

“Don’t You See I Want a Home and Children?”  
A Deaf Woman’s Experiences in Twentieth-Century Texas

*by Virginia A. Pickel*

“It would be folly to refuse help that may have some value.”<sup>1</sup> So wrote twenty-two-year-old deaf college student D’Jelma Desse Hearn in her February 15, 1940 diary entry. Miss Hearn had just encountered Professor Dallas S. Williams in her speech class at Southwest Texas State Teachers College (SWTSTC, now Texas State University). Williams offered Hearn “instruction in lip reading twice each week.”<sup>2</sup> She expressed skepticism but ultimately agreed to the lessons, which began on February 20, 1940. Their work to increase Hearn’s lip-reading skills benefited her throughout the remainder of her life.

D’Jelma Desse Hearn was born approximately forty-five miles south of San Antonio in Rossville, Texas on July 24, 1918 to housewife Roberta Addison “Addie” Newman and carpenter Julius Owen “J.O.” Hearn.<sup>3</sup> During the 1920s, the Hearn family experienced a decade of change. 1920 brought the birth of a son, Dwyatt Owen Hearn. Soon after, the family moved to Fentress, Texas, approximately fifteen miles southeast of San Marcos; in the mid- to late 1920s, they finally settled approximately forty miles north of Laredo in Encinal, Texas, where the children attended school.

The biggest change for D’Jelma Hearn came in 1928 when she was stricken with measles at the age of ten. Her mother described Hearn’s deafness as an infection that “settled in her ears,” causing her to lose all of her hearing in one ear and nearly all of it in the other.<sup>4</sup> Hearn, however, did not attend a school for the deaf during her childhood. If she had, she would have encountered conflicts regarding preferred teaching methods for D/deaf students.<sup>5</sup> At the turn of the twentieth century, *oralism* began replacing *manualism* as the preferred, and frequently mandatory, method of educating D/deaf students in the United States. *Manualism* referred to the use of sign language

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<sup>1</sup> D’Jelma Hearn-Zirkle Papers 1938-1978, Texas State University Archives Texas State University-San Marcos.

<sup>2</sup> Hearn-Zirkle, "D’Jelma Hearn-Zirkle Papers 1938-1978."

<sup>3</sup> Hearn’s birth certificate originally read “De Jelma Desse Hearn,” but was later legally changed to indicate the correct spelling of “D’Jelma.” Other legal documents occasionally spell “Desse” as “Dessie.”

<sup>4</sup> Elaine Adams, e-mail message to author, March 4, 2014. Mrs. Adams is D’Jelma Hearn’s daughter.

<sup>5</sup> Terminology Describing Deaf Individuals, accessed February 9, 2014, [http://www.gallaudet.edu/clerc\\_center/information\\_and\\_resources/info\\_to\\_go/educate\\_children\\_%283\\_to\\_21%29/resources\\_for\\_mainstream\\_programs/terminology.html](http://www.gallaudet.edu/clerc_center/information_and_resources/info_to_go/educate_children_%283_to_21%29/resources_for_mainstream_programs/terminology.html). This paper will make use of the generally accepted D/deaf distinction. That is, “Deaf” indicates those who identify with and live within the Deaf culture, while “deaf” describes those with a medical hearing loss but no connection to Deaf culture. “D/deaf” will be used when the topic could apply to both.

in classrooms, while *oralism* embraced the use of speech and lip reading with strict punishments for students caught using sign language. The *combined* method blended *oralism* and *manualism* by encouraging the use of sign language, speech, and lip reading.<sup>6</sup> In modern terms, Hearn would be described as *postlingually deaf*, meaning her deafness occurred after she learned to speak a language—in this case, English.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, she would most likely fit into the *oralism* group. Hearn successfully completed her high school education in 1934 without the assistance of adaptive technology, and when her father bought her a hearing aid in 1938, she decided to go to college in San Marcos.

