

## SOUTH UNION SHAKERS DURING WAR YEARS

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It was August 15, 1861, when General Bedford Forrest, with a company of eighty-six cavalry, rode into the South Union Shaker village and pitched camp at the head of the mill pond. This visit and many others were to be set down by Eldress Nancy Elam Moore, a member of the Shaker ministry, who got a "feeling to record . . . the destruction, distress, and desolation . . . of the unnatural war." Her two-volume diary, which began with Forrest's arrival, ended on September 4, 1864. It was Nancy's journal that would be sent later to the head ministry in New Lebanon, New York, as the official record of how South Union was drained of its strength and property. Being as objective as she could, the eldress gave a candid account of how the 223 society members tried to maintain their neutrality even though both armies were surging back and forth across their land.

One reason for the constant passing of the troops was the society's location. The main street of South Union was a state road, which connected Bowling Green and its military fortifications, held alternately by the Confederates and the Federals, with Russelville, the organizational site of the Kentucky Confederacy. Further on, this road led to Forts Donelson and Henry. Just west of the village, the road was intersected by another main road which led to the Green and Ohio rivers.

The Memphis branch of the L & N railroad, offering the fastest rail service then in the South, crossed the Shaker farm and angled through an edge of the village. Since this was the first time in American history that the railroad determined troop movements, the "cars" passed constantly.

As a Shaker pacifist, Nancy knew the difficulties and dangers of trying to maintain a neutral position. Not only the Northern troops but also their Federal Kentucky neighbors could not understand the Shakers' refusal to take up arms to support the government. On the other hand, the secessionists were intolerant of the Shaker abolitionists who refrained from war and went about their normal business.

For most of the war the society was harassed by soldiers of both armies who came demanding food, cloth of all kinds, fresh horses and forage, or shelter for the night. Often the dust had not settled after the departure of one group before another group came into sight.

Almost every page of Nancy's Journal contains entries such as:

Decr. 9th 1861 Captain Taylor came early in the morning and called for breakfast to be ready by eight o'clock for two hundred and fifty Cavalry who had camped at Covington's this side of B. Green.

Decr. 10th Captain McLemore with one hundred and fifty cavalry called in at the office horse lot . . . The captain called on us for forty pounds of bread for his men; and dinner for himself and four other Officers.

Decr. 19th The Southern Pickets rode up about seven o'clock at night and called for supper to be prepared for four hundred soldiers. We were to have it ready by eight o'clock . . . After working hard and getting the victuals cooked they did not arrive at the appointed time but came about midnight with five hundred Cavalry all expecting supper.

In the early months of the war, the visitors were mostly Confederates — but later when the Federals also came making demands, the eldress observed, "These men are as unreasonable as the Rebels. War imbrutes instead of refines."

The Shakers realized early that they would have to treat both armies the same. In the beginning they furnished the soldiers fruit and food without charge. When it became clear that their policy of free food would bankrupt them, they began charging a nominal sum. However, it became increasingly difficult to collect from either army. The leaders wrote numerous letters to the military authorities and made many trips in an attempt to collect the money due them.

Even though the society suffered financial losses, not only from the armies but also from the marauders of the time, the members continued to live by their millennial law of charity. Often the brethren went to Bowling Green with pies, fresh fruits, or dried beef to distribute at the army hospitals. Once the sisters contributed four baked turkeys and ten baked chickens, along with doughnuts, apple butter, and homemade catsup to the soldiers' New Year's dinner.

The sisters found it hard to turn away any of the hungry soldiers who came to the village. Eldress Nancy wrote: "We believed we would save more by being kind and accommodating to them than we would lose." When one officer remarked, "Madam, I fear you will kill us with good victuals," Sister Hannah's answer was, "Better that than with a bullet," which seemed to "take him by the heart."

The general serenity of South Union was broken in many ways. It was not uncommon to hear "wild, hideous, savage yells, come roaring from the Cars" as a train would pass "filled inside and outside with Infantry." At night the quiet might be broken by the "clinking of the soldiers' weapons on the floor, and the thumping of their boots as they turned over thro' the night." At other times the society members were disturbed by the light chatter of "those young women who were escorted by the officers." Nancy described a group of them as being "of the secesh die . . . very light minded and real squealers."

