If you could create a deaf utopia, what would it be like?

Everyone would communicate in sign language, both deaf and hearing. Many, if not most, children would be born deaf.

**Deaf Utopia Did Exist**

There actually was such a place once. It was an isolated island off the Massachusetts coast - Martha’s Vineyard. Some early Vineyard settlers carried a gene for deafness (the first known deaf one was Jonathan Lambert, 1694), and over years of marriage, generation after generation was born with hearing loss. At one point, one in four children was born deaf! There were so many deaf people on the Vineyard (most deaf lived in Chilmark) that residents developed a sign language, Martha's Vineyard Sign Language (MVSL). MVSL later merged with mainland signs to form American Sign Language.

**High Deaf Population**

Some censuses taken of 19th century Vineyard population reveal the extent of deafness. In 1817, two families had deaf members, with a total of 7 deaf. Just a few years later, by 1827 there were 11 deaf. The 1850 Chilmark census identified 17 deaf out of 141 households, in the Hammett, Lambert, Luce, Mayhew, Tilton, and West families. In 1855, it was 17 plus 4 in nearby Tisbury. The 1880 Chilmark census had 19 deaf in 159 households. New deaf families in the 1880 census included the Nobles and the Smiths. To put this into perspective, compared to the mainland U.S. where the frequency of deafness was 1 in almost 6000, on the Vineyard it was as high as 1 in 155 (1 in 25 in Chilmark, and 1 in 4 in the Chilmark town of Squibnocket).

**High Acceptance of Sign Language**

Sign language was so accepted on the Vineyard that a newspaper marveled in 1895 at the way the spoken and signed languages were used so freely and easily by both deaf and hearing residents. People moving to Chilmark had to learn sign language in order to live in the community. Deafness was so common that some hearing residents actually thought it was a contagious disease. Deafness was never considered to be a handicap.

**Gradual Decline in Deaf Population**

These intermarriages persisted and the deaf population of Chilmark and the rest of the Vineyard continued to propagate. It would have kept growing if not for the growth of deaf education on the mainland. As deaf Vineyard children attended schools off-island, they tended to settle off-island, married mainland mates, and gradually the deaf Vineyard population died out. The last deaf Vineyard native passed away in the 1950s.