THE SIGN LANGUAGE OF THE PLAINS INDIANS
OF NORTH AMERICA

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Signs and gestures have been used from the earliest recorded times either as a substitute for speech or in order to supplement speech. In many occupations today signs are used much more conveniently than words. Sounds are often impractical because of noise, distance or the need for silence. Social relationships, even in our modern time, are facilitated by the use of nonvocal communication.1

The Plains Indians, as generally referred to in this paper, are the Indians who used the sign language and who lived between the Missouri River and the Rocky Mountains, and from the Frazer River in British Columbia to the Rio Grande River in the South.

According to Walter Prescott Webb the Plains have remained a cultural unit.2 Within this cultural unit there are thirty-one tribes of Indians. The eleven typical tribes are the Assiniboine, Arapaho, Blackfoot, Cheyenne, Comanche, Crow, Gros Ventre, Kiowa, Kiowa-Apache, Sarsi, Teton-Dakota.

The sign language, according to Hodge's Handbook of American Indians, apparently was never used west of the Rocky Mountains except among the Nez Perces or other Indians who were accustomed to periodic hunting trips on the Plains.3

Picture-writing the world over, as well as in the North American continent, probably grew out of sign language thus giving us three stages of development. (1) Sign language, (2) Pictographs and (3) Alphabet.4

The English scientist, Sir Richard Paget, has estimated that "the human hand is about 20,000 times more versatile than the mouth."5 He further theorized that by the aid of the arms and

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fingers it would be possible to produce over 70,000 distinct elementary signs while the maximum number of mouth gestures is 144.

There has been a great deal of speculation concerning the origin of the language of gestures. It is fairly well established that the specific origin is not known. Several men have made extensive studies of the sign language. Perhaps the two most notable men are Captain William Philo Clark and Garrick Mallery.

Lewis F. Hadley, who at one time lived in what later became Western Oklahoma, made a study of the sign language. He said, referring to the development and origin of the Indian sign language:6

My idea is that the Indian Sign Language is of a natural growth; a creation of necessity when we recognize the hundreds of their distinct languages, to say nothing of the numerous dialects of each, we must perceive that no one Indian tongue could be very widespread; that one could not travel continuously and meet people of the same speech.

And the circumstances of the Western plains and mountain Indians who followed Buffalo from one feeding ground to another over vast regions of country would tend to bring different tribes into the same locality, and as they could not understand each other's words, it is but natural to suppose that some means of communication would grow to become intelligible.

Captain Clark goes into the origin of the sign language in some detail:7

That we find no positive evidence of the existence and use of gesture speech does not necessarily show that there was none, (indicating the status of the Eastern tribes in former times) as is shown by the following notable examples. Circumstances forced Lewis and Clarke [sic] in their exploration of the then unknown West to spend the winter of 1804-5 with the Mandans, Gros Ventres, and Arickarees in their village on the Missouri, only a short distance below the present site of their camp at Fort Berthold. During the winter the Cheyennes and Sioux visited this village, and there can be no doubt that gesture speech was daily and hourly used by the members of these tribes as it is today when they meet, but no mention is made of these tribes as it is today when they meet, but no mention is made of the fact, and not until these explorers met the Shoshones near the headwaters of the Missouri do we find any note made of signs being used. If these explorers who entered so minutely into the characteristics of the Indians in their writings failed to make a record of this language, I do not think it very surprising that earlier investigations should have, under less favorable auspices, also neglected it.

I have called attention to the lack of any systematic code of gestures among the Algonquins, and given some idea of the great geographical area covered by their language, and I believe this to be the reason for the non-culture and lack of general use of signs.

The condition of affairs in the South was, however, much more favorable to the growth or perfection of gesture speech than in the North, for there were many different vocal languages spoken by the various tribes in that section.

In 1885 Captain W. P. Clark made the observation that during the last 100 to 150 years the following tribes had had determined

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centers, if not of origin, certainly of perfection and propagation of
gesture speech: (1) Cheyennes and Arapahoes; (2) Mandans, Gros
Ventres and Arickarees; (3) Crows; (4) Blackfeet; (5) Kiowas
and Apaches.  

Colonel Richard Irving Dodge believed, as did the Plains Indians,
that the sign language was invented by the Kiowas who held an
intermediate position between the Southern and Northern Plains
tribes.  