Many nights the Shakers could see "camp fires blazing and sparks

flying in high winds." The fires were doubly disturbing since they were often laid from the good Shaker fences.

Events themselves could be disturbing. Such was the case when two of General Buckner's Medical Department came down from the Bowling Green headquarters to request that the Shakers take care of some five hundred sick soldiers. The brethren pointed out their own crowded conditions due to a recent loss of a large dwelling by fire, but agreed to take as many as twelve at a time. Buckner's men left hinting that the General's request would be changed to an order. However, the order did not materialize since the Confederates were soon to lose the Bowling Green fortifications to the Federals.

Nancy retold many stories which came out of the Bowling Green occupation. It happened that when the Rebels first took possession of Bowling Green General Buckner had ordered one of the soldiers to haul down the United States flag. Not satisfied with tearing it down, the soldier trampled the flag under his foot. In relating how the soldier fell from the roof and broke both legs, Nancy wrote "he died in a few days and no doubt received the reward of his works."

Another story concerned the Rebels when they were being routed from Bowling Green. The generals gave word for all to save themselves as best they could. It was then a young woman called out to the men, saying "I've heard of Bull Run, but what sort of a run do you call this?" Nancy never learned whether anyone took time to reply.

Atrocity stories also came from the fort. One James Pike told of having seen a man left in the round house, handcuffed and burnt to death.

With the exception of one slight skirmish, no fighting occurred on the Shaker land, so Nancy gave no firsthand account of any military engagements. But she often commented on the war news she got from the newspapers or from the trustees when they returned from business trips throughout the territory. Many rumors, often false ones spawned by the tensions of the time, were recorded by the eldress, who was particularly disturbed by the constant talk concerning the activity of both Morgan's Raiders and of the many neighboring guerrillas.

Throughout the war, Nancy shared the anxiety felt by all Shakers everywhere as to whether or not their position as pacifists would be recognized officially. She recorded the persistence with which the leaders appealed directly to the military authorities, the Kentucky Legislature, and President Lincoln.

Finally, on December 31, 1863, the South Union society was relieved to receive a telegram from Secretary Stanton giving all the Shaker brethren an indefinite parole. Earlier in the war, the Shaker trustees had gone to Russelville to give the Confederate government the only

two guns in the society. According to the law every man worth \$500 had to furnish a gun or pay \$20. When the officers learned that the Shakers had only two guns for the use of so many people, they let the brethren bring "the most indifferent one back."

Nancy felt distressed as she saw her world of gentle manners and humanitarian impulses giving way to one of laxness and insensitiveness. By March, 1863, she was writing:

I fear we are becoming too much under the influence of the spirits that accompany the armies which causes a hardness of heart towards our fellow mortals; For certainly the time has been in this place, that we could not have suffered a well man to lie down on the bare floor without bed or covering, much more to let one who is sick with ague chills and fevers to come in dripping wet, and then have to dry his own clothes; and then rest the best he could by the fire.

It is probable that the gentle eldress never realized how the roughness of the times colored her own language, causing her to use such expressions as "he fell dead and never kicked" or "This same Bostick . . . threatened to let out bro. Urben's guts."

That Nancy should have been disturbed by the changes in her Shaker way of life is not surprising for she had been living at South Union for fifty years. Born in nearby Warren County, September 1, 1807, she had been brought to the colony when she was four. When the South Union Society drew up its Church Covenant in 1830, twenty-three-year-old Nancy was one of the signers. At forty-two, she was appointed to the ministry where she served forty years until her death December, 1889.

During the 1,068 continuous days that she recorded "the perilous and awful times," Nancy may have sensed that the promise of Utopian living, which had seemed so bright in the 1850's, would never be fulfilled.

It is true that the South Union Shakers never fully recovered from the losses incurred from both the war and the several disastrous fires believed to have been set by some of their jealous neighbors. Other factors which contributed to the decline of the society were the hard Reconstruction times, the inability of the Shaker craftsmen to compete with the new, large-scale steam manufacturing, and the general waning of all communal experiments.

Never re-capturing its pre-war vigor, South Union came to a close in 1922.