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The Enfield Shakers' Gift Of Song

by Mary Ann Haagen

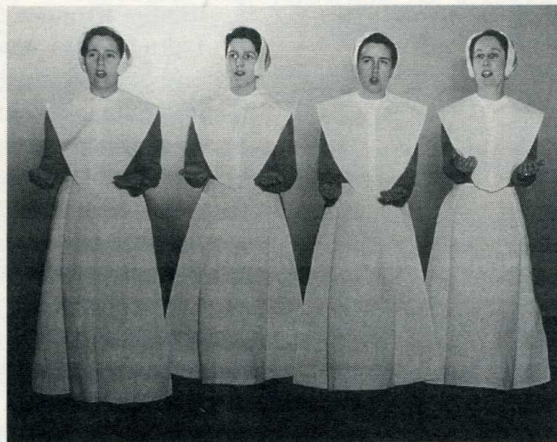
Ann Lee, founder of the Shakers, understood the power of song. She used music to express the inward sense of life and love that the Shaker way offered her followers. Years after her death, Believers who had known her testified to the impact of her singing.

"As I passed through a room where Mother was, I saw her sitting in a chair, and singing very melodiously, with her hands in motion; and her whole soul and body seemed to be in exercise. I felt, as it were, a stream of divine power and love flow into my soul, and was convinced at once that it came from Heaven, the source and fountain of all good."¹

The Shaker community at Enfield, New Hampshire, participated fully in the Shaker gift of song. Hundreds of pieces that were received or composed here have come down to us. We also have written accounts of the importance of music in the daily life of Believers. Several individuals stand out as particularly gifted composers and musicians in this Society. Abraham Perkins, James Russell, and Timothy Randlett taught music theory, invented musical instruments, and have the greatest number of songs attributed to them. But many other Enfield Believers shared in the gift of creating or receiving songs. They considered them not to be evidence of their own creative genius, but as gifts of the Holy Spirit. Abraham Perkins, who came to the Shakers with no training or experience in music, spoke on the sub-

ject with wonder.

"I have been the favored and happy recipient of many beautiful, heavenly gifts. Songs innumerable have been put into my mouth and their sentiments engraven in my soul, for which I claim no credit. How I received them or where they came from I am unable to tell. The words and the music of the pieces were generally combined, accompa-



Ruth Dennis, Phyllis Goodwin, Marjorie Hayes and Ann Tarney of the Enfield Shaker Singers.
Photo courtesy Ann Tarney.

nied in their ministration with a spirited, pathetic sensation. Sometimes when one piece was finished, another would follow, until six or seven would be produced, all different in key and character.

As a medium for the spirit, the gift to me has been more impressional than in any other form; and therefore, has taken hold of my senses and reached my soul as it could in no other manner; and for several years my physical organs were used for singing, speaking and writing, as the spirit moved and I

was dictated. I well remember as I entered the gospel field of labor and learning that the various pieces of music, hymns, anthems etc. sung in the Society were original inspirational or composed by its members, how anxious I felt to become an instrument for so beautiful a gift."²

When we at the museum think about our charge to preserve the Enfield Shaker heritage, we recognize the importance of celebrating this aspect of Shaker life. Fortunately, Enfield has a long history of interest in the musical heritage left by the Shakers. Perhaps Enfield's most important champion of Shaker music was Mrs. Clarice Carr. She came to Enfield as a public school teacher in 1937. She became aware of the Shaker community that had once thrived here, but whose last living members were then residing at Canterbury Shaker Village. Aided by the memories of townspeople who had known the Shakers, she began studying the history and music of the Enfield Shakers.

In 1945 Mrs. Carr was approached by the organizers of the first New Hampshire Folk Festival. They had learned of her interest in Shaker music. She was asked to present this important but little known folk tradition at the festival. Thus the Enfield Shaker Singers came into being. From 1946 to 1961 the quartet performed not only at the New Hampshire Folk Festival, but at local historical societies and churches, and

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