

Captioned Films for the Deaf

By Edmund Burke Boatner
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FOREWORD

In 1958, an Act of Congress authorized the establishment of Captioned Films for the Deaf, an agency which for the past two decades has been of inestimable benefit to the deaf and hearing-impaired of the entire nation.

Established first as an agency of the United States Office of Education, Department of Health and Welfare, Captioned Films for the Deaf continues today, under the title Media for the Handicapped, to expand the frontiers of film services for the deaf.

In recent correspondence with Jack R. Gannon, Director of Alumni and Public Relations at Gallaudet College and Executive Secretary of the Gallaudet College Alumni Association, I have become aware that there is a widespread lack of information—as well as much misinformation—concerning the origins and development of Captioned Films for the Deaf.

I am writing this short account to help clarify both the history of Captioned Films, and the roles various people have played in its creation.



Edmund Burke Boatner
West Hartford, Connecticut
February, 1980

THE WHITE HOUSE

WASHINGTON

May 2, 1960

Dear Dr. Boatner:

Thank you for your recent letter describing the pioneer work of Captioned Films for the Deaf. It was a privilege for me to take part in the enactment of legislation to continue this work within the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

The collection of films which your group gave the Government provides a substantial beginning for the Federal program in this field. This gift, together with the enthusiasm and experience which accompanied it, are most appreciated. I am sure these films will enrich the lives of our fellow citizens afflicted with deafness -- and through them, will benefit the national community.

My congratulations to you and to your associates.

Sincerely,



Dr. E. B. Boatner
President
Captioned Films for the Deaf, Inc.
139 North Main Street
West Hartford, Connecticut

The advent of sound films in 1927 suddenly deprived the deaf of one of their chief sources of information and entertainment; they could not adequately understand the new captionless “talkies.”

Production of silent films was terminated, and while schools for the deaf continued to book old silent recreational films, the films eventually became dated.

In addition, these early silent films did not have superimposed captions. Blocks of text were inserted between segments of action, breaking up the flow and continuity of the plot. At that time there was no satisfactory process for superimposing captions directly onto the film stock. The only method other than this “stop and read” procedure was to blank out portions of the frames while shooting and then later reshoot prepared lettering onto the unexposed areas. This process was both complicated and costly, and was rarely used.

This unsatisfactory situation was impressed on me as late as 1947 when I took our basketball team into town for dinner and a movie one evening. I recall that the movie was “The Son of Monte Christo”. As I watched the boys’ reactions, I could see the looks of bafflement on their faces. In one scene, for example, a group of men were casually sitting around a table talking when suddenly they jumped up and started in at one another with their swords. Why? Our boys couldn’t see any reason for such behavior; they hadn’t heard the conversation. It was then that I made a resolution to see that understandable films were provided for the deaf. Obviously, there should be films with captions, but how were they to be made?

EMERSON ROMERO

While the lack of understandable films was keenly felt by the deaf, American film producers did nothing to remedy the situation, nor had they solved the problem of superimposing captions. Perhaps the failure of British producer Arthur J. Rank’s one experimental effort (described below) discouraged them, and, in any case, they could discern little prospect of profit in captioned films.

However, Emerson Romero, a deaf man whose cousin was the famous movie actor Cesar Romero, did try to do something about the situation. Through his brother, he had acquired a considerable acquaintance with the film industry, and had even played some supporting roles in silent films.

In 1947, while he was working for an airplane manufacturing company on Long Island, Romero acquired prints of a few old films and began to try to adapt them for the deaf, circulating them among schools and clubs for the deaf in his spare time.

Romero did not attempt to superimpose captions, but spliced in the explanatory text, just like the old silent films to which the public had, by now, become unaccustomed. The films were of poor quality, but they were the only ones to be had—the producers were unwilling to make better prints available because of the danger of piracy.

Taking these factors into account, together with the work required to procure, prepare, and circulate the films, and the lack of adequate funds, his effort was doomed to failure. But at least it was an effort; in retrospect, one wonders how Romero accomplished as much as he did.

