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WOMEN'S LIFE IN UTOPIA:
THE SHAKER EXPERIMENT IN SEXUAL
EQUALITY REAPPRAISED — 1810 TO 1860

D'ANN CAMPBELL

“SOMETHING very essential is missing in our studies of communes and communities,” complained the sociologist Jessie Bernard, who noted that researchers must “discover or uncover the *female* structure.”¹ Why is this structure so vital? The answer may be two-fold. First, such information can broaden, deepen or complete our sketches of the communitarian experiment. Scholars have traditionally interpreted these societies primarily from male source materials. We can now reanalyze these histories on the basis of their two constantly interacting constituents: men and women. Second, after gaining an improved concept of the communitarian lifestyle, we can more accurately portray the needs, interests, and contradictions of American society during the antebellum period. As Paul Conkin has explained, a utopian society “usually reflects, in reverse, the dominant fears of an individual or an age.” As other historians have suggested, radical movements “by the very fact of their effort to break free of convention [are] particularly accurate reflectors of the larger social contours of their days . . . here lies their greatest value to historians.”² Are these claims justified? Will an examination of the role of women in these experiments yield essential information on the nature of communal experiments, as well as on the internal stresses of the larger American society? By focusing on unused manuscript materials of women participants in one communal experiment, this essay may answer these questions.

¹ Speech by Jessie Bernard, Conference on Communes, Northern Illinois University, April 8, 1975.

² Paul K. Conkin, *Two Paths to Utopia* (Lincoln, Nebraska, 1964), v; Aileen Kraditor, “American Radical Historians on Their Heritage,” *Past and Present*, LXVI, 142-143 (Aug., 1972); both quoted in Paul Boyer, “A Joyful Noyes: Re-assessing America’s Utopian Tradition,” *Reviews in American History*, III, 27 (March, 1975).

The Shaker experiment—founded and perfected in the New England area—serves as a logical, data-rich, starting point. It was the largest and most permanent of the early nineteenth-century religious communal groups, reaching its apogee from 1810 to 1860, and leaving behind voluminous records, letters, and diaries. Moreover, Shaker communities are the best examples of utopian designs reflecting sexual equality. They were founded by Mother Ann Lee, the only woman to pioneer an American religious communal experiment that lasted longer than one generation.³ Specific questions to be addressed to Shaker literature include: How did the political, economic, demographic, and social structures of the Shaker society reflect their doctrine of sexual equality? What were the social and economic backgrounds of the Shaker women? Finally, what may have enticed them to join and remain in such an experiment?

A dual system of government with half the offices filled by women, the other half by men, served as the cornerstone of the Shaker system because Shakers believed that God embodied both male and female elements. Just as Christ had incarnated the male principle of the Godhead, “Mother” Ann Lee had been chosen to embody the female principle to serve as God’s second representative on Earth. Mother Ann’s message was that since the Deity had forgiven both Adam and Eve and their earthly descendants, men and women must now be united and treated equally in the sight of God.⁴ A summary

³ For a list of “successful communal settlements” during the nineteenth century see Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community* (Cambridge, 1972).

⁴ Frederick W. Evans, *Shakers: Compendium of the Origin, History, Principles, Rules, and Regulations, Government, and Doctrines of the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing* (New York, 1859), 23, 103, 107; Calvin Green and Seth Y. Wells, Editors, *A Brief Exposition of the Established Principles and Regulations of the United Society of Believers Called Shakers* (Albany, 1834), 22, 31, 38, 51; Marguerite F. Melcher, *The Shaker Adventure* (Cleveland, 1941), 10; see also: Edward D. Andrews, *The People Called Shakers* (New York, 1963) or any of his other books on Shakers; John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms* (New York, 1870); J. P. MacLean, *Shakers of Ohio* (Columbus, 1907); Mary L. Richmond, *Shaker Literature, A Bibliography* (Hancock, Mass., 1977).

view of the Shaker governmental institutions illustrates the genuineness of this professed doctrine of sexual equality. Guiding all eighteen communities was the Ministry composed of two men and two women selected for life. All Shakers were consulted concerning major changes of policy, but one of the four ministers, at times a woman, at other times a man, had the ultimate voice.

