deaf community. She is quoted in Jack Gannon's book, *Deaf Heritage*, as saying, "the culture of deaf people has not yet been studied in much depth" (Gannon, 1981, p. 367). While that statement was some years back, it was true then and is still true now in rural areas.

Another reason for limited written documentation of Deaf Appalachian oral histories may be the nature of Deaf culture and the language it uses ASL. ASL is a visual, gestural language, therefore, it was never intended to be written. Generally speaking, when one needs to write about or explain ASL, written English words called "glosses" are used to help those unfamiliar with ASL (Cokely & Baker-Shenk, 1980a, p. x). Lane (1992) gives one example when he states that stories by the Deaf are told in ASL and are not written. In addition, Baynton, Gannon & Bergey (1997) explain that ASL, (like some other languages), doesn't have a "commonly used written form, but does have a long-standing unwritten literature that includes various forms of oratory, folklore, and performance art" (p. 5). However, Lane also reminds us that when publications in English are written by and for Deaf people, they "have played an important role in the bonding of American Deaf culture" (1992, p. 16). Thus, by collecting and documenting my mother's oral histories, I hope to contribute stories (both written and performed) from this rural, Deaf Appalachian community as a work of art with historical significance.

B. E. Smith (1999) perhaps gives the best reason for limited information on Appalachian women in general. She said, "The history of women in Appalachia will not be discovered exclusively, perhaps even primarily, in the official documents of institutions, even those that they founded and shaped. Nor may women necessarily be located at "historic" events (a battle or strike, for example) that they influenced" (p. 9). This includes Deaf women of Appalachia. In

addition, I am aware that my mother's progressive experiences were different from other women in our community, especially the deaf women of upper east Tennessee. Many of them worked in factories and stayed close to home. She, on the other hand, was President of the Tennessee Association of the Deaf for ten years running, and served on the Board of Directors for the National Association of the Deaf, the only board member without a college degree. This, while her peers conformed more to the traditional role of an Appalachian woman of that era. With this insight, I am compelled to write and record the oral history of my deaf mother, her account of growing up in a rural Appalachian community, and her contributions to her people.

Though I am included as a core member of this subculture of the Deaf community and could be considered a subjective researcher, I have worked as a professional, bi-lingual, bicultural sign language interpreter for deaf individuals and the communities they live in where the majority of people are able to hear and speak. Sign language interpreters who are certified by the National Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf adhere to an established code of conduct, yet many of these tenets were social mores for me and other hearing children who grew up in deaf homes. As a trusted member of this community, my purpose is to gather and document information about rural Deaf individuals that might not otherwise be available.

My intent is to address the following research question: What does the life story of Jane Ann Shelton reveal about her cultural influences, educational opportunities and challenges faced while living in a dominant, hearing society in southern Appalachia? Related questions are:

- What influence did having a network of support that could communicate in sign language and having a strong sense of Deaf culture play in assisting Jane Ann to rise above her peers, (both deaf and hearing)?

- How did the values of a rural Appalachian community suppress or induce her ability to succeed?

From birth, I have lived in both worlds, deaf and hearing, often being the conduit of communication between the two. I am grateful that I have been given permission to share the stories of my family and culture with mainstream society.

### **Scope of Study**

This life history research documents a marginalized group of people who have one living Deaf descendent left from the small town of Flag Pond, Tennessee and augment any previous research on Deaf and Appalachian cultures from rural communities of that era. It looks at my mother's life as a deaf woman from that community.

Through gathered videos of her interviews in sign language, I translated the transcripts and arranged them in story format. These stories are in written form and will be performed for both hearing and deaf audiences to offer a historical account of her experience through a series of four performances. An account of these stories will be listed in Chapter 4.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

To find out if this project would have any historical significance beyond my desire to collect Jane Ann's stories, I turned to the literature to see what information was available about rural, Deaf Appalachian families. Because I am also from this rural, Deaf Appalachian community and have worked here as a professional sign language interpreter for over 39 years, I realize I have extensive first-hand knowledge in the areas of rural Appalachia and Deaf culture. I began with rural Appalachia. As an undergraduate, I minored in Appalachian Studies, so I was familiar with some of the studies done on Appalachian culture and values. There have been several studies done on Appalachia over the last 50 years. The geographical area of Appalachia has been described or defined in different ways using a variety of criteria. The Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC) first described Appalachia in 1965 as having 360 counties in eleven states. It broadened those counties to 410 counties in 2002 and then the United States House of Representatives passed a bill in 2005 adding an additional twelve counties. This accounts for approximately 6% of the population in the United States (Podber, 2010, p. 37).

Yet currently the ARC's website lists the Appalachian region spanning 420 counties in 13 states from Mississippi to New York, including all of West Virginia and parts of 12 other states. The other states are Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia (Appalachian Regional Commission). According to the U.S. Census, the 1<sup>st</sup> district of Unicoi County had less than 1,000 people in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011).

The literature review has been separated into three main categories. The first two categories are Appalachian identity using place-based methods and Appalachian identity using

culture or attribute-based methods. The third category discusses Deaf culture, identity within the Deaf community and its values.

### **Appalachian Identity Using Place-Based Methods**

In the latter part of the twentieth century, (the time period from which many of Jane Ann's stories come), there were a number of studies conducted about traditional Appalachia such as those by Peters & Peterson (1988) and Cole (1988). Studies like these document family values, characteristics, and stories of people who are native to the Appalachian region. Cooper, Knotts & Livingston (2010) suggest social scientists tend to look at "identity to understand how people connect to their surroundings" (p. 27). Though this might simply reflect a geographic regional identity, more than a physical connection to the land is prevalent among the people who live in Appalachia (p. 28). The study shows quantitative results that reveal the "importance of the land, the environment, and a connection to place" (p. 38). Their study also correlates with other studies (Rowles, 1983; Cunningham, 2010; Hawke, 2012), depicting a strong sense of identity with the land among those who live in rural Appalachia. This strong connection to place intersects gender, race and sexuality as part of Appalachian identity (Terman, 2016). For example, participants from the LGBTQ community report ways they maneuver through their communities with their intersecting identities, which sometimes pushes them away from the Appalachian region and other times pulls them back home (Terman, 2016, pp. 78-79).

Behringer et al. (2007) emphasizes this connection to land in a health study of the Appalachian region of Ohio. The participants note that "the mountains shape family lives and create and reinforce a strong personal and culture identity with 'place'" (p. 43). This "place based" identity is also evident elsewhere. For instance, Hawke (2012) speaks to the importance of place in identity and draws from Rowle's (1983) description of "autobiographical insideness"

to explain in her study that a place serves as a “physical reminder for the narrative of an individual’s life” even if a person moves away from their place of identity (p. 240). She relates that one interviewee in North Pennine said she often revisited home to “get away” which Hawke suggests is the participant’s manner of remembering her identity. The interviewee added, “the people change, but the landscape doesn’t tend to” (p. 240). In this way, Hawke explains one’s heritage is linked to identity of place and memory, even though the people, the physical buildings, etc. are no longer present (p. 240). This concept was true in my family as various cousins who have moved away to other states come back often to visit my grandmother’s homeplace. They share with me the reason they come is to reminisce about the times they spent there as children. McCauley (1995) discusses this “attachment to place” and the land where one lives, but also describes those Appalachians who move around in their lifetime only to return home where “place” is “marked by ridges and valleys, not property lines” (p. 61).

Growing up in rural Flag Pond, I experienced situations where people within my own family felt strongly about their land, the “homeplace” or “Granny’s cabin” as we called it. There was a deep reluctance to sell the land even for acceptable reasons. For example, when my grandmother passed away, her sons met to decide how to divide her land. After much deliberation around the kitchen table, two of the brothers expressed a desire to sell their share only to the other brothers. They stated the reason for selling was because they were too old to tend the land and keep it up. They strongly emphasized the land not be transferred to anyone outside the family, a condition that all four siblings staunchly agreed on. In addition, great lengths were taken to keep the family cemetery “among our people.” As the family member who eventually ended up with the cemetery, this led to a deep personal conviction for me during my

subsequent divorce in 2011, causing a huge economic sacrifice on my part to honor my relatives' wishes to keep the cemetery in my family.

Another example of this connection is explained by R. Cunningham (2010) who cites R. Humphrey (1984, p. 124), in an article that discusses the concept of Appalachians believing that southern Appalachia is "God's promised land." Both of these men, along with Obermiller & Maloney (2016) say that an example of Appalachians' strong ties to planting crops in the "signs" of the moon are evidence of their intimate relation with the mountains and their faith (Humphrey, 1984, p. 124; Cunningham, 2010, p.57; Obermiller & Maloney, 2016, p. 108). I have heard many people locally use these very words to describe our mountainous community to people visiting Flag Pond. My father, along with several other farmers, planted by the signs based on the Farmers Almanac calendar. My brother still uses it today. One example is to never plant above ground crops like beans when the moon is waning (growing smaller) as they will rot. They should be planted in the signs of the head, heart or upper body. This is based on a Bible verse in Genesis 14 that says, "Let there be light in the firmament of the heaven to divide the day from the night; and let them be for signs, and for seasons, and for days, and years" (Genesis 1:14, King James Version).

Obermiller & Maloney (2016) on the other hand, point out that many Appalachians today are "generations removed from those symbolic places" and don't necessarily have a relationship to the land and the mountains as before (p. 108).

This shift in relationship to land is noticeable in regards to my own four children who have not expressed any desire to move back to their home place. It could be something that the younger generations are experiencing or it is probable there are other factors to consider such as negative memories, lack of employment opportunities, and lack of quality education, to name a



few. However, their connection to the land is noted by their frequent visits to spend quality time in the mountains where they grew up.

### **Appalachian Identity Using Culture or Attribute-Based Methods**

Following the suggestion of ways to identify Appalachians as stated by Krok-Schoen et al. (2015), another method to consider would be attribute-based. In order to ascertain whether changes have happened or how they may have impacted a culture, a researcher must first study the culture of the intended study group in relation to its identity. One must comprehend and understand its norms and values. If not identified by geographic location or a sense of connection to the land, what cultural characteristics, are present in rural Appalachia?

In searching through the literature, initially I found studies from the 1970s and 80s which were generated mostly by the fields of family therapy and counseling (Keefe, 1988a; Keefe, 1988b; Cole, 1988; Hennon & Photiadis, 1979). This surprised me until I read an article by the Rural and Appalachian Youth and Families Consortium (RAYFC) on parenting in Appalachia (1996). The RAYFC states there is limited published research available in the decade before 1996. Though the ethnographic studies were on specific communities and used small samples, the RAYFC articulated three recurring themes in the research found often in families of Appalachia. The themes are localism (being part of the land), historicism (having a sense of place in time) and familism (valuing family of origin) (RAYFC, 1996, p. 387). In reference to familism (putting the needs of family above one's own), Cole (1988) states that Appalachians "value family loyalty above making it in the outside world" (p. 179). Local colloquialisms such as "Blood is thicker than water" illustrate the concept of supporting a family member above others. This value is further demonstrated in the sacrificing of one's own dreams in order to help the family. For example, I have seen instances where a young adult had plans to move away for

a new job or school and a parent became too ill to run the farm. The adult child then stayed behind and forfeited the plans originally made. Often parents work their whole life trying to get ahead to leave something for their children so they will have a better life than the parents.

The concept of familism is further manifested within the realm of the extended family. RAYFC discusses the strong extended family support system existing in Appalachia which provides a sense of identity and belonging (p. 390). Studies by Cole (1988, pp. 177-178) and Keefe (1988a, p. 25) also show the importance of extended family support in a closed family system wherein individuals help their relatives and participate in the raising of a child. Often, we see grandparents helping with babysitting while parents work. In my own family, both my parents and my in-laws assisted with childcare for my children, in addition to daycare services.

RAYFC concurs with Keefe's (1988a) findings by stating "Extended families also provide social control mechanisms, emotional support, and mutual assistance" (RAYFC, 1996, p. 390). Although these studies present a strong sense of familism in the twentieth century, Lewis & Billings (1997) report that "industrialization, urbanization, educational attainment, mass media, and migration were each seen as weakening the hold of familism on rural Appalachians in the 1960s" (p. 4). Thus, one may wonder what is true for the rural Appalachian community in the twenty-first century. When my children were growing up during the 80s and 90s, I received help from parents and siblings but I also got strong opinions, both positive and negative, on what was best for my children, including tips on breastfeeding, medicinal herbs, and discipline.

Cultural values mentioned by the RAYFC study include humor, love of nature, sense of place, patriotism, and self-reliance (1996, p. 390). Other family characteristics of Appalachia include distrust of outsiders, autonomy, and many relatives living very close together (Keefe, 1988a; Cole, 1988). One study, however, by Peters & Peterson (1988) seems to contradict the

characteristics of self-reliance and self-direction among Appalachians. The socialization values of poor mothers in Appalachia (for their children) were compared to urban mothers living in Washington, D.C. by looking at conformity-obedience orientation compared to self-direction and internalization. The study defined conformity-obedience orientation as “obeys parents well, is clean and neat, has good manners, and is a good student” versus the definition of self-direction and internalization as “is happy, is considerate of others, has self-control, is dependable, and is interested in how and why things work” (Peters & Peterson, 1988, p. 55). The research revealed low-income Appalachian mothers valued “obedience-conformity” more than urban mothers and valued “self-direction, internalization values” less than urban blue collar mothers (p. 59).

