

## Ghosts of Braille Past

### Volunteer 1:

Say the following (or something like it) to introduce the activities

"Blind people throughout history have relied on braille, but did you ever stop to wonder how people read before Louis' braille system was invented?"

Braille was adopted in France in 1854, but it took until 1917 for the United States to agree to use the same system. Before 1917, there were several forms of tactile written word, including Moonform and Boston Line Type. These, unlike braille, were tactile letters or symbols.

There may be one invention that stands out among the rest for ensuring the adoption of braille and not another tactile system, and that is the brailler. Unlike Moonform and Boston Line Type, Louis Braille's system could not only be read by the blind but could also be written and produced by the blind, setting his code apart from the rest.

We know that CSB was established in 1865, so CSB was around a whole 52 years before the braille code was invented.

Do you want to hear about some ghosts from CSB past?"

### Volunteer 2:

Ask student volunteers to roll the dice. When they roll the dice, volunteer 3 will read a message from one of the 6 ghosts below, corresponding to the number on the dice.

Can repeat for up to 3 ghost messages. Stop at 3 to allow for the free exploration time detailed below. Note you will be at the Ouija board station.

### Volunteer 3:

Be the voice of the ghosts. Find their messages below:

#### Ghost 1.

"I used to type on the Foundation Writer. Night and day. I loved that smooth, shiney, sturdy stainless steel. My sister couldn't even type on the typewriter, nobody can! Bet

they didn't think a blind guy would be the fastest typist in the west. I started middle school in 1940. That was also the first year I read The Great Gatsby, it came out December 21, 1940. I wanted to write just like F Scott Fitzgerald. I wrote and wrote and wrote on that thing. By the same time the next year, December 7th, 1941, the United States entered into World War 2. Well, next thing you know they stopped making my favorite beautiful stainless steel braille writer. They needed all the metal they could get for the war efforts. But I got to keep mine. I hope it's still here, shiney and sturdy as ever."

### Ghost 2.

"You know, I am a modern girl. Well, maybe not Modern in your time but modern for me. The 1960's were all about being modern! I was in high school in 1965. I was so sick of all these big, ugly, clunky, silly metal brailers. I was so so so excited for... A plastic one!

Plastic was so so so new to me. I mean, it was mass produced after world war two but then nobody really saw it until the 1960s and 1970s. That's when it went craaaaaazy. Everybody wanted it. They wanted to throw out their metal fridge and get a plastic one. Heck they might even have tried to get a plastic oven before they found out it could melt! Well me, I wasn't any different. I wanted my plastic.. And boy did I love the lavender braille writer. You know, I thought that it might be a lot lighter than the 7.6 pounds of the metal ones, but this big baby was a whole 9 pounds. Man was I disappointed when I found out. I heard CSB still has one. It might be warped though. I was so excited for plastic but turns out that material is kinda trash, huh?"

### Ghost 3.

"I always wanted to be a stenographer. Do you know what that is? Well of course you don't. Neither did my friends in high school. In 1985 everyone just wanted to be Madonna! Well, a stenographer is a person whose job it is to transcribe speech in shorthand. You know? Like conversations? A court stenographer types down every little detail that happens in court, so you can put it on the record. I wanted to do that with my whole heart. I even learned shorthand. Well, cause you know I can't be expected to write down every single whole word that fast. So, shorthand is when you type in abbreviations and symbols. My braille teacher taught me shorthand. And I was even so excited when the braille shorthand machine came out. See if you can find the one I used; it's in this room. "

## Ghost 4.

"But who is this? Why have you summoned me? Are you kin? Friend or foe? Doubtless I see you are interested in my knowledge, be it like none other.

What, halt! Where are we... Well, what an odd place for a school for the blind... Fremont? Are we not in San Francisco? We are not on 16th and Mission are we? Oh wow. There certainly are a lot of you, I suppose you must not be in the wrong place.

I will honor you with my hospitality. Be it that these other ghosts are so grotesquely young it troubles me you wont know true history. Behold, the Hall Braille Writer made in the great, respectable year of 1892. The first! Nothing like it! Rest your eyes on this honorable specimen, a pivot in history, a tear in time, this is like none other. When I was a young lad, our quarters were in San Francisco. I remember 1900 - 1904 we were confined to our building. Unfortunately it seems a ship brought in the bubonic plague.

The plague! In the 1900s. Can you imagine, how profane. Well, I wrote stories and letters to my friends till my fingers bled. What a gift! The first machine that ever let me both read and write my own writing. And oh, my writing was so profound. I truly cannot think of a better gift to society."

## Ghost 5.

"My name is J. Robert Atkinson born in 1887. I'll never tell you what the J is for. I lost my sight at 16 from a gunshot wound. It was terribly upsetting to me, and I spent my years fighting for civil rights. I used to love school but when I came back to it after going blind, it was hard to find barely anything written in braille. So, I decided to make some of my own. As my family read aloud, I would transcribe every word they wrote on my braille. I couldn't tell you how long it took me, but eventually I had about 16 different novels I had transcribed into braille. Well, I knew brailers well enough to know what I liked and didn't, and I didn't like the top loading paper. So, I made my own; the Atkinson model portable braille. Well, portable my foot, it ended up being 15 pounds. If you find it here, try to lift it up!

Later in my life, in 1919 I founded the Universal Braille Press. A much faster way of printing braille books. You might know it as the Braille Institute of America. I published several braille books, made my own braille magazine called the Braille Mirror, and created interpoint to save on space and paper. When I wasn't making books, I would ride my horse around town. I imagine everyone looked but I do not care; I had important business. Until my death I would travel around to make speeches and lobby legislators for civil rights and jobs for people who are blind and visually impaired.

You can read about me if you pick up the book Beacon in the Night. "

## Ghost 6.

"OK so I'm not a ghost this is Vanessa. Well, this is Jennifer reading Vanessa's words. Don't take the Perkins braille for granted. All your fancy computer gadgets do not replace the Perkins braille. What about a power outage? What if you need to type under water? What if you find yourself in a time warp and end up somewhere between 1890 - 1980 and you have to write letters to your family and hope they are preserved in time, so they find it and open it and read it one morning and figure out you are in the past!

So anyway, I might have a little anxiety. But that doesn't mean the Perkins isn't important. I mean, it took David Abraham years to build it! With his manufacturing background, David worked in his basement workshop to eliminate the overhanging carriage on the old brailles that made so many difficulties. He made it so the paper could be inserted easily, and the spacing mechanisms were simple. The dots are uniform height no matter how hard you bang on them and don't.... Don't try. Elizabeth has too much to do already. I mean. You might think these things are old and well, they are... they were first built in 1946. That is 76 years ago! Do you think your tech can last this long? Would your laptop? I mean, I usually shatter the glass on my phone by year 4 so I've got a pretty bad track record. But a Perkins can almost always be fixed!"

**Free time: students can move about the tables and explore the materials**

1. Feel and look at old braille letters, moontype, and Line Type.
2. Look at, feel, and read about the old braille writers