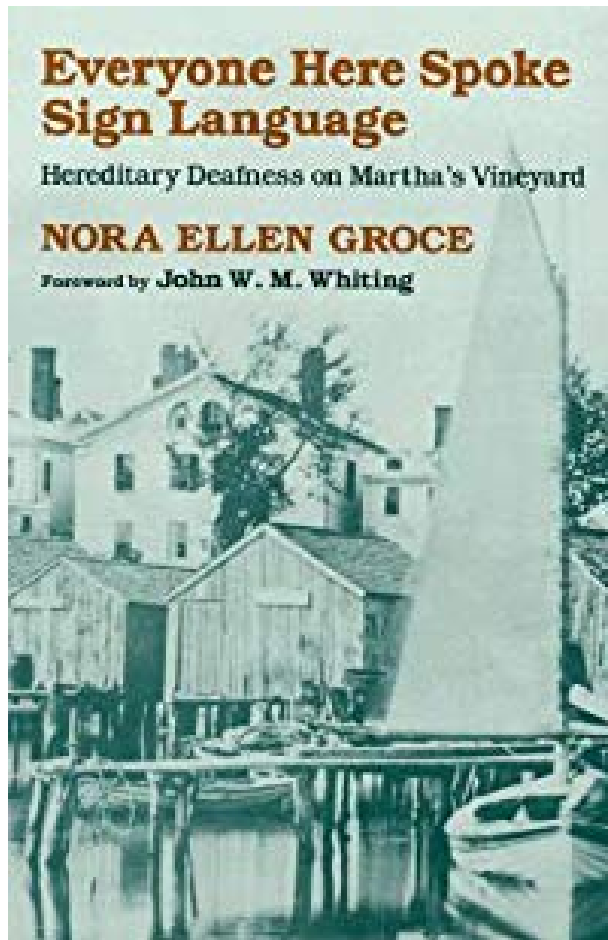


Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard



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From the seventeenth century to the early years of the twentieth, the population of Martha's Vineyard manifested an extremely high rate of profound hereditary deafness. In stark contrast to the experience of most deaf people in our own society, the Vineyarders who were born deaf were so thoroughly integrated into the daily life of the community that they were not seen--and did not see themselves--as handicapped or as a group apart. Deaf people were included in all aspects of life, such as town politics, jobs, church affairs, and social life. How was this possible? On the Vineyard, hearing and deaf islanders alike grew up speaking sign language.

This unique sociolinguistic adaptation meant that the usual barriers to communication between the hearing and the deaf, which so isolate many deaf people today, did not exist.