THE J. ARTHUR RANK EXPERIMENT



J. Arthur Rank

About 1949, British producer J. Arthur Rank exhibited a feature-length captioned film in London. The captions were not on the film itself, however, but were etched on glass slides and projected simultaneously onto a second smaller screen at the lower left of the main screen. A second operator was required to synchronize the projection of the slides with the action on the film, and the viewer had to skip back and forth to follow the captions on one screen and the action on the other.

Although the deaf of London queued up for blocks to see the film, and it gained wide publicity, the results were not satisfactory. To my knowledge, this was the only attempt Rank made to produce captioned films for the deaf.

THE LEXINGTON SCHOOL EXPERIMENT



Dr. Clarence O'Connor

Dr. Clarence D. O'Connor, superintendent of the Lexington (New York) School for the Deaf, a colleague and close friend of mine, was also interested in finding a way to provide captioned films for the deaf. He provided captions for a short film made under the direction of Dr. Ross Hamilton, then assistant to the superintendent of the Lexington School, and using Rank's method of captioning.

I was able to see the film at Lexington; the results confirmed Rank's conclusion that this was not a practical way to produce captioned films.

A TECHNOLOGICAL BREAKTHROUGH

Shortly after the Rank and Lexington School experiments, an entirely new method of captioning films was devised in Belgium, which involved etching captions directly onto a finished print of the film. A negative was then made from the captioned print, and as many copies as desired could be made.

This created a whole new ball game as far as captioning was concerned. The Titra Film Laboratories in New York was successful in securing a franchise for the Belgian process for the whole United States.

CAPTIONED FILMS FOR THE DEAF

Dr. O'Connor and I organized Captioned Films for the Deaf in 1949, later incorporating in Connecticut with an office at the American School for the Deaf. Our primary need was money, and incorporation allowed us to secure a tax exemption. I was president, and O'Connor was vice president.

We gradually secured a board whose members were leaders in business and community activities, as well as some well-known motion picture personalities, including Katherine Hepburn and Mrs. Spencer Tracy. Most of them were not very active, but their names lent prestige to the organization. Graham H. Anthony, a leading industrialist, was quite active, and his efforts later enabled us to secure Federal legislation.

THE JUNIOR LEAGUE OF HARTFORD

The Junior League of Hartford gave us our first substantial financial assistance. The League periodically gave assistance to some organization which it felt had the potential to render significant service in an area of great need. It was not the policy of the League to become permanently associated with any group, but to enable the organization to become self-sustaining.

In 1949, the League had just finished raising a substantial sum to aid The Connecticut Society for Crippled Children, and was looking for another worthy project. I was determined that it should be Captioned Films for the Deaf, but I found that this would not be easy, since 18 other organizations in the greater Hartford area also hoped to be the League's next project. Most of the 18 were very well-known, while Captioned Films for the Deaf was embryonic as yet unproven.

The president of the League was Marion Hepburn Grant, Katherine Hepburn's sister. Perhaps this turned the decision in our favor. At any rate, we were chosen, and Captioned Films was on its way, although it had a long, long way to go.

The League did not have money to make an outright financial grant, but had to raise it. They decided to do this by putting on a variety show—"The Junior League Follies"—with League members and their husbands. Tryouts and practices were held at the American School for the Deaf, and were real "fun" occasions.

The show was successful and enabled the League to make us a first gift of \$5,000, and a subsequent gift of \$2,500. Without this support, it is doubtful that Captioned Films for the Deaf would have been launched.

Later on, individual League members were of great help in writing the actual captions. In particular, Frances Beekley and Nancy Callanan worked out the captions for our first color film, *America the Beautiful*. This was a 25-minute narrated film which Warner Brothers had made for \$100,000 and presented to the government to help sell war bonds.