It is important to understand the environment in which Hearn attended SWTSTC. In 1933, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, permanently disabled by polio he contracted at the age of thirty-nine, began serving his first term as president. Although he went to great lengths to hide his disability, he boosted the popularity of rehabilitation centers that included warm springs therapy. Incidentally, the first rehabilitation center in Texas—Gonzales Warm Springs Foundation for Crippled Children (now Warm Springs Rehabilitation Center)—was founded in 1937 just forty-five miles southeast of San Marcos.<sup>8</sup> One of the most infamous events affecting people with disabilities occurred in 1939, when Adolf Hitler initiated Aktion T4, a secret military operation demanding so-called “mercy killings” of the incurably sick and disabled, including deaf people.<sup>9</sup>

SWTSTC itself had few resources available for disabled students during Hearn’s attendance. It did not establish a clinic for people with speech and hearing disabilities until 1948,<sup>10</sup> and the Office of Disability Services (ODS) was not created until the mid-1980s.<sup>11</sup> The annual catalogs between 1938 and 1942 included only brief mentions of students with physical disabilities. A typical entry stated, “Students excused from required work in physical education [PE] on account of physical incapacity are forbidden to take part in any public activity, except by special permission of the Committee on Public Activities.”<sup>12</sup> These public activities included debate contests, theater or musical productions, student publications, and official college functions. Since Hearn participated in at least two PE classes during her time as a student,<sup>13</sup> it seems unlikely she classified herself under the university description of “physically disabled” and could take part in most activities if she chose to do so.

According to her daughter, Elaine Adams, Hearn did not speak much about her days at SWTSTC, but she kept a diary during the first half of 1940 and through parts of 1943 and 1944. She began her diary on January 1, 1940, with the oft-heard sentiment: “This diary if [*sic*]

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<sup>6</sup> Douglas C. Baynton, *Forbidden Signs: American Culture and the Campaign against Sign Language* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 4-5.

<sup>7</sup> Terminology Describing Deaf Individuals.

<sup>8</sup> Texas Governor’s Committee on People with Disabilities, *From Isolation to Participation: A History of Disability in Texas, 1835-1999*, (Tex. 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Texas Governor’s Committee on People with Disabilities, *From Isolation to Participation: A History of Disability in Texas, 1835-1999*, (Tex. 1999).

<sup>10</sup> *Dedication of the Speech-Drama Center* (San Marcos, TX: Southwest Texas State University, 1971).

<sup>11</sup> Amalie Wheat, e-mail message to author, February 28, 2014. Ms. Wheat worked in the ODS office at the time of contact.

<sup>12</sup> *The Teachers College Bulletin* IV, no. 7 (August 1938): 22-23.

<sup>13</sup> Hearn-Zirkle, “D’Jelma Hearn-Zirkle Papers 1938-1978.”

faithfully kept. I wonder how faithfully kept it will be! But of course I must keep it as I have kept no other diary.”<sup>14</sup> Since there is a three-year gap in her record-keeping, one might wonder if it tapered off from lack of diligence, as many diaries do, or if the advent of World War II (WWII) somehow altered her priorities in writing. In any case, D’Jelma Hearn’s personal records provide a glimpse of her experiences as both a college student and deaf woman. Some entries could have been written by college students today. For example, “I hope I get a letter this week with a nice fat check!”<sup>15</sup> She also wrote extensively about her leisure activities, specifically the movies and plays she enjoyed. Other entries demonstrated how deafness affected her everyday life. Visits with friends sometimes proved particularly tiring: “Visits made [*sic*] you feel badly are seldom pleasant. Especially if you can’t hear very well.”<sup>16</sup>

Hearn first mentioned her speech teacher in her February 13, 1940 entry. “Mr. Williams wants to talk to me Thursday for an hour. I cannot imagine what he wishes to talk about, but I believe it has to do with my inability to participate in class-room [*sic*] discussions.”<sup>17</sup> Professor Dallas Stephen Williams was born approximately seventy-five miles northeast of Dodge City in Pawnee Rock, Kansas, on October 15, 1910. He received his bachelor’s and master’s degrees from Louisiana State Normal College (later Louisiana State University) in 1935 and 1937, respectively. By 1940, Williams was teaching speech and drama at SWTSTC. According to the 1940 United States census, he lived in San Marcos with his wife, Alice Muth, and their young son, Muth.<sup>18</sup> Unfortunately, other than Hearn’s diary, the sources available provide little information regarding Williams’s career at SWTSTC from 1937 to 1941.<sup>19</sup>

