

Being Hard of Hearing in 1921

Published July 6th, 2020

Gael Hannan



Never judge a book by its cover – even an inexpensive photocopied one – because what’s inside might be jaw-dropping.

This week, sorting through 20 years’ accumulation of hearing loss material, I was about to pitch out a spiral-bound booklet called *80 Years of Looking & Learning*. I opened it and was mesmerized. Compiled in 2001 by the early lip reading advocate Dorothy Scott, the mimeographed pages not only tell the story of the Toronto Hard of Hearing Club formed in 1921 – but they also give an amazing, humorous look at life with hearing loss over the past 100 years.

Thank you to the existing members of the *Toronto Hard of Hearing Club* for sharing this written history.

Note: The following is taken directly from the booklet with only minor grammatical changes and notes. Some terminology may be considered politically incorrect by today’s standards.

1921 – A small group in a then rather small Toronto got together to form the Toronto Lip Reading

Club – the “First in the British Commonwealth”.

Who started it? Why then? Who had hearing loss in 1921?

The Hard of Hearing populace then, as now, included those born with defective hearing or who developed a loss in infancy, but with impairment mild enough to enable the child to learn to communicate through speech and hearing.

[In addition], a couple of years before, the ‘War to End All Wars’ had dragged to its exhausted end. The lads had come home with their memories – of mud and pain and gas and the screams of dying comrades. Some had a constant reminder – they had to learn to live with Hearing Loss. Gunfire, wounds, shock, meningitis and ear infections had changed their lives forever.

Hearing loss was not confined to veterans. In the day before antibiotics, immunization and middle-ear surgical correction, those who suffered from partial deafness were often children and young adults. In the early years of the century, young Alec of Dundee developed scarlet fever. He did recover, but with ever-increasing deafness. In school, the top children sat at the front of the class. If your grades deteriorated, you were moved back and back until you sat with the failures in the rear, where poor confused Alec, who had confidently hoped for university, eventually found himself.

There were lots of Alecs in Toronto. There was no way of diagnosing partial deafness in early childhood until defective speech gave some clue. Even if you did find out that the problem was poor hearing, not mental incapacity, what could you do?

One option for children over 7 was the School for the Deaf and Dumb in Belleville [now Sir James Whitney School for the Deaf], founded in 1907, which ran a 9-month, no-holiday term designed to prepare the child for non-verbal workplace activities – printing, saddle-making, domestic service, etc. The brochure stated, “It is not desirable that parents come often (to visit) or remain long”. But although it was a good school, at the forefront of deaf education, many deaf children were kept at home by their parents.

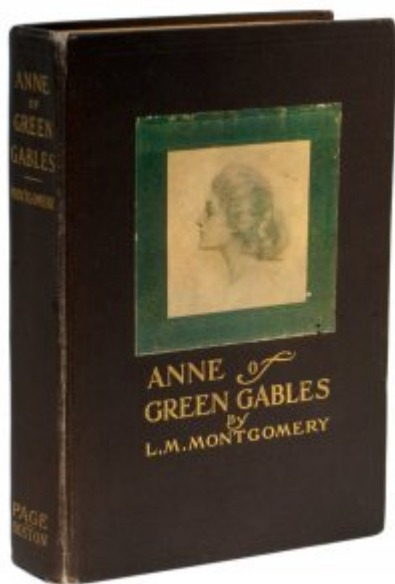
With the returning soldiers came new wives, often accompanied by ‘unmarried sisters’. And so K. Grace Wadleigh came to Toronto. She was a trained Teacher of Lipreading and Education of the Deaf and little was known about her except that she was Terrific. The Toronto School Board of the time had no place for her in her chosen field, although she did later work with them. But that didn’t stop Miss Wadleigh. She became the founding teacher of the Toronto Lip Reading Club, formed in February 1921.

The annual membership fee was \$1.00; by making the annual fee very small it was hoped no one would be prevented from joining. Meetings were held at the YMCA Thursday evenings and Saturday afternoons with teachers Miss G. Wadleigh, (the “First Teacher Of Lip Reading To Adults In Canada”), Miss G. Tuller and Miss M. Faircloth, both teachers of the deaf. What kind of training would these ladies have had? Certainly they all had their teaching certificate and probably were hard of hearing. By 1923 there were 73 members and the annual fee had doubled to \$2.00. “Silver teas” were held to raise money, whereby participants left donations in a strategically placed bowl.

By the 1930s, things were beginning to hum in the hearing field! Universities and teaching

hospitals were setting up Deaf and Hearing research facilities. Although the 4A Phono-Audiometer was introduced in 1926 to screen hearing, findings were pretty subjective. Most testing was still the old “*Can you hear my watch?*”

The ‘Hearing Eye’ was the “Official Publication of the Canadian Federation of Lipreading Organizations”, formed in 1933. L.M. Montgomery, the author of Canada’s beloved Anne of Green Gables, was a frequent contributor and in 1935 she gave a talk to the club. She stood on a wobbly platform with a lamp shining on her face so that it would be visible. “*She enunciated so clearly that lipreaders were well repaid*’. The same year, the Toronto Lip Reading Club was divided into three departments – Women, Men and Young People – and the first Theatre Amplifier was introduced in six movie theatres. This service involved sitting in a pew at the front using a telephone-like device. Only the boldest allowed themselves to be so helped – to be hard of hearing was still thought slightly shameful.



What a brilliant slice of hearing loss history! The booklet continues on with events through next 80 years, but you are probably more interested in hearing how things turned out for poor young Alec. Well, he studied course notes from a friend who went to engineering college, and he went on to build up a successful family business in custom engines. He also built himself a hearing aid from radio components. The microphone was in a lamp, the amplifier in a desk drawer and he interviewed clients leaning casually on his hand which held the receiver. Few realized that the man had disabilities, least of all himself.

The booklet ends with the *Lipreader’s Prayer*:

From Mouthers and Shouters
And Stiff Upper-Lippers
And people with pipes in their mouths,
Good Lord, deliver us.