

Of Wine and Wisdom: A Review of Fulton Tontine

by Stephen Baldwin

Wine and wisdom

are like day and night. When the gods prefer their favorite nectar without dire consequences, we mere mortals are content with the results if we overindulge on the cultured grapes, hoping to become wiser along the passage of time. A good case study would be Thomas Jefferson who represented America in France with John Adams in 1785. The versatile Virginian purchased 59 bottles of Bordeaux. Unfortunately, the ship to his home state with some of his orders sank and became part of Davy Jones' locker.

If wisdom nurtures from inevitable human mistakes or flaws, then one should never ship half the French vineyard to America on one ship. With destiny on his side, Jefferson made it possible for America to buy half a country from a desperate Napoleon in 1803. Maybe the dweller from Monticello wanted to make up for his loss eight years earlier. Regardless of the hypothesis, not far from the newly acquired river town of St. Louis is a hamlet that changed the course of deaf America 153 years later.

Fulton, Missouri, the location of the Missouri School for the Deaf (MSD), played a significant historical role for the National Association of the Deaf (NAD). Perhaps to best understand it is to take a look at America's struggling governmental endeavors.

The history

It took our Founding Fathers nearly six years after the problematic Articles of Confederation to discern the need to centralize the national government, guarantee individual freedoms, and stabilize the economy among other vital national issues.

Compared to NAD, which was founded 100 years later in 1880, it took the officers, members and leaders 76 years to finally revamp its constitution and make it representative for the deaf population-at-large. According to Jack Gannon's *Deaf Heritage: A Narrative History of Deaf America*, it was as early as 1889 when Thomas F. Fox, the fourth president of NAD, made a futile call for a new federation of state associations and a stronger national office. Like the presidents before and after him, Fox saw the weaknesses of the 1880 NAD Constitution—the lack of a strong representation of common people.

From the Fox administration to the 1915 James W. Howson Plan of reorganization to the 1937 James N.

Orman Plan of unifying the state associations and members, the believers in a federal way of governing membership faced obstacle after obstacle, be it a world war, the Great Depression, deaf

"anti-Federalists" or simply static members. It was Howson who called NAD "... sick; it has always been sick; it was born sick..." (*The Silent Worker*, August 1956, page 22).

The wisdom

At the 1955 NAD Diamond Jubilee in Cincinnati, a reorganization committee was finally established to proactively study the known diagnosis and come with an action plan for the prognosis within a year. The NAD Reorganization Committee eventually became popularly known as Fulton Tontine (named after a contemporary French novel and coined by Jess M. Smith) more than the formal name of Fulton Conference and less known as the "Century Club Conference." It took the high caliber leadership of Byron B. Burnes, Robert M. Greenmun, G. Dewey Coats, Ray F. Stallo, Leslie L. Massey, Gordon L. Allen, Mervin D. Garretson, Peter Graves, George Propp, Jess M. Smith, and rest of the 28 delegates to forge a crucial chapter in the history of NAD and deaf America.

George Propp, one of the remaining five survivors, remembers the daunting challenge well: "The group, collectively and individually, not only developed an effective and viable plan, but we hung together and did all the things necessary to implement the concept (reorganization). To a certain extent, the group brought its dynamics to every assembly that followed. "No one was without discernable blood, sweat and tears associated with the task of rewriting the NAD constitution for two grueling days of hot Missouri weather from June 12 to 14, 1956.

"Our meeting was disciplined and goal oriented," Propp recalls, "The outcome was also similar in that we accomplished what we set out to do. The major distinction might be described as the fact we didn't get saddle sores from going to this one-horse town." Humor, dramatic presentations, wit, and personal stories of the diverse personalities had one interesting commonality as noted by Propp: "the political inexperience of the participating individuals...was well balanced...by the Frat and guys like Edwin Hazel."

The 1956 NAD Reorganization Committee accomplished many tasks by rewriting the ineffective by-laws, setting up a new bicameral system, giving the NAD Executive Board credibility, developing strategies for financial stability, and adopting critical measures that would give the NAD echelon and membership a badly needed shot-in-the-arm. As soon as the Fulton Tontine delegates left for their respective state association meetings, there was a full-fledged campaign to educate the deaf community across the country. Pages after