These women spent many hours viewing the film, transcribing the narration, and working out appropriate captions. When I invited a group of adult deaf to view the finished film, it was a great success. One woman, Mrs. Elsie Durian, wept; it was the first film she had understood in more than 20 years.

We were finally on the right track, but we found that securing and captioning feature films with dialogue was quite a different matter. We had yet to clear the cove and embark upon high seas.

I can't give enough commendation to the Junior League of Hartford. I am sure that no chapter of this national organization has been instrumental in developing a project that eventually benefited so many thousands of handicapped people throughout the country.

PROBLEMS

Although the Junior League support gave us increased impetus and enthusiasm, we wound ourselves facing several major problems for which we had no ready solutions.

FINANCIAL

The need for funds was always a pressing problem. Although no one who worked on the project was paid for his time or expenses, there was still the cost of securing films and the expense of circulating them.

We continued to seek contributions without too much success, although Dr. O'Connor was able to obtain some sizable gifts from wealthy friends, which helped greatly. Our only other source of income was from the rental of films as we gradually got them captioned and into circulation. We charged \$15 for black and white, including a feature and a short, and \$20 for the rare color prints we were able to get.

We circulated films almost entirely among schools for the deaf, and our system was simple. I knew most of the school administrators, and I would simply write a letter to the head of a given school, indicating that we were sending him a film on a certain date, and giving instructions for passing it along. My secretary, Miss Dorothy Spencer, handled the details of shipping and billing. About the only complaint we received was that we couldn't send new films often enough.

We always envisioned that captioned educational films would be an important area of service, but that project had to wait until later. Our immediate goal was to demonstrate that the production of suitably captioned entertainment films was feasible.

ACQUISITION OF FILMS

Film producers were plagued by widespread film piracy, although they did everything they could to guard against it. For this reason, they were unwilling to sell or lease prints of any of their better films.

This made it very difficult to obtain films of suitable quality, even though we were willing to sign agreements, as we were able to in some cases that the films would only be shown in schools for the deaf. As time went on, the situation improved somewhat, but acquisition remained a very difficult problem. Since RKO was the most cooperative studio, most of our films were obtained from them.

CAPTIONING FILMS

We learned early in the game to take only films for which we could get the script, but the script alone did not solve our captioning problems. Scripts came in loose-leaf binders; about two inches thick per feature-length film, and had to be greatly condensed, not only into captions, but also into language suitable for deaf viewers. This was a tricky problem. We had to calculate the length of each caption, and insert it exactly so that it would extend only through the scene which it described, and not lap over into the next scene.

The problem of timing captions was so complex, in fact, that it threatened to defeat us altogether. At our wit's end, we decided to consult with RKO. I remember driving down to New York in December,



1951, with Mrs. Helen Kingston, president of the Junior League of Hartford, and Mrs. Ruth Wessels, then president-elect. We discussed our problem with a Mr. Arthur M. Goode, of RKO's 16mm department, but it seemed that he had no solution to offer.

Just as we were leaving, I had an idea. I asked Mr. Goode if his company exported films to foreign countries, and he answered, "Yes. We export to nearly all of them." I then asked if the captions were first written in English before being translated into the foreign language. Mr. Goode did not know, but offered to find out.

Provisionally for Captioned Films for the Deaf, it turned out that the producers did work out captions in English before translating them. This was the breakthrough that solved our captioning problem. From this point on, we worked directly from the captioned scripts written for foreign films. It still required someone experienced in the language limitations of the deaf to reword the captions, but now our captioner would know the exact length of the insertion and had only to maintain the same syllabic count. A skilled captioner could now arrange suitable captions without even viewing the film.

J. PIERRE RAKOW



J. Pierre Rakow

J. Pierre Rakow and his wife Lillian (néé Gourley) had come to the American School for the Deaf in 1937. He had become deaf at the age of 14, and had attended P.S. 47, a day school for the deaf in New York City, for a year and a half before going to Evander Childs High School, and later to New York University. He later became a partner in a typewriter agency in the New York City area, where he gained a wide business experience.

