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The Real Shaker Sweater

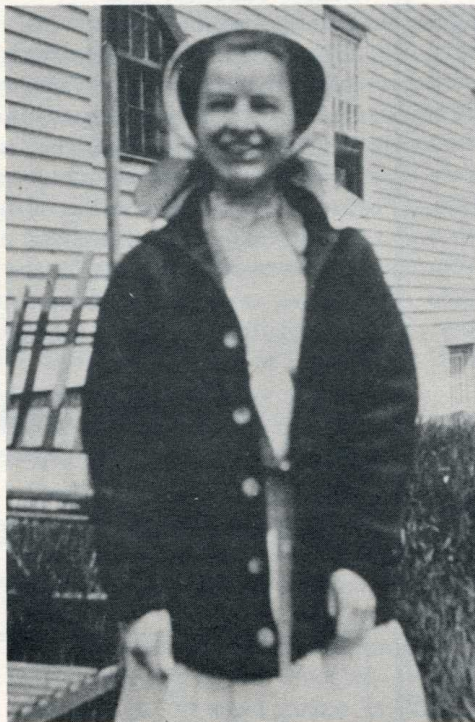
excerpts from an article by

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Will the real Shaker sweater please stand up! We have all seen catalogue ads for Shaker Sweaters which seem to be cotton, rib knit, crew neck pullovers. But where do these sweaters come from? The Shakers first started producing sweaters for sale in response to the needs of the "World's" people. According to a document in the Canterbury archives entitled "About the Shaker Sweater" "A man who had been to England upon his return to America, brought a sweater to us, and asked if we could make one like it. We had no machine for that purpose but in April 1886 Mr. S.W. Kent came with a big order for the sweaters, if we could fill it." Unfortunately, we do not know the pattern of the original design or whether it was made or hand knit. In order to take advantage of the potential market, the Canterbury Shakers ordered a single web knitting machine from Jonas Aiken which was delivered in October of 1886. "According to our records, we commenced to knit on the machine at once and before December 25, had shipped an order of 60 dozen sweaters to New York. This was the beginning of a very profitable trade."¹

What is a Shaker sweater? Textile and knitting dictionaries define it as a "heavyweight rib knit fabric developed by members of the Shaker sect."² Today, several mail order catalogues (among them LL Bean, J. Crew, Lands' End, and Eddie Bauer) and department stores (JC Penney) manufacture and market their "classic" Shaker sweaters. They all claim to knit them the authentic way, using the Shaker created half-cardigan stitch

(a modified form of machine ribbing which thickens the fabric).³ Furthermore, all of these modern reproductions are crew neck cotton cardigans with raglan sleeves.



Sister Ethel Hudson, Canterbury, NH in her auto collar cardigan.

In reality, the original Shaker sweater was very different in style, material and construction. Although we don't know whether they invented any of these distinctive patterns or adapted them from the World, they produced two basic types: coat or jacket sweaters, which buttoned in front and pullover sweaters, all with a variety of collars. They came in eleven sizes 30 through 50 and were made of extra heavy (01), heavy (1), medium (2) and light weight (3) wool yarns which were obtained from S.B. and W.B. Fleisher of Philadel-

phia. The company produced a two-ply yarn from pure Australian wool exclusively for the Canterbury Shakers. The sweaters were available in a variety of colors, including white, blue, gray, black, and garnet.

Unlike today's mail order catalogue sales, Shaker sweaters were sold wholesale, through a middleman named Charles Dudley from Hanover, New Hampshire, and retail through sporting goods houses, in the Shaker store at Canterbury, and on special sales trips to hotels, beaches and mountains frequented by summer vacationers. Pairs of Shaker sisters traveled to resorts in Maine, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, New Jersey as well as to the major urban centers of New York, Philadelphia, and Washington.

Shaker production was prolific and surviving diaries record that during 1910 1,489 sweaters were made.⁴ The sweater industry continued to grow until 1923 when the commercial end of the trade closed. The reason for this may have been the unavailability of quality yarn and/or the difficulty in obtaining a new knitting machine. This shortage of raw materials and equipment certainly contributed to the decline of this most successful Canterbury industry.

1. "About the Shaker Sweater," Shaker Village, Canterbury, NH, Archives, MS #1371.

2. Dr. Isabel B. Wingate, *Fairchild's Dictionary of Textiles* (New York: Fairchild Publications, 1979, 6th ed.).

3. *ibid.*

4. Jessie Evans, Diary, 1910, Shaker Village, Canterbury, NH, Archives, Memorandum section, MS #1985.24.

