

Who was Louis Fant?

Name _____ Class · period _____ Date _____

THE SHORT VERSION

Louis Fant (1931–2001) was a hearing child of Deaf parents who became a teacher, interpreter, actor, and author. He was a founding member of the National Theater of the Deaf, coached actors in sign language for film and television, and coined the term *Ameslan*.

FAMILY, EDUCATION, AND THE STAGE

Bilingual at birth, and a career that kept circling back to ASL

01 FAMILY AND EDUCATION

- 01 Fant was born in Greenville, South Carolina to Deaf parents.

His first language was sign language, but he says “[he] became bilingual at birth... learning sign language from [his] parents and English from [his] relatives.”

- 02 Louis attended Baylor University with the intent to pursue ministry for the Deaf.

However, he changed his mind and decided to go into education, and earned his master’s from Columbia University.

- 03 He started his career teaching at the elementary school level at the New York School for the Deaf.

- 04 He eventually joined the faculty at Gallaudet University, and was a “voice” for the Deaf actors in the school productions.

02 NATIONAL THEATER OF THE DEAF (NTD)

- 01 Possibly due to his involvement in Gallaudet’s theater program, Louis became a founding member of the NTD in Waterford, Connecticut.

Louis traveled with the group across the United States as an actor, interpreter, administrator and more.

Fant felt that the group was important to provide the hearing world a fresh perspective.

It's broken down a lot of barriers... made hearing people aware of Deaf people and that they have something to offer in theater, dance, art, literature, all forms of the arts – that only a Deaf person can offer.

LOUIS FANT, ON THE NATIONAL THEATER OF THE DEAF

CALIFORNIA, SEATTLE, AND A LASTING MARK ON ASL

Coaching actors, publishing books, and naming a language

03 MOVING TO CALIFORNIA

- 01 After three years with NTD, Fant moved to California, where his love of acting continued to play out.

Louis performed locally and in a number of character roles on television, including an appearance on the show *Little House on the Prairie* as well as *Cheers*.

Louis also worked in consulting and was a sign language coach for other actors, including famous actress Diane Keaton and Henry Winkler, best known as Fonzie on *Happy Days*.

Louis also contributed to the film version of the play *Children of a Lesser God* as a sign language coach.

04 SEATTLE AND THE END OF FANT'S LIFE

- 01 Towards the end of his life, Louis moved to Seattle to teach sign language, run training and work as an interpreter.

While in Seattle, Louis concluded his teaching career and retired from Seattle Central Community College.

- 02 Louis was also recognized by the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf for making outstanding contributions to the field. The National Center on Deafness at California also honored Louis with the Daniel T. Cloud Leadership Award.

- 03 Louis also published 9 books, including *The American Sign Language Phrase Book*, four articles, and contributed to 8 films in an effort to promote ASL.

Louis also coined the term **Ameslan**, a once widely used acronym for Ame(rican) S(ign) Lan(guage).

- 04 Louis Fant passed away when he was 69 years old due to complications from pulmonary fibrosis, and was survived by his wife and four children.

05 NAMES AND TERMS TO KNOW

NAME OR TERM	WHY IT MATTERS IN THIS STORY
Ameslan	The term Louis coined for American Sign Language, once widely used before ASL became standard.
National Theater of the Deaf	The Waterford, Connecticut company Louis helped found and toured with as actor, interpreter and administrator.
Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf	The professional body that recognized Louis for outstanding contributions to interpreting.
<i>The American Sign Language Phrase Book</i>	The best known of the nine books Louis published to promote ASL.
Sign language coach	The job Louis did for hearing actors, including Diane Keaton, Henry Winkler, and the film of <i>Children of a Lesser God</i> .

CHECK YOUR UNDERSTANDING

Answer in complete sentences using what you read

06 WRITTEN RESPONSE

01 Louis said he became bilingual at birth. What did he mean, and where did each language come from?

02 What did Louis originally plan to do with his education, and what did he do instead?

03 List three different roles Louis filled at the National Theater of the Deaf.

- 04** Louis said NTD made hearing people aware that Deaf people have something to offer in the arts “that only a Deaf person can offer.” What do you think he meant?

- 05** Louis was hearing, but spent his whole career working in and for the Deaf community. Name three specific ways he did that.

07 WHERE THIS INFORMATION COMES FROM

“Ameslan” [dictionary.com](#)

Louis Fant memorial [deafroadrunner.com](#)

Louis Fant biography [Gallaudet University · gallaudet.edu](#)

“Louis Fant; Taught Deaf Students and Actors” Jon Thurber · [Los Angeles Times](#), June 17, 2001

“Louis Fant, 69, Who Helped Start the National Theater of the Deaf” [The Associated Press](#), June 25, 2001