It is noted that most blue collar workers value obedience, conformity and neatness (when it comes to their children) while middle class, white collar workers value abstract thinking, intellectual ability and freedom from supervision. The authors state that low income families in Appalachia focus on the closeness of family and urge children to be dependent on their parents (Peters & Peterson, 1988, p. 52). This seems to conflict with the characteristic of self-reliance as noted by Keefe, Cole and other researchers of Appalachia. However, Peters & Peterson state this may be a “product of socioeconomic status instead of subcultural status” (p. 59). So, while low-income Appalachian mothers value the obedience-conformity orientation, they also recognize the need for their children to “try hard to succeed” in order to get ahead in life. Otherwise, their children are doomed to have the same socio-economic status as their parents when they grow up (p. 61). Within my own life, I saw my mother making sacrifices for my brother all the time. To begin with, she gave up college. Over the years, she would use money that was put back for things we wanted but didn’t necessarily need such as sports uniforms, school trips, various school club requirements, etc. She would have found the means to pay for my college education

too if I had decided to go when I got out of high school. In this sense, I could be self-reliant, trying hard to succeed yet still honoring my father and mother, as our religion mandated.

In fact, religion in Appalachia affects a large part of the cultural norms. Belief in a higher power gives a sense of hope and purpose in life. While I might not be able to control everything, I can pray with the expectation God will hear and answer my prayers. However, there are those who link this strong sense of faith in rural Appalachia with the idea of fatalism.

Welch (2011) states that fatalism is “also called learned helplessness, mountain stubbornness, hardiness, and sometimes loss of control” (p. 108). She discusses the concept in the health field as “a belief that a divine being will be involved in the illness and potential recovery of the patient” (p. 109). Learned helplessness can also be attributed to past experiences where Appalachians have tried to work through something such as searching for employment, only to be passed over by someone else. After a while, they just accept the rejections.

Frustrations can be explained away as God is making you stronger for something else. This leads to acceptance of the situation one is in. The Appalachians’ belief that “God won’t put on you more than you can handle” (Cole, 1988, p. 180) often guides them to a more complacent present focus on today rather than a future one (Bull, 2010, p. 607) and provides an outcome of strong resiliency. Living in Flag Pond, I have seen the endurance of those who have hardships, either physically, emotionally or economically.

Cole elaborates on this resilience (endurance) in Appalachians as those who can accept the “Lord’s will” (p. 180). Thus, Appalachian people are often bound loyally to the concept that their God will take care of them and all they can (and should) do is live morally right and do right to the best of their ability.

## **Deaf Culture, Identity, and Values**

Having established a broad understanding of the sense of place and cultural values of southern Appalachians, it is imperative to understand Deaf culture before I can find the intersections between Appalachia and Deaf culture. According to Padden & Humphries (1988), the word “Deaf” with the capital letter “D,” was coined by J. Woodward in 1972. It was used to describe those who “share a language (ASL) and a culture” (p. 2). In reference to ASL, the authors say that “one of the primary identifying characteristics of the group is its language” (Padden & Humphries, 1988, p. 6). There have been many instances in my life when others have made statements about ASL being an “abbreviated” kind of “English on the hands.” However, American Sign Language is not a broken, shortened, abbreviated form of English. It is recognized by linguists as having its own grammatical structure and considered a natural language (Singleton & Tittle, 2000; Lane, et al., 1996, Padden & Humphries, 1988). In addition, like many languages, ASL also has its own origin stories filled with metaphors of how and why Deaf people came into being. Padden and Humphries refer to the stories of Abbé de l’ Epée and Jean Massieu as “folk mythology” describing when the Deaf community was created (pp. 31). Today, Epée is considered by many to be the Father of the Deaf, (Lane, et. al, 1996, p. 154).

Besides the language, there is a desire within the Deaf community to be with those who have similar values and share common goals. This is where support is garnered from like-minded individuals and stories are handed down, including stories of origin (Scheetz, 2004, p.19). When I was a young child, my parents and other Deaf people would meet in different homes in the community. Everyone signed, including the children. Storytelling was an integral part of the social gatherings as there were stories being told in various circles of the social gathering. Stories were told in the kitchen among the women and in the living room or outside

by the men. Even the children were telling stories. Because of our shared bi-cultural, bi-lingual experiences, there was a certain amount of trust and comfort in being with other children who had deaf parents. I remember with fondness sharing long conversations and stories with these friends called my “CODA brothers and sisters.” CODA is an acronym which stands for “Children of Deaf Adults.”

While the practice of ABC and number stories (stories using handshapes like letters or numbers) was used occasionally at special events, depictions of farm life and other stories relevant to our rural way of life were commonly told. For example, when a group of Deaf friends got together with our family, my father would begin to tell stories about simple things such as milking a cow or going squirrel hunting. Yet, the stories were far from simple. In fact, it was so vivid, one could almost see the milk flowing into the bucket or squirted in the cat’s eyes as he described milking a cow. In another story, he described in great detail the waving of a squirrel’s bushy tail as it scampered up a tree or across the forest floor. There always seemed to be a few “designated” storytellers whose stories were favored over all the rest and my father was one of them.

Lane (1992) states that the “mastery of ASL and skillful storytelling are highly valued in deaf culture” (p. 16). In fact, these skills are learned early on in the residential schools for the deaf (Lane, p. 16) where certain children step up to tell stories as others gather around Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996, p. 153). Later, as adults, they volunteer to tell at social events (p. 153). My father was well known for his stories within my own Deaf community. Many times, I would be playing outside only to hear bursts of laughter and shouts of glee. When I would go investigate, I would see several people gathered around my father as he regaled them about some recent adventure in his everyday experiences. Lane, et al. (1996) explains “The storyteller and

the story have an important role to play in the bonding of the Deaf-World and the transmission of its heritage and accumulated wisdom” (p. 153).

By the late 1960’s and early 70’s, most Deaf people were going to the Deaf club in Bluff City, typically once or twice a month. Pot luck dinners, closed-captioned movies, and holiday celebrations were opportunities for Deaf people to get together where stories were shared throughout the night. Often, they would forego their own family’s holiday meals to share with their community of Deaf friends. This is not surprising as Deaf clubs are known for being the “strongest organizational bonding in the Deaf-World” (Lane et al., 1996, p. 134). Established in the late 1880’s through the 1930’s and 40’s, deaf clubs were known for their social events such as captioned films, games, performances, storytelling, and feasts, to name a few (Baynton et al., 2007, pp. 104-108).

Although they peaked during the 1950’s and 60’s in most cities, the Tri Cities Chapter of Tennessee Association of the Deaf (TCCTAD) was still going strong until early in the twenty-first century when financial issues caused the closure of the building. My mother told me the building (located on Silver Grove Road in Bluff City, Tennessee) was formerly used for church services before being transformed into a club house. In fact, many of the older members of the local Deaf community used to tell us children about the former clubhouse burning down and being rebuilt. Some of them had pictures of the old three story church/clubhouse but it was gone by the time I was born. In its place was a long, one story building, with a huge rectangular room. On one side of the building was a small kitchen and restrooms off to one side.

Other aspects that are important in the Deaf community are listed in *A Journey into the Deaf-World*. Some of their values discussed include but are not limited to: Deaf identity, group decision-making, informality, reciprocity, physical contact, and promoting unity (Lane, et al.,

1996, p. 70). The authors also explain the importance of organizations for the Deaf (athletic, social and political) as well as artistic expression (p. 124).

Over the years, in my own home and working as a professional sign language interpreter, I have seen the comradery of the Deaf community. When one of the members becomes ill, they rally to their bedside, at the hospital or their home. If someone passed away, they come together and support one another in their grief, throughout the funeral process, often given seats that denote family with a sign language interpreter (if the minister was not deaf). When the local communication center was up for bid, they again came together for the good of the whole community, making decisions as a group. There are no secrets within the Deaf community as everyone knows everyone else's business. While the sign language interpreters must abide by a confidentiality tenet, the Deaf community does not adhere to such a standard. Homecomings at TSD are well attended by alumni and sporting events such as the Mason-Dixon basketball tournament are enjoyed by the Deaf community from eleven different southern states. In addition, personal space is different among Deaf people with frequent hugs given upon arrival, during conversation and even for leave taking, among all parties. Lane, et al. (1996) state these aspects all contribute to a sense of unity (p. 71).

As I reviewed the literature, I was able to find sources and studies on Appalachia and even rural Appalachian culture. I also found literature on Deaf culture but none on rural, Deaf Appalachia. From my experience, I can see similarities like the connection to place. Appalachians have a connection to the mountainous land and Deaf individuals have a connection to their residential school for the Deaf. Appalachians have a strong sense of connection with their families and extended families and the same is true for Deaf people and their connection to other Deaf people who feel like siblings and cousins. Deaf people, like Appalachian people,



have a solid feeling of belonging and a sense of pride in their community. Like rural Appalachia, they come together and support one another in times of need and fellowship. So, while the literature is rich in Appalachian studies as well as the Deaf community, there is precious little (if not absent) information on these marginalized rural cultures together. I could not find anything on the unique challenges of an individual belonging to both non-dominant communities.

Some of the referenced scholars I found were older than ten years old. However, the information on rural Appalachia and Deaf culture was consistent with the era my mother grew up in, as well as my own. In addition, the values of Deaf culture expressed in the literature seemed to be in line with what I know as a working professional in the Deaf community. Jane Ann's oral history is comparable to the literature reviews describing values of that time. This study sheds light on those similarities.

Furthermore, the intersectionality of rural, Deaf Appalachian women simply isn't documented. In her article, "Intersections of Appalachian Identity," Terman (2016) argues that the Appalachian people share similar "commonalities: a relationship to land and the environment, cultural traditions, economic systems, and other social issues." She suggests these similarities are experienced depending on various intersectionalities including "other relevant identities" (p. 75). I concur with Terman with regard to the intersectionalities of other relevant identities as they apply to rural, Deaf Appalachian women who have not completed a formal education. Thus, the contribution of collected oral histories from the last living deaf female in this rural, Appalachian community is vital for preserving the stories of their way of life.

CHAPTER 3  
METHODOLOGY

**Research Methodology**

In this chapter, I discuss my research methodology. Qualitative research is a means by which one can study human lives through a number of methods including observation, interviews, participation and focal groups. The Qualitative Research Network at the University of Utah College of Nursing defines qualitative research as follows:

Qualitative research is a process of naturalistic inquiry that seeks in-depth understanding of social phenomena within their natural setting. It focuses on the "why" rather than the "what" of social phenomena and relies on the direct experiences of human beings as meaning-making agents in their everyday lives. Rather than by logical and statistical procedures, qualitative researchers use multiple systems of inquiry for the study of human phenomena including biography, case study, historical analysis, discourse analysis, ethnography, grounded theory and phenomenology (University of Utah College of Nursing, n.d.).

I chose to do qualitative research because it is the best method for my research project. It allows me the opportunity to collect information through interviewing my mother. In addition, qualitative research speaks to the human condition rather than collecting stats as with quantitative research. My study is a life history research project which looks at a marginalized people and culture, the Deaf community, by telling the story of one woman. Life history is a type of oral history. Since oral history interviews are the most comprehensive way to get my mother's life story, I chose to use this research methodology. My goal is to tell her story and through her story give insight into an oppressed, disenfranchised group. According to the Oral History Association,

Oral history is a field of study and a method of gathering, preserving and interpreting the voices and memories of people, communities, and participants in past events. Oral history is both the oldest type of historical inquiry, predating the written works, and one of the most modern, initiated with tape recorders in the 1940s and now using 21<sup>st</sup> century digital technologies (Oral History Association, n.d.).

D. Ritchie (2003), says “..., oral history collects memories and personal commentaries of historical significance through recorded interviews” (p. 19). He also asserts that oral history can’t have just one straightforward definition as it has to match the “goals, resources and other practical considerations” (p. 19). Thus, operating within the framework of oral history, I analyzed the intersectionality of a deaf, Appalachian female who was not formally educated yet was able to overcome the stereotypes and barriers placed on her by society. In documenting her oral history, I am also preserving the legacy of the people in the Flag Pond area.

I conducted this qualitative research with an emphasis on oral history using mostly a standardized interview as described by B. Berg (2009, pp. 104-111). According to Berg, there are three types of interviews: standardized, semi-standardized and unstandardized. Standardized interviews are more structured, adhere to a list of questions, and could be compared to a paper and pencil survey (p. 105). Semi-Standardized interviews are somewhat structured with flexibility in the order of questions and the ability to interact more for clarification purposes. Unstandardized interviews, according to Berg, have no structure or order to questions or answers.

