JOHN LEE CLARK

My Alma Mater

When people go blind, they are rarely in a hurry to pick up a white cane. They choose to train their eyes on the ground as they walk. Even after they begin to bump into poles and other people, they don't want to use the white cane, which would broadcast their blindness to the world. Some have been hit by cars multiple times before they finally unfold the metal feeler. By then, when their eyes are at last free to roam about again, they don't see much of anything.

Because I was born deaf in Minnesota, I avoided this fate. Not blindness, for I became legally blind when I was twelve and my vision continued to change until I was twenty-five. But I spent an unusually short season watching the ground before me. You see, it was my good fortune to be a student at the Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf, which happens to have some of the loveliest grounds I have ever laid my eyes on. It was this beauty that, in good measure, encouraged me to use a cane and retire my eyes to a life of leisure. This is not unlike how many deaf people enjoy music, reserving their residual hearing for pleasure instead of straining at speech. The rest of what I needed to embrace my deaf-blindness came from the culture of the school and from my family, both of which were, and still are, proud to be "different."

Like many schools for the deaf founded in the nineteenth century, my alma mater is on elevated ground so the poor unfortunates would be nearer Heaven. The campus rests atop a tree-filled bluff overlooking the Straight River and a winding road that soon intersects with the still-intact Main Street in Faribault, the seat of Rice County, about an hour's drive south of the Twin Cities. Sharing the same bluff but effectively separate is the private boarding school, Shattuck-St. Mary's, famous for its hockey teams and for expelling Marlon Brando.

Whether it was intended from the beginning and all along I do not know, but the layout of the buildings is in perfect tune with deaf culture. At the center is an open green, which has a baseball diamond and some maple and oak trees beyond the outfield. Olof Hanson Drive, a one-way road and the first state "highway" to be named after a deaf man (who was a one-time president of the National Association of the Deaf and a renowned architect and minister), circles this green. All of the main buildings except one more or less face this green and thus each other, giving the campus the feeling of an enclosed, almost secret garden. And it is a garden, with

spacious lawns in front of the buildings, smooth white sidewalks, well-tended shrubbery, and green lamp-posts topped by white globes that shine orange-yellow at night.

The buildings are all of native limestone, smooth-cut where the stones meet one another but crag-hewn on the outside. Three of the newest were built during the Seventies, squat, saved from looking naked and bald by their dark wood-shingled tops. The rest, except two, were built in the early part of the twentieth century. Two of the older establishments are neo-classical masterpieces and are state landmarks. The limestone is still yellow on the newer buildings and it ranges from pink to brown on the older buildings.

The first building on the right of the curve that begins the circle is Tate Hall. It is a long, massive mansion featuring marching rows of tall windows with green shutters and white trim. At the end of either wing is an elevated porch with white columns and stone stairs on either side, going front or back. The main entrance has wide stairs leading up to tall columns supporting a wide Doric gable. If there were two marble lions, they wouldn't have been out of place. At the middle of the long slate roof is a white cupola. Tate Hall houses the girls' dormitory, the administrative offices, and the infirmary, as well as the old superintendent's apartments, now the school museum. James N. Tate himself dropped dead there in 1923—I can show you the very spot.

Past the playground near the south porch of Tate Hall, past a picnic pavilion, looms Lauritsen Gymnasium. Because of the way the two main entrances jut out a bit like the corners of a castle, with GIRLS carved in stone above one and BOYS the other, and above each at the top a gable, the structure has a somewhat gothic appearance. The fact that the large upper windows, where the basketball court is, are frosted adds to this appearance. They are like the heavy lids, half-closed, of a gargoyle.

When it opened in 1930, it wasn't called the Lauritsen Gymnasium, for Dr. Wesley Lauritsen had graduated from the school only thirteen years earlier and just in the beginning his long career, which included serving as athletic director and editor of the school's highly regarded and nationally distributed paper *The Companion*. He retired in 1962 in time to complete a history of the school for its centennial festivities in 1963. Until his death in 1991, he attended almost every home game, standing at the same spot where he stood as athletic director. It was only after his death that the then-current athletic director was able to stand at that ideal place, surveying the entire court, the bleachers, and the balcony above one of the hoops. When I enrolled, I quickly learned of Lauritsen's most famous saying, also the title of his editorial column, "Good Work Is Never Lost."

