

THE SHAKERS



Photograph with permission of Brother Arnold of the Shakers

Researched by:

Donna Jean-Lynn Helwig
Sandra Piechocki
Valerie Smith
Rebekah Sommers Wilcox

Consultation by: Brother Arnold

Fall 2005

I. Description of Culture

A. Demographics

- The only active Shaker Community in the world is at Sabbathday Lake, New Gloucester, Maine.
- The number of Shakers currently residing at Sabbathday Lake is four, two women and two men, ages from 41-78.
- Approximately 200 people identify themselves as the Friends of the Shakers and contribute money and time to the Sabbathday Lake Shaker Community to maintain buildings and gardens. Some of these “Friends” were former Shaker Village members.
- The Shakers of Sabbathday Lake are no longer admitting children as members, but they are open to admitting adult members.

B. Brief History

- Founded in 1747 in Manchester, England, as the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing.
- Ann Lee (“Mother Ann”) became their leader in 1772 after her spiritual revelations.
- Fleeing religious intolerance, Mother Ann left England with a small group of followers and created their first American settlement in 1774.
- Named “Shakers” by outsiders who observed their ecstatic movement during worship
- Original group consisted of 15 to 20 relatives and grew to 75 unrelated members.
- A group of Shaker missionaries founded the Sabbathday Lake Community in 1783.
- Height of the Shaker population was in the mid-1840s when there were 6,000 Shakers in 19 communities.
- Invented hundreds of labor-saving devices including the clothespin, automatic washing machine, flat broom, packaged seeds, water-repellant cloth, and the circular saw.
- Pioneers in the science of food preservation
- Best known for their emphasis on celibacy and simplicity of life, the Shaker theology stresses worship and love of God, communal living, purposeful work, pacifism, and universal brotherhood.
- Shakers experienced a significant decline in communities between 1908 and 1923 due to industrialization.

C. Foods

- In the past, the Shakers grew most of their own food and raised meat.
- No taboos or restrictions
- Meals are simple.

- Water is the beverage of choice, but wine or beer, in small amounts, is allowed at dinner.
- Small, organic orchard on site with pears, cherries, plums and apples

D. Dress

- Modern clothes are worn, including slacks for women, except when educating in a public setting or when attending Meeting.
- Sisters' traditional clothing includes dresses, but no caps or bonnets.
- Brethrens' traditional clothing includes collarless white shirt, a vest and dress pants.
- No ornamental objects or jewelry

E. Language/Communication

- American modern English is spoken and written.
- "Yea" and "Nay" are used in place of "yes" and "no."
- Leaders of the community are addressed as Eldress and Elder.
- Members address each other as "Sister" and "Brother" ("Sisters" and "Brethren").

F. Holidays

- Observe every civil and Christian religious holiday
- February 29 is the birthday of the founder, Mother Ann.
- Lent and Holy Week at Easter time
- Fireworks on the Fourth of July
- August 6 is the day Shakers arrived in America.
- Halloween
- Thanksgiving feast with prayers before
- Advent, the 12 days of Christmas, and Epiphany

G. Religion

- Monotheistic: God is one and is equally female and male in essence.
- Prayer is regimented; i.e., private prayer upon rising, group prayers two to three times per day.
- Scripture readings include the Psalms and Bible passages. Additional readings include the personal narratives of Ann Lee (known as the Testimonies) and other spiritual leaders like Joseph Meacham, and Shaker-produced journals and books testifying about the Shaker experience from a first-person point of view.
- Members may read and discuss the above at Shaker Studies on Wednesday evenings.
- Prayers of intercession are offered for friends who are ill or people who have a close, spiritual bond to the Community and who are committed to praying for the Shakers.
- Long service on Sunday; public is invited.

- Shakers have always practiced tolerance of other religions. They do not believe that their religion is for everyone.
- People who are non-Shakers are referred to as “the world.”
- Celibacy is practiced as a form of commitment to Christ and to emulate his celibacy.

II. Family, Relationships, and Roles

- Shakers live communally as a family.
- All resources are pooled; property, money, etc. is held in common.
- The community provides total support for its members.
- They practice equality and separateness between women and men.
- Separate sleeping and working areas for women and men
- Women and men use separate doors to enter dining area.
- Women and men use separate staircases to access sleeping quarters.
- All rooms shared in common are in the middle of the house.
- Women and men sit at separate tables during regular meals.
- At gatherings, men and women sit across from each other without touching to discuss religious, social, and community affairs.
- Elders speak first at gatherings.
- Members are free to leave the community if they so desire.
- The Community meets to make sure the person leaving has the means to take care of him or herself in the world.

