

# Native American Signs Are Important To ASL

M.V.S.L

I think they  
have to look  
like you, too

**By Stephanie M. Clark**

Participants at the recent National Association of Native American Deaf Convention were amazed to discover that the ASL they are using today may have originated from their ancestors, who used Indian Sign Language. Melody Cody, a Cherokee, brought her research from the University of Arizona and gave a fascinating presentation on preserving Native American Deaf Heritage.

Cody said there are 126 books published on usage of Indian Sign Language (ISL), but the last research was in 1956, long before the identification of ASL within the Deaf Community.

Among Native Americans, ISL was used as a back-up language when spoken language failed between different tribes. ISL was also used in many ceremonial rituals, which the chiefs were required to know.

According to Cody, research shows that 60% of ASL came from French Sign Language, but where did the other 40% come from?

There is much evidence that the Wampanoag tribe, which controlled all of Southeastern Massachusetts and parts of Rhode Island, may be a big part of the answer.

Some Wampanoags lived on Martha's Vineyard in the area known as Gay Head. In the 1600s, a group of people from Kent, England, settled in Chilmark and West Tisbury, towns

that are near Gay Head. Due to intermarriage in those towns, there was a high rate of hereditary deafness (the story of the Martha's Vineyard deaf is well-known). The hearing and deaf people of the area began to use an old sign language brought over from Kent, England to communicate with each other. These signs changed over the years among the local deaf population.

It is believed that the deaf people in Chilmark interacted with the Wampanoags in Gay Head through the use of their sign language and the ISL of the tribe. The English deaf people began to adopt more and more of the Wampanoag's signs into their own sign language.

When the deaf children were later sent to the American School for the Deaf in West Hartford, Connecticut, their signs mixed with the French Sign Language that was introduced at the school in 1817.

French Sign Language and the Kent Sign Language of the English settlers have both been recognized for their contributions to ASL. Perhaps it is time that the Wampanoags were given recognition for their Indian Sign Language contribution also.

More research is needed before this can be validated. Meanwhile, keep in mind that almost 40% of ASL may come from the Indian Sign Language used in our very own state of Massachusetts!