**Living among the Shakers, 1843**

**E**arly nineteenth century America witnessed a proliferation of a number of utopian experiments in communal living that strove to construct a society in which people could live in perfect harmony surrounded by the bountiful plenty of Mother Earth. The Shakers were one of the most successful of these attempts

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An offshoot of the Quakers, the Shaker concept was brought to America from England in 1774 by Ann Lee. Originally a member of the Anglican Church, Ann converted to the Shaker sect and expressed her religious zeal by disrupting Anglican services. She was arrested and during her imprisonment experienced a number of visions that revealed to her that sexual intercourse was the source of mankind's woes. Her visions further informed her that she was the embodiment of Christ's Second Coming charged with the duty to take the Word of God to the New World. Upon her release from prison, "Mother Ann" (as she was later referred to) and eight fellow Shakers sailed to America and established a Shaker community near Albany, NY.

Mother Ann died in 1784 but the Shakers thrived. Numerous communities were established throughout New England, the Midwest and as far south as Florida. Shaker life was based on a repudiation of the outside world, self-sufficiency, communal ownership of all possessions and the strict separation of the sexes. They stressed hard work and a life style of elegant simplicity. An important part of the Shaker experience was the dance - as it liberated the soul and invited the temporary possession of the individual by spirits from the Beyond.

Their rejection of sexual relations between men and women necessarily forced the Shakers to rely on converts to perpetuate their movement. This eventually led them down the road to extinction. Following the Civil War, the number of Shakers steadily dwindled. One community consisting of fewer than 10 members still survives in Maine.

*An anonymous visitor spent four months among the Shakers at their community near Albany, NY. He recorded his observations:*

**The Daily Routine**

"The hours of rising were five o'clock in the summer, and half-past five in the winter. The family all rose at the toll of the bell, and in less than ten minutes vacated the bedrooms. The sisters then distributed themselves throughout the rooms, and made up all the beds, putting everything in the most perfect order before breakfast. The brothers proceeded to their various employments, and made a commencement for the day. The cows were milked, and the horses were fed.

At seven o'clock the bell rang for breakfast, but it was ten minutes after when we went to the tables. The brothers and sisters assembled each by themselves, in rooms appointed for the purpose; and at the sound of a small bell the doors of these rooms opened, and a procession of the family was formed in the hall, each individual being in his or her proper place, as they would be at table. The brothers came first, followed by the sisters, and the whole marched in solemn silence to the dining room. The brothers and sisters took separate tables, on opposite sides of the room. All stood up until each one had arrived at his or her proper place, and then at a signal from the Elder at the head of the table, they all knelt down for about two minutes, and at another signal they all arose and commenced eating their breakfast. Each individual helped himself; which was easily done, as the tables were so arranged that between every four persons there was a supply of every article intended for the meal. At the conclusion they all arose and marched away from the tables in the same manner as they marched to them; and during the time of marching, eating and re-marching, not one word was spoken, but the most perfect silence was preserved.

After breakfast all proceeded immediately to their respective employments, and continued industriously occupied until ten minutes to twelve o'clock, when the bell announced dinner. Farmers then left the field and mechanics their shops, all washed their hands, and formed procession again, and marched to dinner in the same way as to breakfast. Immediately after dinner they went to work again, (having no hour for resting), and continued steady at it until the bell announced supper.

At supper the same routine was gone through as at the other meals, and all except the farmers went to work again. The farmers were supposed to be doing what were called 'chores,' which appeared to mean any little odd jobs in and about the stables and barns. At eight o'clock all work was ended for the day, and the family went to what they called a 'union meeting.' This meeting generally continued one hour, and then at about nine o'clock, all retired to bed."

**The Power of the Dance**

"At half past seven p.m. on the dancing days, all the members retired to their separate rooms, where they sat in solemn silence, just gazing at the stove, until the silver tones of the small tea-bell gave the signal for them to assemble in the large hall.

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| The Shaker Dance |

Thither they proceeded in perfect order and solemn silence. Each had on thin dancing shoes; and on entering the door of the hall they walked on tip-toe, and took up their positions as follows: the brothers formed a rank on the right, and the sisters on the left, facing each other, about five feet apart.

After all were in their proper places the chief Elder stepped into the center of the space, and gave an exhortation for about five minutes, concluding with an invitation to them all to 'go forth, old men, young men and maidens, and worship God with all their might in the dance.' Accordingly they 'went forth,' the men stripping off their coats and remaining in their shirt-sleeves.

First they formed a procession and marched around the room in double-quick time, while four brothers and sisters stood in the center singing for them. After marching in this manner until they got a little warm, they commenced dancing, and continued it until they were pretty well tired.

During the dance the sisters kept on one side, and the brothers on the other, and not a word was spoken by any of them. After they appeared to have had enough of this exercise, the Elder gave the signal to stop, when immediately each one took his or her place in an oblong circle formed around the room, and all waited to see if anyone had received a 'gift,' that is, an inspiration to do something odd. Then two of the sisters would commence whirling round like a top, with their eyes shut; and continued this motion for about fifteen minutes; when they suddenly stopped and resumed their places, as steady as if they had never stirred..."

**References:**   
    This anonymous account appears in: Noyes, John Humphrey, History of American Socialisms (1870, republished 1966); Stein, Steven, The Shaker Experience in America (1992), Whitworth, John McKelvie, God's Blueprints: a sociological study of three utopian sects (1975).

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