# "Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language"

*For many generations on Martha's Vineyard, deafness was no bar to a full social life*

Box 15
enc. #2

**by Nora Groce**

The fifth of April, 1715, had not been a good day for Judge Samuel Sewell of Boston. On his way to the island of Martha's Vineyard there had been trouble finding a boat to cross Nantucket Sound. The vessel then lay for hours without wind, and once it was across, the horses had to be pushed overboard to swim for shore on their own. Sewell and his company reached shore at dusk—cold, hungry, and in bad humor. Finding a group of local fishermen nearby, the judge engaged one of them to guide him to Edgartown and later noted in his diary: "We were ready to be offended that an Englishman . . . in the company spake not a word to us. But," he continued by way of explanation, "it seems he is deaf and dumb."

This Englishman was indeed deaf, as were two of his seven children. His is the first recorded case of what we now know to be a form of inherited deafness that was to appear consistently within this island population for more than 250 years and affect dozens of individuals. Probably one or several of the small number of settlers who originally populated the area brought with them a trait for hereditary deafness. As long as the "gene pool" remained limited in the small island population, this trait appeared with high frequency in subsequent generations. Put another way, the founders of this isolated society had a greater likelihood of perpetuating the trait for congenital deafness than if they had been part of a larger, changing population.

Martha's Vineyard offers what I feel to be a good example of the way in which a community adapts to a hereditary disorder. Lying some five miles off the southeastern coast of Massachusetts, the island was first settled by Europeans in the early 1640s. The population, of predominantly English stock with some admixture of indigenous Wampanoag Indian, expanded rapidly, owing to a tremendously high birthrate. Families that had fifteen to twenty children were not uncommon and twenty-five to thirty not unheard of. Although several hundred households are listed in the census records of the mid-eighteenth century, only about thirty surnames are to be found, and during the next century and a half only a handful more were added to the original group of names.

After the first generation, marriage "off-island" was rare. While Vineyard men sailed around the world on whaleships, merchantmen, and fishing vessels, they almost invariably returned home to marry local girls and settle


Courtesy of Stanton Lair, Martha's Vineyard

*This post office-general store was often the scene of sign-language conversations.*

down. Women married off-island even less frequently than did the men. Contact with the mainland was said to be more sporadic than with foreign countries. In the nineteenth century, islanders claimed that more of their men had been to China than to Boston, only eighty miles away. Even today, many islanders have never been to the island of Nantucket, barely eight miles to the east.

Throughout the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries, marriage patterns on the island followed the customs of any small New England community. Most of the islanders, however, could trace their descent to the same small nucleus of original settlers, indicating that although they were unaware of it, considerable "inbreeding" took place. The result was that during these two and a half centuries, within a population averaging little more than 3,100 individuals, hereditary deafness occurred at a rate many times that of the national population. For example, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, an estimated one out of every 2,730 Americans was born deaf. On Martha's Vineyard the rate was closer to one out of every 155. But even this figure does not accurately represent the distribution of deafness on the Vineyard.

Marriages were usually contracted between members of the same village, creating smaller groups *within* the island's population characterized by a higher frequency of deafness. The greatest concentration occurred in one village on the western part of the island where, by my analysis, within a population of 500, one in every twenty-five individuals was deaf. And even there the distribution was not uniform, for in one area of the village during this time period, one out of every four persons was born deaf.

The high rate of deafness on the island brought only occasional comment from island visitors over the years. Because most of the island deaf lived in the more remote areas of the island, few off-islanders were aware of their presence. Vineyarders themselves, used to a sizable deaf population, saw nothing unusual in this, and many assumed that all communities had a similar number of deaf members. Almost nothing exists in the written records to indicate who was or was not deaf, and indeed, only a passing reference made by an older islander directed my attention to the fact that there had been any deaf there at all.

While most of my information on island deafness has been obtained from the living oral history of islanders now in their seventies, eighties, and nineties, part of my genealogical data was acquired from the only other study of this deaf population. I came to know of it when an 86-year-old woman I was interviewing recalled that her mother had mentioned a "teacher of the deaf from Boston" at one time taking an interest in the island deaf. This "teacher of the deaf" turned out to be Alexander Graham Bell, who, having recently invented the telephone, turned his attention back to his lifelong interest in deafness research. Concerned with the question of heredity as it related to deafness, Bell began a major research project in the early 1880s, which was never completed.

