

The Friends' Quarterly

A Newsletter from The Museum at Lower Shaker Village

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O Hear Their Music Ring

by Mary Ann Wilde

The outdoor services held on Mount Assurance, the feast ground of the Enfield Shaker community, were a rich spiritual feast, designed to strengthen and sustain believers. First hand accounts of services at Shaker feast grounds, and the songs which give voice to the symbolic power of the feast day's rituals provide insight to the spiritual sustenance offered to believers so many years ago.

As believers walked up the hill to the Holy Mount, they sang marching songs which spoke to them of the spiritual journey that each one embarks on when becoming part of a Shaker community.

While we're marching,
while we're marching,
To Jehovah's holy ground;
While we're marching, while we're
marching,
See his glory shining round.
Bright celestial hosts are shining,
O hear their music ring;
Loudly echoing through the heavens
Praises to their Lord and King.

The songs and the terrain reminded them that the journey was ongoing, and often uphill, with temptations and distractions ever present possibilities. But the journey takes place in community and therein lies critical support and encouragement. What is essential is to keep moving forward in the faith.

Now my dear companions, is the time
to start anew
Anew, anew, for the Kingdom of
heaven.
With faith and zeal and courage strong
We will ever be marching on,
Toiling on, struggling on, for a perfect
Heaven.

At a resting place part way up the hill, believers were encouraged to throw off any burdens, bad feelings or other encumbrances that hinder spiritual progress. Though the burdens shed were not tangible, the physical act of throwing



them down the hill identified the need to cast off attitudes or patterns of behavior which hinder us in developing as human beings. The Shaker song "Come life, Shaker life, come life eternal, shake shake out of me all that is carnal" is a reminder of the specific Shaker challenge to live a celibate life. But another speaks more universally:

Shake, shake, shake off, leave all
death behind you.
Break, break, break off every band
that binds you.
Labor for the gifts of God for they will
make you free, free
Travel in the narrow road of low
humilite, te.

One of the first ceremonies within the feast ground proper is the honoring of those oldest in the faith. "May the first born of Mother Ann's children stand in a body that the young might march around them. For their light is great and shineth

even unto God's throne. And when you have sung a song of praise, ye may go to the ancients and light your lamps, that you may have light to direct you on your way." Again, no actual lamps are lit. The light is inner light of lives lived in the faith. This ritual simultaneously encourages "the first born" to share their life experience and inner light, as it makes clear the respect that the younger believers are expected to show to those more traveled in the Shaker way.

Many of us are just beginning to pay attention to the importance of one of our most precious natural resources, water. It is significant that water

is honored at least three times in the feast ground service. The center of the feast ground is referred to as the holy fount. From the "fountain of everlasting strength" believers are invited to drink. The fountain is also the source of water in the ceremony of planting spiritual seed. A third ritual, bathing in the waters of the fountain, was an important symbol of purification and community. "The elders gave us sponges, and filled a tub with the waters of the Fountain, and we dipped our sponges therein, and sponged and showered each other till we felt perfectly free and simple."

O Halen Halen Vinda!
Come O ye children of the living God.
Come bow down low and wash, bathe
and shower
In the holy, holy fountain of the Lord
your God.

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