

Stephen Paterwic, "The Effect of the Civil War on Shaker Societies" *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* Volume 2, No 1 (Spring 1973).

Published by: Institute for Massachusetts Studies and Westfield State University

You may use content in this archive for your personal, non-commercial use. Please contact the *Historical Journal of Massachusetts* regarding any further use of this work:

[masshistoryjournal@wsc.ma.edu](mailto:masshistoryjournal@wsc.ma.edu)

Funding for digitization of issues was provided through a generous grant from MassHumanities.



Some digitized versions of the articles have been reformatted from their original, published appearance. When citing, please give the original print source (volume/ number/ date) but add "retrieved from HJM's online archive at <http://www.wsc.ma.edu/mhj>.



The Effect of the Civil War  
on the  
Shaker Societies

by

Stephen Paterwic

Although the decline of Shakerism was caused by serious internal factors, among which the loss of religious enthusiasm as seen in the evolution of Shaker worship was the most serious, the Civil War and other so-called external factors were important. These external factors helped to break down the Shaker economic empire as well as facilitated a change already taking place in American life. Specifically this change was the transition from a rural agricultural society to an urban industrial one. The Civil War played an integral part in this process and indeed when seen in the perspective of Shaker history, the Civil War marks the boundary between two periods. The first was a time of growth and development of the Church before the war. In contrast the second period saw the evident decline and a corresponding reduction of members that took place after the war. Thus, when examining the decline of Shakerdom, it is important to consider the effects of the Civil War on the Shaker societies. A little background information at this point will be helpful.

Shakerism, like so many of the great religious movements of history, was an attempt to find "a more real approach to the

life taught by Crist Jesus...."<sup>1</sup> America of the last half of the eighteenth century and first half of the nineteenth century keenly felt this spirit. In fact, one characteristic of this age was a large number of sects, both foreign and native, that organized themselves into small societies, some quite apart from the world, although none could escape its influence. The most successful of these groups was the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, commonly called Shakers. But unlike many of the sects, the Shakers did not seek an earthly utopia; rather they wanted "to bring about a climate in which souls could become fully developed spiritually."<sup>2</sup> For them this meant a belief in Jesus of Nazareth as the male Christ and a belief in their founder, Mother Ann Lee, as the female Christ.

Originating in England, this group was given the name Shakers or Shaking Quakers after their unique way of worship, during which the Believers shook and danced with religious frenzy. Seeking religious toleration Mother Ann and eight companions landed in New York City on August 16, 1774. Soon they had established themselves at Nishkayuna, now Watervliet, New York. At first few conversions were made, but with the help of religious revivals like the New Light Baptist revival at New Lebanon, New York in 1779, many people came to be attracted to them.

However, the colonies at this time were involved in the Revolutionary War against England. With their strange religion and

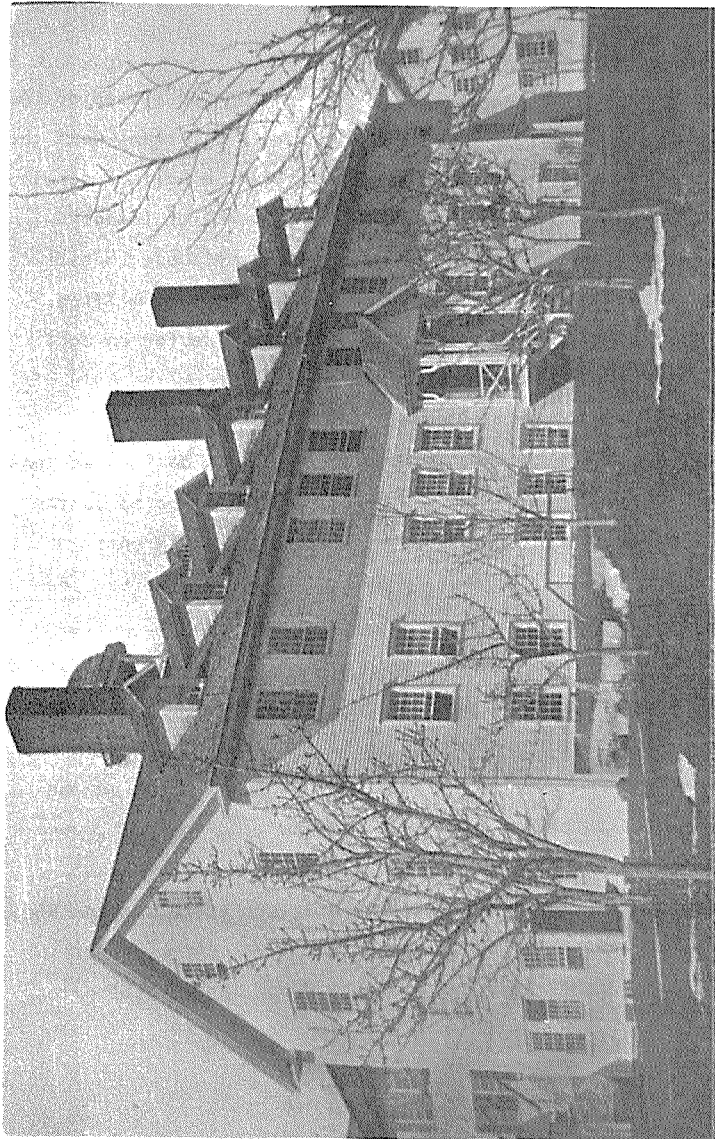
English background the Shakers came under suspicion for being anti-American; this situation quickly intensified when, on grounds of religious belief, they refused to take the oath of allegiance to the United States. Severe persecution resulted, especially at Harvard, Massachusetts. From the intensity of opposition it appeared as if the sect would have to disappear. Nonetheless, the Shakers remained true to their principles and they prospered despite persecution.