Hearn received her first lip-reading lesson on February 20, 1940, during which she noticed an already marked improvement. She wrote, “I heard (really heard) a lot of what [the] Speech teacher said in class today.”<sup>20</sup> Based on her diary entries, she most likely attended her lessons once or twice a week and built a good rapport with her professor. As her lip-reading improved, she found it easier to understand and participate in the conversations around her. She relayed one particular incident in which she even challenged her teacher. Prof. Williams was speaking to Hearn’s friend about Hearn and a yellow sheet of paper; however, Williams tried to claim he was not talking about Hearn. Hearn wrote, “I knew he was talking about me, too, because he used [the] pronoun SHE every once in a while. Surely he couldn’t have been calling the paper she. Gosh, he’s a funny guy. He thinks he can fool me!”<sup>21</sup> (emphasis original). Hearn’s diary for 1940 ended on April 19. On April 18, she indicated she was still attending her lip-reading lessons. It seems reasonable to assume Hearn continued her lessons through the end of the 1940 academic year and possibly resumed them through Williams’s final year at SWTSTC in 1941. Hearn graduated from SWTSTC in May 1942 with a Bachelor of Science in education. Between 1942 and 1944, she taught first and second grades at George West Independent School District (ISD), approximately 85 miles south of San Antonio.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> U.S. Federal Census, 1940. Accessed through Ancestry.com, March 11, 2014.

<sup>19</sup> Personnel File by Dallas Stephen Williams, 1963, RG/52-01, Archives & Special Collections, University of Nebraska-Lincoln Libraries, Lincoln, NE.

<sup>20</sup> Hearn-Zirkle, "D’Jelma Hearn-Zirkle Papers 1938-1978."

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

D'Jelma Hearn's diary resumed in late 1943 and continued into the following year. Her 1944 entries provide the most detailed look at her experiences as a deaf woman. She described her dating experiences, primarily at United Service Organizations (USO) events. She met a "tall black headed guy [who] seemed to like me, but [I] believe he was just sympathetic because I couldn't hear good. He really embarrassed me by asking to see my instrument."<sup>22</sup> Her "instrument" refers to Hearn's hearing aid. She used various hearing aids throughout her lifetime with varying degrees of visibility. One of Hearn's most poignant pleas occurred in her February 9, 1944 entry, quoted in its entirety here:

A Prayer: Dear Lord, you know I'm deaf and happiness in little things mean so much. If you won't give me my hearing, then give me some chances to meet someone I can love & who will love me too – but not one who loves out of sympathy alone. Please, oh, dear Lord have mercy on me & see to it that the ladies will let me have a visitor's card & please send some one who will like me & give me the good times I a [*sic*] right to have, but don't have them because you took away my hearing. Dear Lord, I know you are a just God and will do this for me if you see fit to do it. But what I ask of you is to see fit to do it. Don't you see it makes me so unhappy to be as I am – unloved and unwanted – unable to prove I could be useful in a home? Don't you see I want a home & children? But God I don't want just anybody who comes along. I want someone who will really love me, give me a swell romance before we tie the bonds & one who will still be loving kind & exciting after the bans [*sic*?] are read. Is it too much to ask? Dear God, answer my prayers. I say this with tears. So God please be merciful and answer me.<sup>23</sup>

Little is known about Hearn's experiences between 1944 and 1947, but on February 21, 1948 D'Jelma Hearn married Harry Robert Zirkle in Yuma, Arizona. According to their daughter, the couple met at a USO dance in San Antonio. Zirkle was an auto mechanic who had previously served in the United States Army Air Corps and had some family in California. Hearn's parents most likely did not approve of the match, which would explain the couple's apparent elopement and subsequent residence in Los Angeles for the first year of their marriage. By June 1949, the Zirkles returned to Texas, and D'Jelma gave birth to her first daughter, Harriet Elaine. A second daughter, Judith Lorraine, was born two years later. Zirkle devoted her time to raising her daughters over the next decade, as was relatively common in the 1950s. In 1959, the couple's tenuous marriage ultimately led to a separation, and D'Jelma returned to her teaching career.<sup>24</sup>