The gymnasium in its early days was such a jewel, with a court that could be divided into two still-full courts that colleges rented it for home

games and tournaments. The University of Minnesota five played there, leading to some confusion in the local papers because both the university and deaf school teams were called the Gophers. The deaf school helped the situation by changing the name to the Hilltoppers. Because it proved difficult to design an attractive pictorial logo—they once used a hill with a spinning top at its apex, and at another time, inexplicably, a mosquito—the students voted in 1971 to change it to the Trojans. In time, the gymnasium ceased to be a coveted venue, but it remains a popular gathering place for the deaf community, especially when the opposing team is another deaf school. One wonderful part of the deaf school experience is traveling to other states to play their deaf school teams.

Across the lane that branches off Olof Hanson Drive and into Shattuck campus, with a Civil War-era cannon out in front, is Rodman Hall. It is where the students eat three meals every day and on the weekends the school is open to host home games against out-of-state deaf schools. It is a squarish building with trees close to its two main entrances, again one for girls and one for boys. Not that boys and girls have to enter at the one or the other like they were required to do in the old days, when all of the boys ate at one end of the dining hall and all the girls at the other, but the boys' entrance is closer to the boys' dormitory and Tate Hall is closer to the girls' door. The cafeteria is on the second floor, in a high-ceilinged room with huge windows. The first floor is a student community space, called the Friendship Room.

It is fitting that Rodman Hall and Lauritsen Gymnasium are next to each other, for the men they are named after entered the school together, although Roy Rodman never graduated. Instead, he was hired as a janitor. Over his long career, he accrued such respect and status that he was regarded as the personal owner of the entire campus. Dr. Frank R. Turk, an alumnus and the deaf youth leadership guru, loves to tell Rodman stories, which always illustrate the value of character and hard work. Legend has it that Rodman polished every single light bulb on campus, including the rows of high lights in Noyes Hall Auditorium, no small task. He protected the hardwood floor in the gymnasium with his body, not allowing a single outdoor shoe to tread upon it, not even if it belonged to a referee. During chapel on Sundays, in the days when most students stayed on campus for months at a time and the school still had such Bible talks, Rodman watched the chairs like a hawk, swooping down on anyone who caused a chair to get out of line.

About that cannon out in front: It was used to celebrate touchdowns in the days before football players wore helmets. Deaf people enjoyed hearing or feeling the booms. Our closest modern equivalent is the big marching-band bass drum, which some deaf football teams use for counting up to snaps and for cheers. My football coach, Mike Cashman, a history buff,

once told me that the cannon was abandoned and wasn't found again for many years. It is now home to birds' nests, and from time to time students sit on it or lean against it or take team or group photographs with it. Down from the mouth of the cannon, about five feet underground, there lies buried a time capsule. During summer school 1990, before I enrolled in the fall, we were asked to make this time capsule and to return in the summer of 2000 to dig it up. That summer came and went without anyone doing such a thing, and I suspect I am the only one who remembers. I suppose I am waiting for it to be of a decent vintage before I go out there with a shovel.

Next to Rodman Hall is the boys' dormitory, Frechette Hall, one of the three Seventies buildings with the dark brown shingles all around the tops. It has three wings, each one a two-story building with narrow windows. Each is connected to the central area via a hallway that is all windows and a roof. At the very center of the common is a fireplace. Not just any fireplace, but one designed for big fires, with a large circular concrete bed and a huge iron chimney like an upside-down trumpet coming down from the pyramidal ceiling, its wide mouth not three feet above the bed. Students hang out there, in spite of other attractions in the common area: the row of booths, a large TV, a billiards table, vending machines, and other things. Perhaps it is the power of the circular that draws them here, or the fact that it is bright but with indirect light.

