

The Eugene and Inez Petersen Collection

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Abstract

During the mid-1980s, a Deaf couple, Gene and Inez Petersen, set out to document the life stories of ordinary and extraordinary Deaf Americans. Traveling across the country, they videotaped interviews with over 150 people. Inez spent hours transcribing the videotapes. Completed transcripts were then sent to those interviewed for review, and approximately 50 were selected for inclusion in the final collection. Gene's manuscript presented Deaf Americans from all walks of life—old and young, men and women, blue collar and professionals—who talked about their educational, social and vocational experiences, and opinions and philosophies. The stories recount the richness and diversity in the Deaf community over the last eight decades. But the manuscript was not published before the Petersens were killed in an automobile accident.

In 1999, with approval from the Petersen family and the original interviewees, the author created the Gene and Inez Petersen Collection Web site at <www.rit.edu/~glk9638/history.htm>.

In the early 1980s, a deaf couple, Eugene and Inez Petersen, began a face-to-face interview project that would take them around the country, visiting with deaf Americans in their homes recording their life stories. The interviews were conceived as a way to introduce deaf adults to hearing people, parents of deaf children, and young deaf adults who have had little or no contact with adult deaf role models or to the world of deaf Americans. An attempt was made to get to know these deaf interviewees by listening as they talked about their educational, social and vocational experiences, opinions, and philosophies. The interviews revealed the ordinariness of the lives and experi-

ences of deaf people, but also portrayed the extraordinariness of people who had succeeded in compensating for a severe disability. These interviews were also conducted primarily in American Sign Language (ASL) by people who were deaf and accepted as being members of the Deaf community in America, although the majority of people interviewed were bilingual, responding in both ASL and Pidgin Signed English (PSE).

The approximately 150 interviews were videotaped, then laboriously transcribed by Inez Petersen—who would watch signed portions of the videotapes, then type phrases or sentences in English on a manual typewriter. Eugene Petersen then checked the transcripts for accuracy in capturing the flavor and informational content of the interviews as well as the translation to English. The transcriptions were shortened to 5-15 pages, double-spaced, and returned to the interviewees to check for accuracy. Approximately 50 of the 150 edited life stories were returned to the Petersens; the remaining 100 drafts were not returned, despite follow-up TTY calls and letters. Eugene Petersen ascribed this lack of response to what he called the “old nemesis of prelingually deaf people: Their reading comprehension. They were uncertain if they fully understood their own stories and [were] too proud to ask for help.” The remaining 50 life stories were gathered for publication as *You Deaf? Visits with Deaf Americans*, but were not published before the Petersens were killed in an automobile accident in 1989.

A colleague of Eugene Petersen, Susan Foster, who had been given a review copy of Petersen's manuscript in the late 1980s, reopened the issue of publication of the life stories in 1998. After consultation with Gail Kovalik, PI on this project, the decision was made to “publish” the life stories in a relatively new medium, the World Wide Web. Attempts were made to contact each of those 50

interviewees to obtain their permission to post their life stories on the Web, to obtain updates or epilogues to their life stories, and to obtain photographs of these individuals. In short, we wanted to make these full-text stories come to life in a way that would be more visually pleasing and interesting to people who have become accustomed to the capabilities of the Internet and the WWW. Plans included placing videoclips of the original interviews on this Web site, storing the original videotapes in an archive when found. (To date, 6/30/00, only one original videotaped interview has been located. A videoclip of Barbara Hinrich's life story, which relates how she became deaf, is on the WWW at <www.rit.edu/~glk9638/history/hinrichs.htm>; click on the link under the photo at the top of this page.)

Concomitantly, we attempted to contact Eugene Petersen's children in an effort to track down the original videotaped interviews, transcripts, permission forms, and any other materials related to Eugene's original work. We also contacted several individuals at Gallaudet University, where Eugene had been named to the 1985-86 Powrie V. Doctor Chair of Deaf Studies to complete work on this project, thinking that the library or Archives might have copies of the videotapes. This took several months, and we finally learned from one of the Petersen children that all of these original materials had been lost in the intervening years since the Petersens died. Gallaudet University did not have copies of any of these materials either. Thus, the only material remaining from this important project was Eugene Petersen's edited manuscript.