Consistent with Shaker teachings, each family or settlement employed both sexes as leaders: Elders and Eldresses oversaw spiritual affairs on local levels, Deacons and Deaconesses guarded temporal concerns, and a board of Trustees managed finances. In short, Shaker men and women occupied a variety of positions in their hierarchical structure. Not all had equal power; spiritual development, not gender, was the basis for distinction. Under this arrangement, some women rapidly developed administrative skills and became charismatic leaders. For example, Mother Ann Lee founded and directed the movement, and Mother Lucy Wright served as its presiding genius during the Shakers' golden period of expansion in the early nineteenth century.

While the Shaker political creed gave women an equal voice with men, it was not designed to appeal exclusively to women. Had this been so, Shaker women could have formed a convent and existed in a solitary retreat on the borders of the larger society. Shaker doctrines, however, preached salvation for both men and women, and for all persons adopting the Shaker creed. Furthermore, if the Shakers had wanted to favor women they might have apportioned offices on the basis of the female-male membership ratio. Since more women than men joined the Shaker sect throughout its existence, women would have occupied more positions, double or triple the number held by men. Had this been the practice, men would probably have felt uncomfortable, left, or refused to join the movement. To prevent this, the Shakers engineered a "male quota system," although it was never so-called. Half the offices were reserved for men despite the fact that males were always a minority in the membership.

A separate but equal philosophy also characterized Shaker economics. Work done by either sex was not ranked as superior or more important than the other, although these celibates felt it was dangerous for men and women to work in close proximity. Journalist Charles Nordhoff asked a Shaker man if women were allowed to work as blacksmiths. "No," he answered, "because this would bring men and women into relations we do not think wise." By implication, this Shaker did not think women incapable of becoming good blacksmiths. The separation was based on moral rather than upon ethical or economic grounds.⁵

Unlike contemporary accounts by Shaker men, many women's diaries outlined in minute detail the activities of the *entire* community. One feminine diarist recorded a week's activities: "The men butchered four beef creatures and commenced thrashing. . . . Young boys began school. . . . cooking shifts rotated and most women began the fall cleaning. . . . The aged sisters at the East shop commenced spinning the mops . . . the young sisters at the new shop set up their two wheels. . . ."⁶ Efficiency of labor-saving measures dominated the assignments. Men did the heavy work even in the domestic quarters, and undertook duties usually assigned to women such as picking fruit or carding wool during rainy weather or odd times before meals.⁷ Such actions indicate that Shakers were more concerned with getting the work done than with worrying about which jobs were reserved for men and which for women. On the whole, however, women performed tasks

⁵ Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States* (New York, 1875), 166.

⁶ Journals and diaries of the Shakers are found in the Shaker MSS Collection, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio (listed in Kermit Pike, *A Guide to Shaker Manuscripts* [Cleveland, 1974]) hereafter referred to as Shaker MSS followed by series and volume number. See Shaker MSS, V, B, Crossman journal (no. 143); see also Hampton journal (no. 263); no. 41 Susan H. Myrick's journal (Harvard, 1834-1842); nos. 44-46 Grove B. Blanchard's journal (Harvard, 1836-1844); no. 50 Harvard Sisters' journal (Harvard, 1840-1844); no. 127 Annie William's journal (Mt. Lebanon, 1832-1855); no. 231 Church Family's daily record (Union Village, 1805-1896).

⁷ Shaker MSS, V, B, Church Family diary (no. 33).

inside the communal household and men outside. Jobs were often rotated.⁸

What is described above is a preindustrial nineteenth-century household economy. The division of labor was traditional, because the Shakers did not have to allocate fifty percent of their blacksmith, carpenter or field jobs to women to achieve equal status for them, as some twentieth-century feminists insist is necessary. The point is that on the basis of their religious doctrines and government structure, Shaker women were considered on equal terms with men. Shakers could thus arrange for women to perform the tasks for which they had been trained or were best equipped physically to do. For the Shakers, equality for women did not mean "doing what men do."