## **Data Collection**

For the purposes of this study, an interview questionnaire was used during the initial interview to populate memories for my mother. Subsequent information was gathered using unstandardized interviews as collected through texts, emails, and other videophone conversations.

Prior to the initial recorded interview, I sent Jane Ann an interview questionnaire with a list of questions as shown in Appendix B. Topics asked about were childhood, education, employment, Deaf identity, Appalachian identity, political life and types of relaxation. An informed consent form was also sent to Jane Ann for her signature. In the form, I described the purpose of my study which was to collect her stories and document the life experience of a deaf woman growing up in rural Appalachia, not having finished her formal education, who was a leader and an advocate in the deaf community, and who was socially and politically active in the state of Tennessee.

This form also described any possible liabilities arising from conducting her oral interviews such as the possibility of uncomfortable memories. When conducting oral histories, the researcher can never be totally sure whether a question may prompt an unpleasant memory. This was a risk not only for my mother but also for me because of our relationship. In giving her the interview questions in advance, the risk may have been reduced (if she read the questions ahead of time). In that case, I may have lost some spontaneity, candor and vulnerability in the process because she would be able to plan what she said.

Because my mother and I currently live in different states, almost a thousand miles apart, I have limited access to her in person to conduct interviews. Thus, we decided to use a videophone so that I could interview her in ASL which is our native language. A videophone is a software program that sends video and audio signals over the internet to connect two sources

together, much like videoconferencing is done through programs such as Skype, Zoom, etc. However, I knew from past experience in video recording a monitor that the end result would be a poor quality video. I also knew that it was nearly impossible to have an interactive interview because of my mother's visual disabilities as it is very difficult to communicate or interject when she is talking (signing). I would not be able to interrupt (for clarification purposes) or get her attention during the interview. The conversation would have to be one sided.

Thus, I resolved the issue by sending her a list of the questions (an interview questionnaire) in advance, so she would know what I was asking for (see Appendix B). She, in turn, videotaped herself with a separate recorder. Having a quality video was crucial in terms of accuracy, documentation, and much more effective in staying on track. Furthermore, this proved to be vital in the structuring of her stories when I began working on the performance pieces in sign language. I was able to use the same style and vocabulary in sign language as Jane Ann, including gestures, facial expressions and other grammatical nuances, while capturing her style and emphasis on what was important for her.

This is crucial as I want to be able to present her stories in sign language to audiences who are deaf. This interview method may be construed as being outside the normal interviewing principles of traditional qualitative research but was necessary for me to interview my mother given her visual limitations and the inability to meet face to face. In fact, a study by Lucas et al. (2013) states this type of interviewing with modern technology opens up possibilities with research subjects who are deaf, no longer requiring one to be in the physical presence of the subject in order to interview (p. 1).

This technology is having a huge impact on research with those who use sign language because it is opening up doors to interview other than how traditional data has been collected (p.

9). According to Lucas, et al., recruitment of subjects is enhanced, sign production can happen at two separate times, and travel with data collection equipment is obsolete (pp. 9-10). One drawback is the researcher may not interact with the community (if that is the desire) (p. 10). Napier, Lloyd, Skinner, Turner, & Wheatley (2018) say that having a qualitative follow-up interview via this technology would be beneficial but that it takes more time to prepare videos, edit the content, etc., and the users may not be representative of a generic group (p. 115). However, online sign language surveys may be the new standard approach (p. 116).

In addition to the initial recorded interview, I gathered additional information from Jane Ann through texting, emails, or casual conversation via videophone. For these instances, I used pen and paper to write down things as she conversed with me in ASL. This was awkward at times because she had to wait when I needed to write down something lengthy. I also made copies of her emails and texts for future reference. In addition, I had previous knowledge about certain facts that I could include from my memory and conversations with other family members.

The first interview lasted approximately two and a half hours. Jane Ann sat in her living room in front of the videophone. She used the interview questionnaire to guide her as she gave a narrative of her life. Later, I “voice interpreted” the signed stories into English as a digital recording and then transcribed them. I chose to transcribe the digital recording verbatim, with minimal editing, recognizing the limitations that a live, interpreted conversation could have on the outcome of the story. However, I felt confident in the interpretation because I was familiar with Jane Ann’s communication style and had worked with her as a professional interpreter in a variety of settings for numerous years.

Jane Ann did not seem to be impeded by the video recorder and continued to tell her stories non-stop throughout the interview. Once I interpreted and transcribed the videos, I sent

the initial transcripts to her for proofing. We exchanged numerous video calls and texts over the past year making sure I had captured her oral histories accurately. I then sent her the final stories to edit and critique.

My mother has been eagerly receptive to documenting her life stories. No one else was formally interviewed for this project but there were family members who were sometimes present just outside the camera's view, as she asked at one point for a glass of water which was given to her. In addition, the sound of a television could be heard during the interview. Because Jane Ann was speaking in sign language, I turned off the sound of the video recording when I went back to interpret her stories for the transcript.

Video recording Jane Ann was a good decision because it helped me tell her story. Since ASL is my first language, watching my mother sign her story on the videos also aided me in understanding firsthand the message she was trying to convey in her native language. This allowed for a more accurate translation of her stories in the transcript. In turn, an accurate transcript helped me to write the stories for performance. I was also able to tell her stories to an audience using the signing style exactly as she would.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE STORIES: DEAF IN APPALACHIA

Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan (1996) state how imperative storytelling is to Deaf culture and that the tellers must be recognized and respected because the storytellers act as the culture's historians and teachers, imparting Deaf-World values to the community (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996, p. 7). As I watched my mother tell her stories, I was reverent and present being careful not to avert my eyes as this is considered disrespectful in the Deaf community when one is talking. In the "hearing world," we often look around when talking with others, not having the need to look at someone's eyes the entire time because we can hear the conversation. In addition to being disrespectful, if attention is not paid to the facial expressions and body movements, valuable information is lost from the conversation. I recall many times growing up when I heard something and looked away while my mother was talking. She would admonish me and say, "Pay attention to me while I am talking to you instead of looking around! You're being rude!" C. Padden illustrates this in her article, "The Deaf Community and the Culture of Deaf People" (p. 23).

In the first story, Jane Ann talks about her childhood and life growing up in the farming communities of Flag Pond, Tennessee and the Shelton Laurel community in Madison County, North Carolina. She describes starting school in Knoxville and her relationship with two aunts who were the only mother figures in her life. Jane Ann describes her summer breaks and work on the farm with her father and paternal grandmother.

Then she discusses her courtship and marriage in the second story which halted her high school education and eliminated her plans to attend college on a scholarship (see Appendix C for photographs of Jane Ann's childhood).



In the third story, Jane Ann describes some of the places she has worked, as well as fighting against oppression and discrimination and how she dealt with those issues.

The last story deals with my mother's involvement in the political arena as president of the Tennessee Association for the Deaf and as a lobbyist in the Tennessee State legislature. She also transitions from there to discussing her years at the Tennessee School for the Deaf and what it is like now.

These are just a sample of the stories I collected. In thinking about the creation of stories, I am aware of R. Bauman's article (1986) which discusses the rhetoric that often surrounds "oral literature." As a result, he asserts that valuable parts of the culture in folklore are left out in the telling of stories which is a necessary component of the oral performance (p. 3). In the crafting my mother's stories, I was careful to remember the important elements of telling a good story with a beginning, a middle and an end, making sure to show conflict as well as resolution without compromising the historical truth to her life experiences. Although listeners cannot remember too many names when heard orally, I felt compelled to include all names as they are imperative to the Deaf culture and their identity. In addition, I included more description than I normally would in an oral story to record a way of life that is no longer in existence. Of interest to note is within Deaf communication and storytelling, details and descriptions are a large part of ASL as a visual, gestural language which is not always present in spoken languages such as English. This is evident in Jane Ann's stories as she gives specific details and descriptions.

## **Childhood**

### **Living on Devil's Fork**

My father was born in 1896 in a little community over in Madison County North Carolina called Big Creek. He was the oldest of seven children and he was the only one that was

deaf. So, he was sent to Morganton, North Carolina to the North Carolina School for the Deaf. My mother was born in 1918 in a little Community called Devil's Fork, which is in the South End of Unicoi County in Flag Pond. She was the youngest of eight children, the youngest three children were all deaf (her two older brothers and herself). My mother went to school at the Tennessee School for the Deaf (TSD) in Knoxville as did my two uncles.

My parents were married in 1940. There was a big age difference but in the deaf community, age makes no difference. It's about communication and because both my parents were deaf and could sign, that was a natural attraction. I was born in 1943.

Then, it was discovered that my mother was not able to take care of me. Now some called it postpartum depression and others said she just had some issues but for whatever reason it was decided by the family that I would go and live with my mother's sister, Mettie. Aunt Mettie owned a little grocery store and diner which was next door to their house and my cousin Voyd's auto mechanic shop. My earliest memories were of riding a tricycle around and around and around on the "L" shaped porch of the house. I don't know if it was my tricycle but I know I got to ride it a lot. When I took a break from riding, I grabbed my bottle which had the nipple cut off and drank/ate the oatmeal out of it. I remember just turning that bottle up. That was my snack.

I remember my mother's mother, Celia. She could fingerspell just like all the other family members and I saw her talk with my father in the same way. Celia was always very quiet, and sweet. My mother's mother was very kind and more sensitive to me. Maybe because she had three deaf children herself so she understood. I never saw her get angry. I also played a lot in my earlier years with my second cousin, Grace. We both loved to ride tricycles on her porch, which was three-sided and just as much fun as Aunt Mettie's porch. Later, her house burned

down and they rebuilt it with only a front porch. I remember that Grace died young due to a heart ailment.

Before we moved over to the main highway (Highway 23), I lived with Aunt Mettie on Devil's Fork. Her son, Voyd and his wife, Helen, lived up the road within sight of our house. Only a field existed between us and I often went and played with Wanda, their daughter. Sometimes I'd play with the Rice girls who lived above Voyd's house beyond another field. One day, I wanted to go visit the Rice sisters. My Aunt Mettie said I could not go, but I was apparently defiant in my tender years. I started walking up the main road to their house. To my surprise, Aunt Mettie caught up with me by the time I reached Voyd's house. I still recall how she switched my legs all the way back home. She fingerspelled, "n-o-t-s-a-f-e," spelling out the letters with the manual alphabet, indicating it was too dangerous to walk on the road because I could be hit by a car. I still remember her spelling out, "D-o-n-o-t-t-a-l-k-b-a-c-k. O-B-E-Y!

This was how Aunt Mettie always communicated with me, by using the manual alphabet. She would fingerspell, "A-r-e y-o-u h-u-n-g-r-y? W-h-a-t-d-o-y-o-u-w-a-n-t-t-o-e-a-t?" with lightning speed. She was super fast! Actually, all of the relatives on my mother's side used the manual alphabet to communicate with Deaf family members. You might think they would have learned to sign, especially since the youngest three siblings were deaf and had been educated at TSD. However, everyone on my mother's side communicated this way. In addition, there were several relatives up and down Devil's Fork who knew the manual alphabet and used it frequently with the Deaf members of our little rural community.

Almost every weekend, Father walked over from his home in North Carolina to visit. Sometimes, he came on Saturday and spent the night. Other times, he only came on Sunday to visit. The walk was about seven or eight miles to our home on Devil's Fork and about twelve

miles when we moved over to the house on Highway 23. I remember them telling me “This is your father” and although I didn't really understand that when I was real small, I was comfortable with him. I have an album full of pictures that he took of us together, especially when he visited me. Aunt Mettie and my father communicated by fingerspelling as well.

One of my earliest memories is from the outhouse. That's what we had back then and I was sitting there one day looking out at a row of beehives. One in particular caught my eye. I thought to myself, “There are several bees coming in and out of their hives, except for that one hive.” So I went over to investigate and at first the bees weren't bothering me. When I saw the one hive had no bees flying in or out, I grabbed a rock and banged real hard on top of the hive. That was when I discovered there were bees inside as they spilled out and began to sting me! My aunt must have heard me screaming and ran to get me. I don't really know what happened after that, whether I was in a coma, went to the hospital or what. I just remember I was swollen all over. Eventually the swelling went away and I survived.

Now when I was old enough to attend school, of course, I was sent to TSD. I remember walking in on the first day of school. My father dropped me off and he said, “I'm going home. You stay here and learn. I'll come back at Christmas.” After he left, I immediately tried to start a conversation with some of the other children in the room. However, most of them stared at my hands flying, wide-eyed, and started backing away from me with looks of terror in their eyes. I didn't know what was wrong with them or why they were afraid. It was explained to me that they couldn't sign. They had not learned sign language because no one at their home could sign either. During those early days and months, I learned what it meant to be “Deaf” and that only students who couldn't hear went to TSD. Prior to starting school, I had never been told I was “Deaf.” My father told me once that he and I couldn't hear while others around us used their

mouths to talk. However, he didn't explain "Deaf" as a culture or that we used ASL. But it was all I had ever known. Later that first day, when I found other kids with Deaf parents, we fell into a rhythm of signing and just "talked up a storm" as those shy, "signless" kids watched on. Eventually, they learned the language from those of us who already knew ASL and began communicating in sign language themselves. It's interesting because watching us helped them acquire sign language quicker. I guess because they were "Deaf" inside, that intuitiveness of knowing "I am Deaf and that is normal for me" helped them adjust and adapt easier. My first cousins, Virginia and Carolyn, were also there along with their older brother Otis. They signed fluently, so I felt comfortable much sooner. At Christmas, my father came back to get me and we rode the bus back home to Aunt Mettie's house.