William Tomkins, another student of the sign language, stated
that records of the landings of Columbus and the recordings of
Coronado and Cabrillo showed that Indians at that time conversed
by means of signs. Tomkins book, Universal Indian Sign Language
Of The Plains Indians Of North America, contains a significant state-
ment made by Dr. William H. Corbusier, a Surgeon in the U. S. Army
and a deep student of Indian affairs, who said in 1878: "The tra-
ditions of the Indians point towards the South as the direction from
which the sign language came. The Comanches acquired it in Mexico;
The Plains Indians did not invent it." This quotation expresses
virtually the same opinion which Captain Clark expressed as to the
origin of the sign language.  

The use of signs or gestures as a cultivated art founded upon
natural principles served a very useful purpose for the Plains
Indians. This non-vocal communication enabled each Indian nation
to converse with one another intelligibly. Warriors of different
tribes could communicate at long distances, alliances among them-
selves could be made for attacks on enemies, and attacks could be
arranged for upon settlers and travelers.

Since almost all Indians are known for their reticence, it was
surprising to J. Lee Humfraville to note that the Indians would
sit for hours and hours and converse in the sign language with much
rapidity. Captain Clark was associated closely with the Cheyennes,
Crows, Sioux, Bannocks, Assiniboins, Gros Ventres of the Prairie,
Mandans, Arickarees and other tribes of the Northern Plains. He
discovered that to have the Indians first make the gesture was an
absolute necessity. If a white man makes a sign to an Indian in a

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8 Ibid., pp. 13-14.
9 Colonel Richard Irving Dodge, Our Wild Indians: Thirty-Three Years' Per-
sonal Experience Among The Red Men of The Great West (Hartford, 1882), p. 385.
10 William Tomkins, Universal Indian Sign Language Of The Plains Indians Of
North America (San Diego, 1929), p. 89.
11 Carrick Mallery, Introduction To The Study Of Sign Language Among The
12 J. Lee Humfraville, Twenty Years Among Our Savage Tribes (Hartford,
1897), p. 155.
13 Ibid., 153.
certain way, the chances are ten to one that he will return it in the same way, even though he has never seen it before.14

Garrick Mallery, an ethnologist, observed that thoughts could be communicated rapidly by the use of signs. He said:15

When highly cultivated [the sign language] its rapidity on familiar subjects exceeds that of speech and approaches to that of thought itself. This statement may be startling to those who only notice that a selected spoken word may convey in an instant a meaning for which the motions of even an expert in signs may require a much longer time, but it must be considered that oral speech is now wholly conventional, and that with the similar development of sign language conventional expressions with hands and body could be made more quickly than with the vocal organs, because more organs could be worked at one time.

A case in point of the discontinuance of the gesture language is the development of the Chinook language or jargon in southern Oregon which resulted as a consequence of the trade of the Kalapuyas Indians with foreign people.16

Mallery further illustrated that signs have been abbreviated as in the case of a Cheyenne conveying the meaning of old man to him. The Indian held his right hand forward, bent at the elbow, fingers and thumb closed sidewise. This did not seem to convey any sense so he found a long stick, bent his back, and supported his frame in a tottering step by the stick held, as was before only imagined. There at once was an old age dependent on a staff.17

Clark observed many signs which disappeared with new developments.18

Before the introduction of the coffee-mill among the Indians, coffee was represented as a grain, or more elaborately by describing the process of preparing and drinking the beverage. The little coffee-mill killed off these gestures at once, and the motion made as though turning the crank of the mill to grind the parched berry is to-day understood as meaning coffee by nearly all the Plains tribes.

There are certain modal divisions which Garrick Mallery made of the gesture language. He divided the signs of the Indians into innate and invented; developed and abridged; radical and derivative; (1) Indicative, as directly as possible of the object intended; (2) Imitative, representing it by configurative drawing; (3) Operative, referring to actions and (4) Expressive, being chiefly facial.19

Signals should be mentioned along with signs because they were a prominent part of the communication on the Plains. Mallery said with reference to signals that: "Signals may be executed, first by

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14 Clark, op. cit., pp. 5-6.
15 Mallery, op. cit., p. 4.
16 Ibid., 12.
17 Ibid., 55.
18 Clark, op. cit., p. 15.
19 Mallery, op. cit., p. 59.
bodily action; second, by action of the person in connection with objects, such as a blanket, or a lance, or the direction imparted to a horse; third by various devices, such as smoke, fire or dust, when the person of the signalist is not visible.  

