MARTHA'S VINEYARD, 1700-1900: A DEAF UTOPIA?

Author(s): Barry A. Crouch

Source: *Sign Language Studies*, Winter 1986, No. 53 (Winter 1986), pp. 381-387

Published by: Gallaudet University Press

Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/26203924

MARTHA'S VINEYARD, 1700-1900: A DEAF UTOPIA?

Barry A. Crouch

Nora Ellen Groce's Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language [Harvard U. Press. 1986. 169 pp., $17.50] has received national attention and uncritical reviews. Some of the praise is deserved by this first major work focused on hereditary deafness over a long historical span and tracing its roots to England. The author's almost total reliance upon oral testimony as to the status, role, condition, class, and historical situation of the deaf on Martha's Vineyard for three centuries leaves an impression of an idyllic society. An assessment of the methodology and the sources she consulted is necessary for a balanced critique of the book. As a field, deaf studies is in its infancy, but one sign that the field is recognized is the appearance of a major article about deaf people by Oliver Sacks in the New York Review of Books. Professor of Neurology at the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Sacks built his essay on his review of three books about deaf people published by prestigious presses: When the Mind Hears and The Deaf Experience by Harlan Lane, and Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language by Nora Ellen Groce. The latter work is the focus of this review.

Groce's book centers in the interaction between the deaf and hearing inhabitants of Martha's Vineyard over approximately three centuries. Her primary concern with this small isolated island off Cape Cod is to "construct an ethnohistory of a genetic disorder." She pictures a bucolic community where the hearing did not discriminate against the deaf and each group allegedly participated actively in the other's activities. She writes that the deaf Islanders thrived in this insulated world and lived as normal a life as was possible for deaf people living among the hearing, while their counterparts on the mainland survived in a more hostile environment.

A brief survey of Groce's findings demonstrates how she arrived at these conceptions. Although she uses the Vineyard as her laboratory, deaf people were prominent in only two towns on the island, Chilmark and Tisbury. A few other deaf persons were scattered throughout the Vineyard, except in Gay Head. During the 19th century one person in every 155 born on the Vineyard was deaf; Groce computes the national rate of deaf birth at one in every 5,728, a figure much too low according to recent deaf demographics. (See SLS 51, 187f.) A more reliable calculation would put it at one in every 3,700. More specifically, for Tisbury the average was one in 49, and

for Chilmark, one in 25. In Edgartown, a deaf individual surfaced in the 1720s, and by the late eighteenth century the deaf birth rate was four times the national average. By 1800 six deaf people lived there out of a population of 1,375, the last one dying in 1880. In summary, for the time span covered by her study (she vacillates on the dates covered by her work), Groce identified "at least seventy-two deaf persons born to Island families" and a "dozen more were born to descendants of Vineyarders who had moved off-Island" (pp. 3, 42).

The cause of this high incidence of deafness was a recessive gene transmitted by a group from the Weald of Kent in England, who move to America seeking religious freedom. They first migrated to Scituate (32 miles south of Boston), next to Barnstable, and then finally to Martha's Vineyard. Genetically isolated on the island, these settlers carried the genetic trait and expressed it through several generations of marriages among individuals with a common ancestor. Writes Groce: "In the three hundred years of settlement, only one deaf child was born to a couple in which one partner's family came from off-Island" (pp. 21-49).

In accordance with the characteristics of a recessive gene trait, 85 percent of all congenitally born deaf in Vineyard history had hearing parents. These children included 29 males, 34 females, and 9 whose sex went unrecorded. The first deaf person on the island was Jonathan Lambert, mentioned in the early eighteenth century by Samuel Sewell, a famous Boston judge. Lambert, whose wife apparently was hearing, moved to the Vineyard in 1694 and fathered seven children, two of whom were deaf. Besides the Lamberts, two other families, the Skiffes and the Tiltons, provided the major genetic pool for the strain of deafness. The number of deaf individuals born on the Island gradually rose until the 1840s (peaking at 45), when 14 deaf children were born in Chilmark, which had a population at that time of about 350. In the 1870s, concluded Groce, "only one deaf child was born in the town. In 1900 there were fifteen deaf people alive on the Island, but by 1925 only four remained, and by 1945 only one." That last one died in 1952. (pp. 22, 23-26, 41, 49)

An important aspect of Groce's interpretation is the origin of sign language and its use by both deaf and hearing persons. According to oral tradition, "there was no difference in the types of signs or their order when used by deaf islanders talking among themselves and by hearing individuals with the deaf" (p. 59). On the Vineyard, Groce asserts, the "hearing people were bilingual in English and the Island sign language. This adaptation had more than linguistic significance, for it

eliminated the wall that separates most deaf people from the rest of society" (p. 4). She quotes from an article by a reporter in the Boston Sunday Herald in (January 20) 1895 to reinforce her thesis; the reporter noted that "the spoken language and the sign language will be so mingled in the conversation that you pass from one to the other, or use both at once, almost unconsciously. [The deaf] are not uncomfortable in their deprivation, the community has adjusted itself to the situation so perfectly."