Under capable leaders such as Father James Whittaker, Father Joseph Meacham, and Mother Lucy Wright, the Shaker testimony was expanded throughout much of New England and was even brought to Ohio, Indiana, and Kentucky. As a result eighteen permanent societies were gathered under the precepts of celibacy, confession of sins, withdrawal from the world, and communal living. These were at Alfred and Sabbathday Lake in Maine, Enfield and Canterbury in New Hampshire, Harvard, Shirley, Tyringham, and Hancock in Massachusetts; Enfield in Connecticut, New Lebanon, Watervliet, and Groveland in New York, North Union, Union Village, Watervliet, and Whitewater in Ohio; and Pleasant Hill and South Union in Kentucky. At their peak, during the 1830's the Shakers had approximately six thousand members organized into fifty-eight units or families within seven states. From this date until the 1850's membership levelled off and the Shakers continued to expand their many occupations.

At mid-century the typical Shaker village consisted of rows of beautiful buildings, among which the most prominent were the meeting-house, dwelling houses, surmounted by a bell or cupola, huge airy barns, and many shops in which scores of industrial pursuits were carried out. The most famous of these industries were seed packaging, herb extracting, chair making, milling, printing, and metal working. Still Shakerdom rested on agriculture and important sources of income came from the sale of cattle, milk and dairy products, fruit, and vegetables.

By the 1850's then, the Shakers could look back on at least seventy years of growth and prosperity. When compared to the early days the state of affairs was certainly different. Or was it? Perhaps on the surface everything seemed better than before. But exploring deeper it is obvious that the position of the Shakers before and during the Civil War was similar to the one they experienced during the Revolutionary War.

First of all, the early persecutions ceased, not because the Shakers changed their principles, but rather because the "world's people" changed their attitudes.<sup>3</sup> For example, when the Revolutionary War was over or nearly over the Shakers' pacifism no longer was important to American society. As the country settled down into a time of relative peace, Shaker pacifism was pushed into the background and largely forgotten.



NO. 22. CHURCH FAMILY DWELLING, EAST CANTERBURY, N. H.

It was not long before the Shakers came to be respected for their well-ordered way of life and their dedication. However, this did not mean that hateful sentiments could not resurface as they did during the period of the War of 1812. Thus, during the 1850's, when the nation polarized as never before on the question of slavery, the Shaker societies found themselves in an awkward position.

From their very beginning the Shakers regarded slavery as a "black rising tide...engulfing, one after another, the landmarks of freedom and human rights...."<sup>4</sup> Founded on a principle of sexual equality it was natural for them to look down upon the institution of slavery. For many years Negroes had joined the Shakers and were treated as equals; in the southernmost colonies many Negroes were hired from their masters to help with the various occupations and they eventually were freed. So strongly did the Negro regard the Shakers that one once said "dar is no religion in dis country only what de Shakers has; de rest is all done gone up."<sup>5</sup> In effect, the Shakers were non-violent abolitionists who looked forward to the day when the equality they advocated would extend throughout the land.