One particular year, when I went home for summer break, I saw my aunt Mettie laying in her bed and I asked her "A-r-e-y-o-u-o-k?" She responded by fingerspelling, "I-a-m-d-y-i-n-g." I didn't really understand it at the time. Looking back, I realize I was only seven years old at the time. She laid in her bed a lot that summer. In the fall, I went back to school and after Thanksgiving, my cousin Voyd came to pick me up. He said my aunt Mettie had died. After the funeral, I went back to school until the Christmas break. However, instead of going to my Aunt Mettie's house, I went to live with my father and his mother in North Carolina. I really couldn't understand why I didn't go with my cousin Voyd and his wife, Helen, but that is how it went. Soon after, Voyd and his family moved away to Virginia.

### **Living on Shelton Laurel**

My father's home was in an even more remote area than Devil's Fork. He lived over in the mountains of western North Carolina. There were no other houses in the hollow where we lived. Most of the people in our community were farmers, including my father. Most grew

tobacco and some wheat. We had a large garden and a big farm as well. My father grew tobacco as his main cash crop. He also grew produce to sell. When he sold his tobacco, he put back the money to live on for the next year. I recall his tomatoes were very pretty and not cracked. When I came home for the summers, I helped him in the fields. When my father first taught me to hoe corn, I kept knocking the plant over or chopping it off, which must have been frustrating for him. He'd tell me, "No, this is how you do it" but I remember I wasn't doing it right. Finally, he said, "Forget it." I guess I learned later as time went on.

I did help my grandmother canning and putting food in the jars, breaking beans. I hated to break beans because it seemed like forever and ever, string and break, string and break, string and break! My fingers were so sore from stringing and breaking green beans for the winter. Then we set the canning jars of beans down in a big washtub over a fire. My grandmother boiled them for a long time. I don't remember how long. Today we have pressure canners but back then that's how it was done. After we pulled the tub away from the fire, the jars would seal tight. We canned tomatoes and cucumbers. Oh, and chow chow too. I can remember chopping cabbage forever to have enough to make kraut. So I worked helping prepare the food for the winter. That's how the people lived.

As for meat, we didn't have beef cattle or hogs. We had plenty of chickens of course. They would wring their necks and I thought, "Wow." Then they'd pluck their feathers. That's what we had to eat. They'd wring their necks by swinging them around with their hands. We also had rabbits. I remember my father picking the special kind of "grass plant" (a wide green leaf-like plant) that the rabbits liked to eat along with food pellets. My father didn't like to hunt much but when he went squirrel hunting, we had squirrel gravy. I remember having that for a meal several times. Sometimes I thought it was sad when we had to kill the animals but that was

life on the farm and that's how we survived. Most of the time, people were worried about preparing their food for the winter. There wasn't much time for socializing except when they got together to eat.

I know that they always helped one another with each other's farms. Whether it was cutting tobacco or hanging it up in the barn, they helped each other. I remember whenever school was closed for the Christmas holidays, I came home for two or three weeks. We pulled the tobacco leaves off of the stalks and then grade them into separate piles for sale. The tobacco had to be "in case" which meant it was just moist enough to handle it without crumbling. After that, we stacked them up in flat baskets and take them to the market in Asheville or Johnson City. That's how we had Christmas money to buy shoes or clothing. I remember I spent a lot of my Christmas breaks that way. We didn't have a TV back then. Most people just sat around and told stories or talked. We had more family interaction. Today families are scattered everywhere. They're all watching different TVs or on their cellphones and not interacting with anyone.

On the farm we also had a Jersey milking cow and a mule named Bob that was used for plowing. My grandmother churned butter from the cow's milk. Then she poured the butter into decorative wooden molds with designs of ducks, swans, flowers, etc. Next, the molds were put in the spring box to chill. This is a box that has cold, spring water flowing through it, (usually partially underground or covered), causing the air inside to be cooled.

On Thursdays, we walked down to the road and a truck came through selling a variety of things such as flour, salt, pepper, canned foods, spices, vanilla, molasses, and oatmeal. My grandmother would take butter and eggs to exchange. I always found it interesting to see how they bartered items, but I don't know how they kept the butter cold in the truck. People traded

for things they needed which couldn't always be bought at the store. At the store you had to have cash, but with the truck you could barter your items. So, there were fresh vegetables such as cucumbers, squash, okra, or tomatoes. It kept down some of the traveling to the store which was in Marshall. We were very poor but we had good food and we never went hungry. I know he worked hard to survive. I guess that's why I never got toys and things at Christmas. I only remember one time that my father left and went to the store one year before Christmas. He came back with a little doll. That's the only toy I ever remember getting from him. He bought me shoes and things, usually when I told him my old ones were hurting my feet. Some years, we went to Elzie and Jean's house for Christmas.

My father's mother could not sign or fingerspell at all. In fact, I am not sure how she and my father communicated. I wrote notes to her and wrote back if she needed to. She was a stern woman who was so different than my other grandmother. She worked all the time and she expected the same from me. She always had a frown on her face, like a scowl. I don't know if it was because she was divorced and had a hard life raising seven children alone and farming (that would do it) but that was her nature. Regardless, I was always trying to do what she asked and be a good girl. I scrubbed wooden floors on my hands and knees and washed our clothes on a metal washboard. Later on, we got a wringer washer. I had to haul the water up to the house from an open fire where it was heated. After they were washed, I hung them up to dry on the clothesline. Then, I took them down and ironed them. I also had to cook meals. No matter how hard I worked, she still had that scowl on her face.

Although I couldn't really communicate with my father's mother, I managed until it was time to return to school. There, I could communicate with everybody. I was fortunate in that I was able to continue going to TSD in Knoxville even though I had a North Carolina home. I



loved going to school because everybody could communicate there--the teachers, the students, and the staff. I enjoyed that so much but I also loved coming home because my father could sign. All the neighbors in Shelton Laurel could fingerspell just like my family and friends on Devil's Fork. Looking back, I realize just how odd it was that the whole community within a 12 mile radius could communicate with the deaf members by fingerspelling. I guess we were sort of like a mini-Martha's Vineyard, which had their own little Deaf community.

### **Summer Breaks and Family**

My sister, Faye, came along when I was four years old. It happened that my mother couldn't take care of her either. So she was placed with our uncle, Elzie. He and his wife, Jean had tried to have children but were unsuccessful. They had a little boy who had not survived childbirth, so they were tickled to death to get this new baby. Even though I now had a younger sister, I didn't know it for a long time. You know how kids are when they get together and they're fighting and playing games together? Well, one day we were in a little scuffle or a disagreement and I remember Jean (I called her Jean most of the time) said to us, "You all should not argue because you are sisters." We just sort of looked at one another. From then on, I always had that special bond with her and she's been dear to me ever since. Though she is four years younger than me, she feels like my twin because we are so close.

Summer breaks meant more time with family which was always special. Sometimes, my deaf cousins, Carolyn and Virginia, came over with their family and we had picnics up in the cool, shady part of the mountains. Other times, I stayed with them. Some of my fondest memories were when we all jumped into the back of a pick-up truck. We were out in the country, riding along with the bugs hitting us in the eyes. We learned how to duck down behind the truck cab, dodging the bugs. It was hot too! After we arrived at Horse Creek, we ate and

went swimming. We just enjoyed being with one another. That's what was important to our family. Even though we were poor, we knew how to have a good time, cook good food and take it with us on a picnic.

Sometimes I visited Jean and my sister, Faye. It was at least seven miles from North Carolina to where Jean and Elzie lived, but I walked those roads from North Carolina to Tennessee. My eyesight wasn't as bad back then. I took a shortcut through the mountains. Many times people asked me why I never got bit by a snake. There were rattlesnakes, copperheads and other kinds of things but I really didn't pay attention to stuff on the road. Oh, I turned around to look behind me occasionally, but I didn't really look down for snakes and things.

Sometimes, I walked from my father's home to the local store on Big Creek which was run by Beryl Shelton. It was about a mile from our house and I still remember the feel of warm dirt between my toes as I trod down the dirt road. Since my neighbors and cousins could fingerspell, communication was not a problem for me there either. One of my favorite things to do was go swimming just below Beryl's store. It was a good sized swimming hole in the creek. Many of the kids couldn't swim but I had learned at TSD, so I didn't have a problem. Some of the girls seemed to be amazed that I could swim so well as they sat on the bank to watch me.

I'd walk those long miles over to Tennessee just so I could be with Jean, my sister Faye, and Elzie. Their home seemed to be a social hub of the deaf community. Even though this was a little pocketed community up in Flag Pond and western North Carolina right there at Shelton Laurel and Devil's Fork, a lot of deaf families lived there. There were the Kings, the Rays, (my family), and the Sheltons. Deaf families from the upper east Tennessee region came to visit too: the Campbells, the Wallaces, the Sumners, the Valentines and the Carrs. Everybody got together

at various deaf homes and we had the best time laughing and carrying on, signing, playing games, cooking and talking. We sometimes visited the Deaf club over in Bluff City. I loved going to Jean and Elzie's because that was like the community center where Deaf people went. I was still in school at TSD but they had a deaf Sunday school class taught by a deaf man named Glenn Shelton. Everyone gathered together because of the communication. I think it was interesting that everyone in the community could sign in some capacity. Some could use ASL, some could do the manual alphabet. Some used home signs and gestures. Some were friends, some were family, and some who were obviously my cousins, could fingerspell as well. So it was a wonderful place to grow up and I went back and forth from North Carolina to Tennessee, playing with the girls from both communities.

### **Married Life**

When I got to be a little bit older, a Deaf man named Glenn, caught my eye. He looked to me like Marlon Brando only a little bit shorter and a little bit broader. He was strong and muscular and he was Deaf, of course. I had been around him all my life. He was always coming down to Jean's and he loved to make people laugh. He had this big hearty laughter and every time he laughed, people looked at him and smiled. He was always playing jokes on Jean, like putting snakes in her bed or on the floor behind her, but not poisonous ones. Once, he poured water on her from the roof when she walked out of the house! Another time he killed a rattlesnake and coiled it up on the porch behind her where she was doing her washing. When she looked down, she screamed. Then that little bitty woman jumped off the high end of the porch! I still remember to this day how it scared her so bad and she began to fuss at him in sign language of course. He understood that she was upset and yet, he still just threw back his head and laughed even harder. She didn't stay mad at him long.

I was intrigued with this man and he kept coming around and naturally after a while, we started courting. Then, there was a day when he came with Jean to pick me up from school for Easter Break. When we got back to Flag Pond, we dropped Jean off and went on to Ringgold, Georgia to get married. We had eloped! Well, we were so excited and in love. We spent that whole weekend together and then we came back home. We had planned to share the news with everybody but when we got home, my paternal grandmother Milom had passed away. It didn't really seem to be the appropriate time to have a celebration and talk about us getting married. So, we just kept quiet about it and after the funeral, I went back to school in Knoxville. Then I found out you couldn't be married and still be in school. Now I had an extra reason for keeping it secret and I didn't tell anybody.

At the end of my sophomore year, before beginning my junior year, they came and talked to me about going to Gallaudet College (that's Gallaudet University now), the only liberal arts college for deaf people. I have to say that I was a little bit surprised because when I was in elementary school, I was moved up two grades because I was so bored in class. The administrators said "Obviously you're too smart for this level" and so I was bumped up. I didn't like being with kids two years older than me. I really had a hard time relating at first and I didn't want to be there. I wanted to stay with all my friends and my cousins who were my age. Now, they wanted to send me off to college before I could even finish my junior year of school, so I said no. The following year, they again approached me, offering a scholarship to Gallaudet which meant I had to forego my senior year in high school, but I finally agreed to go.

Now, Vocational Rehabilitation was going to sponsor some of the college expenses so I had to go and get a physical. I went to Erwin and saw Dr. Hyder who was real kind and patient. He wrote notes back and forth to me. This was the way hearing people communicated before

interpreters were available. I wrote and told him what I was planning to do so he did a physical. When I got dressed, he came back in and wrote on the paper. He asked me if I was married. I thought to myself, “Why is he asking me? Is it that obvious on my face that I'm married?” I didn't wear my ring. He was my doctor so I didn't feel like I could lie to him. I wrote back and told him I was. Then he wrote something that changed my life forever. He said, “Good, because you're pregnant.”

I knew then that Gallaudet was not going to be a possibility for me. I had a duty and a responsibility, so I let all that go. But then the cat was out of the bag. While I could hide the marriage, I couldn't hide my belly and so I wasn't able to finish my senior year of high school because you couldn't attend high school back then if you were pregnant. However, I did have little baby boy and he was the joy of my life. If I had any emptiness from not having a mother all of those years, I didn't worry about it anymore.

