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NOTE FROM THE PUBLISHER

Mary Herring Wright participated as an informant in the Black ASL Project, which researched the linguistic features that make Black ASL recognizable as a distinct variety of American Sign Language. As part of the project, Carolyn McCaskill, coauthor of the introduction to this new edition, conducted an interview with Wright in her home. In the interview, Wright shares her sign lexicon as well as stories from her youth. The interview can be viewed at www.youtube.com/GallaudetUniversityPress.



FOREWORD

*How transient is joy and grief
A moment stamped in bold relief
Then lost on memory's yellowed page
We trace them dim with dust and age*

—author unknown

Memories of my yesteryears are not dusty, and don't seem at all aged. I don't dwell in the past, but memories of my childhood are like beautiful jewels to be taken out every so often, played with, enjoyed, and packed away again. Those were years when sound had meaning, when I could hear. Now it's just vibrations, loud noises, constantly watching lips and every gesture, trying to get some meaning out of what is being said.

I began losing my hearing when I was about eight years old. By the age of ten, I was completely deaf. Although I have been examined by several specialists, none of them were ever able to determine exactly what caused my hearing loss. They are certain, however, that it is nerve deafness.

I decided to write my story because I wanted my children to have a lasting document that chronicled my experiences growing up as a deaf person. I also decided to write my story for my many deaf friends because my story, in many ways, is also their story. Many stereotypes about deaf people persist. Even today, some people continue to use the phrase “deaf and dumb” when referring to persons who are deaf. The use of the words *dumb* and *mute* are very inaccurate because many deaf people can speak. Therefore, none of them are really dumb or mute, even if they choose not to speak. The general public should understand that deaf persons are first and foremost human beings with the same fears, desires, anxieties, hopes, and most importantly, intellectual abilities, that hearing persons have.

In the book, which roughly covers from the mid-1920s to the early 1940s, I talk about my experience of the transition from a hearing world to one of total silence. The book chronicles my ongoing adjustment as I travel back and forth each year between my deaf world at the North Carolina School for the Blind and Deaf and my hearing world at home. My adjustment to hearing loss occurred at a time when I was also experiencing the physical and emotional growing pains that come with adolescence. In addition, the story occurs over a period that covers two major events in American history—the Great Depression and World War II.

Finally, my story adds an important dimension to the growing body of literature on deaf people as I am an African American woman who is deaf. My book is unique and historically significant in that it provides valuable descriptive information about the faculty and staff of the North Carolina school for Black deaf and blind students from the perspective of a student as well as a student teacher. It also describes the physical facilities as well as the changes in those facilities over the years.

My story is one of enduring faith, perseverance, and optimism. I share it in the hopes that it will serve as a source of inspiration for others who are challenged in their own ways by life’s obstacles.



INTRODUCTION TO THE ANNIVERSARY EDITION

It was such an honor for us to meet Mary Herring Wright, a Black Deaf author who wrote her memoir as a Black Deaf student attending a segregated school for deaf students. During the summer of 2007, we traveled to Wallace, North Carolina, for an interview as part of the Black ASL project. Mary's daughter answered the door and brought us into the living room where Mary sat patiently with her sweet and gentle smile. The purpose of the Black ASL project was to gather Black Deaf participants' historical accounts of their segregated or integrated schools and to record how they used to sign certain concepts. But with Mary, it was like history came alive as she told us stories about being a young girl at the North Carolina School for the Colored Deaf and Blind (NCSCDB) in Raleigh, North Carolina. The Black ASL research team was captivated by her tales and her unique signs; for this reason, her interview recording was the longest of all.

Sounds Like Home has a similar effect on us as readers. Her memoir is candidly written in a way as if she was our grandmother telling us stories that draw us in with vivid descriptions of her hometown, her family, her neighbors, and her school. In part one of the book, her

stories put us in the mind of Mary as a young child living an eventful life before she completely lost her hearing at the age of ten. In part two, Mary introduces various characters in her coming-of-age tale that shaped her as a deafened young woman who had to navigate the new world of deafness at a residential boarding school for the deaf.

It began as a traumatic experience for Mary as she had to leave her beloved family for the school in Raleigh. Such an experience was exceedingly common for young deaf children who left home for the first time to attend state-funded boarding schools with specialized education services for deaf children. The children had to stay all year at the residential schools, even through holidays and breaks. It was an understandably difficult decision for families to let their children go to school that resulted in limited contact. Older or experienced students knew what it was like to leave home for the first time so naturally they looked after the young deaf children and comforted them. Through time, the younger children became part of the surrogate family, bonded through deafness and sign language.

For Mary, she was in a unique position as a deafened child, meaning she functioned as a hearing child before losing her hearing at the age of ten. This represented a turning point in her life as she transitioned into the Deaf world with “Raleigh Sign Language,” which is known as a North Carolina variety of Black American Sign Language used in the southern and border US states among Black Deaf signers who had attended segregated schools for the deaf (McCaskill, Lucas, Bayley, and Hill 2011). Mary recounted her struggles as a Black Deaf person trying to find acceptance in two worlds: the hearing world with her family and friends in Wallace and the Deaf world with her school peers. Eventually, Mary came into her own with her caring and adventurous spirit.

Mary’s memoir (along with the collection of photos in the book) gives us a rare look into the daily lives of students, teachers, and administrators at NCSCDB. For us, the narratives and photos are just as important as the linguistic evidence that we collected and published in *The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL*. While our book validates the existence of Black ASL based on historical and community sources, the memoir

reanimates the memories and souls of Black Deaf students trapped in the historical documents. It saddened us to learn that historical documents and photos were promptly discarded when the facilities of the formerly segregated deaf schools were demolished or repurposed. The remaining documents and photos are still in the hands of aging former students and their descendants, but within the next generations, those historical materials may be discarded as well. Memoirs such as Mary Herring Wright's *Sounds Like Home* and Maxine Childress Brown's *On the Beat of Truth* (her mother also attended NCSCDB) serve as a permanent witness to the lives of Black Deaf people and as a reminder that some historical documents are the physical memories that are waiting to be reanimated through such memoirs.

Although this memoir is Mary's story, this is our story as well. We as Black Deaf people find ourselves in her story. Carolyn, as one of the authors of the introduction, was taken back to the days when she attended the Alabama School for the Negro Deaf and Blind as a child. Memories that she had buried deep into her psyche came forward and she laughed and cried with Mary because she felt that it was her story too. Joseph, as the other author, was born long after segregation, but he too found himself in Mary's story as he went through his identity development as a Black Deaf person. The memoir is the story of Black Deaf human beings who live their lives at the intersection of race and deafness and who are coming into their own as educators, entrepreneurs, leaders, authors, actors, athletes, lawyers, professors, dancers, directors, activists, and more; they are the realities that were once thought to be impossible dreams for Black Deaf students vocationally trained at segregated schools for the deaf. The memoir is also the story of hundreds of Black Deaf souls who are no longer with us. Mary Herring Wright, we thank you for your gift and may you rest in peace knowing that your story will be passed on through generations.

Joseph Hill and Carolyn McCaskill