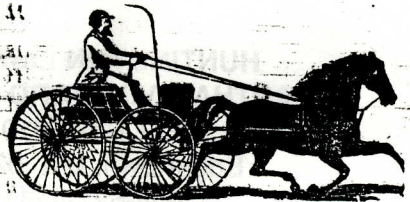


AS I REMEMBER THE ISLAND 60 YEARS AGO



By Joseph Chase Allen

There were several deaf-and-dumb persons, as deaf-mutes were called, living in Island towns. Although all of them were educated and could read and write, none of them depended upon this method of communicating with one another or with their more fortunate neighbors, but used the sign language. As a result, almost everyone old and young could converse to some extent with the deaf-mutes, and many could use the sign alphabet and spell out words and names for which there were no signs.

The ability to converse in this manner was highly convenient for everyone who could master it. Persons who had the full use of their faculties employed the sign language, especially when exchanging remarks

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with someone who was at a distance. It was far more effective and accurate than shouting.

Cap'n Herbert Mayhew, driving a horse up and down Music street in West Tisbury, was hailed by his father, Cap'n Lennie. The latter simply touched his lips with an extended finger. "Dad wants to speak-to-me", said Herb, and halted the horse.

What Prudie Had to Say

James Look, a boat-builder, farmer and fisherman, was busy in his shop on the shore of Tisbury Pond. "Waaaah!" came the blast of a tin fish horn. "That's Prudie," said Jim, "she wants to tell me something," and he stepped to the door. Sure enough, his wife stood by her kitchen door, some distance away and made a few gestures. "Got to go," said Jim, "Sam West wants a bushel of potatoes." It might be added that these individuals could all speak and hear.

Cap'n Ernest Mayhew, bound in from Nomansland in his freight boat, with a contractor, the late H. N. Hinckley, aboard, was passed, on Devil's-Bridge by his brother, Ben Sr., who stood at the rail and made a few motions. "Now what was that about?" asked Hinckley. "Oh," said Ernest, "he just told me that Ginnocio wants me to run down to Makoniky and pick up some bricks for him."

"He said all that with those few signs?" exclaimed the amazed contractor. He did, indeed!

During the long boresome periods of town meetings and other assemblies, when all present were enjoined to be quiet, it was a common sight to see two, possibly more, persons who knew the sign language, conversing across the room in dead silence. The subject of their conversation might have been anything from the run of fish at the time or an epidemic of measles. It bothered them not at all that various others present could follow their exchange of remarks and certainly they made no noise or disturbance, but satisfactorily filled in a tiresome interlude.

Fishermen in particular used this sign language when on the grounds where the boats lay at some distance from each other. Comments on the luck, local gossip and probably poli-

tics were discussed by this method, in which, as in shorthand, one gesture conveyed a sentence, perhaps more.

Paper bags of various sizes made from yellow manila paper were used for various purposes and carried by stores in quantity. Every bag had a reinforced area on one edge, and this had a small hole in it. Hooks suspended from the ceiling or screwed to a wall held the bags by the hole, and could be pulled loose by tearing the paper. Racks of wood, with different-sized compartments in them, held a variety of sizes of such bags.

All were necessary when tea and coffee came to the stores in bulk and had to be weighed out by the pound or other quantity. Beans, rice, sugar and many other commodities also came in bulk and were so weighed and bagged up as sold.

Grocer Would Accommodate

The can opener, to be found and operated manually or by electricity in every kitchen today, was not necessarily to be found in all kitchens of sixty years ago. There were customers who, buying a can of something or other, would ask the grocer to open it for them. The grocer always had a can opener at hand to accommodate his patrons when asked.

Much of the coffee was ground when purchased by the consumer, and the grocer was also obliged to dabble in a cask of pickle when salt pork was wanted, and also to draw molasses from a spigot in a cask, to fill the jug, jar or bottle brought by the customer. Vinegar came in bottles at times, but also in casks, and in the average "back room", these casks stood in a row on a raised platform, along with kerosene, also in a cask, quite probably tar, turpentine, paint oil and other liquids. Somehow there is no recollection of a clerk drawing from the wrong barrel.

Recollections of that general period include an occasional glance into the establishment of Fischer Brothers of Vineyard Haven, dealers in Nomansland Boneless Codfish.

This establishment was in the former cooper's shop, located on what is now the parking lot at the head of the Vineyard Haven steamboat dock. Between this building and the water and spreading somewhat to the north lay a boat railway, and in winter this area held a number of