Shakers believed that abolishing nuclear families and forbidding sexual relations were essential to the integrity of their creed. In the traditional family the husband acted as if he "owned" his wife. Indeed during the early and mid-nineteenth century, women have been classified as "overgrown children" or "perpetual wards," first of their fathers and later of their husbands.⁹ According to Shaker doctrine, both feelings of superiority and possessiveness by men, and of inferiority and submissiveness by women must be overcome to achieve salvation.

In addition, Shakers maintained that sexual intercourse,

⁸ For excellent source materials on Shaker men and women and their work, see Series V, B volumes, especially no. 28, no. 29, Sister Polly Lee's journal (Groveland, 1843-1871); no. 50 Sisters of Harvard journal (Harvard, 1840-1844); no. 92 memoranda kept by an unidentified sister (Mt. Lebanon, 1835, 1836); no. 93, no. 94 Elizabeth Lovegrove's journal (Mt. Lebanon, 1827); no. 128 Betsy Bates' journal (Mt. Lebanon, 1833-1835); no. 134 Betsy Crossmann's journal (Mt. Lebanon, 1848-1872); no. 158 Unidentified Sister's journal (Mt. Lebanon, 1860-1866); no. 263 Emily Hampton's journal (Union Village, 1851). See also Edward D. and Faith Andrews, *Work and Worship: The Economic Order of the Shakers* (Greenwich, 1974), 109-136.

⁹ Sarah Margaret (Fuller) Ossoli, *Women in the Nineteenth Century and Kindred Papers Relating to the Sphere, Condition and Duties of Women* (Boston, 1893), 72-73; Eleanor Flexner, *Century of Struggle* (New York, 1959), 7; see Nancy F. Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: "Woman's Sphere" in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, 1977).

even when sanctified by marriage, was the main root of evil. Mother Ann's heavenly inspired instructions on how to avoid this primal sin were to abolish traditional marriage and deny any sexual congress.¹⁰ Mother Ann had personal as well as scriptural sanctions for their abandonment. Fearing childbirth, she remembered so great was her anguish that bloody sweat pressed through the pores of her skin, tears flowed down her cheeks until the skin cleaved off and she wrung her hands until the blood gushed from under her nails.¹¹ Even worse, after such suffering Mother Ann lost all of her four children at birth or during infancy. Scarred by her ordeals, it was not surprising that Mother Ann concluded that as long as women engaged in sexual relations, their lives would be punctuated by physical pain and the threat of imminent death for themselves and their children.

The appeal of Shaker life for women of childbearing and child-rearing ages is revealed by an examination of the demographic composition of these communities. Shaker settlements averaged a 2:1 female to male sex ratio but ranged from nearly 1:1 to as great as 5:1 ratios. Specific age data calculated from an analysis of nine Shaker communities using the 1810, 1830, and 1850 manuscript censuses give a much more graphic and accurate picture of the settlements' makeup. Shaker men and women have been divided into categories of younger (under 20), years of childbearing and child rearing (20-45) and older (over 45). The sexes were approximately equal in the under-20 age group, but in the 20-45 grouping—the main years of childbearing and child rearing—women predominated by 2 to 1 or even 3 to 1 ratios. In the oldest group, ages 45 and up, the ratios continued to be predominately female, but not by quite so large a ratio.¹²

¹⁰ Calvin Green and Seth Wells, *Summary View of the Millennial Church* (Albany, 1848), 107.

¹¹ Andrews, *Shakers*, 8.

¹² United States Census of Population, Manuscript returns for 1810, 1830, 1850. For 1810 Enfield, N. H.; Canterbury, N. H.; Hancock, Mass.; Tyringham, Mass. For 1830 Watervliet, N. Y.; South Union, Ky. For 1850 Mt. Lebanon, N. Y.; Hancock, Mass.; South Union, Ky.; Enfield, N. H.; Union Village, Ohio;

To see how the Shakers contrasted demographically with their neighbors, one region, Upstate New York and one county, Logan County, Kentucky, were compared with the Shaker settlements in the area. In Upstate New York (with the Shaker settlement figures included), women comprised 48 to 49 percent of the entire population. In the Shaker settlement of Watervliet, women made up the majority of the population in all three life-cycle stages and ranged from 59 percent of the youth and 60 percent of the old to a high of 65 percent in the middle grouping.

