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FEATURED

A sign of a community: Rarely documented deaf village in Edinburg detailed in book

By Charles Paullin The Northern Virginia Daily
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Kathleen L. Brockway, a descendant of a community of 52 deaf people who lived in Shenandoah County, wrote about the community for the 12-part book series that is being distributed at various events for the county's 250th anniversary celebration year.

Photo by Wesley Arey

The Academy Awards gave the honor of best picture to the film "CODA," which stands for children of deaf adults.

It's a movie about a deaf mother, father and older brother of a hearing high school girl getting along with life.

In one scene, the brother is at a bar with a few fellow fishermen, sharing a drink. Everyone is talking and laughing, but only with each other around a table. Not with the brother, who is sitting with them.

"Could you imagine how difficult it must be in a small town like that where no one knows how to sign around you?" asked Kathleen Brockway, a Maryland resident.

As far back as Shenandoah County's founding 250 years ago, that difficulty was not the case locally in Edinburg, where a community of deaf people had been fully incorporated into a village in the town around Lantz Mills.

"Could you imagine if everyone could talk to [the brother in the movie]?" Brockway said. "That was what was happening in there, in this village."

Brockway is a deaf descendent of the village, who researched it after a distant cousin stumbled upon a transcribed recording at the Shenandoah County Public Library that mentioned it as he was conducting research for a separate project.

As part of a 12-part book series on several different aspects of Shenandoah County's history for its 250th anniversary this year, Brockway published insight about the village across 28-pages, which includes sign language examples and historic pictures.

Brockway spoke with The Northern Virginia Daily about it all by phone interview recently through a Sorenson Communications relay translating service.

"Now to have it [documented]...for that specific community is amazing," Brockway said. "I want to be able to tell we have a deaf culture, we have stories to share, we have experiences there to share."

Brockway's further research into the community found that the village had about 52 deaf people in 1880 within a five-mile radius, according to the federal census. The county had a population of 18,204 at that time, according to worldpopulationreview.com.

There are several areas throughout the country that are known for having high populations of deaf people, such as Frederick, Maryland, and Austin, Texas, Brockway also details.

But there are few in which deaf people were highly involved with the fabric of the community, such as Martha's Vineyard, which is one of the earliest documented communities with their own sign language starting in 1714, according to a Harvard University webpage.

About one in every 155 residents of Martha's Vineyard was deaf at the peak of its population in the 19th century, generally exceeding the rate of deafness in the country, [Britanica.com](https://www.britannica.com) states.

"People assume that it's the only deaf village that existed," Brockway said. "It's not the only village that was out there in America. These other places are important, too."

Similar to Martha's Vineyard, the Edinburg village had its own language, known as the Lantz Mills Sign Language, or LMSL. It used an alphabet entirely different than the one for the now widely used American Sign Language.

The LMSL existence is similar to a different dialect of a speaking language, or even an accent of a speaking person that might place a rural twang on the delivery of their words, Brockway explained.

The language was created organically, out of necessity, for deaf people to connect with the community, even before the Virginia School for the Deaf was established in 1839, Brockway said. It allowed deaf people to have equal access as farmers and churchgoers with no handicaps, Brockway said.

"They were all smart people, they were all business owners in a community and they created this language to interact with each other without education," Brockway said. "The key to their brilliance was that communication."

Deaf people worked at several businesses in the village, primarily at Christian and Sons, which built coffins, furniture and other woodworking products, Brockway explained. The business provided several caskets used for a cemetery at Union Forge Church.

"Yes, we do things just as you do," Brockway said of the deaf community. "And if you feel like that we're different just because we sign, you guys can sign too...that village is proof of it. Hearing

people can sign and they can be completely engrossed with deaf people in a community.”

Among the first deaf residents in the county was Barbara Hollar, born in 1740 in Pennsylvania before her family moved to the area in the 1760s, Brockway writes in the book. In addition to the popular surname of Hollar, others common surnames of the deaf population were Christian and Nester, Brockway said.

The deaf community was prevalent in the county until the 1970s, as they started moving to city areas where there were more opportunities for them, Brockway said.

It’s not clear exactly why such a large community settled in Shenandoah County, as there are little historic recordings of the deaf community and complete omissions of it from existing documentation, which Brockway shows in the book.

The transcription of the recording she received is a medium of history that is lacking in general for the deaf community, Brockway added, something she is hoping to combat by publishing the book.

“You can’t hear it,” Brockway said of the recordings. “The fact that somebody took the time to take these audio recordings, make a transcript to match it so it became accessible to people who are deaf and who didn’t know of this community before now...is a pretty big deal.”

All 12 books, including “The Lost Shared Signing Community of Lantz Mills and Shenandoah County, Virginia” by Kathleen L. Brockway, will be distributed at the various events for the Shenandoah County 250th anniversary celebration, a schedule for which can be found at sc250.org.

Contact Charles Paullin at cpaullin@nvdaily.com