Until now, deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing Minnesotans have been all but invisible in the archives of Minnesota's history. In partnership with the Minnesota Digital Library, the Commission of Deaf, DeafBlind and Hard of Hearing Minnesotans (MNCDHH) embarked on an exciting journey through the collections of the Charles Thompson Memorial Hall, the Minnesota Association of Deaf Citizens, and the Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf Alumni Association Museum to document the vibrant lives and celebrated accomplishments of this strong community.

In 1863, the present-day Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf was established in a store in downtown Faribault. The school soon moved across the river to a new building, Mott Hall, which became part of a handsome campus. School superintendents and teachers supervised the education of the students in subjects ranging from writing to woodworking. There was also time for extracurricular activities, such as military drill squads for male students, drum corps for female students, theater performances, and even farming. The students always found plenty of time for fun outdoors and indoors. Sports were also very popular, and ranged from basketball to football where students played without helmets in the early days!

Educators have long debated the best methods for instructing deaf, deafblind and hard of hearing children. In 1884, notable educators such as Edward Miner Gallaudet and Alexander Graham Bell attended a national conference in Faribault and discussed the advisability of employing deaf teachers to teach deaf students, which became part of the oralism vs. manualism debate. Oral education classes have been offered in the past at the present-day Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf. George Wing, a deaf teacher at the school, developed a system for written language instruction called Wing's Symbols. American Sign Language (ASL) has also been an integral part of education at the school, as seen in this charming portrait of students fingerspelling with their teacher and speaking directly to us from more than 100 years ago.

In the summer of 1885, alumni of the present-day Minnesota State Academy for the Deaf held their first reunion and voted to form an association that became the Minnesota Association of the Deaf (now the Minnesota Association of Deaf Citizens), as shown in their
Subsequent conventions were held all over Minnesota, including in Duluth where attendees took a Tally-Ho tour and in St. Paul where they visited the Indian Mounds. In the assorted group portraits from the conventions, one can spot notable deaf Minnesotans who served as presidents of both the state and national associations of the deaf, such as teacher Dr. James L. Smith, architect Olof Hanson, and activist Jay Cooke Howard.

Other distinguished individuals to search for in the collection include Wesley Lauritsen, Audree Norton, Marie A. Patenaude, Peter N. Peterson, Louis A. Roth, Anton Schroeder, Thilda P. Smith, Anson Spear, Victor R. Spence, Louis C. Tuck, Frank Turk, and Blanche Wilkins.

Not to be missed are the fascinating stories of Petra Fandrem Howard, Cadwallader Lincoln Washburn, and Charles and Margaret Thompson.

Petra Fandrem Howard attended the first oral education class at the present-day Minnesota Academy for the Deaf. She enjoyed traveling, but was also a busy activist. She was a suffragette who worked for women’s right to vote. She attended many Minnesota Association of the Deaf conventions with her husband Jay Cooke Howard, including the 12th Biannual Convention in Duluth. They later divorced, and she went on to become the first female president of the Minnesota Association of the Deaf and the first deaf vocational rehabilitation counselor in Minnesota.

Cadwallader Lincoln Washburn was born into a local prominent family of political and business fame (including ownership in the Gold Medal flour mills). He was a graduate of the present-day Minnesota Academy for the Deaf, and was good friends with fellow graduates Olof Hanson and Charles Thompson. He went on to become a prominent artist who traveled extensively, met personalities such as the artist Pablo Picasso, and became renowned for his drypoint etchings.

Charles Thompson came from a wealthy local family and had many residences, including his winter home in Thomasville, Georgia, his horse farm in Windom, and his camp at the ‘deaf colony’ in Alexandria. A sense of his lifestyle can be gathered from his chauffeur’s memoirs. Together with his wife Margaret Brooks Thompson, he became a generous benefactor of the deaf community. When he died, Margaret dedicated the first deaf clubhouse in America to his memory. The Charles Thompson Memorial Hall was designed by the deaf architect Olof Hanson, and was completed in 1918 to much fanfare. It has supported diverse activities such as fraternal society meetings, sports teams, vaudeville performances, and dinner events, and continues to serve as a clubhouse and civic center for the community to this day.