After Rakow came to the school, we established a class in typewriter mechanics, which I believe was the first such course in a school for the deaf. The course was quite successful. There were three major typewriter manufacturing plants in our area, and we were able to place many of the course's graduates in jobs—a great accomplishment in that Depression era.

Rakow was later made supervising teacher of the vocational department of the American School, a position he held until his retirement in 1963. Mrs. Rakow, a 1928 graduate of Gallaudet College, became the school librarian and taught typing and business classes. She also retired in 1963.

Rakow was a man of great capabilities, and his enthusiastic contribution to Captioned Films for the Deaf, from its inception to its successful conclusion, was of inestimable value. It was he who persuaded the Titra Film Laboratories, which held the American franchise for the new captioning process, to caption our films. This company became so flooded with business, including that of major film producers that it was difficult for them to take care of all their orders, but they never failed to caption our films. In later years, Titra had to farm out some of our captioning to European companies, and a few were even captioned in Egypt.

Rakow was indefatigable in seeking sources of films, and was a persuasive and shrewd bargainer. He also coordinated the efforts of our volunteer captioners, and aided them with advice and suggestions. All in all, he was an indispensable man.

FEDERAL LEGISLATION



Graham H. Anthony

As time passed, it became apparent to us that our goal of making captioned recreational and educational films available to the deaf throughout the country was too vast an undertaking to be achieved by a single small private organization. We decided to seek an Act of Congress that would provide for the production and circulation of captioned films for the deaf.

By 1958, we had developed 29 feature-length captioned films, together with short subjects, which we were circulating among schools for the deaf. Although we were warned that we couldn't get a bill that applied to a single handicapped group through Congress, we decided to try.

At this point, we were favored by a fortuitous circumstance, which in retrospect would make one feel that the Lord was on the side of Captioned Films for the Deaf. Graham H. Anthony, now a member of the Captioned Films board, as well as a director of the American School for the Deaf, was appointed to the Advisory Committee to the director of the Vocational Rehabilitation Division of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

The director of the Vocational Rehabilitation Division at this time was Mary Switzer, one of the most able and inspirational persons I have ever met; the deaf never had a better friend.

In the fall of 1958, Anthony arranged for us to have an interview with her, so O'Connor and I went down to Washington with one of our captioned films. We couldn't have been more warmly received. Mary insisted that her boss, the secretary of H.E.W., view the film, and that afternoon she arranged for us to tell our story to the acting librarian of Congress, a Mr. Verner Clapp, who we were pleased to find was a graduate of Hartford's Trinity College.



Mary Switzer

We proposed that the Library of Congress be the agency responsible for Captioned Films for the Deaf. Clapp thought it was a wonder idea, adding that since the Library already served the special needs of the blind, it was only logical that it also help the deaf.



**Senator William
Purtell**

Senator William Purtell of West Hartford, Connecticut, introduced the bill in the Senate, calling for an authorization of \$250,000 to establish an agency to procure, caption, and distribute suitable films for the deaf. This agency was to be operated by the Library of Congress. Purtell was very enthusiastic, and secured the co-sponsorships of 40 of his Senatorial colleagues. Everything was going so well that we were confident of the bill's passage.

After the Christmas recess, however, O'Connor called to relay some disquieting news; things weren't going well in Washington. It seemed that the Library of Congress didn't want anything to do with the new film agency. O'Connor and I went down at once for another conference at the Library of Congress, and found that the rumors were all too true. Mr. Clapp, the acting librarian with whom we had previously talked, and who had given us such warm

encouragement, was no longer with the Library. He had left to take a position with the Ford Foundation, and the regular Librarian, F. Quincy Mumford, had resumed his duties.