Nineteenth-century scholars, without the benefit of Mendel's concept of unit factor inheritance (which only received widespread circulation at the turn of the century, although it had been published in the 1860s), were at a loss to explain why some but not all children of a deaf parent were themselves deaf. Selecting New England because of the older and unusually complete records available, Bell believed that by tracing back the genealogy of every family with two or more deaf children, he could establish some pattern for the inheritance of deafness. He soon found that practically every family in New England with a history of deafness was in some way connected with the early settlers of Martha's Vineyard, but he was unable to account for the fact that a deaf parent did not always have deaf children and so he abandoned the study. Although Bell never published his material, he left dozens of genealogical charts that have proved invaluable for my research—particularly because they corroborate the information I have been able to collect from the oral history of the older islanders.

Since Bell's time, scientists have found, through the construction and analysis of family pedigrees and the use of mathematical models, that congenital deafness may result from several causes: spontaneous mutations involving one or more genes; an already established dominant or recessive inheritance, as Mendel demonstrated; or factors otherwise altering normal development of the ear and its pathways to the brain. Human populations, of course, cannot be studied with the same exactness as a laboratory experi-

ment. However, the appearance of apparently congenitally deaf individuals is far too frequent on Martha's Vineyard to be mere coincidence, and the evidence collected thus far points to a recessive mode of inheritance.

While the genetic nature of a hereditary disorder in small populations is something that both anthropologists and geneticists have studied, there is another question, rarely addressed, that is of equal importance: How does the population of a community in which a hereditary disorder exists adjust to that disorder—particularly one as prominent as deafness? In modern society the emphasis has been on having "handicapped" individuals adapt to the greater society. But the perception of a handicap, with its associated physical and social limitations, is tempered by the community in which it is found. The manner in which the deaf of Martha's Vineyard were treated provides an interesting example of how one community responded to this type of situation. "How," I asked my informants, "were the island deaf able to communicate with you when they could not speak?" "Oh," I was told, "there was no problem at all. You see, everyone here spoke sign language."

From the late seventeenth century to the early years of the twentieth, islanders, particularly those from the western section where the largest number of deaf individuals lived, maintained a bilingual speech community based on spoken English and sign language. What is of particular interest is that the use of sign language played an important role in day-to-day life.

Islanders acquired a knowledge of sign language in childhood. They were usually taught by parents, with further reinforcement coming from the surrounding community, both hearing and deaf. For example, recalling how she learned a particular sign, one elderly woman explained:

> When I was a little girl, I knew many of the signs, and the manual alphabet of course, but I didn't know how to say "Merry Christmas," and I wanted to tell Mr. M. "Merry Christmas." So I asked Mrs. M., his wife. She could hear and she showed me how. And so I wished Mr. M. "Merry Christmas"—and he was just so delighted.

This women then described how she taught her son, now in his late seventies, how to speak the language.

> When my son was perhaps three years old, I taught him to say in sign language "the little cat and dog and baby." This man, who was deaf, he used to like to go down to our little general store and see people come and go. One day when I went down there, I took my son there and I said to him, "Go over and say 'how-do-you-do' to Mr. T.," the deaf man. So he went right over, and then I told him to tell Mr. T. so-and-so—a cat, a dog, and whatever. And wasn't Mr. T. tickled! Oh, he was so pleased to know a little bit of a boy like that was telling him all those things, and so he just taught my son a few more words. That's how he learned. That's how we all learned.

Particularly in the western section of the island, if an immediate member of the family was not deaf, a neighbor, friend, or close relative of a friend was likely to be. Practically all my "up-island" informants above the age of seventy remembered signs, a good indication of the extent to which the language was known and used. In this section, and to a lesser extent in the other villages on the island, sign language formed an integral part of all communications. For example, all informants remembered the deaf participating freely in discussions. One remarked:

> If there were several people present and there was a deaf man or woman in the crowd, he'd take upon himself the discussion of anything, jokes or news or anything like that. They always had a part in it, they were never excluded.

As in all New England communities, gathering around the potbellied stove or on the front porch of what served as a combination general store and post office provided a focal point for stories, news, and gossip. Many of the people I have talked to distinctly remember the deaf members of the community in this situation. As one man recalled:

> We would sit around and wait for the mail to come in and just talk. And the deaf would be there, everyone would be there. And they were part of the crowd, and they were accepted. They were fishermen and farmers and everything else. And they wanted to find out the news just as much as the rest of us. And oftentimes people would tell stories and make signs at the same time so everyone could follow him together. Of course, sometimes, if there were more deaf than hearing there, everyone would speak sign language—just to be polite, you know.

The use of sign was not confined to small group discussions. It also found its way into assembled crowds. For example, one gentleman told me:

> They would come to prayer meetings; most all of them were regular church people, you

know. They would come when people offered testimonials, and they would get up in front of the audience and stand there and give a whole lecture in sign. No one translated it to the audience because everyone knew what they were saying. And if there was anyone who missed something somewhere, somebody sitting near them would be able to tell them about it.

