

Vineyard deafness

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Book explores phenomenon of the past

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Think of one deaf person you know.

Now, imagine a place where some of your neighbors, friends and relatives cannot hear. In this place, the hearing world has adapted, beginning in childhood, to the world of silence by learning sign language. Here the deaf are not treated as outcasts or stigmatized.

This was the Island of Martha's Vineyard for about 250 years. Isolated and insular, it was home to an extraordinarily high incidence of hereditary deafness. In the 19th century, one of every 5,728 Americans was born deaf. On the Vineyard, it was one in every 155.

Smooth interaction

Mildred Huntington of Vineyard Haven says the deaf and the hearing interacted rather smoothly.

"They used to gather at the country store in Chilmark," says Mrs. Huntington, who lived in Chilmark for 11 years with her husband, E. Gale Huntington, after they married in 1933. "The people that could hear would use sign language to talk about what was going on. They were very well accepted by the community. They were not looked at as something queer or disabled. They went to town meeting and to church. If a man and a woman went to church and one couldn't hear and the other could, one would interpret the sermon for their spouse."

Telephone inventor Alexander Graham Bell, who was active in education for the deaf, was fascinated by the Island phenomenon and in the late 19th century did extensive research to find out what caused Vineyard deafness. He never figured it out.

called," their acceptance in part a function of a certain tolerance typical of a tightly knit small town.

"Everyone has a place in rural society," she says. "Everyone fit in somewhere. You don't have people on the streets, that total alienation from society."

The language barrier, a virtual wall for the off-Island deaf, was less of a problem on the Vineyard, says Ms. Groce. That's because hearing Islanders out of necessity picked up at least some rudimentary sign language.

"We didn't think they were any different," says Bette Carroll, 66, a lifelong resident of Chilmark. "They didn't hear. But we never seemed to have any problems with conversation. I did a few signs with my hands. My mother taught me. It seemed normal enough."

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The bilingualism and community acceptance meant far more "mixed marriages" of deaf and hearing spouses than off-Island, says Ms. Groce. Of those deaf Islanders born prior to 1817 and who married, 35 percent married other deaf people. Nationally, about 79 percent married other deaf people.

One factor contributing to acceptance of deafness on the Vineyard was the seeming randomness of the trait. About 85 percent of all Island children born deaf were born to couples with hearing parents, she says.

A neighbor in Chilmark, for instance, was deaf but the woman's husband and children could hear, says Mrs. Huntington.

"Acceptance was a function of their neighborhood," says Arthur Railton, editor of the Dukes County Historical Society's journal *Intelligencer*. "Islanders grew up knowing them. Like anything else, that feeling of strangeness goes away with familiarity."

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Ms. Groce describes the original Vineyard settlers as "a traveling medieval gene pool." And swimming in that pool, she surmises, was a recessive mutant

ingly isolated until, in the late 18th century, nearly everyone married someone to whom they were already somehow related, she says. With each succeeding generation, virtually every family became genetically linked to the original Kent settlers. And as that trend increased, so also did the statistical chances of giving birth to a deaf child, says Ms. Groce.

During her research, she identified 72 deaf Islanders over nearly 300 years with hereditary deafness and at least a dozen more born to Island descendants who had moved off the Island.

As the Island transformed after the turn of the century, so did the deaf population and the suspect hereditary genes. The influx of off-Islanders, seasonal and year-round, opened up the once isolated place to a new, fresh gene pool, says Ms. Groce.

Through new marriages, the recessive gene was washed off the Island, she says.

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On the Vineyard, Ms. Groce's book "was not a revelation but clarified the reasons for the deafness," says Railton. "More than anything else it delineated the way deaf mutes were treated, that they were not outcasts and were not shunned."

The book brought the Island's historical deaf population to an audience far beyond the Vineyard.

Masonobu Sano, a deaf doctoral student from Tokyo, made a pilgrimage last year to the Vineyard after reading Ms. Groce's book, which an editor had asked him to translate into Japanese.

In his new book, "Seeing Voices. A Journey Into the World of the Deaf," Dr. Oliver Sacks of New York pays tribute to Martha's Vineyard and to Ms. Groce's book. "I was so moved by Groce's book," he writes, "that the moment I finished it I jumped in the car, with only a toothbrush, a tape recorder and a camera — I had to see this enchanted island for myself."

Similar project

And, about a century later, Nora Ellen Groce set out on a somewhat similar project. Her important work, "Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language," published in 1985, traced the Island's hereditary deafness back to a group of early Vineyard settlers, and beyond, to a remote region of England.

The Harvard University anthropologist described a cloistered world entirely acclimated to the Islanders who could not hear. And it was a place that she and others insist we can learn much from today.

"There was something wonderful on the Vineyard that can be used worldwide," Ms. Groce says in an interview. "It's not just an interesting local study. It can give direction and understanding to disabled people in other parts of the world. They didn't look at these people as a social charity. And, as evidenced from the Vineyard, they could achieve a great deal in life."



The last known Islander with the hereditary deafness died in 1952 and only a few Vineyarders remain today who recall living with the deaf. Within two years of the start of Groce's research on the Island in 1979, more than half of her oral research "informants" had died, she says.

Ann Allen, librarian with the Dukes County Historical Society in Edgartown, was raised in Chilmark, which, along with West Tisbury, had the highest incidence of deafness. The deaf people she recalls "weren't ridi-

gene for deafness that likely originated centuries before in the rugged English countryside.

Working with the persistence of a detective, she traced the genetic trait through a maze of marriages to a group of settlers who put down stakes on the Vineyard between 1642 and 1710. Most of the deaf Islanders had either Lambert, Skiffe or Tilton, the names of the earliest settlers, in their heritage.

Isolated region

These settlers, who had followed the Rev. John Lathrop from England to Scituate and then Barnstable, came from that part of the English county Kent known as The Weald. In her book, Ms. Groce described the area as "heavily wooded, sparsely settled, with no access to river or sea and having notoriously bad roads, the low Weald was an especially isolated region."

Many were born, lived and died in the same village. And local records Ms. Groce reviewed indicated an unusually high incidence of deafness in the region.

Those same factors of geographic and genetic isolation and intermarriage — not unusual in rural areas at the time — would later mix with the mutant deaf gene on the Vineyard, Ms. Groce theorizes.

The Island's population was about 400 in 1700, climbing to about 3,100 by the turn of the 19th century and holding there until the beginning of this century, Ms. Groce says.

Growing isolated

The entire Island grew increas-

Not a handicap

"Martha's Vineyard is a case where a disability doesn't become a handicap," says Trey Duffy, director of the McBurney Disability Resource Center at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. "It's not a limitation. It's just a difference, not better or worse. If that is applied to everyone, then the disability will only become insignificant."

"We can at least meet (the deaf) halfway so they are not isolated," says Andrea Galvin, who teaches hearing-impaired students at Martha's Vineyard High School. "Deaf people can't learn how to speak, but hearing people can learn how to sign."



The Vineyard's deaf children, who began to attend the American Asylum for the Deaf in Hartford, Conn., in the 19th century, carried their sign language off-Island and helped influence the development of American Sign Language, says Ms. Groce.

The Vineyard courses, which include the history and culture of the deaf, were created as a result of an ambitious student petition, said Ms. Galvin. The petition was directly prompted not so much by student awareness of the Island's special place in the history of the deaf in America, but rather by the students' desire to be able to communicate and interact with fellow students who were hearing-disabled and deaf.

"The island is like a family, and people take care of one another like a family," said Ms. Galvin. "This a special place."