Mr. Mumford's attitude was at complete variance with that of Mr. Clapp. Where Clapp had shown keen interest in our project and had given us warm encouragement, Mumford stated bluntly that he did not feel that Captioned Films for the Deaf came within the province of the Library. When we pointed out that the Library was serving the blind, he replied that if he had his way he would disassociate the Library from that activity also. He did add, "However, we are the servant of the Congress, and will do whatever it directs us to do." Since by law, the Library received two prints of every film copyrighted in the United States, and had what was probably the largest collection of films in the world, Mumford's position did not seem reasonable to us. We could not help but be amused, however, to see the same aides who had nodded in agreement with Mr. Clapp in our previous meeting, now nodding in agreement with Mr. Mumford.

We repaired to Mary Switzer for advice, and she agreed that it would not be a good idea to have Captioned Films for the Deaf managed by an agency that did not want it. So the bill was reworked to place it under the direction of the Office of Education in the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare.

PASSAGE OF THE BILL

The bill passed the Senate in the spring of 1958 without difficulty, but when it reached the House, it became buried under a log jam in the Committee on Health, Labor, and Education. This session of Congress was approaching its end, and although no one was against our bill, its chances of clearing that committee seemed nil. The chairman had decided not to convene the committee before the end of the session because a major labor bill, to which he was opposed and which he was determined would not be voted on, was coming up. The one way he could be sure of the outcome was not to convene the committee at all.

Graham H. Anthony came to our rescue in this crisis. He caught the first plane to Washington with one purpose—to see that our bill came out of that committee. The chairman, who had been a close friend of Anthony's for many years, was not able to see him, so Anthony went to see the clerk, who was also a close friend, and with whom Anthony and a deaf companion had hunted birds in North Carolina in their younger days.

Anthony told him about the bill, but the clerk said, "Graham, you know I can't do anything about the bill. The chairman is just not going to convene the committee!" Anthony replied, "Joe, you have got to think of the need of our deaf people. If you don't, you won't ever be able to live with your conscience. I *know* you can do something!"

After considerable argument, the clerk finally said, "Graham, I ought not to do this, but for the deaf I will, just this once." He directed a girl to find the bill and bring it to his desk. He then reached in his drawer, pulled out the committee stamp, slapped it on the bill, and put the bill in the hopper. Shortly thereafter, the bill was routinely passed by the House! I am sure a lot of credit is due to the deaf companion with whom, long ago, they had both hunted birds in North Carolina.

The bill passed in 1958, but it wasn't until 1967 that Graham Anthony told me the full story of exactly how the bill reached the House floor.

In September of 1958, the Board of Captioned Films for the Deaf, Inc. had a victory luncheon and meeting at the Hartford Golf Club. At this meeting, we voted to donate our library of 29 captioned film programs to the U.S. Office of Education, and to use our last funds to present checks to Miss Dorothy Spencer and Mr. J. Pierre Rakow—with appropriate resolutions of thanks—as a small expression of our appreciation. It was then voted to dissolve the corporation.

It was ten years since we had started our long and often discouraging task of providing a source of captioned films for the nation's deaf, but we had achieved our goal. We were able to succeed not only through the efforts of those people I have mentioned, but through the dedication of numerous others I haven't; the members of the Junior League who labored so long and hard, the cooperative film producers, our generous donors, and all the members of our Board. No man ever won a football game alone. It was our team that won, and it was a great victory.

AFTERWARDS



Dr. John Gough

The bill carried an authorization of \$250,000, but that was not an appropriation. Only \$78,000 was subsequently appropriated for the first year of operation. A tremendous job lay ahead. Fortunately, just the right man was selected to undertake this pioneering job; John Gough, teacher of the deaf, former superintendent of the Oklahoma School for the Deaf, and a man of wide business experience. He brought Captioned Films to the height of success, and today, under its new title Media for the Handicapped,

with an annual budget of millions of dollars, it is serving the deaf of the United States with all types of captioned films.



Dr. Malcolm Norwood

It is a source of personal satisfaction to me that his successor and present director of Media for the Handicapped is Dr. Malcolm Norwood, who was formerly a pupil of mine at the American School for the Deaf.

Edmund Burke Boatner
February, 1980