Unfortunately, their abolitionist views alienated many people in the South. This, coupled with the fact that the Kentucky Shakers had grown prosperous, owning over ten thousand acres of land, encouraged a great deal of jealousy. At South Union, Ken-

tucky for example, many neighbors were envious of the fact that the Shakers had purchased the Grasslands farm through a secret bidder. To mask their true feelings a few citizens used the Shakers' abolitionist views as a means to cause trouble. Nevertheless, most neighbors liked the Shakers and warned them of possible attacks. But still, it was necessary to enlist the aid of two lawyers, Bristov and Grider, to help defend their rights. Many southerners were upset by the fact that the Shakers were rich and content without having to use slave labor.

In the northern communities the Shakers' view of slavery was not a serious factor in alienating neighbors. Although Shakers everywhere shared the belief in equality and opposition to slavery, in rural sections of the free states of Ohio, New York, Connecticut, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, and Maine, there were so few Negroes that abolitionist sentiment was not a serious threat to any way of life. Moreover, the opportunity for the Shakers to demonstrate their strong feelings regarding abolition was limited by the fact that any political action was contrary to their principle of separation from the world. Thus while fiery debate was taking place in Congress and while the sections were moving apart, "the quiet Shakers pursued their way, showing justice and mercy alike to slave and slave-holder."<sup>6</sup>

It was not surprising that the Shakers were pacifists during



the Civil War. After all, they had been pacifists during the Revolutionary War and the War of 1812. In an attempt to mollify their neighbors, during the revolution, the Shakers followed the advice of Father Joseph Meacham and paid muster fines totaling two thousand dollars alone for the New Lebanon colony. This practice was continued from Revolutionary times until February of 1815 when it was decided that these payments supported violence, as did the practice of hiring substitutes for those drafted to fight in the War of 1812. On February 2, 1815, a declaration was published stating why they refused to assist the military. In it the Shakers let it be known that they only were soldiers of Christ and were prepared to die for their beliefs.

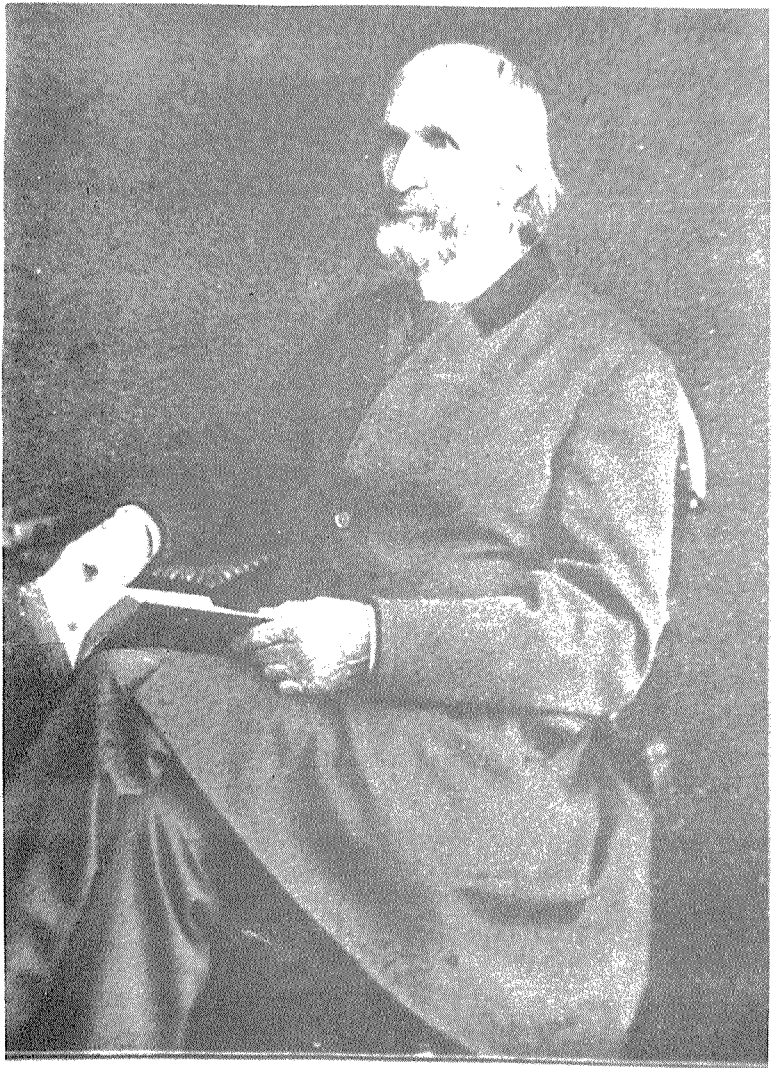
With the outbreak of war between the North and the South this same issue reappeared. At first the North was confident of a ninety-day victory. But as the war continued and no end was in sight, the situation had become so serious that the states had to supply larger and larger numbers of men for the army. For example, in 1862 George Ingels of North Union was drafted into the army and at South Union in May of that same year handbills were posted calling for all male citizens to declare their patriotism by taking the oath of allegiance to the United States government. The Shakers of South Union appealed to the local military commander, General Shackelford, who released them from this requirement. Shortly afterwards a Federal enrolling <sup>\*</sup>officer came seeking the

