The publication of Through Deaf Eyes: A Photographic History of an American Community is a result of the landmark photographic exhibition of archival documents presented by the Smithsonian Institution in 2001 and the recent broadcast of a documentary film by the Public Broadcasting Service in March of this year. In addition to the viewing of the touring exhibition by more than 400,000 people and the broadcasting of the documentary film on the national network, the story of the Deaf community has touched the four corners of America and beyond. Public awareness of the historical struggles and triumphs of Deaf people has increased because of the impact of mass media.

This book, featuring more than 200 photographs, depicts the lives and experiences of Deaf people under the influence of American norms, values, and perceptions during different historical periods. Segregation existed in America, and different groups, particularly women and people of color, were denied equal rights. Deaf people also did not cross racial and gender lines for much of our history. As stated by the authors, the Deaf community did not exist in a vacuum, and our views were identical to those of the larger society.

The authors describe the early education of deaf people as the bedrock for the formation of the Deaf community. As one would expect, struggles to preserve sign language, drive automobiles, obtain employment in private and government sectors, access information, recognize American Sign Language, be treated equally, and preserve the right to determine their own destiny strengthened the cohesiveness of the Deaf community over the years. At the same time, the growing diversity within the Deaf community no longer provided consensus or universal views on issues related to educational placements and technological advancements such as cochlear implantation. It is too early to discuss these issues from a historical standpoint, however.

The authors did not address two important historical developments that changed the dynamics of the Deaf community in recent years. First, the introduction of various signing systems to improve the command of English among Deaf children is not addressed. Shortly after William Stokoe recognized American Sign Language as a “real” language in 1960, the invention and publication of various artificial signing systems flourished. The historical implications of such phenomena need to be analyzed and discussed. Second, schools for the deaf have generally functioned in loco parentis. Schools have exposed Deaf children to Deaf teachers and other Deaf role models. With the decreased enrollment (20%) in schools for the deaf since the passage of the PL 94-142 in 1975, now known as Individuals with Disabilities Educational Act, the implications of role shifts to families and the lack of exposure to Deaf role models are areas which have not been explored.

Overall, the authors have done justice to successfully documenting an important visual history of Deaf America. The book reads well, and the quality and organization is evident throughout. Educators, students, and other interested individuals, particularly families, should see this book. A strong foundation in Deaf History is something that deaf and hard-of-hearing children should receive from their families because it can enhance the development of self-esteem, self-concept, and self-confidence and, as such, contribute to the development of the child’s individual and social identity.

J. Matt Searls
Department of Cultural and Creative Studies
National Technical Institute for the Deaf
Rochester Institute of Technology