The only constant mother I had was Jean. She was more like a mother to me and I learned so much from her on how to take care of this little boy. I remember when I was going back and forth to school. She didn't have much money. In fact, she had my sister Faye to raise and yet she always made sure I had extra money to take back to school with me. She made sure I had little snacks and treats to take with me back to school. Her sister in Mississippi had sent her some really nice clothes. Because I was about the same size as her, she sent the clothes back with me. She wanted me to have nice clothes to wear to school. Jean was always trying to take care of me when I was growing up. I used to help her with the garden and canning because my uncle Elzie wasn't able to since he was blind by that time.

After my son was born, I had a little girl and then I had another little girl who died the day after she was born. People ask, “How do you survive that? How do you go on?” All I

remember was I had two small kids at home waiting for me and there was nothing I could do about that. So I just picked up and went on and took care of those little babies. Guess who babysat for me while I worked? Jean did all the time.

After my kids got a little bit older, I went back and enrolled at a business college and started taking classes in accounting. I was the only female and I had no interpreter. The men in my class loathed me because I ruined the curve on all the tests. Lucky for them, not so for me, I got sick about that time and wasn't able to continue with college. However, years later because of all the political activities I did on behalf of Tennessee School for the Deaf and deaf Tennesseans, I was presented an honorary high school diploma from TSD, mainly because I lobbied successfully for \$12 million dollars to build cottages at the school.

Now life has taken me several places over the years. While I might have some regrets, there's some things that were just meant to be. As I look back over my life, I guess I would say this: things happen for a reason. We may not understand them but there's always a purpose in there. My blessings came from growing up in a family that could communicate with me; where I could see adult deaf role models and feel accepted. If I hadn't been deaf, I doubt I would have accomplished half as much as what I did.

### **Entering the Job Force**

My employment history is an interesting story but it's a long story. A long time ago, I first started out as a seamstress. Most of the people in this small community worked as a seamstress or they worked at the railroad or the pottery place. There were not a lot of factories back then, but there was the sewing factory. Where I worked, they made the rentals, the uniforms people rented to work in. I worked there for about 14 years. I learned and picked up the different kinds of sewing which paid about \$1 to \$2 per hour but I made about \$5 per hour

because I was very fast on my piecework. It was a challenge but I stayed focused. Sometimes the other women would ask me to slow down because they didn't want the company to raise the production rates.

I remember one day a lady came by and she was making all these gestures which seemed like she was making fun of me with fake sign language. I looked at her and thought "whatever" and went back to sewing. But it kept on and on, her making fun of me because I was deaf. I knew that some hearing people were like that so I just ignored them. One day she came in again and I wondered how I could make her stop making fun of me (in a nice way). I got an idea and so the next time she came by, I got up and went over to her table and pretended to talk, moving my mouth and exaggerating my face but not making any sounds. "Blah, blah, blah," I mouthed as I pointed here and there, as if I was imitating her in some way. Then I signed to her, "Oh, you don't know what I'm saying, oh okay." I then turned and started walking away. The woman was asking everyone, "What did she say, what did she say?" Really, I hadn't said anything. But after that, she stopped bothering me. She never made fun of me again. In fact, we became friends after that. Sometimes, working with hearing people, you have to deal with things like that.

Mostly in the sewing factory, the women wrote notes to me when they needed to communicate. There was another deaf lady who worked there but she worked in a different department. At lunch, we sat together for 10 or 15 minutes to chat and then went back to work. We had separate bathrooms so we didn't see each other at break time. Other than that, I didn't have a single co-worker who learned to fingerspell or sign.

It happened one day, the secretary of the union came in. She said, "You're not working here anymore, you're going to move to a different place." I said, "No, I have more seniority." She said, "Well the material has changed and you have to move." I said, "Why move

to a different place? Because then I would make less money. I've worked here for several years. Losing my seniority just because the material has changed doesn't make sense."

I had been working on 100% cotton for years and then they changed to a polyester blend but the sewing was still the same. The union secretary replied, "No, you have to move to a different department." I realized then that the union was playing favorites. I saw another woman who had worked in the same spot for 20 years and she was moved to a different place. I thought to myself, "This is not right." Everybody is losing their seniority because of the union. The company was working with them too, so I said, "That's it."

I called the Labor Board. I don't remember the exact details now but I know I called them. Finally, one day someone came to my house. I don't know if the kids let him in, but I was cooking supper. It was like the FBI. He was showing me all his credentials and things. I read "Labor Board" on his card. He began to write and explained he had heard I had a problem at work and asked me to tell him about it. So, we wrote back and forth. We didn't have interpreters and we wrote well into the evening. He said "Okay, I will be back in touch with you. Thank you very much." Then he left.

Later, they called me from work to go into court. I don't know about other people who were called in but they did call me. I remember that same man from the Labor Board was there and the attorneys were there and the company and the Union representatives were there. I was young but I was not afraid. So, we wrote back and forth and I told them it wasn't fair how the factory was treating me. You know, we still communicated in writing but I told them, ironically, through pen and paper, how I was being discriminated against.

When it was all said and done, they said, "Thank you for coming." Later, I heard that all the people who had worked there for a longer time got their jobs back, including me. Those of



us who had seniority, we went back to our old jobs. After that, I saw that the other women were happy because they'd got their old jobs back. They were excited and I was glad for them. But, for me, I didn't feel anything. So I got up and walked into the boss' office and I said, "I'm quitting." I didn't say I resign, I said "I'm quitting" and they said, "Why?!" They were terrified. "Please don't quit, did we do something wrong? Let us help you." I said, "No."

It was because I had already challenged the Union Board. I knew if they didn't do the right thing, the factory could have been shut down and I think they were afraid of me. I said, "No, I was a fool to work in this position for 14 years. It's time for me to go and find something else." I said something about finding new endeavors and so I just walked out. You know, that day my husband was still at work. So, I walked home. He came in later and said, "What's going on?" and I told him I had quit because I felt it wasn't worthwhile. I worked another job temporarily, making rods of some kind and then we moved to Micro-Switch, a Honeywell plant.

Before that, I tried to help some of the hearing people at the temporary job that I worked. They complained all the time and didn't know what to do. I felt sorry for them. Afterwards, I quit and went somewhere else. Then, as I said, I started working at Honeywell after that. I also worked for one summer at Levi-Strauss as a seamstress.

I don't remember exactly what happened after that. I try to put negative things in the past. Past is past. Then, I went to work at Honeywell. They were very nice people. I taught sign language classes there and the co-workers, bosses and supervisors were all very helpful and wanted to learn. I had worked there maybe two or three years but I didn't like this particular job I was doing. It was assembly. Then, I saw a posting of a job opening in another department. It was open for bid and I was interested.

They told me a person who has hearing problems could not apply. Really? So I just challenged that and signed my name to the list. Then my supervisor came to me and said, "You shouldn't have signed your name because you can't hear." I replied, "No, I can work anywhere, I can do anything." He said, "No, that position requires you to be able to hear, it's dependent on hearing." I said, "Well why don't you give me a chance and I'll show you that I can do it. Let me try it for a week and if I can't, I'll go back to my old job."

My supervisor still seemed hesitant. I told him that if I wasn't allowed to try, it would be discrimination. So, they put me on the job and explained that I had to look at a meter to test whether the switch was good. I wondered what hearing had to do with that. Besides, I could feel the "click" and tell whether the part was good or bad. The bad parts went into a "reject" pile. Then I adjusted the bad parts. The title of the job was "adjustor." When it had been adjusted correctly, these small "micro switches" were placed in an "accept" pile. I tested the switches and sorted them accordingly. They watched me for a while and I asked if I would be allowed to stay on the job. They decided I could keep the job and they removed the requirement of hearing from the job description.

One day at noon I was eating lunch and another deaf man who worked there (who couldn't read and write) came over to me. He said, "I keep having problems at work." I don't remember the exact reason but he was having problems meeting production. That particular job was piece work and his production relied on the amount of pieces he could do. I told him perhaps he could talk with his boss to have the piecework requirement suspended while the machine was being fixed. There was a form that had to be filled out. The man said he would ask about this.

About a week later, my supervisor came to me and accused me of telling the man to slow down on the job. I said, "What?! I would never tell someone to slow down. He was complaining that he did not have good piece work and couldn't make production." My supervisor said, "No, you told him to slow down." I replied that I did not and stated that the man was just having trouble with the machines. I told them they needed to bring in an interpreter because this deaf man could not read and I did not want to be involved. I mentioned they could get an interpreter from Asheville but instead, they called in my husband (from another department) to interpret. He was not an interpreter! He was deaf also but he could talk some. I was dismayed.

Later, as I thought about what happened, I got really upset and so I gathered my tools. At that time you had to bring your own tools for adjusting. Anyway, I gathered all my things, closed my locker and said goodbye to everyone. They asked where I was going. I replied, "I quit" and I walked out. I didn't feel like going through that process, hedging on this, that and the other. So I went to my husband and told him I was quitting and to take me home. For them to blame me for something when I was innocent, I just decided to leave. My husband wanted to go and talk with them. I said, "No, take me home now!"

So, I went to the car and waited on my husband to take me home. The main boss came and said he wanted to pay me through unemployment. He said if I walked out, I could not draw unemployment. He said, "Please sign this so you will at least be able to draw unemployment until you find another job." The main boss was very nice and he knew I had worked hard in the Deaf community. He said, "Please let me fix things so that you can come back." I replied that this job was not my preference and I would find another job somewhere else later. He understood. So, I drew unemployment. It was really nice of him to do that. Then, the

communication center in Johnson City needed a director, so I applied for that and was hired at the Regional Center for the Hearing Impaired.

I don't want to talk negatively about work, but I was a scapegoat at the Center. I was betrayed by a couple of co-workers who were not ethical. I don't really want to talk about the past but I know it wasn't fair. I was blamed in the end for being a whistleblower and was fired. Later, we found out it was one of my closest colleagues who had reported things to the state and got a lot of people involved in an investigation. The past is past but in the end, we went to court and I won a small settlement. I may write a book about that story later, but I was disappointed in that outcome.

Some hearing people think that being Deaf is stressful. The only thing I can say is, "I'm Deaf and I always fight oppression." I will not tolerate any type of oppression. I ask people to respect my rights. Some deaf people, I think, feel oppressed, especially in the work force. Maybe I was oppressed as well, I don't know. Some people say, "You're deaf, how do you feel about being deaf?" I think, "So what?" I thank God that I'm Deaf. If I wasn't Deaf then I wouldn't be where I am today. This means a lot to me to be Deaf. It's made me a successful person. I've had a good life even though I didn't have a higher education and other things, I've had a good life. God's given me the skills, the talent to speak with other people, to learn how to get along with hearing people in the world. Maybe better so than other deaf people. Often I have worked with hearing people and it seemed they respected me. I don't know if sometimes people don't understand, but they sometimes say, "Oh, you're deaf" and again, I say "So what?" I have many things that they don't. I have many capabilities that people who are hearing do not have. The one thing that I can't do, which sometimes makes me feel less independent, is my inability to drive. But I still travel a lot. I travel more than people imagine.

One thing I hate to see is when people say, "Oh, I wish you were hearing." Sometimes, other deaf people say, "Oh, I wish I had been born hearing and not deaf." I think, "Why would anyone say that?" I'm not really sure why but for me, I say, "So what?" I'm happy with what I am and I plan to die still being Deaf. I don't want some new invention that is going to make me be able to hear. I'm Deaf and that's it. I live independently. I function independently. Years ago, I used to have a TTY and if the phone rang, there was a light that flashed. If somebody knocked at the door, the light flashed. When I woke up in the morning, I had a light flashing and a vibrating alarm clock that shook the bed. When I was younger, we didn't have that technology nor when my children were babies. I survived. Sometimes, the baby slept with me so I could know when he woke up. Today, deaf parents have a lot more technologies in the home to help with raising their children. We didn't have that back then. If I had a baby today, there would be a flashing light when it cried. It meant we had to be a lot more responsible back then. We had to look and check in on them really often. For me it was not as difficult, I think, because I breast fed. So I knew if they had a wet diaper or were teething or if they got hurt. When they were babies, I didn't have to worry about things as much, but then when they got older and got hurt, they came to me. So, at that time, I didn't need as much technology when my children were growing up. We managed.

I remember when the TTYs first started coming out. Western Union had huge telegraph machines that they adapted into TTYs. There was a big coupling device on this huge metal, square box. When you typed on it, this old fashioned typewriter sent messages over the telephone line, which shook the floor. One day I was typing and my neighbor came in. He was angry and said, "You cut me off on the phone!" I didn't realize that. I had just picked up the phone and started dialing. Back in that day there were party lines. I don't remember how many

there were, three or four. Most of the time if you picked it up and you didn't hear anything, you could dial out. Because I was deaf, I didn't know and had innocently cut him off. When he came in, he was furious. I said, "Oh, well how am I supposed to know when you are on the phone?" I didn't have access. Later on, I was in a meeting with a group of telephone employees and I mentioned this situation to them. I think we were all attending some kind of disability meeting. I don't remember now what we were talking about on that day but one of the points I brought up was how embarrassed it made me feel because I made my neighbor angry. I didn't realize that it was a party line. There was a man there at the meeting who said, "We will make sure that you get a private line so that doesn't happen again. Because of this situation, we will make an exception." So, I was the first person to have a private line in Flag Pond. After that, I felt very independent because I could call anybody. Of course, now everybody has a private line, but I was the first person to get a private line in Flag Pond (laughs) because of my deafness. I find that interesting. I have all kinds of stories related to the workplace so perhaps I will start writing them down someday soon.