names of men of draft age. This prompted Brother John Rankin and Elder Harvey Eades to send a letter to President Lincoln in August of 1862. They received a positive reply from Edwin M. Stanton, the Secretary of War. This gave them encouragement, but their joy was short-lived; three of their men were called for the draft, one of whom was detained. Brother Rankin wrote to Washington again seeking an exemption. At the same time similar events were taking place in the northern colonies.

The Shaker central ministry, located at New Lebanon, called Mount Lebanon after 1861, counselled the Brethren of Union Village "to give freely to the Sanitary Committee for the benefit of the suffering soldiers but not to take hold of a gun or do anything as a soldier, not pay a fine, hire a substitute, or pay instead, that the government may hire one in the room of a Shaker."<sup>7</sup> Complicating matters was the passage of the Conscription Law of March, 1863. This act allowed the federal government to directly draft men into the armed services. The Shakers of Mount Lebanon decided to try to gain a release from this act for the seventy Shaker men who would be effected. At first they received little satisfaction. However, this Shaker settlement was the home of Elder Frederick Evans, who was to prove exceptionally capable of dealing with the problem. A memorial was drawn up and Elder Evans and Brother Benjamin Gates went to the District of Columbia to personally present

it to President Lincoln. In the memorial they argued on religious and constitutional grounds. Also, and perhaps more important, they mentioned that "white haired veterans of the wars of Revolution and 1812, who afterward became good Shakers," had rejected "as the 'price of blood' the bounties and pensions legal their due."<sup>8</sup> The amount of money owed to the Shakers including interest totaled \$439,733. The Shakers of Mount Lebanon alone claimed \$150,000 of this sum. The implication was the money owed to the Shakers more than covered the amount that would have been necessary to hire substitutes for Shakers. It also reinforced the fact that the Shakers were a peaceful people. After the Shakers had stated their case, Lincoln remarked: "Well what am I to do?" In the typically direct Shaker fashion Elder Evans answered "It is not for me to advise the President of the United States." Duly impressed Lincoln replied "You ought to be made to fight we need regiments of just such men as you."<sup>9</sup>

The result of this meeting was favorable to the Shakers; they were granted exemption by means of an indefinite furlough. Nevertheless because the Shakers were unquestionably Unionists some Shaker men did leave to join the army. When hostilities had ceased, some of these sought readmission and were reinstated. On the other hand, a few of the Brethren were afraid to remain in the Kentucky societies during the war for fear of the draft,



NO. 29. ELDER FREDERICK W. EVANS

and they were transferred to other societies. Thus, the Shakers had adjusted themselves to the task of trying to cope with one of the problems of the Civil War.

A more serious problem that the Shakers were unable to rectify by the stroke of a pen or an executive order resulted from the location of the Kentucky societies. Kentucky was a slave state and during the period of the secession crisis the state was divided over whether to secede or remain loyal to the Union. This thought distressed the Shakers for they placed great value on union within Shakerdom. With colonies from Sabbathday Lake, Maine to South Union, Kentucky it often was hard to maintain a unified movement but they always made an effort. If Kentucky seceded from the Union, Pleasant Hill and South Union would be isolated from their sister communities. Moreover, the Shakers were Unionists and if a separation occurred, the two colonies would become islands in a hostile sea.