Out in the back are a playground, a tar-and-gravel basketball court, and a limestone cottage, the home of the school's Boy Scouts troop. This being the rear end of the campus, the backdrop is dominated by trees. This is the site of my earliest memories of the school, from the several summer-school sessions I attended before I transferred there as a full-time student for my sixth grade year. Both boys and girls slept in Frechette Hall, in separate wings of course, but we shared everything else—the T-shirts we painted in the kitchen, the barbecues we had outside, and the pillows and cushions we sprawled on to watch "Star Wars" flicker on the wall—the reels had come from the National Association of the Deaf, which captioned films before captioning became standard.

The next two buildings we students almost never entered. The power plant, a military-style block with Eisenhower written all over it, is where the school groundskeepers and maintenance men lurk. They all were hearing men in my time, and I think they all still are, many belonging to the same families, and I don't remember ever seeing any one of them sign. Their wives worked in the cafeteria and, because of their daily contact with students, more of them signed. The school during my time there had only one deaf janitor, a lady who was born in Taiwan. Because I had deaf parents, she knew them and always asked me to tell them hello for her. I remember grumbling about there not being more deaf people working in

the cafeteria or in maintenance. But that they loved the campus was and is evident, everything there testifying to their care. The women cooked first-rate meals and one of them was a legendary baker of cakes. For them, the school must have been like, as it was for us but in a different way, a second home.

Tucked behind the power plant is the campus's oldest standing building. Erected in 1896, it used to be the school's laundry facility, where girls also learned dressmaking. Long boarded up and now beyond restoration, it will be razed sometime in the near future. Beyond the slowly-crumbling edifice is the same backdrop of trees, but with a faded sidewalk going all the way to the railroad tracks at the foot of the bluff, where the river glides by. If you pay attention, you will find an even fainter walk splitting off into the woods, ending at a fire pit. No doubt many sweethearts had their rendezvous here.

Back up the trail and back to Olof Hanson Drive, there is a pair of rectangular buildings opposite Tate Hall across the green. Mott Hall and Pollard Hall are on what used to be the original Mott Hall, the school's first large-scale building. Begun in 1868 and completed in 1879, the imposing structure was razed after it was declared a fire hazard. Many alumni thought and still think that this towering edifice should never have been destroyed. However, it had so many architectural flourishes that it made me dizzy when I first saw a sketch. I suspect that it would not have agreed with modern sensibilities anyway. The "new" Mott Hall houses a printing shop, a carpentry shop, and a metalworks and welding shop, all very important in the old days, when most deaf boys graduated fully trained for trade work, especially in printing. Pollard Hall houses the offices that offer various special services, such as the state information clearinghouse on deaf children.

Atop a gentle knoll is the campus's second state landmark after Tate Hall, an impressive domed building with two wings bent back so that it might look like, from above, a stubby boomerang with a ball at its elbow. Noyes Hall is named after the school's second superintendent, who served from 1866 to 1896. The nascent poet in me was often in awe of his full name, Jonathan Lovejoy Noyes. The main entrance leads into the auditorium, where there is a stage. At either side of the stage, in a recess in the wall, is a white bust, one of Tate and the other of Noyes. The central ceiling is the dome, where there used to be a skylight. Facing the stage and looking up, one cannot miss two massive paintings. A WPA artist during the Great Depression created these images. On the left wall, the painting is of a sunny day with a rainbow, some chubby clouds, and yellow-green grass—California grass, not Minnesota grass. In the middle of this idyllic landscape is a huge human hand, rising out of the ground like a mountain. The hand is dry and cracked. On the opposite wall the painting depicts

a stormy night with bolts of lightning, but here the hand is smooth and luminous. I suppose the artist was telling deaf students that struggle is good.

There is a balcony, with fixed wooden theater seats, but the floor of the auditorium is bare except when chairs are set out. The school proms and dances usually take place there. There is a play put out by the students every spring. Commencement exercises. Visiting speakers. And weddings. By state law, the superintendent of the school is vested with the power to perform marriages. Alumni, teachers, and staff have gladly availed themselves of this service for over one hundred years. How nice it is to have a friend, not a stranger, officiate on your special day, and how nice it is, if you are deaf, to have your vows read to you in your own language instead of through an interpreter! Noyes himself—with his large Victorian belly straining against waistcoast, gold chains dangling, and whiskers on full display—loved to perform on such occasions. The new superintendent, Bradley Harper, the father of one of my classmates, had wanted to become the first American Pope. That didn't work out, but at least he'll be able to do weddings.

