

LANGUAGE OF THE SOUTH UNION SHAKER MANUSCRIPTS

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Among the manuscript records kept at the South Union Shaker Colony from 1807-1922 are house journals, trustees' account books, and diaries—all filled with attention-getting words and phrases. Some of the expressions belong to the times and can be found in other writings of the period. Some reflect the individual author — his personality and his philosophy. Still others reveal quite clearly the general Shaker attitudes toward business, celibacy for society members, religion, and war.

It is highly probable that the men and women responsible for the records never thought how the diction itself would mirror the atmosphere and color of their socio-religious community. It is also highly probable that the writers never conceived of a time when the society records would be the property of "the world" to be read more by outsiders than by Shakers.

The Shaker record-keepers often took their expressions from the customs of the day. In describing the speed with which a brick wall was being laid, Eldress Nancy E. Moore wrote, "The Brethren made Bee." No doubt her image came from her intimate knowledge of cornhusking bees where all the huskers raced to win. The Shakers themselves engaged not only in the popular cornhusking but also in other competitive races such as "spinning frolicks" and "chopping bees," when good-hearted rivalry and excitement sparked the strenuous tasks.

Also reflecting the times long past are such expressions as:

Elder Harvey *stump spoke* it
and

We assembled at the church at early *candle lighting*.

Since work of all kinds was a definite part of each individual's daily routine, the expression *chored around* was used frequently. For example, "I did not feel well; still I chored and worked" or "chored around at various things."

An entry for November 15, 1834, read "*Flax-scutching*—A company of sisters go to scutching flax today." The entry not only carries a reminder of the former home industry of "scutching" but it also contains the idiomatic *go to* used in the sense of the sisters *begin* scutching today.

Some of the diction is archaic or obsolete enough to send the reader to a linguistic atlas. Examples are "to eat a *cheek*," meaning to eat an impromptu meal of cold provisions, and "to gather a fine *chance* of berries," that is, an indefinite amount. The verb phrase *hove up*, used in the sense of *coming to a halt*, appears in the sentence: "The stage horses ran off and *hove up* in the thicket." Sometimes the verb carried the regular past tense ending, being written *hoved up*.

When an eldress wrote of a company of men and women coming from Russellville "to *gallant* over the premises," she probably meant "roam idly accompanied by the other sex," but she could have been using *gallant* in its rarer sense of "being showy or smart in dress." Either meaning indicates the Shaker attitude toward excessive frivolity.

A tone of disapproval also marked two later entries,

Sunday - - - 1902

Leotine Genter (girl) horseback riding today and every day almost like a Texas cowboy in pantaloons for the purpose
and

August 1, 1909

Some few parties in buggies came to the South Lane and hitched their horses and are going over the place *taking pleasure*.

Another word which was given a peculiar Shaker slant was the verb *labored*. In the accounts of the Shaker services it was often written that the songs *were labored*; that is, the singing Shakers *labored* or *worked* at shaking out their evil spirits. The songs that were *labored* or acted out contained such lines as:

Wake up, stur *{sic}* about
Be more spry and nimble

or

Awake my soul, arise and shake
No time to ever ponder

or

I hate the Old deceiver
He is an unbeliever
I will have nothing to do
With the old deceiver.

No Shaker principle was more stressed than that of industry, for the Shakers believed it was their religious duty to do well economically. To them you worshipped God aright if you minded the main chance. Although Sunday was observed as a day of worship and rest, the Sabbath could be bent if circumstances made it expedient.

June 28, 1829 *Bending the Sabbath*

Twenty-seven young brethren bound and handstacked twenty acres of wheat today—right good worship.

On two other occasions when Sunday work was considered essential, the entries were headed *Temporal Sabbath* and *Trading Sunday*.

From the very earliest days of their organization, the Shakers considered the economic phase of their life to be an integral part of their religious life. The South Union Shakers came to speak of money as "the one thing needful." Thus Christ's words of commendation to Mary were given a peculiar twist when they were used not in reference to spiritual things but to money. It must be remembered, however, that the gain of money was to be the natural result of constant, honest endeavor, not the result of ruthless business dealings. Mother Ann's children had been taught that work and worship were to be equated.

There were many entries such as,

Elder Henry and another returned from a business trip with clear of expenses eleven hundred of the one thing needful.

or

William Ware did better in getting the one thing needful than we had expected.

The meticulous sales accounts kept by the merchants themselves contained the current monetary terms: "Sold one dollar and three bits-worth of seed" or "Sold a few picayunes worth."