Fortunately, Elder Harvey Eades was right when he predicted that "Kentuckians have entirely too much good sense to commit an act so insane" as secession.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, this did not stop sections and factions in the state from attempting secession. In fact, the western part of the state, home of the South Union Shakers decided to secede. Thus the Shakers had to shift from a position of neutrality in a divided state to one of neu-

trality in Confederate territory.

The community at South Union was located between Bowling Green and Russelville. Nearby in Tennessee was also Fort Donelson, a key to the Confederate defense of the southwest. Russelville served as the site of the convention which elected the Confederate governor, George Johnson, who established his office in Bowling Green. The Shakers thought it wise to send a delegation to Bowling Green to discuss their position. The governor cautioned them not to visit the northern societies; they followed his advice, and during the first year of the war they experienced little trouble.

However, the Shakers came to the realization that they had to remain open to whatever power may dominate them. When soldiers came for food, at first they gave it freely. As the number of soldiers kept increasing they set a price for their services. At South Union the fee was seventy-five cents for overnight lodging and two meals. In payment they sometimes received a receipt on the government, but in many cases they were never paid, or they only received partial payment. In the spirit of Christian charity the Shakers did not demand full payment, and they did not always complain when their claim was rejected. In fact on New Years Day, 1862, the Sisters from the North and Center families at South Union helped the women of Bowling Green prepare a dinner for the soldiers of that town. When the Southern position de-

teriorated in that part of the South, the Shakers often were called upon to provide food for thousands of passing soldiers. On one night in January of 1862, for example, twelve hundred soldiers called at midnight for food. At least six hundred pounds of bread was given to them as well as food for the remainder of the two to three days they were camped there. When the soldiers finally left, one of the officers said to the Sister who had looked after them: "Madame, I fear you will kill us with good food." Her reply was "Better than with a bullet."<sup>11</sup>

Such generosity was the central theme of the Kentucky Shakers during the Civil War. They were well aware that their opposition to slavery alienated the South and that their pacifism had alienated the North, and they decided to appear neutral before both parties. Such a stand was difficult to maintain and on occasions their Union sympathies would surface. A good illustration of this happened after Fort Donelson fell to the Union on February 16, 1862. The joy at South Union must have been great, for a journal dated February 18, 1862 reads: "Aspect changed-Rebels gone and Union Soldiers constantly here. How different from the Rebs they are...."<sup>12</sup> Great tension had been relieved since while the South had commanded this area of Kentucky, the Shakers of South Union were never sure of what their fate would be. For example, rumor had it that South Union either would be converted into a hospital or burned to the ground.

Now, with Union control the federal troops patrolled the area to protect the Shakers and their neighbors from guerilla bands that terrorized the countryside.

Soon however, there was a change in the favorable attitude of the Shakers toward the federal forces. The Shakers were shocked at the lack of respect and order in the Union army as compared to the seemingly more courteous Confederates. In addition, the Union forces confiscated large amounts of material. An excellent record of this can be found in the diary of Eldress Nancy Moore, of the South Union Ministry. In one passage she complained that when the Union forces left, they "carried with them corn, vegetables, fruit, chicken, horses, everything they could lay their hands on."<sup>13</sup>

Actually early in the war, the Shakers of South Union had removed their best horses to Princeton, Indiana for safe keeping. Nonetheless even the few draft animals the Shakers had left were the source of plunder by the soldiers of both sides and it became necessary to use hired mules to do the plowing. Likewise the Shakers of Pleasant Hill suffered from their close proximity to the battlefield of Perryville, Kentucky. It was not uncommon for them to feed and provide supplies for thousands of soldiers each week. To make matters worse, the Kentucky Shakers were often isolated from the northern Shakers by a lapse in the mail service and the dangers involved in travelling to visit other



communities during the war years.

Besides losses from pillaging and food expenses, the Shakers also had to contend with outright physical destruction. On one night in November of 1862, for example, General Sills' Union cavalry used thousands of white oak fence rails for fires as they encamped for the night in the Shaker pasture at South Union. Even the Shakers admitted that these fires were magnificent to watch, but in the future they made sure the Brethren supplied wood for camp fires to ensure that they would not lose their fence rails. Unfortunately the winter of 1862 was unusually cold and large quantities of wood had to be provided.

