

# Book relates history of deafness on island

By Michael Bezdek *Box 15*  
Associated Press

To all that is charming about Martha's Vineyard, anthropologist Nora Ellen Groce has added a little book about the years on the island, when, as her title indicates, "Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language."

By dusting off some research by Alexander Graham Bell, combing town records and prevailing upon the recollections of aging citizens, Groce captured the 300-year history of profound hereditary deafness on the island off Cape Cod.

It is a story not so much of an unusual incidence of deafness - it was among the highest in the United States - as it is an account of a place, especially the up-island towns of Chilmark and West Tisbury, where the disabled worked, loved and lived without restriction or stigma.

The high incidence of deafness and the isolation of the island suggested that the deaf and those who could hear used sign language widely from about 1650 into the 20th century.

"This was not a policy decision and it was not charity," Groce said. "The Vineyard experience is a classic example of how well the disabled can be integrated into society if society is willing to adapt to them."

Signing was ubiquitous, and interviewees recalled walking into the post office or other meeting spots and finding an animated conversation going on without a sound being heard.

Groce said many of those interviewed had difficulty remembering which people were deaf, so common was the experience of communicating in sign.

One person recalled a woman neighbor accusing someone in his family of stealing one of her chickens. "She yelled at me, and I told her off, but good. Come to think of it, I guess we did our yelling in

sign language."

Groce said the sign language, which most islanders learned as children, was especially useful where speaking was difficult, such as among fishermen on a stormy sea, or where speech was considered to be out of place, such as in church or school.

Groce, now associated with Children's Hospital and Harvard Medical School, said old islanders were puzzled by her interest in the subject and surprised when told the incidence of deafness on the island was high.

In the 1800s, one American in every 5,728 was born deaf, while on the Vineyard it was one in 155. And the high incidence of deafness had drawn some researchers to the island.

Bell, who was married to a deaf woman and who worked with the hearing impaired for most of his life, went there in the late 19th century to study the possible hereditary causes of the deafness.

He wrote little about it, and Groce ventures that Bell, who believed lip reading was the only means for the deaf to find a normal place in society, dismissed the Vineyard as an anomaly.

### Book published recently

But his lengthy research on Vineyard genealogy provided a starting point for Groce, whose 192-page book was published recently by Harvard University Press.

Her research showed the recessive deafness on the island probably had its roots in the settlers' remote ties to common ancestors in Kent, England. Those connections had greater impact than usual because of the isolation of the island.

Early in this century, with the start of the great tourist influx and a much more mobile island population, the incidence of deafness diminished rapidly.

There was a period of adjust-

ment as many of the new arrivals looked, incorrectly, upon the deafness as an evil of inbreeding.

But not all newcomers looked down on the deaf. Painter Thomas Hart Benton, for one, learned sign language during his summers on the island, became friendly with many of the deaf and included them in several portraits.

Now, only a few elderly residents can recall the days of signing, and many of the several dozen key informants have died since

Groce began her research in 1979. The last in the line of deaf islanders died in 1952, and only hints of signing remain.

As one man in his eighties told Groce, "You know, strangely enough, there's still vestiges of that left in some of the older families around here, I believe. Instinctively, you will make some such movement and it will mean something to you, but it doesn't mean anything to the one you're talking to."