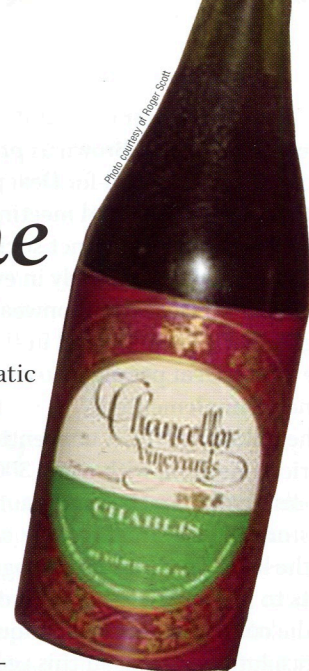


Photo courtesy of Roger Scott

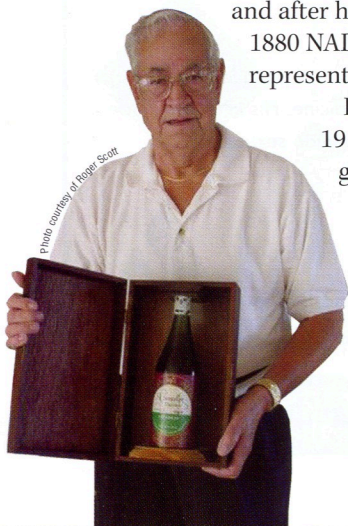


Photo courtesy of Roger Scott

The wine bottle (left and top right) guarded by Merv Garretson.



Continued on page 24

pages of explanation about the constitutional proposals in *The Silent Worker* and many state association's periodical went practically non-stop from July 1956 to August 1957 and beyond. Apparently, the aggressive and calculated lobbying across the country made the membership take notice before heading for the 24th NAD Convention.

Perhaps the most crucial moment came when the motion to accept the "revised NAD Constitution and By-laws as amended to the recommendations of the committee of the whole at 1:45 p.m. on July 24, 1957" at the 24th Convention of the National Association of the Deaf in St. Louis (*The Silent Worker*, August, 1957, page 3). Not only had the motion carried successfully, it was ratified by 28 state associations within the year and no state opposed the constitutional changes. It was no coincidence that the actual groundwork for the major revision took place a year earlier at a location that was a good two hours' drive west of St. Louis.

1960 saw the new NAD take effect officially in Dallas. It was the start of state associations paying fee quotas to the NAD home office, thus beginning a new era of prosperity and stability, especially under the dynamic leadership of Frederick C.



Fulton Tontine, 1956

Eventually it was suggested in 1974 by Jess Smith to accommodate the significance of the Fulton Tontine by meeting for breakfast during future NAD conventions. Two years later Ray F. Stallo sent a bottle of California wine with the understanding that the last living survivor open the bottle and toast to the spirit of the 1956 Reorganization Committee. It became a famous ritual for every surviving member and visitors to meet at subsequent NAD conventions and to reminisce about the

Fulton experience over a custom made wooden wine box and its accompanying engraved brass plate, courtesy of Jess Smith.

Now the mystery deepens, who had the wine bottle after all those years? After contacting three of the five surviving members, it turned out that Mervin D. Garretson, one of the two youngest delegates at 33 years old and came from a good "Wyoming-Montana stock," has sole possession of it. He searched for the Fulton Tontine wine bottle in his garage store room and reports with enthusiasm: "I'm relieved to find the famous wine bottle still intact, buried among the dust and cobwebs of a catchall corner. For awhile I was kinda worried as we have moved several times since 1956." One can imagine what price the aged wine bottle will garner at an auction on behalf of NAD general funds.

Come to think of it, Thomas Jefferson's 1787 Chateau Margaux sold for \$520,000. Bids galore, indeed. Going once, going twice, sold to...

The impact

Dramatics aside, proven serene historians and long-time NAD members duly recognized the impact of the Fulton Tontine. The 1956 Reorganization Committee saved NAD from drowning in a cesspool of chronic financial, organizational, and morale woes. At that time Burns, Greenmun and other dedicated members could barely survive by the skin of their teeth.

After state associations in 1958 ratified the new constitution, NAD appeared to be rejuvenated in time for the Golden Age of federal government grants, enlightened programs and innovative projects for the next 30 years. Thanks mostly to President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society, NAD took advan-