Furthermore, fear of guerillas increased. Everywhere around them they saw and heard of looting, but they suffered more from the fear of robbery than from actual robberies. This luck did not hold true in regard to fires. For example, the Shakers of South Union, Kentucky experienced four great fires, all set by arsonists. The first involved the West Family dwelling house, which burnt in January of 1861. The second occurred in September of 1862. This was the greatest of the fires and could have been prevented if the Shakers had listened to Negroes who warned of a plot against them. This fire destroyed the grist mill, a factory building with machinery, and wool and cloth amounting to a loss of \$59,000. The last two fires hit the railroad depot,

which burnt twice, once in February of 1863 and again in June of 1865. As there was no insurance, these fires resulted in complete losses.

In the midst of all their trials, a Kentucky Sister following in the Shaker tradition of spiritualism "had a comforting vision of a host of angels encamped over and about them, protecting them."<sup>14</sup> Whatever the cause, the Kentucky Shakers continued throughout the war to feed, clothe, and nurse soldiers of both sides. A few bright moments occurred as the war reached its halfway point. All during the period the Shakers tried to maintain normal religious, business, and educational functions under great stress. It was always encouraging to receive visits from their fellow Believers, and in 1865 a group of Kentucky trustees travelled north. In that same year the Shaker Ministry of Ohio, located at Union Village, paid the Kentucky communities a visit, bringing encouragement and hope. Toward the end of the war when mail could be exchanged freely, welcome correspondence helped to ease the feeling of isolation.

Despite all their problems, the Shakers still cared about their religion and worked to maintain their villages, both land and buildings. One memorable event took place in 1863 when Captain McPherson of Bowling Green toured the Shaker society at South Union. He was deeply impressed by the great number of improvements that the Shakers had accomplished in their unfor-

tunate state. After inspecting a newly laid stone walk he said "We ought to engrave in deep letters which can never be erased, 'Laid in the year of the Rebellion of 1863. While the people of the United States were at war fighting and killing each other the Shakers remained quietly at home improving their village.'"15

Although it can not be denied that the Southern Societies suffered the most from the Civil War, all of the Shaker societies were adversely effected during this period. There was a dislocation of trade, which helped destroy the industrial basis of Shaker society. One of the largest and most important of the Shakers' commercial activities was the seed industry. Every year in late winter and early spring the Shakers sent out wagons filled with all kinds of seeds for sale. Through improvement of the stock and honest marketing, the Shakers had attracted a large number of customers. Also closely connected to the land was the fruit, berry, and vegetable preserving industry. Such export industries as these brought large amounts of money into the Society and helped them balance payments. In 1855 alone, the three Church families of Pleasant Hill earned \$10,250 from the sale of preserves. In the north, Boston, Albany, and Poughkeepsie were a few of the important distribution points. In

the west and south, the great river ports served as vital marketing centers.

However, one important condition for successful sale of export goods is that of free, uninterrupted trade routes. During the war years trade with the South virtually stopped as the Mississippi River and mainland routes into the South became battlefields. The Union navy completed the elimination of trade by its blockade of the Southern coast. This hurt the communities in Ohio and Kentucky, and many debts owed to the Shakers could not be paid. But the closing of the South as a market for goods adversely effected the northern colonies as well. For example, Enfield, Connecticut lost its large seed business with the South and from the resulting "bad debts they lost nearly all they had saved in thirty years."<sup>16</sup> Furthermore with the great need to provide for home consumption and with thousands of soldiers to feed, the Kentucky Shakers were forced to concentrate on keeping the home community satisfied and they let trade with the South languish. Other industries such as stock raising were also adversely effected by the war. It is estimated that the war cost the South Union Shakers \$100,000. Such tremendous losses were felt not only by South Union, Pleasant Hill, and Enfield, Connecticut, but by all the societies because true to their great insistence on union within Shaker-

dom the colonies helped one another in time of need. The economic effects of the war were universal.

In addition to this, in the Kentucky societies, younger members had become lax and the war spirit had infiltrated the once isolated communities. It is not surprising that this should occur when one considers the effects of a large number of soldiers constantly passing through their land and disturbing their way of life. The war had seriously taxed the strength and prosperity of the Kentucky Shakers and although they regained a measure of this prosperity after the Civil War, they "never really recovered" from the effects of the war.<sup>17</sup> After the fighting had stopped, the Shakers had to learn to survive.