### **The Political Arena**

I got started in politics purely by chance. I had attended business college for a little bit, but then I got sick and wasn't able to finish. Bob Lawson, my former high school teacher said, "You should run as the president for TAD (Tennessee Association of the Deaf)." I thought, no, I would just be the laughing stock because I didn't have a college education. Then he said to me, "No I think you're very intelligent." I never really thought of myself as intelligent. Maybe common sense would have been a better way to describe it, but I was being encouraged to run for the presidency. I thought about what a president does and also about TAD. What does Tennessee Association of the Deaf mean? I was clueless. Bob said, "You would be a GOOD

president." He apparently saw a lot of potential in me. I thought he was just teasing me. So, I agreed to run for president, just for fun. I really didn't know anything about what was required of a leader. I thought maybe he looked at me because of my personality--I could get along with people and I was friendly and liked to help people. So, maybe that was it. I learned a lot of stuff from that but as far as HOW TO be a president, I didn't know initially. I learned how to run meetings and so that's how I got involved with politics. I know playing politics can be a good thing and sometimes it can be a bad thing. Today, politics are bad all the way around. But if you use it in the right way, it can be good. Even though you might be doing the best you can and you might be doing good, other people can take that and make it bad.

At first, I said, "I don't want to be president. I want to practice first." So, they established a President-elect position so that I could study and learn how to be a president. They set up a new board member to have a president-elect position. They had a past president and a current president, along with a president-elect. So they voted me in as the president-elect. They wanted me to run as president that year but I just knew nothing about it. I wanted to learn. So, you know what happened? The president delegated lots of things to everybody else. He told me "Oh, you have to go do this." But I thought, I didn't really know how to do certain things. I said "That's your role" and he responded, "I have to work all day." So, I went and did things on behalf of the president. Anyway, after the two years of president-elect, I still didn't feel I was really ready but I had the support from some others, so I went ahead. I saw that there was a lot of need in the Deaf community and I didn't know anything about the legislature or how to lobby. I had "zero knowledge" about that. The main boss at Micro-Switch supported these efforts and even paid for my flights to Nashville. The Tennessee Council for the Hearing Impaired (TCHI) was established through these efforts which was a good experience. I had to find out who was

on different committees, going from one person to another and talking with them about what the Deaf community needed. Then the bill would be presented and passed. Throughout that process, I learned how to lobby and TCHI was established.

After that, I heard the Library Services for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing was going to close, so I had to go and find money for that. I talked to different legislators about keeping that open. It just so happened that one of the legislators was from my home town-Zane Whitson. He was always willing to help. He helped us a lot. Whatever we needed, I'd just meet him and he'd send it down to the legal department with a note. They wrote whatever bill was necessary. Then I would go down with an interpreter to have the bill drafted. Within a couple of hours, I came back and saw that everything was okay. Then it went back to Zane for approval. If he didn't approve it, he'd tell us to take it back down and have them change a few things. Or, he'd call them. So with the bill, he told me who to go see and I did. With his guidance, I met the appropriate people and got the signatures that were needed to pass the bill or put it into effect. I learned how to process a bill. I was thinking about all those people trying to write bills on their own when, really, the legal department downstairs will do it for you. You just had to give them the idea and your creative notion and then they wrote the whole thing.

During this time, we learned there was no "hard money" for the five communication centers for the deaf in Tennessee. So, I had to go in and find permanent funding every year because it was a year to year thing. I don't know how that functions today, but back then I remember going and lobbying for money to come consistently every year. So that the money would be permanent and they wouldn't have to worry about it from year to year. Today I don't know how it works but that's how it started-the funding for the communication centers.



Another time, I lobbied for what I think was the most important thing. It was on behalf of Tennessee School for the Deaf. The superintendent asked me to go and lobby because the dorms were outdated and they were dilapidated. They had been there for several years and they needed new housing. The girls' showers had electrical wiring up that was loose and exposed underneath the showers. Had there been a crack in the showers, they could have possibly been electrocuted. I was told this and realized that we needed new buildings. So I went to the legislature. It was a good experience for me.

Originally, I went in asking for 12 million dollars and was sent to the finance committee because they didn't have enough money and we needed to find an extra six million dollars. The governor had a surplus fund, so they sent me to see him. I said, "The governor?" At that time it was Governor Lamar Alexander. The legislator told me, "See if he can help you find the extra money. I think we have about 6 million so see if you can get another 6 million from him." So, I went to meet the governor, who was very nice. I shook his hand and explained briefly what we needed. Then the governor called another man in the Department of Education and they began to talk about this situation. He said, "We'll find the money." So while I was waiting, they went to discuss things and then came back in and said, "Yes, we have the money so go to the legislature and ask for the other 6 million. I think you can get some more from them too." I thanked him and left.

I can't remember now who sponsored that bill, but I wrote a note and told them we needed new dorms. The legislators liked to keep things simple and wanted to be direct. I don't even remember who signed it, the Democrats or the Republicans, the House, the Senate...it's been a long time ago. Anyway, I took the note in and they said "You need to go to the chair of the Finance committee." They gave me the man's name and I went to see him. I asked if he

would sponsor this bill and he said, "Oh sure." I said, "It's six million dollars" and the man said, "Oh okay, well take it to the secretary, she'll take care of it, I got to go."

So, I remember asking the secretary, "Okay, this is six million, are you sure he can sponsor this?" The secretary replied, "Well, he said he would sign it!" And he did. In the end, we got 12 million dollars and the cottages were built at TSD. Later, I received an honorary diploma from TSD, making it my alma mater.

Things had changed a lot in my life since I was a student at TSD. When I was growing up, I never really knew about big "D" Deaf and little "d" deaf. Looking back, I realize we had mostly "big D Deaf" students there. At TSD, we had a culture with a cherished community with our own value system. The little "d" deaf were mostly mainstreamed and didn't really socialize with other deaf people. Today, more children are in "inclusion" settings, but I think some of those children are not as successful. Sometimes children need that focused attention in education. Not having quality interpreters hinders the progress for deaf children as well. Sometimes these children invent signs without having any syntax, leaving them without a foundation in any language.

As a child, I was advanced and wasn't challenged enough, which is why I made all A's. Some deaf children are in school systems where they are not challenged either and that is sad. I believe strongly that deaf children can learn better through challenges and curriculum, not a lesser curriculum because they are deaf. At the school where I am today, Jean Massieu Academy (JMA) there is an equivalent accessibility, (a.k.a. equal access). I don't support the concept of "dumbing it down." We should say, "Deaf CAN do" instead of "Deaf can't do" because they are capable. They can write English well IF they have a good education. Some have just found

excuses, " Oh well, because they are deaf" or "I realize I am deaf, so I couldn't do this" but that is not true. They can learn.

When I entered the political arena as president of the Tennessee Association of the Deaf, people were not prepared for the "Deaf can do" message. Even some of the Deaf community I represented in Tennessee at the time didn't think we could get things done through the legislature. Many of the things I did on the political level were thankless jobs and not appreciated. Sometimes it was due to a lack of education and understanding which led to a little negativity. Without access to a quality education, it can be difficult to understand what is needed. However, we shouldn't blame other deaf people, but should respect one another. The lobbying efforts did bring about some changes which affected the quality of life for Deaf Tennesseans and that is what was important. In addition, some people (both Deaf and hearing) supported me and thanked me for those efforts.

That's not to say that deaf people who are not educated don't have issues. It limits the opportunities for anyone if you're not educated. I think at the time I was president and involved in the state legislature, some deaf people thought legislators were too advanced... too above them. To me, I didn't think they looked down on deaf people. They treated me as an equal. The conversations seemed to be fair, but the deaf people didn't want to talk to the legislators, senators or the representatives.

However, I think as long as you respect the legislators, there is no difference. I know that a lot of people I talked to in the Deaf community were intimidated by the legislators. I saw a lot of mutual respect there. I don't know how to explain that, but in the long run, I guess it's like the "Crab theory" in Deaf culture. When one crab tries to crawl out of a bucket full of crabs, the other crabs will reach up and pull it back down into the bucket. Likewise, when some people see

a person being successful, they say things to destroy that person's character or do spiteful things, because of jealousy or envy. It's like Jesus was in his hometown. Being a leader, you're never liked by people in your own community.

My favorite memory in the legislature happened outside the Capitol. I was walking with my interpreter down a long corridor from the offices to the big general meeting which was the final assembly at the Capitol. She heard somebody running down the corridor so we separated, thinking the person must be running late for a meeting or something. Then the person stopped. He was out of breath and he said, "Do you have the little 'I Love You' pins?" I used to give the legislators little "I Love You" sign language lapel pins. "Do you have one? I want to give my wife one" he said. I looked up at him and recognized him as a senator from Memphis. I pulled out two or three from my purse and gave them to him. He said, "Thank you!" He was so excited as he turned around and started back. He had run all the way down the corridor to find us. We were just walking casually but I never will forget him running down the corridor just to get an "I Love You" sign language pin.

I have so many similar positive experiences that I could share with you about the legislature. There were far more positive experiences than negative ones and some were mind changing. Like the one legislator that told me TAD only had 350 members that year as if we were not important. I felt so insulted. I had to remind him that I was representing more than just TAD members. I was there on behalf of ALL Tennesseans who were deaf, which was way more than 350, and they were REGISTERED voters in the state of Tennessee.

I've faced many challenges in my life, including being the only person without a degree on the National Association of the Deaf Board of Directors. I've stayed level headed and

focused on the issues, studying hard to learn what I need to contribute to the task at hand. I must say I have been blessed to be Deaf.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

#### **Challenges, Considerations, & Reflections**

In this chapter, I discuss some of the challenges I faced, concerns I had with the research process and my reflections on the study. I also discuss future considerations and conclude with my own perceptions and reactions to the stories revealed in this oral history.

To begin with, in doing a historical document of my mother's life, it was difficult to perform interviews due to the geographical distance between us. While the use of technology (videophone, email, texting, video recording) made this oral history possible, it added challenges such as when I needed to verify things quickly as thoughts came up. Our interactive time was also impeded by our locations. Additionally, due to my mother's vision issues, my inability to interject, interrupt or redirect during the interviews presented dilemmas in delayed responses to my questions. As is typical of oral history interviews, there were also times my mother could not remember factual information such as dates or places, which prompted me to look elsewhere for documented evidence. This was complicated by the fact Jane Ann is the last living Deaf individual from the Devil's Fork/Shelton Laurel community, so I sometimes had to ask questions of younger hearing family/extended family members which was not always productive.

Another challenge was my difficulty in interpreting her videotaped interviews so that they could be transcribed. Professional interpreters are to "render the message faithfully," meaning to stay as close to the intention of the source message as possible. As the researcher, I found myself at times watching for themes (while trying to voice the stories), instead of staying focused on the task of interpreting. This caused for a less than acceptable interpretation at times (in my opinion) which would have been redone if anyone else would have been using the

interviews. However, it proved to be an invaluable lesson for future interviews and/or research on individuals who use ASL.

In working through this study, I can see where there could have been a better application of interviewing techniques. Using others to voice interpret the videotaped interviews and comparing their interpretations with mine might have yielded a different or more pristine “interpreted” product. For example, when I listened to the “voice interpreted” interviews, I realized the syntax was not as smooth or professional as I usually would have interpreted. In hindsight, I am not sure how transcribing the interviews helped me in this process and may have been an added burden. Since my native language is ASL, I actually could have used the original recordings to take my notes, eliminating or reducing the amount of time diverted away from the culmination of my study. In addition, since I plan to present my stories to deaf audiences and Jane Ann, a skilled storyteller, gave much of the interview in story form, I can see how the ASL version would be a truer rendering of her story.

Another thing to consider is how my stories would be presented differently to a hearing audience. An orally told story would have a broader emphasis with fewer details. Giving the names of the Deaf families in our community would not be necessary when telling to hearing audiences. Explaining vocabulary such as Ushers Syndrome and the nuances of culturally Deaf people would need to be crafted into the stories. In addition, dialogue would be equally important in telling to both hearing and deaf audiences, as well as showing conflict and resolution, in order to have a good story. Since English and ASL have different syntaxes, I would perform orally or in sign language, but not both at the same time. Just like two spoken languages, simultaneous telling is impossible for most brains to facilitate. In addition, consecutive telling with both an audible and gestural language is difficult and awkward.