The substantially larger proportion of women in the Shaker settlements than in nearby areas is also illustrated by comparing the 1830 ratios of women in the South Union settlement with those in all of Logan County, Kentucky. In Logan County (with the Shaker settlement figures included) women made up 49 percent of the population. In contrast, women comprised 58 percent of the Shaker settlement population. More specifically, women constituted 52 percent of the younger, 62 percent of the heavy childbearing and child-rearing class, and 57 percent of the older members. Twenty years later, Shaker women constituted 48 percent of the younger members (down a bit from 52 percent), 63 percent of the older members (up 1 percent) and 77 percent of the middle-aged members, a sharp jump of 15 percent in the largest group which gave the community a three-to-one women-to-men ratio in this potentially most fertile category.

While a detailed analysis of all Shaker settlements over the century is needed, this sampling indicates a significant demographic pattern differing from the surrounding communities, counties, even regions, and which varied by birth cohorts or generations. The significant female bulge in the child-rearing group would argue that the Shaker colonies were a haven for

Watervliet, N. Y. The female proportion in sample Shaker communities was, for the under 20 group, 45 percent in 1810, 56 percent in 1830 and 48 percent in 1850. For the 20-44 group, the proportions were 65 percent, 63 percent, and 57 percent, respectively. For the over 45 group, the rates were 57 percent, 59 percent, and 59 percent.

women who preferred celibacy to traditional marriage and its concomitant dangers to their own lives and to their possible offspring.

Although much has been made of the Shaker spirit of Christian brotherhood, little or nothing has been written about Shaker sisterhood, which also developed by separating the sexes. Actually sisterhood was an integral part of both the Shaker and the larger American society. As Carroll Smith-Rosenberg recently demonstrated, "devotion to and love of other women became a plausible and socially accepted form of interaction in the nineteenth century" stimulated in part by "rigid gender-role differentiation within the family and within society as a whole."¹³ Smith-Rosenberg argues that marriage caused high levels of intense anxiety for many women. Perhaps the large number of women joining the Shakers at the time they would traditionally be raising a family reflected this inability for some women to make necessary adjustments to the married state.

If Smith-Rosenberg is correct in believing that a "specifically female world did indeed develop, a world built around a generic and unself-conscious pattern of single-sex or homosocial network," then the Shaker settlements with their rigid separation of the sexes should present primary examples of such female structures.¹⁴ Diaries of Shaker women were filled with such sentiments for their fellow women within each settlement and for women in other settlements. Visits as well as correspondence were recorded as frequent and rewarding. In one sister's record of a week's visitation schedule, "Sister Harriet comes here, Elder Sister Hannah goes to the second order. . . . Four sisters and brothers go to New York. . . . Sisters Ann, Prudence, and Florinda and three girls call here and then go to the other families. . . . Sisters Caroline and Marcia came down

¹³ Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Female World of Love and Ritual; Relations between Women in Nineteenth Century America," *Signs, Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1, 9 (Autumn, 1975).

¹⁴ Smith-Rosenberg, 1, 9, 20, 21, 28.

to help weave carpets.”¹⁵ Women corresponded with their new friends, exchanging such comments as “I was so excited to have visited with you,” or “thank you so much on behalf of all your Hancock sisters.” They also exchanged presents and cherished their attachments. Some visits were remembered for decades—at least one visit for over fifty years by both the surviving hosts and guests.¹⁶ Whether these attachments were physical or not is difficult to document. Although there are extensive denunciations of heterosexual love, I have not encountered a single explicit reference to or condemnation of homosexual behavior. However, as Smith-Rosenberg pointed out, physical or nonphysical but very deep attachments between women were generally “socially acceptable.”¹⁷ The private accounts by Shaker women helped recreate an atmosphere of excitement, vivacity, and closeness of community members which has been largely missing in the published accounts. Most important, since so much human warmth and exchange of information were generated by these visits, Shaker sisterhood must have substantially strengthened the Shaker network and have helped the separate settlements maintain a unity of human affection and purpose.