The deaf were so integral a part of the community that at town meetings up-island, a hearing person would stand at the side of the hall and cue the deaf in sign to let them know what vote was coming up next, thus allowing them to keep right on top of things. The participation of the deaf in all day-to-day work and play situations contrasted with the manner in which those handicapped by deafness were generally treated in the United States during the same time period.

Sign language on the island was not restricted to those occasions when deaf and hearing were together, but was used on a regular basis between the hearing as well. For example, sign language was used on boats to give commands and among fishermen out in open water to discuss their catch. I was told:

Fishermen, hauling pots outside in the Sound or off Gay Head, when they would be heaven knows how far apart, would discuss how the luck was running—all that sort of thing. These men could talk and hear all right, but it'd be too far to yell.

Indeed, signs were used any place the distance prohibited talking in a normal voice. For example, one man remembered:

Jim had a shop down on the shore of Tisbury Pond, and his house was a ways away, up on the high land. When Trudy, his wife, wanted to tell Jim something, she'd come to the door, blow a fish horn, and Jim would step outside. He'd say, "Excuse me, Trudy wants me for something"; then she'd make signs to tell him what she needed done.

On those occasions when speaking was out of place, such as in church, school, or at some public gatherings, the hearing communicated through signs. Such stories as the following are common: "Ben and his brother could both talk and hear, but I've seen them sitting across from each other in town meetings or in church and telling each other funny stories in sign language."

Island people frequently maintained social distance and a sense of distinct identity in the presence of tourists by exchanging comments about them in sign language. The occurrence of what linguists call code switching from speech to sign also seems to have been used in certain instances. For example, I was told:

People would start off a sentence in speaking and then finish it off in sign language, especially if they were saying something dirty. The punch line would often be in sign language. If there was a bunch of guys standing around the general store telling a [dirty] story and a woman walked in, they'd turn away from her and finish the story in sign language.

Perhaps the following anecdote best illustrates the unique way island sign language was integral to all aspects of life:

My mother was in the New Bedford hospital—had an operation—and father went over in his boat and lived aboard his boat and went to the hospital to see her every night. Now the surgeon, when he left him in her room, said they mustn't speak, father couldn't say a word to her. So he didn't. But they made signs for about half an hour and mother got so worked up, they had to send father out, wouldn't let him stay any longer.

Sign language or rather sign languages—for even within this country there exist a number of distinct languages and dialects—are languages in their own right, systems of communication different from the spoken languages used by hearing members of the same community. It has often been noted that American Sign Language, the sign system commonly used among the deaf in the United States today, is influenced by French Sign Language, introduced to America in 1817. The data from Martha's Vineyard, however, clearly support the hypothesis, made by the linguist James Woodward, that local sign language systems were in use in America long before this. By 1817 (the year the American School for the Deaf was founded in Hartford, Connecticut), deaf individuals on Martha's Vineyard had been actively participating in island society for well over a century. Because they were on an equal footing, both socially and economically, with the hearing members of the community, and because they held town offices, married, raised families, and left legal and personal documents, there must have existed some sort of sign language system that allowed full communication with family, friends, and neighbors.

It may prove difficult to reconstruct the original sign language system used on the island during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but study of this question is currently under way. Whatever the exact nature of the original language, we know that it later grew to acquire many aspects of the more widely used American Sign Language, as increasing numbers of deaf island children were sent to the school in Hartford during the nineteenth century. This combination of the indigenous sign system with the more standardized American Sign Language seems to have produced a sign language that was, in many respects, unique to the island of Martha's Vineyard. The most common remark made by islanders who still remember the language is that they find it very difficult or are completely unable to understand the sign language spoken by off-islanders or the translations for the deaf that are beginning to be seen on television.

The use of sign language as an active system of communication lessened as the number of individuals in the community with hereditary deafness gradually disappeared, the last few dying in the 1940s and early 1950s. This decrease in the number of deaf can be attributed to a shift in marriage patterns that began in the latter part of the nineteenth century, when both hearing and deaf islanders began to marry off-islanders. The introduction of new genes into the once small gene pool has reduced the chance of a reappearance of "island deafness."

As the number of islanders born deaf dwindled, younger generations no longer took an interest in learning sign language, and the older generations rarely had the need to make use of it. Today, very few people are left who can speak the language fluently, although bits and pieces of it can be recalled by several dozen of the oldest islanders. A few signs are still kept alive among those who knew the language and on a few of their fishing boats. As one gentleman, well along in his seventies, told me recently:

You know, strangely enough, there's still vestiges of that left in the older families around here. Instinctively you make some such movement, and it means something to you, but it doesn't mean anything to the one you're talking to.

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