One concern I had in doing this oral history project was finding recent information on Deaf culture. Some studies were older than ten years. Perhaps this is because some things in Deaf culture have not changed much over the last several years. However, technology does seem to have impacted the socialization patterns of the Deaf community. For example, Deaf people used to get out and visit one another more often. Just like my mother did when she was younger, our family would often go to other homes of deaf people on the weekends. Several deaf people would gather at one home and stay well into the early morning hours before departing to their respective homes. We also went once a month faithfully to the local Deaf club for social gatherings, watching captioned movies on 16 mm reels, or to celebrate holidays. However, like many of the deaf clubs across America, our local deaf club is now closed. My mother told me she believes it is due to the availability of captioned movies and programs on television, as well as having access to smart phones and/or videophones. She says Deaf people do not have as many face-to-face interactions, thus causing deaf clubs to close and fewer Deaf social events to be held (Jane Ann Shelton, personal interview, April 2019).

Reflecting on my research, I recall fondly the strong familial relationships exhibited in my mother's stories as her hearing relatives interacted regularly with the Deaf community, socializing, eating, etc. Of interest to note was their ability to communicate with one another effectively, either through ASL or fingerspelling, even within the community. Wood Jackson and Turnbull (2004) discuss how deafness can impact the family and even the extended family with the determining factor being the communication mode of the child with other members (p. 23). Keefe (1988a) describes familial ties as being important for a strong identity which provides "a feeling of 'roots,' and pride in one's heritage." She suggests that family and community blend together, strengthening one's bond to the community (p. 31). It is hard to



determine whether this “blending” can be attributed to Appalachian culture or Deaf culture as I can see it being a result of both.

I also saw other similar traits in rural Appalachian and Deaf cultures besides familism such as family values, honesty, integrity, faith, and being good to people. It seems that living in a rural area where everyone knows each other, the custom of looking out for everyone else, and valuing each member of the community was a positive thing for Jane Ann. The close proximity of extended family also seemed to contribute to Jane Ann’s well roundedness which is prominently noted in rural Appalachian communities (Keefe, 1988a, p. 29; Cole, 1988, p. 178; Lichter & Cimbaluk, 2012, p. 86). Areas that seemed to be challenging were when Jane Ann went into the workforce. There, she faced discrimination and bias but took up the task of challenging those who would marginalize her.

I felt exhilarated as my mother told funny anecdotes about the dilemmas she faced and I felt pride at her ability to overcome the challenges society presented. Other times, I was saddened at her losses and the sacrifices she made for her children. For instance, I know she had to be deeply disappointed to miss out on going to college. However, knowing rural Appalachia as I do, it is no surprise that she chose family over herself. She also stayed in the area for many years, until both my brother and I were grown and my father passed away before she moved to a larger city, which was much more conducive for her as a Deaf woman. Her ties to family and place are typical of Appalachia.

I was in awe of my mother’s ability to keep going forward, being a positive role model for my brother and me. Throughout my lifetime, living in a Deaf household has been similar to my friends and their homes. However, there have been challenges that our family has been reluctant to talk about publicly. For instance, my mother has mentioned the guilt she felt for

leaving her family while she lobbied in Nashville. She justified it by saying her husband (my father) was home with my brother and I when she had to be out of town and that we were not little children but teenagers. I remember my father's role reversal during these times as he became the nurturer during those years of my puberty. There were times I missed my mother's presence but felt an obligation to accept these absences because she was doing such an important thing for the Deaf community. To be sure, no one ever acknowledged the sacrifices our family made so that "all Deaf Tennesseans' lives would be enhanced." Yet, there were several who told me I should be very proud of my mother and her accomplishments as she won accolade after accolade for achievements accomplished. Of course, I was very proud of her and felt guilt myself whenever I resented her absence. She may have been their lobbyist but I only had one mother. In an amazing way, she balanced the duties of mother, employee and lobbyist in a manner that showed strength and capability.

Another area of discovery was when I asked my mother what she thought about the "label" of Appalachia. She responded she did not feel like a "hillbilly," which let me know she thought the word Appalachia was a negative connotation. In fact, many people who live in Flag Pond think of the word Appalachia in a negative context rather than a way to describe our culture. This was congruent with what I found in the literature (Cooper, Knotts, & Livingston, 2010, p. 26; Krok-Schoen et al., 2015, p. 231). An important revelation, it made me realize that not everyone shared my pride of being an Appalachian, nor understood its reference to our beautiful (and positive) cultural attributes. It is important to note in a study by Duvall, Dorgan, & Hutson (2016), that even as an "insider" one cannot and should not define who is considered Appalachian (p. 36). Of equal importance is to think in terms of being an insider of the Deaf community as well. It is not my place to say what it means to be Deaf but I can share the stories

of a Deaf Appalachian family. I was careful to refrain from letting my perspective shadow the findings and attempted throughout this process to see the “mystery” as recommended by Goodall (2000, pp. 83-84). He says narratives are clues to a bigger mystery.

Being an insider, I gathered valuable data from this research study. As noted in a study by Weiner-Levy & Abu-Rabia Queder (2012), I was keenly aware that as an “insider,” I would be given information that someone from outside the cultures (Deaf or Appalachian) might not be able to obtain (p. 1164). I had an advantage as a member of the community and was someone my mother could trust not to exploit the Deaf community. In addition, I was aware of my subjectivity. As an insider, I did not have an “observer’s point of view.” This response is consistent with other researchers’ comments in similar situations. Duvall et al., (2016), for example, argue that subjective research can enrich the findings. They consider subjectivity to be “an opportunity to enhance the data” (p. 30). I was very cautious to be respectful of the privilege I was given to interview my mother and document her stories.

I am mindful of my own reflexivity and how my perception of vulnerability might impact the telling of these stories in live performance. If I am too “all bearing,” or not clear enough in the description of my culture, I may portray the Deaf community in a negative light. Alexander (2011) explores the researcher's possible concern with academe and the separation it could cause within one's own culture (p. 99). Furthermore, I am very aware of my own fears of not being scholarly enough to document these stories for the academic world, or having a negative impact on my own Deaf Appalachian culture. There is a certain fear of being ostracized for being perceived as not portraying them in a truthful way. Like Newman (2011), I see the duality of subjectivity in that I am an insider because of my birth status within the Deaf community, yet I

am an outsider because I am not truly Deaf. In addition, as with any culture, there are both positive and negative aspects (Newman, 2011, p. 553).

I am aware that my familiarity with my mother could have possibly shadowed my reflections in this study. I recognized that as a subjective researcher, I needed to be aware of my bias and not “color” everything in a positive light in an effort to protect the dignity of my Deaf family. I was constantly checking in with myself and my research, trying to be reflexive in my observations. This reflexivity hopefully allowed me the opportunity to document a sampling of rural Deaf Appalachian culture in Flag Pond during the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Nonetheless, I am reminded by Weiner-Levy & Abu Rabia Queder’s (2012) statement:

Factors such as empathy, knowledge, alienation, exclusion or inclusion, a sense of belonging to and understanding the participants’ inner world and others exert complex and intricate effects that impact the encounter, overriding the familiar and well-discussed issue of whether one is part of or external to a given culture, an insider or outsider (p. 1154).

This suggests to me that those who wish to do further research of the rural Deaf Appalachian communities can be successful if they first take the time to understand the people and their unique culture. Based on my experience living in this community, I would recommend that “outsiders” be introduced initially by someone “belonging” to the “inner core” and plan to spend some quality time with community members for optimal success.

### **Future Directions**

More studies and documentation need to be done on rural Deaf Appalachians as that generation is aging and dying. Because there is no documented literature on this group of people, we are losing valuable cultural information. My goal is to publish my mother’s stories,

documenting this “miniature Martha’s Vineyard” community, as well as tell these stories to both hearing and deaf audiences. Because storytelling allows individuals to take away what they need, I especially want to perform for young deaf individuals to inspire or encourage them in their path of discovering their identity. Deaf children (and their parents) in rural areas are not privy to the rich cultural heritage of the Deaf community unless they attend a residential school for the Deaf. I hope to be a conduit to that legacy through storytelling. Through social media, the Internet, special education directors, and regular channels/venues of storytelling, my desire is to share these stories of one woman’s success largely due to her community.

I also hope to publish a book and journal articles based on the information I have gathered. It is my hope that others will join me in collecting stories from our elderly Deaf community to share with our younger generation, as well as mainstream society, promoting a better understanding of this often marginalized population.

This was an oral history of one rural, Deaf Appalachian woman who showed remarkable success even without a formal education. One possible reason could be Jane Ann’s second generation deafness. Bandurski & Galkowski (2004) reference many studies that discuss the impact of a deaf child having deaf parents and their superiority over other children (deaf or hearing) born to hearing parents. These studies illustrate areas of superiority in mental achievement, communication, socialization skills, emotional stability, as well as academic advancement (Bandurski & Galkowski, 2004, p. 155; Berke, 2012, p.21; Braden, 1987, p. 263; Wood Jackson & Turnbull, 2004, p. 23; Woolfe, Want, & Siegal, 2002, p. 772).

The importance of having Deaf community members involved in young deaf children’s lives cannot be stressed enough and was evident in Jane Ann’s childhood. Chute and Nevins are referenced in the 2015 National Center for Hearing Assessment and Management’s resource

guide for early hearing detection and intervention by saying that Deaf adults can offer the experiences of a Deaf person, which no one else can do. In that same chapter 18, Benedict, et al. (2015) emphasizes how this leads to healthy self-esteem, respect and acceptance (p. 18-2). Jane Ann had an advantage over other deaf children because she had Deaf adults who could model the language for her. According to some research studies, this attribute contributed to early language acquisition of ASL (Berke, 2012, p. 21). In addition, Jane Ann's story about teaching other deaf kids how to sign is consistent with the literature of Prinz and Prinz (1985) as referenced by Tomaszewski (p. 71). Thus, one could say because Jane Ann was born a Deaf child of Deaf parents, she displayed more academic ability, confidence, maturity, and emotional strengths compared to other children.

This superiority, however, does not apply to motor development as noted in a study done by Lieberman, Volding & Winnick (2004, p. 281). Their study revealed that children who were deaf (with hearing or deaf parents) had similar motor development to their hearing peers. There is also one study that disputes the concept of superiority in academics. Hovinga (1989) states that while Deaf children of Deaf parents may have scored higher academically in earlier years, it is no longer true due to the effects of time. With more and more parents learning to sign, her study shows there is no significant difference when any deaf child is exposed to language at an early age. However, she also discloses that the study was limited to one geographic group of 17 children (p. 25). While it may not be statistically relevant to apply this to all Deaf children of Deaf parents, it warrants further studies.

So what *do* we know about Jane Ann based on her oral history? We know that she affirms she had a loving, supportive family with positive Deaf and hearing role models, access to viable and visible communication early in life, appropriate education, and adequate exposure to

the “hearing world” to name a few things. In addition, while there may be some research to suggest Jane Ann’s birth to Deaf parents contributed greatly to her success, there is nothing to refute that Jane Ann’s Appalachian values also contributed to her success. Thus, it seems further exploration of this subject might shed some light on my mother’s success in her earlier years, such as being advanced two school grades because of her superior knowledge of the academic material. Due to the current lack of documentation on this and other rural, Deaf communities, it is appropriate to conduct more oral histories and perform more qualitative research on this group of individuals, as well as preserve the cultural heritage of a place and people almost forgotten.

### **Conclusion**

Through this documentation and research of my mother’s oral history, I have shown the achievements of her personal life as well as examples of culture and tradition from the Devil’s Fork and Shelton Laurel communities in Flag Pond, Tennessee and Madison County, North Carolina. With the advent of technological advances, the impact on rural Deaf culture, (as well as Appalachian culture), could indicate a transition to a more contemporary community that in some ways reflects the shift their urban counterparts are experiencing. T. Holcomb (2013), professor at Ohlone College in Fremont, California, asserts the following:

Although residential school experience, ASL, and participation in Deaf clubs were visible markers of Deaf culture, they are not necessarily its “core values,” as traditionally discussed by Deaf scholars. Instead, the core of Deaf culture consists of solutions for effective communication, access to information, validation of the Deaf experience, and complete acceptance of being Deaf as a normal existence (p. 102).

Certainly, I can see evidence of this in our rural region as more deaf children are being educated in their local communities. Our local deaf club closed down in the early 90s due to

financial hardship caused by a declining number of participants attending. With it came the beginning of the end of the Deaf community as I knew it growing up. ASL is still intact, with more classes being offered regionally through churches, organizations, and even in local schools (both secondary and higher education). However, the language is being somewhat diluted locally with various signed systems of well-intentioned non-Deaf individuals wishing to share “sign language” with their communities.

Some parts of the culture are still evident however. For instance, the practice of what I affectionately call “the long Deaf goodbye,” has not diminished. This custom is where Deaf members of my family (and myself) continue to talk even after they have begun taking their leave. Holcomb confirms that the “formal ritual of leave-taking” has not been impacted by the use of technology such as pagers, videophones, and other devices (2013, p. 19). I can remember as a little girl being told to put my coat on because we would be going home soon. After much time had elapsed, my brother and I would take our coats off only to be chastised because “we would be going home soon.” This happened several times over the next several hours resulting in us falling asleep (coats intact) only to be awakened late into the night or early morning hours finally to leave.