In all aspects of their social life, especially marriage and education, deaf Islanders, in Groce's interpretation, led a "normal" life. She finds that they married freely, 80 percent who lived to matrimonial age marrying -- equal to the hearing rate. She notes that the marriage rate in the 19th century for deaf persons was 45 percent (married of marriage age) in the United States, and that the average for the deaf Islanders is high even compared with present day norms. More suggestively, Groce says that of those deaf islanders born before 1817 only 35 percent married other deaf people. Nationally the deaf-deaf marriage rate was 79 percent. The Island deaf also married younger, remarried at an unusual rate after the death of a spouse, and had a low divorce ratio, with only two divorces recorded in the last century. Moreover, families had an average of 5.9 children, which was "strikingly higher" than the average in the 1880s average of 2.6 for the mainland deaf population. There was "no statistical difference in the number of offspring born to deaf-deaf and to deaf-hearing marriages," she surmises. (pp. 78ff)

Groce finds that educationally, deaf Vineyard children outdistanced their mainland counterparts in the 19th century, although the situation in earlier times is not clear. Schools were established early in Island history, but whether any of the deaf attended during the 17th and 18th centuries is unknown. Groce assumes, from signatures on "early wills, deeds, and other documents," that "many of them could sign their names," and were therefore somewhat literate. Once the American Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb opened in Hartford in 1817, Groce writes, "all but one of the Vineyard deaf attended for some period of time." Massachusetts funded "virtually all" the education of the deaf Islanders, and as a result "many of the deaf Vineyarders were better educated than their hearing neighbors." Comparably, only 25 to 35 percent of "deaf Americans were literate in the 19th century and many of those were only partially literate." Many deaf Americans (estimates range from 30 to 75 percent for the 19th century) never attended school. (pp. 77f)

Economically, civically, legally, and socially,

Groce contends, deaf Islanders were "fully integrated" into Vineyard society. They engaged in the three major occupations of agriculture (all married deaf men owning their farms), navigation, and fishing -- and some women established cottage industries. Financially they did better than the deaf in the continental United States, and none were listed on the town poor farm lists. They accepted civic responsibility, serving in the town government and the local militia and legally managed their own affairs. Socially, the deaf "intermingled everywhere," participating in numerous Island activities and attending a myriad of functions. Because of this total integration and absence of an attitude toward them as "handicapped," deaf Vineyarders never found it necessary to establish separate clubs or to engage in distinct amusements, for this would have necessitated the exclusion of spouses, "siblings, children, best friends, or immediate neighbors, all of whom would have been hurt" (pp. 80-94). Groce concludes that deafness was so intertwined with Vineyard society that acceptance became the standard through the history of the Island.

The materials. While this portrait of an idyllic, almost utopian community of deaf and hearing people working and living together is emotionally satisfying -- indeed compelling to persons committed to democratic and equalitarian goals; examination of Groce's sources and their use clouds the picture. Groce argues that she drew on "genetics, deaf studies, sociolinguistics, ethnography, and oral and written history" for the bulk of her documentation. (p. 3) Very little of this, however, was contemporary primary source material, the stuff from which most reliable history is written.

She mentions, for example, that she located at the John Hitz Memorial Library, in Washington, D.C., the notes of Alexander Graham Bell, who had studied deafness on Martha's Vineyard for four years. Yet, how valuable these manuscripts were in aiding Groce's study is not clearly delineated, for there are no citations of this material. The United States census apparently was also consulted, but these compilations are only useful after 1830, and are thus confined to part of the 19th century. For Groce, her most important data came from numerous oral interviews she had with approximately fifty individuals (all hearing), who recounted their experiences and recollections of deaf Vineyarders. (pp. 5-11) In short, the interpretative part of the book rests on secondary sources and oral history, with almost no contemporary supporting evidence.

Groce vigorously defends her reliance on essentially one source: "Oral history is more than

simply a way to confirm information from written sources," she writes; "Many things never enter written accounts -- the mundane facets of every-day life, neighborhood events and characters, gossip, scandal, and misconduct" (p. 117). It is not clear what recent sources on historical methodology she has consulted, but this assertion about oral history is simply untrue. Social historians do indeed find information about everyday life in sources other than interviews.

Groce also contends that "quite often it is only through oral history that one can get full knowledge of an individual or incident, even if it is mentioned in a written record. And in a good number of cases in this study, the written records turned out to be wrong, and the oral information much more accurate" (pp. 5-7). While this assertion may or not be accurate, it is well to keep in mind what the historian Kenneth Lynn has said: "The transcript of an interview is always a literary creation, not a replica of reality... [the] interviewer's intellectual and emotional attitudes establish a point of view toward the material, delimit the information elicited by the questions asked, and dominate the edition of the raw transcript" (1978: 490f).