Not all trips away from the village were as lengthy as those made by the trustees and merchants. There were many carriage trips or *Ride Outs* to the neighboring towns. Eldress Nancy usually referred to them as *little trips* or *little excursions* with the adjective suggesting that pleasure trips were not to be indulged in to any excess.

South Union being an agricultural community, the weather was a very important factor. Temperatures and other weather conditions were recorded daily. When describing the effects of a drought, Jefferson Shannon, one of the colony's leading trustees, spoke of the grass as being *parched to snuff*. But later when the rains came, the jubilant Shannon gave way to flowery writing: "Now vegetation begins to put forth and creation seems to wear a smile."

Weather was also a factor in the society's industrial program. An economic as well as a personal slant can be noted in an elder's weather entry for December 15, 1814:

Rain hurtful to the mill walls and hurtful to my feelings.

Not only were there daily weather reports, but there were also regular membership reports. Since an accurate membership record was a covenant requirement, all arrivals and departures had to be listed. The

accounts concerning the people who were entering the society were usually brief and factual. But those recounting the departures of the transients or so-called *Winter Shakers* and the less frequent departures of those considered *true blue* were always detailed.

Being intolerant of those who *turned off*, the journalists often expressed their feelings through invective headings such as,

Backwards they go
Backed off the tract
Wormed out
Trotting fast
Off the hinges
Fleshed off

Then followed the detailed accounts of those who were leaving and why.

Sometimes the journalists recorded the leave-takings in the lively diction of the backsliders themselves. Such was the case with Viney, who announced in no uncertain terms that she "would burn in hell to a cracklin" before she would return. But "in spite of her big talk she came back."

It was also reported that—

Poor James Page says he would be willing to be burned up in a log heap if that would bring him salvation—but to get it this slow way, he'll be d---d if he can stand it. So he goes off with himself.

And Henley went "to camp meeting yesterday and found as he thinks an easier way to get to heaven." So he, too, *turned off*.

One person who came and went several times was Jo Dunn. When he left for good, the writer resorted to punning: "The last of Dunn. Dunn has done it."

The Shaker millennial law of charity stated that all who came for help must be received by the society. However, the journal accounts often pointed out that the astute leaders recognized the weaklings among the arrivals. One such newcomer was described as having "come first to poverty and then to the Shakers." Another, Jephtha "came in rags some time since, now well dressed, takes his leave without a thank you for medicine or clothing. So the world wags."

Deaths of the faithful, which were departures of a more honorable kind, were usually recorded in the euphemistic language of the nineteenth century.

When Charles Eades died in his seventy-eighth year, it was written:

He fought through the Revolutionary War for liberty of body and gained it, and then fought equally brave for liberty of soul and gained that also.

Isaballa Paisley "finished her course in time 35 minutes after 5 p.m. in the 85th year of her age—full of years and full of honor." Sister Frances "passed out to her long home. Peace to her ashes" and Sister Annie "passed out beyond the veil of time."

One of the most remarkable aspects of the Shaker life is the longevity of the members. When Mother Lucy Wright, head of the New York colony, died at sixty-six, the news of her death was recorded in the South Union journal, followed by the question: "Why so short lived?" Again, when Sister Sarah Robinson died at the age of seventy-two, the recorder wrote: "too soon Sarah."

Frequently the diction of the Shaker journals is that of allusion, with the Bible and Aesop's fables being the chief sources. During the Civil War, an elder wrote:

These times it is hard for us to know who are the guerrillas. For nowadays wolves can dress in sheep's clothing.

Later, an eldress wrote:

We have often heard it said, 'Wolf Wolf' and it may be the wolf will yet come.

Aesop was again the source when an eldress wrote regarding a large number of picnickers who came to roam the grounds. "What is sport to them is death to us."

The South Union manuscripts contain surprisingly few errors in grammar. The largest number occur after 1870 when the society was in its decline. The late records not only contain more errors, but they are marked by irregular entries and a noticeable lack of the characteristic neatness.

When errors were made they were the common ones in case and in the use of the verb.

Tense: He has went up to Bowling Green

Agreement: The very roots was parched

Case: While him and his crew were all asleep

Instances of needless repetition are *proceeded on*, *continued on*, and *widow woman's* house—all common expressions of the period.

Peculiar use of prepositions can also be noted:

We accepted of the invitation

and

The sisters went to Canaan for to glean what beans there were.

South Union was the last of the seven Western Shaker colonies to close. To read the society records kept from 1807-1922 is to realize that the language itself reflects much that was characteristic of the Logan County communal experiment.