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# Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard

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Everyone here spoke sign language.

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## Perceived Causes of Vineyard Deafness

People have speculated about the causes of deafness for centuries, but in the latter half of the nineteenth century, doctors and scientists took a renewed interest in deafness, much as polio became a focus in the 1940s and 1950s, and cancer is today. The reasons for this upsurge in interest are not entirely clear. The deaf population had not increased, although the first censuses and the growing number of schools for the deaf made it apparent that there were many more deaf Americans than had previously been estimated. Also, scientists were seeking a single explanation for deafness, and the intense interest in the subject eventually subsided, as scholars realized there was no one basic key to this multifaceted problem. To understand why Vineyarders were confused about the cause of deafness, one must survey the more prominent nineteenth-century theories on the causes of deafness.

### • Maternal Fright

Many Vineyarders, along with some leading medical authorities of the time, believed that deafness, like many other congenital disorders, was the direct result of maternal fright—sometimes called marking or maternal anxiety—the effect on the unborn infant of psychological stress on the mother (see Seiss 1887).

In the first volume of *American Annals of the Deaf and Dumb*<sup>1</sup> in 1847, a report provided evidence of the effects of maternal fright on the fetus. Interestingly, although the location was identified as “a small

town in the southeastern part of Massachusetts," the exact correlation of names, dates, and numbers of children makes clear that it was certainly Chilmark. The author was uncertain of the validity of maternal fright as the cause of deafness but felt it should be discussed. He stated, incorrectly, that none of the mothers had ever seen a deaf individual before, which made a stronger case for marking. In fact, not only were all these women from either Chilmark or West Tisbury, they were all closely related to one or more persons who were born deaf. The deafness described closely followed a recessive pattern of inheritance, but the author, unaware of the laws of heredity, was seeking to make a different point and completely missed the clues modern scientists would pick out. He wrote:

Mrs. M., the mother of the four oldest of these mutes, at the time a widow, gave the following account. "A few months previous to the birth of my second child, I went to the funeral of a neighbor. While at the grave, the singular appearance of a young woman attracted my attention. Someone standing near me told me she was deaf and dumb. As I had never seen a person in her condition before, I watched her movements with great interest. As the coffin was lowered into the grave she clasped her hands, raised her eyes and with a peculiar expression of grief and surprise, uttered such a cry as I had never in my life heard before. Her image was before me by day and night for weeks, and her unnatural voice was constantly ringing in my ears. In due time my child was born, and as I feared, proved to be deaf and dumb. In early life, whenever surprised into a sudden exclamation, the sound of his voice was the same as hers. Of my nine children, four were visited with this calamity."

The nearest neighbor of this family was Mr. S. Soon after his marriage he brought his wife home, where she saw the children of Mrs. M., the first deaf and dumb persons she had ever seen. The impression made upon her mind by the misfortune of her neighbor was similar to what had already been described, and with similar results. Her first child was born deaf and dumb as was also her fourth child. The third family in which there were mutes, was that of Capt. T. His wife, previous to her marriage, had never seen a deaf and dumb person. Soon after coming to

her new home, she was introduced to her neighbors, Mrs. M. and S., where she saw their children and was much affected by their unfortunate condition. A knowledge of the supposed cause of their deafness and the apprehension that it might have the same effect in her case, added much to her concern. Her first child was born deaf and dumb, and also her third and fourth. The other neighbor, Mr. L., who had two deaf children, gave a very similar account of the matter in regard to his wife, ascribing the deafness of his children to the same cause. (Turner 1847:28–29)

Examples of maternal fright crowded the nineteenth-century scientific literature. Hawkins felt sure enough of this effect to state that “nine out of every ten mothers of congenitally deaf children attribute their being so to powerfully operating causes upon the mind during gestation” (1863:17). He made the same mistake as Turner had twenty years earlier, confusing marking and heredity. “It also not unfrequently happens that the birth of one deaf child is followed by others similarly afflicted, as if the defect of the former one had so wrought upon the mother’s nervous susceptibility as to cause, in subsequent births, that very result, which she so naturally dreaded and wished to avoid.”

Even though some doubted that such experiences directly affected the child in utero, the data seemed too strong to dismiss the possibility. Gallaudet, addressing the Royal Commission in London in 1888, explained:

In cases of congenital deafness, maternal anxiety, to which many cases are ascribed, with what degree of truth it would be presumptuous now to judge, may sometimes become epidemic. At least there are certain years in which the nervous system of females is rendered more than usually excitable, and shocks that may have a deleterious influence on the offspring are more common. This is particularly the case in a country that is the seat of war. Many mothers in France have ascribed the infirmity of their congenitally deaf children to alarms sustained during the invasion of France by the Allies in 1814 and 1815, and its subsequent occupation. (Gallaudet 1892:45)

Alexander Graham Bell, though he disagreed strongly with the explanation of maternal fright, said that “in my examination and inquiries among parents I found that belief very prevalent” (1892:11).

## • Environment

Some Vineyarders, along with many nineteenth-century scientists, believed that climate or geography might be the ultimate cause of deafness. One local author even suggested that the salty air on the south side of the Island caused the deafness.

Even Bell, at his wits' end trying to explain the deafness on the Vineyard, considered environment as a cause when he addressed the Royal Commission of the United Kingdom in 1886:

The appearance of deafness is confined to that particular part of the island. The geological character of that part of the island is different from the rest of the island. The surface is undulating and hilly whereas the rest of the island is flat. It has a subsoil of very curious variegated clays that crop out in the form of a bold headland that is so beautifully colored by these clays to have acquired the name of Gay Head. Whether that has anything to do with the deafness I do not know, but it is a very curious fact that it is that part of the island alone where the deafness occurs although the bulk of the population lies outside. (Bell 1892:53)

Bell apparently did not consider the fact that deafness was unknown among the Gay Head Indians, who mined the clay deposits for the local paint mill.