III. Concept of Work/Play/Time

- Work is central to the community.
- There is rotation of jobs within genders for equal sharing.
- All work is meaningful and dedicated to God.
- No longer make furniture
- Continue to make wooden boxes; spin and dye wool; make knitted clothing; grow apples and make apple products; grow herbs and make herbal packets, teas, and other cooking ingredients from them; raise cattle and pigs for meat; grow organic vegetables
- Entire community keeps weekly work and worship schedules.
- Sunday is day of leisure.
- Leisure activities include nature walks, swimming, biking, canoeing, snowshoeing, and cross-country skiing.
- Mandatory vacations away from Shaker community for rest and renewal

IV. Health and Wellness

A. General Information

- Each member makes her/his own healthcare decisions.
- Believe in Samuel Thompson’s theory of medicine: “sweat it, purge it or puke it”
- Herbs and good nutrition are used to build immune system afterwards.

- Herbal remedies are used for minor ailments; Shakers grow herbs used for this purpose.
- Use “doctors of the world” for serious ailments
- Purchase health insurance
- Exercise is met through hard labor.
- Health is valued; God can’t be served in a broken-down body.
- Smoking is not allowed.

B. Challenges to Health Care

- Shakers may use herbs to treat minor ailments. These herbs may interact with other medications.
- Delays in seeking medical help may affect treatment.
- Older members may be more comfortable with same gender caregivers.

C. Suggestions for Health Care Providers

- Health care providers should be aware of any interactions between herbal remedies and other medications.
- Dietary staff should be aware that there are no dietary restrictions.
- Health care providers need to recognize the significance of purposeful work to the Shakers with regard to their overall health status.
- Health care staff needs to be sensitive to celibacy issues when providing treatment or education.
- Health care providers should be of the same gender as the patient.
- Health care staff should be sensitive to the Shakers’ need for prayer time.
- Health care staff needs to be aware and considerate that the Shakers attend to their dying members by being present with them and kneeling in silent prayer.
- Healthcare providers should be aware that the Shakers do practice embalming and burial and are not opposed to cremation.

References

- Barker, R. M. (1985). *The Sabbathday Lake Shakers: An introduction to the Shaker heritage*. Sabbathday Lake, ME: The Shaker Press.
- Burns, K. (2002). *The Shakers*. Retrieved November 27, 2005, from PBS Web site:
<http://www.pbs.org/kenburns/shakers/>
- Burns, K., & Burns, A. S. (Producers), Burns, A. S., Tilghman, W., & Lewis, T. (Writers), & Colby, J. (Director). (1984). *The Shakers: Hands to work, hearts to God* [Motion picture]. United States: Florentine Films and the Television Laboratory at WNET/Thirteen.
- Cohen, J. (2000). *The golden harvest: More Shaker chants and spirituals* [CD]. Hamburg, Germany: PURE CLASSICS.
- Davenport, T. *The Shakers*. Retrieved November 27, 2005, from Davenport Films:
http://www.davenportfilms.com/pages/doc_shakerspage.html
- Davenport, T., & DeCola, F. (Producers), & Davenport, T. (Director). (1974). *The Shakers* [Motion picture]. (Available from Tom Davenport Films, Delaplane, VA, 22025, 1-800-804-7466)
- Harlan, D. (2001, July 24). *The Shakers*. Retrieved November 27, 2005, from University of Virginia, Religious Movements Homepage Project Website:
<http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/Shakers.html>
- Johnson, T. E. (1969). *Life in the Christ spirit: Observations on Shaker theology*. Sabbathday Lake, ME: United Society.
- Lindsay, B. (1987). *Seasoned with grace*. Woodstock, VT: The Countryman Press

Reminiscences about the Shakers. (n.d.). *Shaker workshops*. Retrieved November 27, 2005, from <http://www.shakerworkshops.com/index.htm>

Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village. (n.d.). Retrieved November 27, 2005, from <http://www.shaker.lib.me.us/index.html>

Sabbathday Lake Shakers. (2005). *An invitation to joint the friends of the Shakers*. [Brochure]. New Gloucester, ME: No author.

Thorne-Thomsen, K. (1996). *Shaker children: True stories and crafts*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press.

Wolkomir, R., & Wolkomir, J. (2001). Living a tradition. *Smithsonian*, 32(1), 98-108. Retrieved October 27, 2005, from Academic Search Premier Database.

Who are the Shakers? (n.d.). *Shaker workshops*. Retrieved November 27, 2005, from <http://www.shakerworkshops.com/index.htm>