An amazing example of the use of signals is the statement made that the Cheyenne and Arapaho Indians knew of the death of General Custer the next morning after he was killed. By the use of the familiar signals such as flaming arrows and tom-tom beats one tribe signaled another tribe until the news was passed.  

T. R. Davis says that:

One of Custer's scouts, an interpreter named Gay, rode out and made first "peace", then "circle" sign. The peace sign is made by riding toward the party with whom it is desired to communicate, making the horse take a zig-zag course. I do not know how to describe it better than to say that the course of the horse would resemble a Virginia rail fence. The "council" sign is made by riding in a circle, then forward, circling again, and so on.

In later times a few Indian tribes like the Sioux had a system of heliograph signals conveyed by use of mirrors. Drum signals for calling the Indians together on ceremonial occasions were almost universal among tribes. Signal calls were in general use among the Eastern tribes.

Major-General Hugh Lenox Scott was one of the notable contributors to the study of the sign language. He was puzzled for many years as to the correct sign for "Arapaho", which is expressed by touching the breast at three points from left to right. Scott's study concerning this one sign shows how difficult it is to arrive at the exact meaning of signs:

The Cheyenne and Sioux name for Arapaho-Sky Blue-offered no solution. After I went to Washington in 1902 I searched for some clue in the dictionaries of the Indian language. In Crow the word for Arapaho means many tattoos. At last I had my answer. The Indians picked their skins with porcupine quills until the blood came, then covered the incisions with powdered charcoal. The tattoo markings that resulted were sky blue. Elsewhere I read that the Arapahoes were tattooed on the breast in three places. It took me twenty-five years to get to the bottom of this one sign.

Each tribe had a sign which designated the name of the group. The following tribal signs are described by Randolph B. Marcy: Comanche, or "Snake" is indicated by making a waving motion.

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21 Jeff D. Randolph (Interview), Indian-Pioneer History, Foreman Collection, Vol. VIII, p. 310 (Indian Archives, Oklahoma Historical Society).


with the hand. The Cheyenne, or "Cut-Arm", is made by drawing
the hand across the arm. The Arapahoes, or "Smellers", are indi-
cated by seizing the nose with the thumb and forefinger. The
Sioux, or "Cut-throats", are indicated by drawing the hand across
the throat. The Pawnees, or "Wolves", make their sign by placing
a hand on each side of the forehead, with two fingers pointing to
the front. The Crows, give their sign by flapping the palms of their
hands.25

Colonel Dodge shows that while the Cheyennes and Arapahoes
have been the firmest friends for sixty years yet they do not under-
stand each other in their respective languages.26 It would seem that
since one of the languages is easier that it would have eventually been
adopted by both tribes for intercommunication.27 Many of the Indians
were almost as little versed in the use of signs as ordinary white
people. This was especially true of the Utes.28 Dodge met a few
Plains Indians, who, though brought up with the sign language, had
never arrived at sufficient knowledge of the language to converse in
it.29 He had never seen a woman, child or young man who was at
all reliable with signs.30

A popular misconception concerning the sign language has been
challenged by Garrick Mallery. He has shown that abstract as well
as concrete ideas may be expressed in the sign language.31

Another popular error is the assertion that there is one universal
sign language. Mallery made the statement that this was not neces-
sarily true for.32

In numerous instances there is an entire discrepancy between the
signs made by different bodies of Indians to express the same idea; and
if any of these are regarded as determinate, or even widely conventional,
and used without further devices, they will fail in conveying the desired
impression to any one unskilled in gesture as an art, who had not formed
the same precise conception or been instructed in the arbitrary motion.

Two Arapahoes could not thoroughly comprehend each other in
the dark without the intervention of the sign language. Their language
was evidently very difficult to acquire.33

The Mandan and Gros Ventre tribes spoke their respective
languages fluently yet they understood the language of the opposite

25 Randolph B. Marcy, Thirty Years Of Army Life On the Border (New York,
1866), p. 33.
26 Dodge, op. cit., p. 46.
27 Ibid., p. 47.
28 Ibid., p. 383-4.
29 Ibid., p. 384.
30 Ibid., p. 390.
31 Mallery, op. cit., p. 6.
32 Ibid., p. 13.
better. It was not uncommon to see a Mandan questioning in his own language and receiving an answer in Gros Ventre.\textsuperscript{34}

