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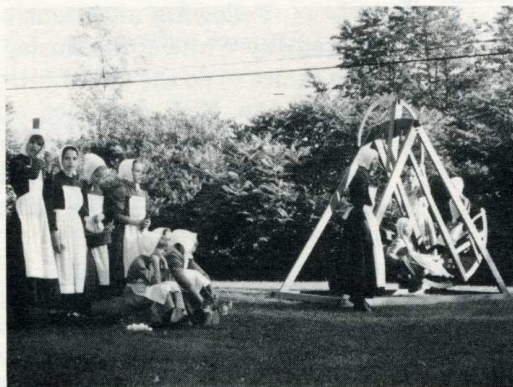
The Young and Tender Buds: Children in Shaker Life

by Mary Ann Wilde

This July, Eric Gesler of Dana Robes Wood Craftsmen in Enfield made a beautiful swing for our Shaker Revels production, "In Yonder's Valley." (See *Faith...*, p. 4) It now sits in front of the Museum, inviting young swingers, and reminding us of the presence and importance of children in Shaker communities. Eric designed and built the swing from a photograph I found while doing research at the Western Reserve Historical Society in Cleveland, OH. The elegance of the swing's design was clear in the photograph. Recreating a glider that would light the faces of children, as it did those of the young Shakers in the picture, was the task Eric set for himself. The sign on the swing, "12 and under, please!", reminds those older that we must stand by and only imagine the sense of lift and glide and wind blowing through. But as we watch, or take a turn at pumping, we can perhaps reflect on the place of children in the Shaker community.

We are fortunate to have the memoirs of Hervey Elkins, "15 Years in the Senior Order of Shakers: A Narration of Facts Concerning that Singular People." In it he offers a detailed remembrance of his youth amongst the Enfield, N.H. Shakers. Daily life for a child raised in community in 1810 was radically different from that of a child of the 1870's or 1790's or 1920's. And within any given era, a child's experience was strongly influenced by the particular adults responsible for the children's order; by the other children living in community at the time; and by the particular circumstances that

brought each child into Shaker life. Whether indentured by parents for economic, personal or disciplinary reasons; whether orphaned, homeless, or part of a family conversion to Shakerism, the child must have



Children swing during Revels performance

experienced placement in a Shaker community as traumatic; emotionally linked to feelings of change, upheaval and rejection.

Yet the Shakers gladly accepted the challenge of drawing children into Shaker life. The society provided generously for the physical needs and education of the children in their charge. Living separately in the children's order, the young had their own space, activities, and work load. But they participated fully in the communal life of the larger body. The hallmarks of Shaker life—separation from the world, separation of the sexes within the community, and a shared spiritual and material inheritance—also characterized a child's experience.

Children were instructed in, and expected to demonstrate, re-

spectful, industrious behavior. Corporal punishment was not forbidden, but was not relied on as a means of shaping character. Public shaming was particularly discouraged. One admonition from "Mother's Word to the Caretakers of Children" that stands out is: "Always fold your hands and stand erect, when anyone is instructing you in your duty; and if you cannot promise to obey or to reform, then say nothing at all, only to thank your instructors kindly for their good counsel." In this teaching I hear profound respect for the child, as well as for the person offering counsel. It is the child's responsibility to know his or her own heart, and if unable to accept what is offered, to refrain from pretense, while acknowledging the relationship with the instructor.

From the many rules relating to rough play, rude language, laziness, teasing, etc., we know that Shaker children shared the same human behaviors we know in ourselves and in each other. From journal accounts it is clear that the job of children's caretaker was more than once surrendered with relief, if not delight. Yet the strongest impression I receive in reading Shaker history is that children were valued and respected. Some believers clearly had a particular capacity for communicating to children the love in which they were held. But all were reminded by the presence of children to seek the child-like in their own spiritual life, and to be a witness for the life choice that they dared to hope these young people might one day make their own.

