

The Martha's Vineyard *Deaf Community*



The young couple is animated in their silent conversation here at the Chilmark Public Library. Their hands move gracefully, sometimes in rhythm with their mouths, which make no sound. The woman claps one hand sharply

against the other as she forms a particular word, and the man frowns. He pulls out a book about the history of Martha's Vineyard, skims a page as she looks with him, closes it roughly and shoves it back on the shelf.

BY DONNA SCAGLIONE

Photographs courtesy of the Martha's Vineyard Historical Society

Above: The Chilmark Post Office, c.1900, was a social gathering place for the island's deaf community.



The sight of two people speaking in sign language would have gone unnoticed in the mid-19th century on Martha's Vineyard. That's when one in four people in the village of Squibnocket, in the town of Chilmark, was born deaf, a phenomenon created by biological and social circumstances still studied today.

But on this late-summer day in 2005, the deaf couple is noticeably frustrated. They want to ask a question about the island but are understood only by each other, and that never would have happened 150 years ago.

Back then, everyone in Chilmark—the hearing and the deaf—communicated in sign language. At the Chilmark general store or the Squibnocket post office, the main gathering places at the time, children watched their parents discuss the weather and their fishing catch and gossip with neighbors in sign. And the children learned the language themselves.

It is particularly ironic that the young man and woman are standing in the Martha's Vineyard Room of the Chilmark library, a room that used to be part of the home of Katie West, the last member of the Martha's Vineyard deaf community. As they browse the history books, they stand on the West home's original yellow pine floorboards, inches away from her brick hearth where conversing in sign language was once as common as tending the fire.

West descended from a community for whom deafness was so common that those who didn't hear faced none of the social barriers the deaf know today. And since everyone learned the sign language unique to the island, which became known Martha's Vineyard Sign Language, communication flowed freely.

"There wasn't any television or radio to be excluded from," observes Joan Poole Nash, a Chilmark native and teacher of the deaf, whose great-grandmother Emily Howland Poole taught her the local sign language. "The only outside source of information was print."

The deaf were active in church affairs and earned wages that

were equal to or higher than those the hearing received. The hearing married the deaf, and couples had both hearing and deaf children without feeling like a deaf child was handicapped. As Nash said her great-grandmother told her years ago, "Those people weren't handicapped. They were just deaf." And as late long-time island resident and historian Gale Huntington told medical anthropologist Nora Ellen Groce for her 1985 book, *Everybody Here Spoke Sign Language*, "I used to speak [sign language], my mother did, everybody."

The first recorded case of deafness on Martha's Vineyard was Jonathan Lambert, who moved to the island in 1694. The trait for island deafness was traced to the rural area of Weald in the English county Kent, where Lambert's family was from, and the characteristic was eventually linked to a recessive gene that originated there. Weald was sparsely populated, had a high incidence of intermarriage, and an extraordinarily high incidence of deafness, Groce reports in her book. The deaf population was so large there that it developed its own sign language, she discovered.

During the late 1600s and through the 1700s, conditions were

Above: The Tilton family home on Middle Road in the late 1800s. Many Tiltons were deaf. Below: The original of this Thomas Hart Benton portrait of Josie West, who was deaf, hangs in the library of the Martha's Vineyard Historical Society.



ripe for the growth of the deaf population on Martha's Vineyard. For starters, the population was booming. In 1700, about 400 people lived on the island, but by 1800 the number grew by more than seven times that to 3,100. After 1710, immigration to Martha's Vineyard had virtually ended and regular contact and marriage with off-islanders had decreased. Since few residents moved off-island, isolation had increased and intermarriage between first, second, and third cousins was common and accepted by Yankee social mores, which Vineyarders followed, Groce reports.

For the most part, Vineyarders didn't really question why some folks were born deaf and others weren't. And we didn't know then what we know today about genetics. Alexander Graham Bell lived in Squibnocket for a while to study the phenomenon. He speculated that Gay Head clay could be the culprit. He left the island concluding that deafness could be inherited, but he didn't understand why some families with two deaf parents had some children who were deaf and some who weren't.

The end of the deaf community occurred with the 1952 death of Katie West, but the decline in the deaf population had started much sooner after the establishment of the country's first residential school for the deaf in 1817 in Hartford, Conn. Vineyard children began attending in the 1820s and 1830s, and by the 1860s, many children were staying at such schools until their mid- to late teens. They married classmates from off-island, whose deafness was caused by other reasons. Such marriages diluted the island gene pool, so the children born to them did not inherit the recessive Kentish Weald gene.

Social and economic changes in the late 19th century also affected the deaf population. The once-prosperous whaling and schooner industries on the island declined, so more young people headed elsewhere in search of a livelihood. A wave of new immigrants from the Portuguese Azores to the Vineyard also changed the mix, as did advances in transportation. The island became a vacation destination, bringing in even more people, some of whom stayed year-round.

While most islanders generally knew who was deaf and who was hearing, being deaf did not dominate one's image in the community. Consider Gale Huntington's story "Chilmark's Deaf: Valued Citizen," which ran in *The Dukes County Intelligencer*, published by the Dukes County Historical Society in February 1981. Huntington writes of Ben Mayhew, Jared's brother, who was hearing impaired and ran a small subsistence farm and "would row a boat or dory as well as anybody else, thanks to a harness on one oar into which he would slip his arm." To differentiate him from two other Ben Mayhews also living in Chilmark at the time, residents nicknamed him One-armed Ben. "It is significant that it was that handicap that was chosen for identification, rather than his deafness," Huntington writes in a footnote.

The entire Chilmark area was bilingual in English and MVSL, which likely came before or was developed simultaneously with American Sign Language, according to Nash, now of Newton. She continues to keep the language alive by teaching it to her students, fielding questions from other scholars studying the deaf, and dispelling the occasional "urban legend" about the Vineyard deaf community, she says.

Nash, whose family dates back 300 years in Chilmark, studied MVSL as a student at Boston University and created an oral history of the language in 1977 by videotaping those who still spoke it, including her great-grandmother Emily, who was in her 90s at the time.

"All the people we were interviewing were just natural storytellers," Nash recalls. "My great-grandmother gave great information. 'I wasn't a great signer,' she would say. She knew a sign in one context wasn't the same in another," and she didn't know how to use them interchangeably, Nash says. This told her what a complex language it was.

The language was complex and at times, quite imaginative, as longtime Vineyarder Eric Cottle recalled in an interview with historian Linsey Lee in her 1998 book *Vineyard Voices: Words, Faces and Voices of Island People*, "They had signs for most of the people," Cottle said. "Now Ernest Mayhew, that was a sign! Because they hung a May basket on something, and he had run right into a clothesline, come right across there and thrown on his back. And that was Ernest Mayhew's sign—go like that—grab your neck, and let's talk about Ernest Mayhew!"

There were other signs that made the language unique to the Vineyard: a flicking thumb for "cranberry" and two fingers hooked together for "swordfish."

"And they (islanders) still do use it," Nash says of today's Vineyarders, "but it gets less and less complex with each generation."

Her father Everett Henry Poole uses it on his fishing boat when he is out of earshot. "He uses it for two things—the weather and his catch," she says.

Cottle learned the language from none other than Katie West, who was the housekeeper in a friend's home where he often had lunch as a boy, and who lived in the house that is now part of the Chilmark library. This is the same place where that young couple stood last summer disheartened, until the librarian introduced them to Nash, who happened to be on island visiting her mother—and in the library at the time.

"They wanted to know if there were gravestones here with fingered signs on them," Nash reports after a conversation with the pair in American Sign Language. "It's that urban legend stuff."

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