Before the Civil War two ways of life, differing socially and economically, had existed and had divided the nation. When the South, with its agricultural planter and yeoman farmer class, was defeated, the northern urban-industrial society came to triumph. Throughout large sections of the countryside the emphasis no longer was upon a quiet farm life. To move west or into the cities became the goal for a great many young people. Many of the Shaker colonies were able to readjust to a limited extent to the conditions right after the war, but "the America which came out of the Civil War was too crass and materialistic for a community of gentle rural folk to thrive in the old way."<sup>18</sup>

Not one Shaker society was able to cope with this transition of American life as the years went by. Their industries based on individual craftsmanship and hand labor could not compete with the new large factories. Furthermore, as the Great Plains were opened up for large scale grain production, American agriculture changed. A decline had set in, sparing none of the Shaker colonies. "After the war industrial capitalism, greatly increased population, and growing urbanization so marked American life that when the later years of the century called forth a new wave of humanitarianism and aroused a dynamic civic conscience, both the times and the movement were different."<sup>19</sup> Fewer and fewer decided to make the commitment to Shakerism as a way of life. No longer did people strive for spiritual perfection in such a manner. In fact many Shakers abandoned the communities after years of faithful service to the Church. One by one the Shaker families shrunk in numbers and were consolidated. Then when the societies became too small, they too were dissolved. Beginning in 1875 with the sale of the Tyringham, Massachusetts society and continuing until 1960 with the sale of the Hancock, Massachusetts community, all but two of the original eighteen Shaker societies have been dissolved.

Thus, the Civil War had a profound effect upon the Shakers.

The economic base of their society was destroyed by disruptions in trade, overt physical destruction, and severe strains caused by the need to provide, what came to be, tens of thousands of free meals and thousands of dollars worth of supplies. Their isolation and self-sufficiency was forever destroyed by the fury caused over their abolitionist and pacifist tenets as well as by the general results of the outcome of the war. It is ironic that the Shakers who hoped that the Union would win the war for the purpose of the freedom and emancipation of mankind, ended up by suffering from its outcome when the Union did in fact win. When the external factors had broken down the form of Shakerism, the internal factors which were slowly destroying its spirit could take their toll.

## References

- <sup>1</sup>Sister Marguerite Frost, The Shaker Story (Canterbury, N.H., n.d.), p. 1.
- <sup>2</sup>ibid., p. 22.
- <sup>3</sup>This term is used to denote all non-Shakers
- <sup>4</sup>Eldresses Anna White and Leila Taylor, Shakerism: Its Meaning and Message (Columbus, Ohio, 1904), p. 180.
- <sup>5</sup>Julia Neale, By Their Fruits (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1947), p. 197.
- <sup>6</sup>White, Shakerism: Its Meaning and Message, p. 180.
- <sup>7</sup>Edward Deeming Andrews, The People Called Shakers (New York, 1963), p. 255.
- <sup>8</sup>White, Shakerism: Its Meaning and Message, p. 180.
- <sup>9</sup>Andrews, The People Called Shakers, p. 216.
- <sup>10</sup>Neale, By Their Fruits, p. 177.
- <sup>11</sup>White, Shakerism: Its Meaning and Message, p. 185.
- <sup>12</sup>Ministry of South Union, Record B, Oct. 1, 1836-1878--? Cited by Neale, By Their Fruits, p. 180.
- <sup>13</sup>Diary of Eldress Nancy Moore, cited in White, Shakerism: Its Meaning and Message, p. 186.
- <sup>14</sup>White, Shakerism: Its Meaning and Message, p. 190.
- <sup>15</sup>Neale, By Their Fruits, p. 195.
- <sup>16</sup>Charles Nordhoff, The Communistic Societies of the United States, (New York, 1970), p. 190. This was first published in 1875.
- <sup>17</sup>Frost, The Shaker Story, p. 20.
- <sup>18</sup>Thomas D. Clark and F. Gerald Ham, Pleasant Hill and Its Shakers (Pleasant Hill, 1968), p. 74.
- <sup>19</sup>Alice Felt Tyler, Freedom's Ferment (Minneapolis, 1944), p. 549.