Zirkle first decided to return to her hometown of Encinal. There, she taught second grade from 1959 to 1965.<sup>25</sup> She continued to seek out some of the same leisure activities she had enjoyed in college. She bought a television in the early 1960s but rarely watched it. She also bought a used piano in the fall of 1959 and played a little each day. Although she had taken piano classes when she attended SWTSTC, she never learned to play very well. It seems likely

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Elaine Adams, e-mail message to author, March 8, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> Hearn-Zirkle, "D'Jelma Hearn-Zirkle Papers 1938-1978."

her deafness at least contributed to the difficulties she encountered in entertainment. The Encinal school district did not re-hire Zirkle for the 1965-1966 academic year, however, she went on to teach one year each at Pleasanton ISD and Charlotte ISD, both approximately forty miles south of San Antonio.

From 1967 to 1975, Zirkle taught fifth grade at Carrizo Springs ISD, eighty miles north of Laredo, Texas. In addition to the finalization of her divorce in 1972,<sup>26</sup> she also began to work toward her graduate degree, although she never completed it. She had attended some courses at Southwest Texas State College (SWTSTC's name changed in 1959), but the bulk of her graduate education came at Sul Ross State University between 1971 and 1974. Two of the more interesting classes she took included "Methods of Teaching the Spanish-Speaking Child" and "Tech of Counseling."<sup>27</sup> She had expressed to her family on occasion that she believed some (usually white) parents doubted her teaching abilities because she wore a hearing aid. According to Zirkle, immigrant and Latino parents in the school district were not as involved in their children's education; it seems likely the district assigned Zirkle to teach them to minimize any complaints they might receive from parents. Her decision to take "Methods of Teaching the Spanish-Speaking Child" demonstrated her commitment to teach her students to the best of her ability. The "Tech of Counseling" class was unique because it produced a recording of Zirkle and a classmate participating in a role-playing exercise in which they played a school counselor and a student, respectively. Zirkle had a bird-like voice – slightly clipped and high-pitched with a faint Southern accent—especially in comparison to her counterpart.<sup>28</sup> She did not always pronounce words clearly, in large part due to her deafness. According to her daughter Elaine, D'Jelma sometimes had difficulty pronouncing complex words she learned from a dictionary; as Elaine grew older, she frequently assisted her mother with her pronunciation efforts.<sup>29</sup>

D'Jelma Zirkle continued her teaching career at Presidio ISD from 1975 to 1978 and one final semester at La Pryor ISD in 1979. She died at the age of sixty in her apartment in La Pryor, approximately 100 miles west of San Antonio. In her heartfelt plea thirty-five years prior, she had asked God to give her a home and children. Despite her rocky marriage, which ended in divorce in 1972, Zirkle produced two wonderful children and eventually bought her own home in Carrizo Springs.<sup>30</sup> This, combined with her successful twenty-year teaching career, demonstrates she met her lifelong goals even if the road was a little rough along the way.

*Virginia A. Pickel holds a degree in Family and Consumer Sciences from Texas State University and is currently pursuing a graduate degree in Public History with a focus in archives and disability studies. She works at the University Archives and will be completing an internship in the Division of Medicine and Science at the National Museum of American History during Summer 2014.*

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<sup>26</sup> Harry Zirkle and Djelma Zirkle Divorce record. Cite Divorce record. "Texas, Divorce Index, 1968-2010," index, *FamilySearch* (<https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/VY64-PMB> : accessed 14 Apr 2014).

<sup>27</sup> D'Jelma Hearn-Zirkle personnel file. Provided to Elaine Adams by Presidio I.S.D. Copy of email transaction subsequently provided to author.

<sup>28</sup> D'Jelma Hearn-Zirkle graduate school cassette recording. Provided to the author by D'Jelma Hearn-Zirkle's daughter, Elaine. Due to the obsolete nature of cassette recording, the author converted the audio to electronic formats during spring 2014.

<sup>29</sup> Elaine Adams, e-mail message to author, March 4, 2014.

<sup>30</sup> Elaine Adams, e-mail message to author, March 4, 2014.

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