Behind the west wing of Noyes Hall is Quinn Hall, where the elementary classrooms are. It has another, smaller auditorium, one more suited to presentations and workshops because there are steps along the entire length of the stage. So it is a popular site for practical, as opposed to formal, presentations and meetings. The rest of the building is low and something of a maze. Outside, the same wood-shingled top of this Seventies building also roofs two open-air passages, one leading to the back of Noyes Hall, and the other to the last of the squat Seventies buildings, Smith Hall, where the high school is. It is named after my favorite alumnus, Dr. James L. Smith, who worked at the school for exactly fifty years, from 1885 to 1935, as a teacher and then principal, and a longtime editor of *The Companion*. Like Olof Hanson and another alumnus, the investment banker Jay Cooke Howard, Smith served as president of the National Association of the Deaf.

It being Minnesota, it is no surprise that there are underground tunnels. Tate Hall, Lauritsen Gymnasium, Rodman and Frechette Halls, the power plant, Mott, Pollard, and Noyes Halls are all connected. Because of asbestos, access to the tunnels is now restricted. But they once were used often enough for strips of wet green grass to fend off snow for weeks in the beginning of winter. I remember reading an issue of *The Companion* from the Twenties and the school's folksy science teacher, Victor Spence, reported observing a robin and her nest of pale blue eggs on one such green lane, not yet knowing, it seemed that it was winter. When I was a student, I entered a tunnel only once. It was football training camp before school started. A vicious wind descended, and we were told that a tornado

was coming our way. We scurried into Tate Hall and down into its tunnel. We were soon joined by the freshly-showered volleyball players, and I remember thinking how we must have smelled, sweaty and mud-streaked as we were, in our long-unwashed practice jerseys. But the girls seemed not to mind, and we all picked up where we last left off in our never-ending conversation and laughter, our faces and hands glowing in the gloom.

That I was born in Minnesota and not another state is an important factor. Playing football and participating in academic competitions in the Great Plains Schools for the Deaf conference, and thanks to my parents' tradition of stopping by at deaf schools on vacations, I have visited many schools for the deaf and also some for the blind. No other campus compares in character and beauty to my alma mater. Call me biased, but I'm not alone in this opinion. In one old issue of *The Companion*, James L. Smith, reporting on the proceedings of a teachers' conference that took place on campus, wrote of entering an empty classroom and noticing a message chalked on the blackboard. It said, "I have never seen a grounds of a school for the deaf so beautiful as yours." In those days, the school surely had stiff competition in this department, as the deaf baby boom of the Sixties was still in the future. When that boom hit, many schools were forced to hastily erect new buildings. For some reason, my alma mater's enrollment numbers have kept between 150 and 250 students through most of its history, allowing the campus to retain its basic layout around the open green. It was beautiful then, but it must be even more outstanding now, in contrast to all of the schools marred by the boom and its aftermath—stuck with empty buildings.

One of the best things about going to a deaf school is acquiring roots. The first thing deaf people ask one another when meeting for the first time is "Where did you go to school?" Often there is only one degree of removal between any two deaf persons, so intricately and deeply connected is the deaf community. Before we even met, my wife, from North Carolina School for the Deaf, and I shared at least three points of connection: The fact my father graduated from her school, our having studied leadership under Frank R. Turk, and our having both served on superintendent selection committees that hired the same person, Dr. Katherine Jankowski, who first headed her school before moving to mine some years later.