Reliance upon almost unsupported oral testimony presents another problem. Because that testimony is bound within the limits of memory, it may preclude the recognition of the changes a society undergoes over a course of two hundred years. The informants Groce relies upon have memories extending back no farther than about 1800. Groce, however, uses their views to extend back into time her informants' uniform assertion that there was a bilingual and integrated society of the deaf and hearing on Martha's Vineyard. For the latter part of the seventeenth, all of the eighteenth, and the first half of the nineteenth centuries there is no direct evidence that the deaf and hearing intermingled as freely and as openly as Groce argues. She has taken the glowing accounts of those she interviewed and applied them to the past without considering the change over time in Vineyard society and the nature of its inhabitants.

Groce's glorification of the past, based on very limited data, can be compared usefully with recent trends in the historiography of American slavery. As a reaction to older perceptions, in which slaves were depicted as passive childlike "Sambos," newer works have tried to portray the slave community as a cultural entity wherein institutions such as religion and the family are praised "for protecting blacks from the worst rigors of slavery and for enabling them to lead fulfilling lives apart from and usually unbeknown to their owners" (Kolchin 1983:581f). As this historian

argues in a later article refuting the revisionist view of slavery, one rarely confronts in this idyllic society "child abuse, wife beating, and unhappy or even squalid and mundane families; one encounters little black cruelty or meanness, few bullies, thieves, and rapists, or just dull, plodding, uninteresting people" (Kolchin 1985:87-111). The only problem on the Vineyard noted by Groce is that of an irascible deaf woman who made life difficult for others. (p. 93)

Groce almost stands the slave culture view on its head by positing a fully integrated deaf and hearing community on the Island, and she contrasts this favorably with the situation in the continental United States. There, she believes, deaf people lived significantly different lives; but exactly what the lives of deaf people were like in British North America, later the United States, remains unknown, so that there is no basis for comparison. It is possible that in a predominantly rural and illiterate society, whether or not genetically unusual like Martha's Vineyard, deaf persons were easily integrated and accepted without the stigma common in the 19th century. Moreover, in Groce's account there seems to be no exchange of attitudes relating to on-island and off-island deaf. Neither impinged on the other. Travel to Martha's Vineyard was unquestionably difficult in the period Groce discusses, but it is hard to accept the idea that no exchange of information occurred -- especially after 1817 when deaf persons attended school in Connecticut.

Groce's reconstructed world is simply too perfect, and hence imperfect. There is no tension, no crime, none of those undercurrents, whether individual or attitudinal, that tend to affect the function of any society wherein a substantial number of individuals are obviously and significantly different from the majority. This is not to say that the deaf should only be studied within the context of pathology and the "absence" of hearing, but the opposite extreme is not the answer either.

The most troublesome facet of Groce's work is that we meet very few deaf people in it. When they appear, they are always defined in relation to the hearing community, with no identity of their own. Groce provides no evidence of how deaf Vineyarders felt about themselves, though she makes such an attempt through various tables and statistics. To get inside a community of the past one must have contemporary written records, and these Groce either did not locate or did not use.

Groce's book is in one respect a well crafted study. The origins and transmission of the Vineyard's hereditary deafness are certainly a model of careful investigation and delineation. How and why this deafness

came to pass is unquestionably a focal point of Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language. But to transpose onto these basic facts the reminiscences of Island residents is another matter. The thesis that deaf and hearing communicated freely and intermingled socially, with few if any problems, simply cannot be sustained over a course of two or three centuries. Communities change over time, and this change needs to be accounted for by thorough research and the careful analysis of the widest array of sources. The deaf who were born, lived, and worked on Martha's Vineyard may have led fuller and more prosperous lives than those on the mainland in relation to communication, work, family, education, and societal affairs; but this has not been proved. What Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language does prove is that deaf history is an exciting field with unlimited possibilities for future investigators.

REFERENCES

Groce, N.
1985 Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Kolchin, P.
1983 Reevaluating the antebellum slave community: A comparative perspective, Journal of American History 70, 581f.
1985 American historians & antebellum southern slavery. In A Master's Due: Essays in Honor of David Herbert Donald, Cooper et al. eds. Baton Rouge, LA: U. of La. Press. 87-111.

Lane, H.
1984 When the Mind Hears: A History of the Deaf. New York: Random House.

Lynn, K.
1978 The regressive historians, American Scholar 47, 490f.

McCallum, R.
1980 Folklore. In North Carolina Research: Genealogy & Local History, Leary & Stirewalt eds. Raleigh, NC: Duke U. Press. 552ff.

Sacks, O.
1986 Mysteries of the deaf, New York Review of Books 3/27, 23-27, 30-33.

Barry A.Crouch is an Associate Professor of History at Gallaudet College. He is a contributor to the forthcoming Encyclopedia of Deafness and Deaf People, and is co-editing with the department chairman, John V. Van Cleve, a book of readings in deaf history.