Major Stephen Long related that the “Kiawa” [sic] and “Kaskaia” [sic] languages, although associated together, did not understand each other except by signs.\textsuperscript{35}

Tribes along the Thirty-fifth Parallel generally understood the Caddo language but they were not willing to converse with white men except through signs and interpreters. They felt that it was beneath their dignity to speak out of their native tongue although some of them could speak Spanish.\textsuperscript{36}

Various explorers, travelers, preachers, traders and army men have given recognition in their writings to the presence of the sign language among the Plains Indians of North America. Randolph B. Marcy in his \textit{Adventure On Red River} said that the sign language was used by all the tribes from the Gila to the Columbia River.\textsuperscript{37}

The Reverend A. J. Holt, a pioneer Baptist preacher who worked among the Comanches, said "... One can learn the sign language and can travel among any of these Wild Indians and make his wants and wishes known thereby."\textsuperscript{38}

Joseph Kossuth Dixon described the Indian council in the valley of the Little Big Horn in Montana. Here the Indian chiefs such as Plenty Coups, Mountain Chief and White Horse talked in sign language by means of interpreters.\textsuperscript{39}

Israel G. Vore believed that the sign language was very inadequate as a means for expressing the gospel story. He said:\textsuperscript{40}

I know exactly how expressive and inspiring it is. It does not represent letters or words, but things. It is very meager—God’s truth can neither be proclaimed or illustrated in it. The very idea to those who understand it is terribly absurd. I am no missionary—No minister of the Gospel—No Writist, ... the fault is my education. I graduated among the Indians of the Indian Territory,—my studies never reached grammar. ...

Chittenden and Richardson mentioned this mute language, the sign language, which may be styled a language of defense and caution.


\textsuperscript{35} Major Stephen H. Long, \textit{Account of An Expedition From Pittsburgh To The Rocky Mountains} (Compiled by Edwin James), II, (Philadelphia, 1823), p. 186.


\textsuperscript{37} Randolph B. Marcy, \textit{Adventure On Red River} (Edited by Grant Foreman), (Norman, 1937), p. 168.


\textsuperscript{39} Joseph Kossuth Dixon, \textit{The Vanishing Race} (Philadelphia, 1925), pp. 9, 10, 191 ff.

Their hieroglyphic buffalo-robies often contained the narrative of important events. This, however, was not because they did not have the proper words in their various dialects.41

There is an amazing similarity between the language of signs and that of deaf-mutes. Even the great German philosopher Kant held the idea that the mind of a deaf-mute was incapable of development.42 Captain Clark stated that he had seen a little child three years of age hold up his tiny hands and carry on a conversation with the deaf-mute parents.43

Professor Webb has summed up the principal differences between the language of the deaf and that of the sign language used by the Plains Indians. (1) The Indians made much wider gestures than do the deaf-mutes. (2) Indians used their arms more than the deaf-mutes. (3) Indians repeated their signs more often. (4) Indians used both hands more than the deaf. (5) The Indians endeavored to keep the back part of the hand toward the observer.44

Marcy observed the similarity of the sign and deaf-mute communications so that he was able to say.45

This pantomimic vocabulary which is exceedingly graceful and significant, when oral communication is impracticable, constitutes the court language of the Plains; and, what was a fact of much astonishment to me, I discovered that it was nearly the same as that practiced by the mutes of our deaf and dumb institutions that I visited. For example, there were some five or six boys directed to take their places at the blackboards and interpret what I proposed to say. I then, by pantomimic signs, told them that I went on a buffalo hunt, saw a herd, chased them on horseback, fired my gun and killed one, cut it up, ate some of the meat, and went to sleep—every word of which was written down upon the blackboard by each boy as rapidly as the signs were made, excepting that all made the common mistake of taking the buffalo for deer.

We have seen that the sign language served a useful purpose on the Plains of the United States. It was well adapted to the cultural pattern of the Plains Indians; especially in connection with their methods of warfare. We have found that the use of gestures are not absent in our society today. The sign language was shortened and changed so that it has virtually become extinct for all practical purposes.

In conclusion it must be remembered that all which has been said in this paper about the sign language should be tempered with the fact which Mallery so forcefully stressed. The fact is "... that in the collection and description of Indian signs there is danger lest

42 Clark, op. cit., p. 9.
43 Ibid., p. 9.
44 Webb, op. cit., p. 74.
45 Marcy, op. cit., pp. 32-33.
the civilized understanding of the original conception be mistaken or forced."  

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