I also see that some Appalachian values are similar to Deaf community values such as familism and communication, as well as the desire to see one’s children do “better” and be more successful than the parent was. The definition of family within the Deaf community is expanded to include other Deaf members who are closer than blood relatives because of the shared community. Like rural Appalachia, the Deaf community is similar in that everyone knows one another and interacts as if they are extended family.



While this “extended family” relationship can be called disadvantageous by some, Holcomb says the Deaf community is similar to small town life with the advantages of “a strong sense of belonging, brotherhood, and mutual responsibility, where everyone watches out and takes care of each other” (2013, p. 240). For Jane Ann, cultural influences and birth as a deaf child of deaf parents set her on an advanced path which distinguished her early on compared to her peers. She was a natural leader from the beginning. The tenacity that is often seen in rural Appalachian women is evident in Jane Ann’s stories and goes beyond herself as she advocated for other deaf people in her community, on the job and in the political arena. It should also be noted that without access to a residential school for the deaf, Jane Ann and many other deaf individuals from this era would not have received a beneficial education.

Though many would call this rural community of Flag Pond and Madison County isolated, Deaf people from Jane Ann’s locale came together in support of one another. Hearing family members and others from the community accepted this group of Deaf people and learned to communicate with them. They enjoyed food, family, faith and fellowship, which is prevalent in both Deaf and Appalachian communities. This acceptance and sense of communication gave Jane Ann a strong sense of self and identity with positive role models, even though her biological mother or a consistent “mother figure” were not present for most of her life.

Society placed many barriers in Jane Ann’s way including their perceived view of her deafness as a “disability.” Yet, time and time again, in her stories, Jane Ann spoke of situations where she faced oppression and challenged those perceived notions of Deaf people as disabled. Jane Ann defies the stereotypical “norms” and presses the limits by saying, “I can do anything except hear. Let me show you.” She denounces those who would call her “handicapped.” In

short, she sums it up best in one of her stories, “I don’t think I would have done half the things I did if I had not been Deaf.”

Indeed, as a society, we must reflect on these stories told by a rural, Deaf Appalachian woman. We must ask ourselves, individually and collectively, if we are seeking due diligence in breaking the cycle of oppression and judgement of the Deaf community so that other Deaf individuals have the same access to succeed like Jane Ann. Within rural, Deaf Appalachia, indeed with all of the Deaf community, we must view these people just like ourselves and their deafness as a “normal variant of the human condition” much like those living among the many Deaf people of Martha’s Vineyard several years ago (Berke, 2019, p. 3). Are we really listening to the competent and intelligent Deaf community, who have the ability to achieve their own goals in life and are entitled to the right of self-determination? If not, then we, too risk falling into the habitual abyss of being the oppressive, dominant aggressor of a viable and healthy culture unheard for way too long.

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## APPENDICES

### Appendix A

#### Vita-Jane Ann Shelton

##### NAME

**Jane Ann Shelton**

##### PERSONAL VITAE

Birth date: 1943

Birth place: Flag Pond, Tennessee

Marital status: widow

Family: One son and one daughter, grown

Citizenship: U.S.

10 grandchildren, 2 great

State residence: Texas resident, 1995 to present

grandchildren

Race: White

##### EDUCATION

Tennessee School for the Deaf, Knoxville, Tennessee – diploma, 1961.

Elizabethton Business College, Elizabethton, Tennessee – two years.

##### EMPLOYMENT

Part-time ASL Lab Assistant, Collin College (CC), Plano, Texas – 2005 to present.

Part-time instructor of ASL I and II classes, Collin College (CC), Plano, Texas – 1995 to 2003.

Part-time instructor of ASL I and II classes, University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, Texas – 2003 to 2006.

Part-time instructor of ASL I and II classes, East Tennessee State University (ETSU), Johnson City, Tennessee – 1975 to 1995.

Program Director, Regional Center for the Hearing Impaired, Johnson City, Tennessee – 1981 to 1987.

##### PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES

President of the Board of Directors for Jean Massieu Academy (Charter School), Arlington, Texas) (2003-present)

President of Tennessee Association of the Deaf (1977-1985)

Board of Directors Member Region III of National Association of the Deaf (1982-1986)  
(First ever elected from the state of Tennessee)

President-Elect of Tennessee Association of the Deaf (1975-1977)

Member of Advisory Board for Interpreting Education Program, Collin College (2015-present)

Member of Tennessee School for the Deaf Alumni Association

Member of National Association of the Deaf

Member of Tennessee Association of the Deaf (for lifetime)

Member of Holston Baptist Deaf Mission (Johnson City, Tennessee)

Member of North Texas Deaf Senior Citizens

Member of Deaf Senior Citizens of America  
Former member of Tri-Cities Chapter of Tennessee Association of the Deaf  
Former member of President's Employment Committee for the Handicapped  
Former member of Tennessee Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf  
Jane Ann Shelton

### **PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES (Continued)**

Former member of Tennessee Council Advisory Committee for the Handicapped  
Former member of Deaf, Empowerment, Advocacy Federation (D.E.A.F.) committee to improve deaf services in Dallas, Texas

### **COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES**

Developed a committee to establish Tennessee Council for the Hearing Impaired (state agency) through the Legislature, and served on this committee to see that the planning followed through.

Served as Chairperson for Tennessee Council for the Hearing Impaired's Executive Director Search Committee.

Served as Chairperson for Tennessee's first annual Deaf Awareness Week.

Served on Public Service Commission's committee to reduce long distance rates for deaf Tennesseans who must use telecommunications devices and other services.

Served on a committee to develop the Interpreter Trainee Assessment Process for Tennessee Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf.

Served on Law Committee for National Association of the Deaf.

Involved with a committee to secure a grant for sign language classes at East Tennessee State University.

Obtained the grants for Tennessee Association of the Deaf to have leadership training workshops, purchase a computer and improve our newsletter.

Consultant for Mental Health Services for the Deaf workshop at Lakeshore Hospital in Knoxville.

Participant for Tennessee Task Force on Educational Needs for Deaf Children for State Department of Education.

Served on a committee that established Upper East Tennessee Council for the Hearing Impaired and served on Board of Directors, which established the Regional Center for the Hearing Impaired.

Served on Policy Committee for the National Association of the Deaf, 1982 - 1984.

Served on the NAD Committee for 1994 NAD Convention in Knoxville.

Served as chairperson of Nominating Committee for Telecommunications for the Deaf, 1985.

Served as Board member of Tennessee Council for the Hearing Impaired, 1978-1985, and Vice-Chairperson, 1984 and 1985.

Served as Chairperson of Credentials Committee for National Association of the Deaf, 1984-1986.

Served as Chairperson of Legislative Committee for Tennessee Association of the Deaf.

Served as Manual Communications Instructor at East Tennessee State University for academic credit.

Involved with a group of professional women to establish the Quota Club of Bristol and worked to establish a Quota Club in Johnson City.

Lobbied the Legislature and saved the two community service centers for the deaf from closing down and the other three from losing the funding in Tennessee.

### **COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES (Continued)**

Lobbied and secured state monies (\$12 million) for establishing new cottages at Tennessee School for the Deaf in Knoxville. Next phases of improvements followed later with support by more state monies.

Lobbied to improve the quality of education for the hearing impaired children in public schools by securing funds to hire professional interpreters.

Lobbied and secured state monies to keep Library Services for the Deaf & Hard of Hearing in Nashville, Tennessee in operation and avoided having it closed.

Lobbied to find means to provide free Telecommunication Devices for the Deaf (TDD) through telephone companies for the needy hearing impaired citizens in Tennessee. (The total of \$98,000 was spent and additional funding continued for several more years.)

Lobbied for passing a Tennessee law for stricter confidentiality of interpreters and relay telephone operators.

Lobbied for recognizing American Sign Language (ASL) as the primary language for the deaf in Tennessee.

Lobbied for increasing funding for five community services centers for the deaf in Tennessee several times through 1988, then State funding for the community services centers became permanent.

Lobbied for establishment of Tennessee Relay Service by a committee of Public Commission Services (I helped to activate the committee formation by PSC for installing TRC operation.)

Helped a group of deaf people establish Holston Baptist Deaf Mission at Johnson City, Tennessee in February, 1989 (after a half year's effort of finding a sponsorship by Central Baptist Church and Holston Baptist Association).

Served as Chairperson for TAD Convention in Johnson City in 1989.

Served on the committee for Deaf, Empowerment, Advocacy Federation (D.E.A.F.) committee to improve deaf services in Dallas, Texas.

### **ACHIEVEMENTS**

Received the award for the Distinguished Hearing Impaired Tennessean from Upper East Tennessee Council for the Hearing Impaired in 1981.

Received the award for the Outstanding Hearing Impaired Citizen from Upper East Tennessee in 1982.

Awarded the "Governor's Prize" for outstanding achievement for "Breaking the Sound Barrier" from Honey Alexander (Tennessee's First Lady presenting in place of Governor Lamar Alexander) in 1981.

Awarded the "Governor's Prize" for outstanding achievement for "Can You Hear Me Working?" from Governor Lamar Alexander (Tennessee) in 1982. (Note: Gov. Alexander was formerly a member of the President's Cabinet.)

Received an award for outstanding service from Tennessee Association of the Deaf in 1981.

Selected as "Mother of the Year" by Johnson City newspapers in 1983 or 1984.

Selected as "Deaf Woman of the Year" by Knoxville Quota Club in 1983, 1984 and 1985.

Selected as "Deaf Woman of the Year" by Twenty-Third District Quota International, Inc. in

1983, 1984 and 1985.

Selected as “Deaf Woman of the Year” by South Area Quota International, Inc. for 1985.

**ACHIEVEMENTS (Continued)**

Awarded the “Golden Hands” from the National Association of the Deaf in 1985 for outstanding service to the deaf communities in Tennessee.

Selected as “Handicapped Professional Woman of the Year” by Bristol, WA-TN for 1985-1986.

Selected as “Handicapped Professional Woman of the Year” by Virginia’s Pilot Club International for 1986.

Received numerous honor awards from the deaf communities throughout the state of Tennessee for recognition of achievements and leaderships from 1974 through 2001.

## **Appendix B**

### Interview Questionnaire

Thesis: Growing Up Deaf in Appalachia

1. Childhood
  - a. Tell me what it was like growing up?
    - i. Playtime/playmates
    - ii. Chores
    - iii. Daily activities
    - iv. Extended family?
    - v. Values/Things of importance
    - vi. Special Memories
  
2. Education
  - a. Elementary/Secondary
    - i. Location
    - ii. Traditions/Customs
    - iii. Challenges
    - iv. Memories
    - v. Values/Things of Importance
  - b. Post-Secondary
    - i. Location
    - ii. Traditions/Customs
    - iii. Challenges
    - iv. Memories
    - v. Values/Things of importance
  
3. Deaf Identity
  - a. Experiences with non-signers/individuals who can hear
    - i. Differences in Big D/little d individuals
      - A. Definition
      - B. Communication
      - C. Culture
      - D. Community
      - E. Stressors?
    - ii. Feelings about label, "Deaf"
    - iii. Arranging Accommodations
    - iv. Memories
  
4. Employment
  - a. Types of Jobs



- b. Experiences
  - c. Accommodations
  - d. Positive/Negative Impact on Deaf Community
5. Appalachian Identity
- a. Experiences with Others/non-rural Appalachians
    - i. Any Stressors?
    - ii. Feelings about label, “Appalachia”
    - iii. Memories
6. Political Life
- a. How did you get started?
  - b. When did you get started?
  - c. Key legislation passed that you lobbied for
  - d. Impact on Tennesseans who were deaf/hard of hearing
  - e. Challenges?
7. Relaxation/Entertainment
- a. Kinds of entertainment
  - b. Experiences/Memories
8. Other Topics not covered/Experiences/Memories

## Appendix C

### Photographs from my personal collection

Clockwise: Jane Ann, Age three months; Jane Ann's Parents, Maude & Oscar Shelton; Jane Ann at TSD, Age five; Jane Ann, Age two



Clockwise, Jane Ann, Age three; Jane Ann, Age two; Jane Ann, Age three with Father, Oscar;  
Jane Ann, Age 16;



VITA

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B.S. Interdisciplinary Studies, Minor in Appalachian Studies, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee 2011  
M.A. Reading, Concentration in Storytelling, East Tennessee State University, Johnson City, Tennessee 2019

Professional Experience: Staff Interpreter, Regional Center for the Hearing Impaired, 1981-1989  
Sign Language Interpreter, certified through Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, (CSC), 1987-Present  
Interpreter Coordinator, East Tennessee State University Disability Services, 1995-Present  
Instructor, Educational Interpreters Institute, Tennessee School for the Deaf, 1998-Present

Honors and Awards: Interpreter of the Year, Northeast Tennessee, 1983 & 1994  
All-Southern Conference Staff Team Award, Southern Conference, December 2017