The sexes were not always separated, since religious festivals and nightly gatherings were attended by both sexes. Cross-community occasions were made possible by extended traveling of mixed Shaker groups. As one Shaker woman described these visits, “Brothers Daniel and John visited the brethren while we visited the sisters . . . then we changed . . . we had a

¹⁵ Shaker MSS, VI, B, Crossman journal (no. 143); see also Church Family diary (no. 33), Sisters of Harvard journal (no. 50), Bates journal (no. 128), Hampton journal (no. 263), no. 2 “Journal of what took place on December 25th” (Alfred, 1845), no. 13 Anna Grange’s journal (Enfield, Conn., 1842-1885), no. 24, no. 25 Daily journal of Mary Dryer (Groveland, 1839-1846), no. 39 Lucy Ann Hammond’s journal (Harvard, 1830), no. 141 Prudence Merrell and Eliza Sharp’s account of a journey west (Mt. Lebanon, 1847), no. 346 Polly J. Reed’s journal (Watervliet, N. Y., 1876).

¹⁶ Shaker MSS, V, B, December 25th journal (no. 2), Hammon journal (no. 39).

¹⁷ Smith-Rosenberg, “Female World,” 1, 8, 24.

very good time." Another remembered that "after breakfast Brother Rufus came to see me, he was very free, and talked about the brethern and sisters at Harvard."¹⁸ Shaker men and women often traveled together by horseback, sleighs, or by coach for longer journeys. This is not to suggest, however, that Shaker men and women were constantly commingling, but rather that our portrait of a complete division between the sexes—except for the famous after-dinner conversation period—needs reexamination. In addition, male and female friendships, deep as well as superficial, were integral parts of Shaker society.

While we have already suggested some religious and personal reasons why women might have wanted to join the Shakers, exact motivations are difficult to pinpoint. What is needed for an improved understanding of the phenomena is a series of studies of the Shaker converts. My collection of biographical information taken from testimonial accounts of eighty-five women living between the 1820's and 1840's in Shaker settlements¹⁹ illuminates their needs, interests, and probably their motivations for joining the Shakers.

Like many religiously oriented people, a search for eternal salvation was the reason most often listed for joining the Shaker settlements. Many of these women had previous religious training and strict moral upbringings. In fact, most joined the Shakers after attending one of their revivals and deciding that they wanted to be among the saved. As one convert explained, "When I came to the age of adult years, I found myself in a miserable situation, lost from God by reason

¹⁸ Shaker MSS, V, B, no. 30 Cynthia Dryer's journal (Groveland, 1846-1850); see also, Hammond journal (no. 39), Sisters of Harvard journal (no. 50), Williams journal (no. 127), Crossman journal (no. 143), and Hampton journal (no. 263).

¹⁹ All Shaker women who could be identified from the journals, diaries, and testimonies and had some basic biographical or autobiographical information given for them were used for my analysis. The names and information gained about these women are contained in the following series, volumes, and folders. Shaker MSS, VI, A, folders no. 2, no. 4, no. 5, no. 6, no. 7, no. 9, no. 11; VI, B, no. 13, no. 19, no. 39, no. 49, no. 52; plus all women's diaries and journals listed above under series V, B.

of sin and knew no way to find union and acceptance with him." Another confessed, "When I was about eighteen years old my trouble of mind increased to such a degree that I could not rest nights." And a third stated, "Previous to my coming among the Believers [Shakers], my mind was often powerfully wrought upon the spirit of conviction, and I would go away by myself and kneel and cry to God to teach me how to be good."²⁰ This girl joined the Shakers shortly after her tenth birthday. Because of their intense religious feelings, these women wanted to devote their lives to achieving salvation. Since the Shakers emphasized religious training, their communities offered excellent preparatory retreats for such spiritually minded girls with or without their parents, and young women with or without their husbands. Although most of them joined their parents or their husbands, at least one-third broke familial ties to follow the Shaker creed.

Whatever its importance, religious motivations alone cannot fully explain why these women joined the Shaker movement rather than the multitude of other religious groups also promising salvation. This was an evangelical age with all varieties of religious sects promising almost immediate salvation. Perhaps it was also usual for the masses of people to phrase unconsciously their motivations in religious terms.