And no graduate of a deaf school is a stranger to history. We are in awe of deaf luminaries after whom our buildings are named or who grace the walls of our school museums or Halls of Fame. Because we are there, too, walking the same paths they walked, sitting in the same classrooms they did, and even meeting them in the flesh, we grow comfortable with history, with the making of history. When I went to Gallaudet, University, the leading historically deaf college in Washington, D.C., it was already a familiar place with familiar names: The Elstad Auditorium, named after

our sixth superintendent and later president of Gallaudet; the Hanson Plaza, named after Olof's wife, Agatha, the first deaf woman to graduate from Gallaudet and one-time teacher at our school; the Washburn Arts Building, named after a Minnesota alumnus, the impressively-named Cadwallader Lincoln Washburn, widely regarded as the best dry-point etch artist the world has ever seen; and all manner of other indications of Minnesotan presence. Some years ago, when I was invited to give a series of talks at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf in Rochester, N.Y., I stayed in Peterson Hall, named after an alumnus and longtime teacher at my school, Peter N. Peterson. I haven't been there, but when I do visit the Southwestern Collegiate Institute for the Deaf in Texas, I will smile because its founder, Douglas Burke, came from my school.

As historic my alma mater is, the years I spent there as a student, from fall 1990 until my graduation in 1997, were among the most exciting in its history. It was the peak of the Deaf Pride Movement. American Sign Language linguistics and Deaf Studies were taught for the first time. The students led a successful protest that brought in our first deaf superintendent. The 1992 football team won The Silent News national championship honors. The Academic Bowl team won five straight championships. And the girls' basketball team! Led by Nanette Virnig, the Johnson sisters, and the unforgettable Ronda Jo Miller, it won five straight national championships. Those girls went on to lead Gallaudet's women's team on an unprecedented run that garnered national attention, including two books. When Miller was lighting up Lauritsen Gymnasium, scholarship offers poured in from Division I schools, but she was only interested in Gallaudet, a Division III school. Hearing scouts, coaches, and reporters couldn't understand how she could sweep aside all those offers, but we understood. We all would have done the same. Miller finished her collegiate career as the all-time scoring leader in Division III.

I was there and I am still there. In 1993, a group of deaf teachers were fed up with hearing teachers and staff speaking in their presence without signing. They successfully passed a motion to declare the entire campus a "signing zone." Signs reminding everyone to sign would be put up everywhere. They held a contest, asking students to enter logo ideas. My drawing won. It shows a green slope with five figures on it, silhouetted against a yellow sun, and above this two blue cloud-like hands making the ASL word "signing." They ordered a pile of those signs, and my art teacher, Bonnie Gonzalez, asked me to add my John Hancock to every single one of them. But I wrote my name in print, "John Clark." She asked me why I didn't sign my name with a flourish. I said I wanted to make sure people could read my name.

So I have many fingerprints on the campus. On entering the campus, one sees a huge sign—my sign—with the words "Welcome" and "Please

use sign language." On leaving the campus, the last things one sees are two of my signs, on either pillar of the entrance pillars, with the words "Thank You for Signing." The signs are also in every building (except, probably, the power plant). But this is not how I want to close this tour of my alma mater.

I have mentioned football but not where the football field is. It is behind Tate Hall and occupies part of a long level field that includes tennis courts and more flat green behind Lauritsen Gymnasium. Across the street that borders this field are old-fashioned houses and beyond them more houses and streets. I wonder if, during all those years, the residents of those houses, sitting on their front porches, have wondered about what it was like to be deaf and to go to that school across the street. All they can see, except for when we practiced or had games and the deaf community came out to root for us, is the back of Tate Hall and the back of Lauritsen Gymnasium. Did they have any idea what it was like to be inside the campus, to be like me or Maurice Potter, after whom the football field is named?

Whenever I saw the aged, stooped Maurice Potter, Class of 1928, star athlete and many years a professional baseball umpire, at our games, I made a point to say hello. He always had an interest in us students. Some years after I graduated, I ran into his son, Jim, who was my math teacher and who had retired at the same time my class graduated, giving us a moving commencement address. I asked after his father and learned that it was near the end. Maurice could no longer drive or attend the home games. But he would ask his son to drive him to the campus, just to take a slow turn around Olof Hanson Drive. And father and son would look out of the car windows and, as I have so often done in my mind, take it all in again.