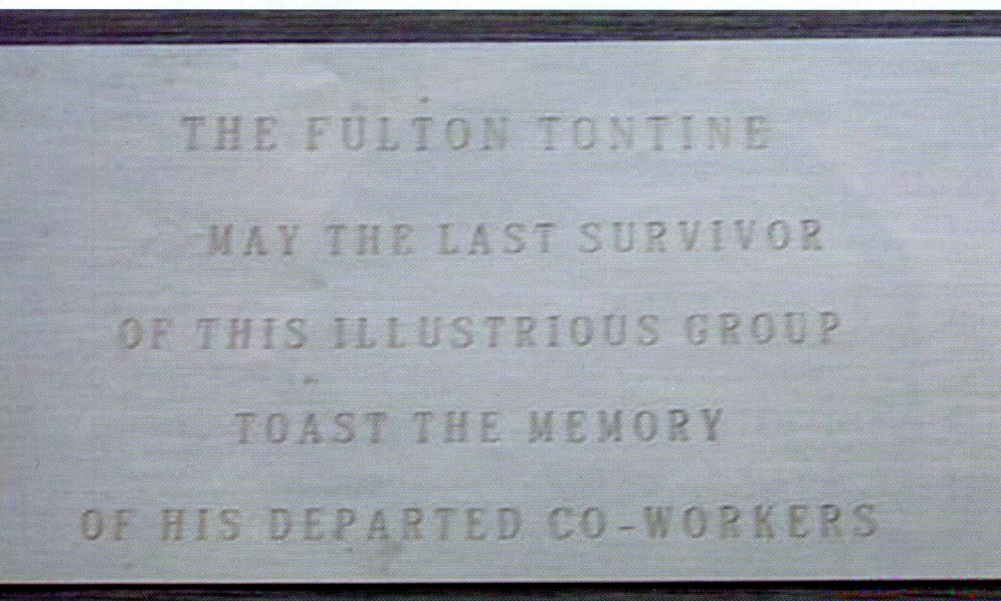


Photo courtesy of Roger Scott

Schreiber, the first executive director from 1966 to 1979. Most of the 28 Fulton Tontine delegates also became active national officers, editors, writers, and leaders for many years. With special admiration, it is a noble feat to see any proverbial cream of the crop members refusing to rest on their laurels.

The wine

A wine bottle also had a role, although not in the way you might think, be it Greek gods or winos. It was 47 years ago when one had to quench the Fulton Tontine delegates' thirst, gratify their appetite, and cultivate their comradeship. The local host committee under Coats, MSD Superintendent Lloyd A. Harrison and wife, Grover Farquhar and wife, Miss Hale and MSD staff. Apparently, southern hospitality was at its classic best. Also, it appears that the town liquor store was nearly empty, too.

tage of the benevolence extended, albeit the NAD best-selling sign language book, *A Basic Course in Manual Communication* by Terrance O'Rourke.

In light of the recent financial and membership situation in Silver Spring, MD, which is now looking up, perhaps we can review the lessons the 28 delegates learned in Fulton 47 years ago. It was a time when NAD changed its by-laws in the name of democracy. Surely there was no time for mudslinging, jealousies, backstabbing, vendettas and forced resignations in Fulton. Such human frailties were kept out of that Dewey-designed multi-purpose canteen room at MSD. According to Garretson, it was a respectful leadership and nobody wanted to mess with the likes of Peter R. Graves of Pittsburgh, a Jimmy Hoffa-type character.

In other words or signs, the wisdom of the past is for us to appreciate today so we can prepare for tomorrow.

Former NAD president Ralph White (1978-1980) said it best when he commented, "...they [the Fulton Tontine delegates] re-made the NAD and made it a people-organization for greater efficiency and responsiveness out of the oft-expressed need for greater democracy within the organization." Interestingly, Gertie Galloway, the twenty-third NAD president (1980-1982), once said that there was a need to review the mission of NAD since Fulton. Maybe we lost that focus along the way, maybe we haven't. NAD is faced with

serious challenges and opportunities. Consequently, there is a genuine need to muster up another Fulton Tontine Conference.

Reviewing the NAD mission in the same spirit as the 1956 NAD Reorganization Committee when it examined the body and soul of NAD is one viable option. It took ample sacrifice, perseverance, courage, determination, talent, humor, harmony, focus, and leadership for the Fulton Tontine delegates to come up with positive results. In the very least, maybe Merv Garretson ought to let the current NAD leadership sample the aged Fulton Tontine wine. Then maybe the Dionysian effects will lead to something constructively Apollonian like it did when the committee created a governmental masterpiece 47 years ago.

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Stephen Baldwin is the sole teacher for the Disciplinary Alternative Education Program at the Texas School for the Deaf. He wrote 28 plays, 122 TV interview scripts, one mini-documentary film, and countless articles for various publications including his 1993 book, *Pictures in the Air: The Story of the National Theatre of the Deaf*.

Editor's note: According to the author, the remaining Fulton Tontine survivors are Propp, Garretson, Jess Smith, Oliver Childress, Jr., and Leslie Massey.

“These days people seek knowledge, not wisdom. Knowledge is of the past wisdom is of the future.”

Vernon Cooper

An article in this NADmag, **“Of Wine and Wisdom: A Review of Fulton Tontine,”** talks about the last time the NAD reorganized its structure. Help shape NAD's future again!

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