Consequently, we must attempt to probe deeper into the common backgrounds, letters, and diaries to find other possible motivations. Fortunately, available materials provide information which can help to indicate other reasons for joining and remaining Shakers.

The women converts shared common economic and social backgrounds. They came from generally large families of six to ten children which were headed by farmers, artisans or backwoods storekeepers. To keep the family solvent any "excess" daughters—not absolutely necessary to perform household tasks—were commonly sent out to other families. One

²⁰ Shaker MSS, V, A, folder no. 4, testimonies of Mehetable Farrington and Anna Cogswell (Hancock, 1827, 1849); folder no. 11, testimony of Lucy Myrick (Watervliet, 1816-1871).

woman remembered that at age nine, "I was put out to strangers, where I suffered many hardships and by unkind dealings I lost my health. . . ."²¹ Indeed, more than one-fourth of the women surveyed had been "bound out" or served similar apprenticeships. About half of the families of the women studied joined the Shakers as a unit, quite frequently with many young children, some mere babies.

It was probably a great relief to converts to realize that their children would be fed and clothed until they reached adulthood even if the parents died. One Shaker sister remembered that her parents joined when she was only three and both died before she turned eight. As she explained, "Here I have lived ever since and have found kind, loving friends who have ever been ready to help me in time of need, yet truly I have found parents in the gospel."²² Perhaps economic security was as much if not more of a factor than eternal salvation in these women's and their families' decisions to adopt and maintain the Shaker creed.

Not only were many of these nineteenth-century families financially insecure but many were unstable. Upon the death of one or both parents, a family might completely disintegrate. Just over half of the women surveyed came from such broken homes. In general, if the father died and if a Shaker settlement was nearby, the widowed mother might bring her children "amongst the people of God."²³ If the mother died, the father was more likely to leave some of the children with relatives or neighbors. If neglected or ill-treated, these children might eventually end up in a Shaker settlement. A third factor, a search for an emotionally stable, socially, economically, and culturally supportive environment to serve as a substitute for the typical nuclear family life-style, brought women to the

²¹ Shaker MSS, VI, A, folder no. 2 testimony of Cilenda Wardwell (Enfield, Conn., 1816, 1843); folder no. 11 testimony by Abigail Worster (Watervliet, 1816-1871).

²² Shaker MSS, VI, A, folder no. 2, testimony of Betsey Haskell (Enfield, Conn., 1843).

²³ Shaker MSS, VI, B, no. 49, testimony of Sarah Pool (Pleasant Hill, Ky., 1841).

Shaker settlements either as bereaved mothers or fatherless girls.

By providing an extended family network for members of broken families, the Shakers appealed to more than a small minority of women and their children. It has been estimated that only one Massachusetts female in five born in the early or mid-nineteenth century completed a "typical" or "preferred" life cycle (marrying, having children, and surviving jointly with her husband to age fifty-five).²⁴ This pattern was probably characteristic of the region of Shaker settlements from New Hampshire to Kentucky. Men as well as women lived broken life-cycle patterns. A sampling of seventy-five autobiographical male accounts from the 1820's and 1840's demonstrates that most Shaker men were also from broken families.²⁵

Because little is actually known about the daily life of ordinary families before 1850, it is difficult at this stage of the investigation to do more than surmise about the alternatives open to members of broken families besides joining the Shakers. Undoubtedly most depended upon their relatives. Perhaps those who joined were isolated geographically or emotionally from their kinfolk. Before the 1840's Shaker communities functioned as community orphanages, and later as old people's homes. Although the first orphanages were then being established, old people's homes were rare until after the Civil War.²⁶ Since a large number of Shaker converts came from broken homes, we should try to see if they had any kin in the area by attempting to link surnames from the surrounding communities. Such a study will be a time-consuming process. The place of birth, information provided by the 1850 federal

²⁴ Peter R. Uhlenberg, "A Study of Cohort Life Cycles: Cohorts of Native Born Massachusetts Women, 1830-1920," *Population Studies* (1969), 415.

²⁵ The seventy-five Shaker men used for this experiment and the basic biographical or autobiographical information about them are contained in Shaker MSS, VI, A, folders no. 2, no. 4, no. 5, no. 11, and VI, B, no. 49, no. 52.

