

Selections from “Growing Up Shaker” by Sister Frances Carr, Sabbathday Lake, Maine.

*Sister Frances Carr came to the Sabbathday, Maine Shakers in the late 1930's when she was ten. Even though her sisters, Ruth and Katie and her brother, Bill, were also at the village, it was not easy for Frances to get used to living in a Shaker community.*

p. 1     When I opened my eyes I was in a strange place. The night before I had arrived at Shaker Village with my little sister, Ruth. I looked for Ruth and saw her sleeping peacefully with just the top of her black head showing. In spite of the heat of the early August morning, little Ruth was wrapped tightly in her bedding. My big sister Katie was looking at Ruth. Katie had come to the Shakers earlier, and we were now joining her. Katie started to laugh; ‘guess you never heard a rooster before.’ I didn’t answer. I was afraid of seeming stupid, but I never had heard a rooster before.

I got up and dressed while most of the other girls in the room were still sleeping. The room was large with six small beds in it. Each bed had a chair beside it, and there was a marble sink in the corner of the room. A large part of one wall had a row of drawers which I would later learn was called a built-in cupboard and drawers. There was also a second door, which I discovered later opened into the room where Sister Mary Beckwith, the caretaker, slept.

I started out of the room, planning to go downstairs and out of doors, when another girl woke up and said, ‘You’re not supposed to go out unless Sister Mary says you can.’ ‘I was only going as far as the porch,’ I replied defiantly. I went downstairs, opened the door, and went out on the huge porch. I looked across the fields to where a cluster of buildings stood. One huge red building was high above the others. Large stacks of lumber were in the area of the buildings. I decided I must have been looking at the lumber mill. It smelled delightful. While I was looking around, I noticed a playhouse and a set of swings close to the porch. Before I could make up my mind to go and try the swings, I was startled by the sound of a loud bell ringing.

I rushed back into the house thinking that now Ruth would be awake and looking for me. When I got to our room, Ruth was already up and talking with Sister Mary, who was helping her choose a dress to wear. I quickly stepped up and told Ruth that it was going to be very hot, and she should wear a dress with shorter sleeves. Sister Mary looked right at me and said, ‘I am taking care of Ruth, and I will tell her what dress to wear.’ I replied, ‘I am her sister, and I promised that I would take care of her.’

At this, Sister Mary said, ‘The bell has rung, and if we do not go, we will be late for breakfast. We can talk later. For now, I will say that your little sister needs a mother, and I will be that mother.’ It was then that I realized that I would not have an easy time dealing with Sister Mary.

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*Shaker girls were expected to help the older Sisters with work of various sorts. They cut up balsam for fir balsam pillows. They learned to knit, and to mend clothing. As they got older they learned to sew, cook, care for chickens, turkeys and geese, and garden. And there was always laundry to be done.*

p. 57 We girls helped with the laundry. It seemed that every time I helped with the laundry, I would always come up with one sock missing; this was a real trial to me. The Shakers never have believed in corporal punishment, and so the two most used punishments were no day at the beach in the summer, or no Thursday night movies in the winter. I really looked forward to the Thursday night movies in the Dwelling house, but I missed many a movie. After quite a few missed socks and an equal number of missed movies, I was missing a sock again on laundry day. I was beside myself! Another missed movie! After roaming around the washroom and drying attic looking for my missing sock, I sat on the edge of the Shaker washing machine and felt a real sense of despair. I was about to miss another movie which was one of the “Our Gang” series, one of my favorites.

In the washroom, all by myself, I decided to pray for help in finding the stocking which was causing me so much grief. As I sat there wondering where to look next, something told me to take a real good look in the bottom of the horrible old tub, because somewhere in the depths of that huge awful tub was a missing sock. I looked again, and sure enough, tucked away in a corner, and not easily seen because the sock and tub were both dark, was my missing sock! It was damp and wrinkled, but I grasped it with delight and ran to Sister Mary! To her credit, she accepted the grimy sock, and I went to the movies.

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*Sister Frances Carr developed a life-long love of cooking and baking. For many years she was in charge of the kitchen at Sabbathday Lake, Maine. Besides making delicious meals day after day, she wrote a Shaker cookbook, taught cooking classes, and lectured about the value of using fresh, locally sourced foods. One year Martha Stewart did a cooking show with Sister Frances in the Shaker kitchen.*

p. 68 “After I moved into the Dwelling House, many changes took place in my work. I began taking a two-week stint in the kitchen along with three others. The kitchen work was set up so that the same people were not always doing the work. Four people, consisting of head cook, baker, vegetable girl and sink girl worked for a period of two weeks, and then had a month off. In a short time, I discovered that I thoroughly enjoyed working with food, and doing food related work. I am not saying that I enjoyed the work of sink girl, with the huge amount of pots and large pans to clean up for the seventy plus people we were feeding at that time. But I enjoyed the camaraderie of the three people with whom I worked closely. All of the cleanup was not left to the sink girl; usually the cook and baker would help out with that chore. Life in the Community kitchen was an enjoyable experience.