

The Friends' Quarterly

A Newsletter from the Enfield Shaker Museum

Volume XVII/No.3

Summer 2007

Enfield Shaker Meals

by Galen Beale, Author and Chair of Enfield Shaker Artifacts and Archives Committee

In his autobiography, *15 Years in the Senior Order of Shakers*, Hervey Elkins recalls his life with the Enfield Shakers in the middle of the 19th century. Mealtimes in the Great Stone Dwelling are aptly described.

Breakfast is invariably one and a half hours after rising, in the summer at six, in the winter at seven; dinner always at twelve; supper at six. These rules are, however, slightly modified upon the Sabbath. They rise and breakfast on this day half an hour later, dine lightly at twelve, and sup at four.... No talking, laughing, whispering or blinking are allowed while thus partaking of God's blessings. ... At the tables, each four have all the varieties of food served for themselves, which precludes the necessity of continual passing and reaching... After eating, all rise together at the signal of the first elder, kneel as before, and gently retire to their places of vocation, without stopping in the dining hall, loitering in the corridors and vestibules, or lounging upon the balustrades, doorways or stairs.¹

Elkins came to chafe at the Shaker's strict rules, but to no avail, for many of these dining ordinances had been given by revelation at the establishment of the Church Order.² Sunday was the strictest day, with no cooking allowed; any cooking was to be completed on Saturday. All the fruit to be eaten on the Sabbath had to be carried to the Dwelling House on Saturday. Rules on equal proportions were scrupulously observed, as the Shakers used food as an opportunity to reinforce the qualities of good leadership:

The Trustees divide every fruit of extra and rare properties among the elders, trustees and common members, male and female with rigorous exactness. None, by reason of care and trust in them reposed, seek for anything more agreeable to eat, drink, or wear, than those have, to whom they stand as leaders.³

Making matters worse for Elkins was the fact that he was in the community at a time when foreign teas and coffee, cider, ardent spirits, tobacco in any form, and the flesh and fat of swine, were utterly forbidden to be used by the picked and chosen ones of the Church Family.⁴ This prohibition must have made meal times even less interesting.

Picnics were part of the Enfield Shaker seasonal rituals. The Shakers' agricultural lifestyle meant that the Believers often found themselves far from home in the middle of the



A 20th Century Shaker Picnic with the World's People, (Smith Collection).

day, so the Kitchen Sisters would pack their lunches. These picnics were a welcome break from the other ritualized meals.

It is easy to sympathize with Elkins in his joyful account of his days as a young boy working on the Shaker farm, and to feel the camaraderie he experienced with his companions. The almost daily picnics in the fields cemented those relationships. These were times when the young boys felt the most free from Shaker regulations:

Thus glided the summer; the most of the days spent upon the mountain clearing burnt land, moving rocks and building a shed contiguous to a barn. We carried our dinners in wooden pails and drank with a vessel the waters which gushed from the earth.⁵

In the late fall, the farmers would harvest the potatoes they had been planted on the mountain farms out of sight of the village. When they arrived at the fields, they would first gather wood for their noontime fire. Elkins describes the best part of the day to come - the picnic:

When the village bell rings for noon, we rush to recruit the fire. We kneel on the cold earth in thankfulness, open our large wooden pails, take there from cold beef, brown bread, white bread, with alternate strata of butter, sweet bread, applesauce and pies. The food is palatable and sweet, but not highly seasoned or rich. We eat on such occasions from wooden or pewter plates. But away from home, we are considered by the sisters who prepare for us viands of greater variety than are to be found on the table at the mansion. Some of the youth bury beneath the heated embers a few potatoes, and half raw and half burned, devour them dripping with butter or beef's gravy. After eating and nicely depositing the fragments and dishes in the pails, we kneel. We then draw for the our fruit and kindly bestow to such as have none, for we love our companions; and "Mine is thine and thine is mine". "We culled this fruit from your orchard and from my orchard and we in all things are one."⁶

1. Elkins, J. Hervey, *15 Years in the Senior Order of Shakers*, (Hanover, N.H. Dartmouth Press, 1858), pp 3-4.

2. *Ibid.*, 23-24.

3. *Ibid.*, 29.

4. *Ibid.*, 29.

5. *Ibid.*, 45.

6. *Ibid.*, 47.

