

# The Chemawa American

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## INDIAN SIGN LANGUAGE

For all of us this is a world of astonishment and opportunity for acquiring a knowledge of many facts. Often we are surprised to find at our very door-step many things that we had overlooked for years, although we may have searched afar for them. The following interesting article published in the Pathfinder illustrates our point:

The American Indian sign language is probably the first American language. It is said to be older than the pyramids, and is the most important gesture language the world has ever produced. This interesting sign language is thought to have been born of necessity. There were so many tribes in North America speaking so many tongues that when strange tribesmen met, if they were friendly, they had to exchange their few sentiments by signs with the hands. As these occasional meetings increased the signs increased in number. Soon the language grew to such an extent that tribesmen held councils, agreed to treaties and planned campaigns, all with gestures. Strangely enough, many of the signs in this "silent language" are exactly the same as the gestures the white man uses for emphasis.

Little Raven, the big chief of the Southern Arapahoes, once said to a cowboy hand on his father's ranch: "The sign language of my people is the simplest and most beautiful language in all the world. Comanches, Crows, Snakes, Osages, Kiowas, and all other Indians understand it. At least the old ones do. It was the first universal language in America. It is of great antiquity. Some day a white scholar will write a book about it, explain it for your people. And he will do much good thereby, and acquire great honor."

That boy was William (Will) Tomkins. Now, after nearly 40 years of study and research Mr. Tomkins has published a little book entitled "Universal Indian Sign Language." It is really a sort of Indian sign language dictionary. It contains 800 Indian sign words and their meanings, all illustrated. It is said to be the first accurate exposition of the language and the only authentic book on the subject that has been prepared yet. It is significant as the first codification of a language that is "talked," not spoken. It contains,

in addition to exact definition of the sign language gestures, a study of ideography and pictography. This book has recently been officially adopted by the Boy Scouts of America.

Some of the highlights of this first American universal language follow: The Indian never bothered to find signs for "the," "a" and "an." All interrogations are made either wholly or in part by the question sign. Instead of saying "Where are you going?" the signs would be "question"—"you"—"going," etc. The sign for "question" covers the words "where" "why" and "when." Instead of asking "What is your name?" the question is stated "What are you called?" the signs for which are "question"—"you"—"called."

Present time is expressed by the signs for "now" or "today," or both for emphasis. The first person singular is indicated by pointing to one's self. The plural "we" is made by the signs for "me" and "all." "You"—"all" mean ye; "he"—"all" means they. Gender is shown by sticking on the sign for man or woman. Past tense is expressed by adding on the sign for long time. All sentences are elemental and simple. The verb is generally placed between the subject and the object.

The greatest difference between the Indian sign language and the signs used by the deaf and dumb, it is pointed out, is in the sign for think. The originators of the Indian language thought that thinking was done with the heart—"drawn from the heart"—and their sign for the word think is made by holding the right hand, back up, against the left breast, index finger extended and pointing to left and moving the hand horizontally outwards about eight or 10 inches. The deaf mute sign for think is to place the extended finger of the right hand against the forehead. Also deaf mutes used a great deal of facial contortion and grimace, while the Indian seldom uses facial expression.

## DETAIL FOR WEEK

Escorts for girls walking: October 30, Financial clerk, Teacher No. 7, Teacher No. 10.

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