For centuries writers had tried to draw some correlation between deafness and the environment. Bulwer, in the first book published in English on deafness, drew from many classical Greek and Roman writers. In accounting for forms of deafness caused by factors other than readily apparent disease, he wrote: "The causes [for deafness] are various and unknowne. There are those who suppose that this happens to some through the propriety of their place of birth. Soranus affirms that those who are borne in Ships at Sea, are by proprietie of their place of birth, like Fishes, mute" (1648:76–77). Bulwer, like many other writers, confused heredity with environment when he wrote: "Munto confidently affirms, that by a proprietie of place, they who were borne within the walls of the castle of Claramont, proved dumbe; as it happened to all the Barons that were borne there." Taking as fact the folktale that those who lived near the "Caturrachs of the Nile" were all deafened by the thunderous noise, Bulwer speculated

as to whether this population “are not commonly borne deafe also, rather than afterwards so made” (79–80).

### • Will of God

Both in Europe and America deafness, as well as many birth defects and diseases, was often attributed to the will of God, generally as a warning or punishment. This folk belief appeared in Biblical accounts and throughout Western literature (Hand 1980:67). Bulwer, in 1648, provided an example. “Sometimes the sinnes of the Parents are exemplarily punished in their children,” he wrote. One deaf child’s inability to hear was directly attributed to its mother’s conduct: “He is an example of God’s justice for, his mother being accused of stealing when shee went with Childe with him, used such an imprecation, that if that which she was charged with was true, her Childe might never speake when it came to be in the World, but remaine Dumbe all his life” (1648:77–78).

This belief in divine retribution was found among the early Puritan settlers in New England, although we do not know how common it was. Governor Winthrop reported a “monstrous birth”—a child born with two mouths, no forehead, and claws (probably anencephalic with an open myelomeningocele). Though the child’s parents were considered upright citizens, Winthrop could clearly perceive God’s wrath in the incident, as both of them were followers of the heretical Mrs. Hutchinson. Increase Mather, in a book written in 1684, cited several cases of disabilities in children as the result of God’s displeasure, and Cotton Mather, his son, noted further examples in his history of Puritan Massachusetts.

Throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, the occurrence of deafness and other disabilities was commonly viewed as a judgment by God. In a letter published in the *American Annals of the Deaf* a deaf gentleman from Iowa stated: “It is part of the punishment inflicted for violation of nature’s laws, which violation—whether it comes from carelessness, design or ignorance—results in deafness, blindness, lameness, etc., and will so result until man has so far improved, mentally, morally and physically, that diseases and accidents of a severe nature will be unknown” (Booth 1858, 1:77).

Such explanations were common (Jacobs 1869:21). In 1847 a Mr.

T., father of four deaf children, stated that “he regarded it as a judgement from Heaven for having married his cousin” (Turner 1847:30). And Carlin, speculating on the ultimate cause of deafness, wrote:

The generality of this unfortunate class of beings enjoy the benefits of all the senses except that of hearing, of which they are deprived by the wise Providence, for their good. (Query: if a deaf-mute child is born of deaf-mute parents, to which is its apparent misfortune to be attributed, to its parents, as some affirm, or to God’s own pleasure and judgement for its future good?) (Carlin 1851:53)

Brooks offered what was probably the best compromise between the concepts of God’s will and heredity, arguing that “if by an adequate census it shall appear that the five thousand couples who married first-cousins have from three hundred and fifty to four hundred imbecile or peculiar children, then it will be proved that the marriage of first-cousins is forbidden of God” (Brooks 1855:238).

Whether divine retribution was ever considered a cause of deafness on the Vineyard is not known. None of my informants ever offered it as an explanation. Only a handful of the informants had ever heard this explanation, and those who had, had heard it from off-Islanders. They rejected this idea out of hand. If the folk belief in divine retribution came to the Island with the early Puritan settlers, it seems to have long since disappeared.

## • Other Theories

One of the older deaf Islanders told a reporter from the *Boston Sunday Herald* in 1895 that he thought deafness was “catching, just like diphtheria and small pox.” A Mr. Sanborn, secretary to the Board of Health, Lunacy and Charity for the state of Massachusetts, in a letter to Bell in 1884, wrote that the prevalence of deafness on Martha’s Vineyard “was due to special causes irrespective of descent from a common ancestor.” As evidence, Sanborn cited the case of a deaf Vineyard couple who, though distantly related, attributed the deafness of several of their children to the fact that “the husband was twenty years older than his wife” (Sanborn 1884).

A traditional rivalry between two of the largest up-Island families



was often jokingly invoked when the subject of deafness came up. Both families had had large numbers of deaf individuals, and as one man told me: “The Norths were always saying they’d of been all right if they hadn’t of married the Brewers, and the Brewers were always saying as how they’d of been fine if they had not married into the Norths.”

Perhaps the simplest explanation was offered by a man from West Tisbury, who attributed the Island deafness to vanity. “It was the women’s fault, you know,” he explained. When I looked somewhat puzzled, he continued, “They would wear their corset stays too tight, and it’d damage the babies.” Such explanations were not uncommon (Newman 1969), and the man adamantly stuck to his beliefs through the long discussion of genetics that followed.