²⁶ David J. Rothman, *The Discovery of the Asylum: Social Order and Disorder in the New Republic* (Boston, 1971), 206, 207. See also Homer Folks, *The Care of Destitute, Neglected and Delinquent Children* (Albany, N. Y., 1900), 30-36.

manuscript census, shows that men and women from widely dispersed places had come together in Shaker communities.

Not all visitors to the Shakers were convinced that the Shaker life-style offered a utopia for its female members. One such skeptical soul, Abigail Alcott, concluded after visiting a Shaker community in the 1840's that "There is servitude somewhere, I have no doubt. There is a fat sleek comfortable look about the men, and among the women there is a stiff awkward reserve that belongs to neither sublime resignation nor divine hope."²⁷ However, the journals, diaries, letters, and other accounts left by Shaker women seem to refute Alcott's observations.

In summary, women joined the Shakers to satisfy the basic needs unfulfilled by their own families and communities, especially stability, security, and a promise of eternal salvation. Fear of sexual relations and possible consequences for both the women and their offspring must have also played an important, but an almost impossible to document, role in these women's decisions. A brief review of the childhood of Rhoda Blake illustrates how interrelated these motivations could be. Born in 1808, at Savoy, Massachusetts, Rhoda was the child of a second marriage of her father and mother, each with two children when they married. They proceeded to have eight more children of whom only four survived infancy. To supplement the family income, the girls learned to weave but in 1811 when the local cotton factories switched to power looms and "we were thrown out of that line of employment. . . . Father tried farming. . . . Mother tried managing a hotel and restaurant." In 1816 a religious revival excited their community. The family, curious about the Shakers, visited them and left impressed. "Father decided to finish the harvest and unite with the Believers." Unfortunately he was "killed in an accident soon after." His wife, Olive, settled the estate and decided to join the extended Shaker family, bringing with her the unmarried children. About twelve years old at this time,

²⁷ Abigail Alcott, *Diary*, July 2, 1843 quoted in O. Shepard, *Journal of Bronson Alcott* (Boston, 1938), 153.

Rhoda joined the Shakers and remained with them until her death in 1891, presumably without much regret for missing the normal cycle of sexuality, childbearing, and child rearing.²⁸ This example portrays the intermeshing of social, economic, and religious factors which in individual cases may defy both ranking and differentiation, but which when studied from a group perspective, can be used by the historian to understand women like Rhoda. These materials also highlight the economic insecurity, family instability, and precariousness of life during the early and mid-nineteenth century.

Because Shakers firmly adhered to the doctrines of celibacy, they were constantly forced to recruit new members from outside their ranks. As long as nondenominational revivals inspired thousands of persons, the Shakers could convert likely subjects. After 1838, however, the Shakers developed their separate revivals based on spiritualism, cutting themselves off from the general evangelistic movement. These revivals were led by adolescent girls, apparently those most fearful of the family roles traditional society had in store for them. After the mid-1840's the Shaker revivals burned themselves out; thereafter the communities began to lose hold of the orphans and children in their care. Only a small proportion of such children remained in the community. The younger generation of Shakers, without firsthand experience of the spiritualist revival, became alienated from their foster families. Collapse was inevitable; Shakerism by the 1850's had become an old people's religion, a religion of remembrance of bygone glory and excitement. It was the adolescents who joined in the last great upsurge of the revivals in the 1840's that kept the Shaker society functioning, at least partially, until the turn of the century and beyond.

However transitory Shaker society was, it does provide an historical American example in which women functioned as the political, economic, and social equals of men. They did so in a nonauthoritarian society inspired by religious ethics

²⁸ Shaker MSS, VI, B, no. 3, Rhoda Blake, [a sketch of her life, experience and recollections, copied and amended by A. G. Hollister, 1904].

whose chief instrument in arriving at its main goal was the overturning of marriage, one of society's oldest and most venerated institutions, and by the attempted abolition of one of the strongest drives, sexual intercourse. In the light of society's current search for new standards of intersexual relations, an appreciation of the Shaker contribution that goes beyond their marvelous furniture would illuminate the benefits and the costs of true equality.