Robert Davila, one of the original interviewee, and now the first deaf Vice President for NTID at Rochester Institute of Technology, helped us find addresses for approximately 35 of these 50 people. Some of those individuals led us to others on the list. We wrote letters, requested new permissions to make the edited interview materials available, asked for photographs, and asked the individuals to write epilogues to their life stories. Several people jumped at the chance to participate fully in this project. Others were reluctant to write epilogues but gave permission to post the old life story and sent photographs. Still others did not respond to our original and follow-up letters.

In 1999, Kovalik obtained a ten-week 50% professional development leave at NTID to develop a Web site based on the available Petersen

interview materials. This leave included workshops in Dreamweaver, a Web page software package, as well as consultation with individuals at NTID skilled in Web development. The life stories were typed into Dreamweaver but not uploaded to the WWW until we received new permissions from the original interviewees. Any materials that they sent to us at this time (photographs and updates on their lives) were also added to their Web pages. Photographs were cropped and enhanced in Adobe Photoshop 5.0 and uploaded to the individual Web pages. Epilogues and additional materials were added to the site, which is still under development. Eventually, 19 life stories, several epilogues and innumerable photographs were added to the Eugene and Inez Petersen Collection Web site, which can be found at <<http://www.rit.edu/~glk9638/history.htm>>.

Communication continues with several Petersen interviewees who appeared genuinely thrilled that their stories were finally coming to "life" on the WWW. One, David Bloch, a deaf Holocaust survivor, has subsequently donated some of his artwork to NTID (copies are posted on his Web page at <<http://www.rit.edu/~glk9638/history/bloch-epilogue.htm>>). Another, Edna Adler (now deceased), who had been a deaf consultant to the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, Deafness and Communicative Disorders Office, Social Rehabilitation Services, Department of Health and Human Services, wrote: "The reemergence of the Gene and Inez Petersen Collection seems just too incredible to believe. NTID is to be thanked profusely and complimented for assuming the responsibility of preserving the collection." A third, Barbara Hinrichs, participated in the Poster Session about the Petersen Collection at PEPNet 2000. Through this conference, we made contact with the daughter of Leo Jacobs and with another of the original interviewees. These two life stories will soon be added to the Petersen Collection Web site.

In March, 2000, contact was made with Gary Petersen, Gene Petersen and Lorraine Petersen White, three of Eugene's children. Gary spearheaded a family effort to develop a life story for his father and Inez, and these materials and photographs were added to the Gene and Inez Petersen Collection Web site at <<http://www.rit.edu/~glk9638/history/petersens.htm>>. On June 19, 2000, Gene

Petersen, Eugene's son, wrote a perspective on the Petersens' work, which is linked to the Petersen Web page. The Petersen Collection is still very much a "work in progress."

There are several people who have not yet given their permission to have their life stories included in the Petersen Collection. If you know any of the following individuals, please contact them and encourage them to get in touch with Gail Kovalik at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf in Rochester, NY (e-mail <glk9638@rit.edu>).

Janice Adams
Glenn Anderson
Daryl and Jill Argrave
Jack Bertram
Barbara Babbini Brasel
Nancy Jo Brown (Deller)
Howard Busby
Alex Ewan
Jack and Rosalyn Gannon
Thomas and Barbara Gant
Phyllis and Nelson Gehman
Harvey and Anna Gremillion

Jeffrey Hoffer
Ellie Jergensen
Joseph and Noreen Jezerski
Roy and Wanda Kirby
Claude Moore
Gerald Nygren
Everardo and Emma Padilla
Marie Jean Philip
Eldon and Donna Ragland
Gregory and Rose Maria Rathbun
William and Nikki Simpson
Tommy Walker
Bruce Weir
Sterling White
Colleen Wilkins
Janelle Yoder (Hartman)
Chris Zagorewicz

In July, 2000, the author submitted a grant proposal, *Life Histories of Deaf Americans*, to the National Endowment for the Humanities. Additional funding will allow us to expand the project begun 15 years ago by Gene Petersen.

