

# RICH DYING SECT

## Shakers, Well Off in Property but Without New Converts, Face Extinction with Resignation —Who Will Inherit Estate?

By DIANA RICE.

**W**ITH the simplicity, frugality and seeming indifference to worldly matters which have always characterized the Shakers, the last members of the United Society of Believers are singing their hymns among the foothills of the Berkshires. The Kentucky settlement is extinct. The last survivors are now at Mount Lebanon, N. Y. Other settlements in Connecticut and New Hampshire are also thinning rapidly. The vows of celibacy taken by members on joining the order and the dearth of novitiates are likely to result in early extinction.

Dipping down into the valley off the Post Road four or five miles west of Pittsfield, just across the New York

her the order had meant first a home and then a vocation. "A life of innocence, strict temperance and virgin purity according to the example of Jesus Christ," she repeated with imitative preciseness. But later she admitted to periods of doubting, when she was not sure that religion filled all needs, and told of the Elders admonishing her because she did not speak up in meeting and tell what was in her mind. As she put it:

"I always found it hard to say anything in meeting. It was not easy for me to speak out as the others did. But I had my thoughts. And I don't know that they were always good thoughts. We all have our misgivings and the Shakers are not different from other people.

"There wasn't any other place for me to go when I was left an orphan but to the Shakers, and here I've been ever since. No, I've never thought of leaving them. I go to Springfield to buy supplies for the store. And sometimes I go to visit my sister. There is never any question about my going. It's talked over in the family and consent is usually given."

Martha Wetherell was not against all progress. Although she didn't think much of people who frequented the movies, she said, people were going to do the things they enjoyed doing, and no one could stop them. If movies were what they wanted, then movies they would have, no matter what any one said, but she had never been to the movies. Sister Martha spoke with some acerbity of the indolent, of those who didn't "do their share."

"After all," she concluded, settling her steel glasses more securely on her straight nose, "human nature is pretty much the same. Shakers have to fight against obstacles the same as any one else. Shakers are individuals and have individual problems. I've gone and sat in my room many a time pondering over injustices, or wondering what to do when some one had not done the fair thing. I used to lose my temper and talk sharply. They tell me here that no one can do anything good enough for me, and I don't know but that's so. There, that's the bell," and off she hurried to admit another customer.

There are no chairs in the Shaker Church. With its broad expanse of hardwood floor, possibly 150 by 75 feet, and its high oval roof, it looks more like a mammoth dance hall than a place of worship. The only touch of color in the whole Shaker village seems to be in the robin's egg blue-painted doors and window frames of this structure. At one end there is a high, small-paned window, at the other four small shuttered openings. These peep-holes open from a balcony, where in the old days the Elders used to sit and watch the members of the congregation as they marched, danced and "shook" in the ardor of their religious yearnings or revelations. A friend of the order said that it was customary for the Elders to admonish those who did not appear to be conducting themselves with propriety or with sufficient zeal.

"Yea, yea," said Sister Corinna Bishop as she rocked slowly back and forth in her padded rocker with its crocheted tids of elaborate design, "we used to march and dance in church and

marry; but the world is none the worse for a few old maids."

This peaceful-looking sister with her hurried years and hairs had not, even after her sixty-three years with the Shakers, entirely lost interest in the outside world. She said that she enjoyed having friends come to see her, and that she sometimes went automobile-billing with them. But she liked best the quiet family life in the church family. This family lives in the house nearest the church and is usually composed of the leading members of the community.

After 150 years of high endeavor and faithful performance of duties, it is worthy of comment that this sect should have produced nothing more conspicuous than a good type of chair and an economical type of stove. Their aloofness from the world has kept these people practically where they were fifty years ago. Neither their godliness nor their abstinence appears to have helped them toward achievement. Nathaniel Hawthorne in his story of "The Shaker Bridal," speaks of the society "whose members are generally below the ordinary standard of intelligence."

Founded in America by Ann Lee and seven followers who came from England in 1773, to escape persecution, the society at one time embraced seven communities with a membership of more than 5,000. The original founders, however, started a settlement in France in 1689.

Religious services are held by each family in a room set apart in the dormitory building. These spacious dormitories, some of them built of red brick and others of wood, are divided into the women's side and the men's side. There are separate sitting rooms and separate stairways. In this way it is possible for the family to reach the dining room without meeting members of the opposite sex. In the dining room men and women sit at separate tables. And in the chapels the groups are also divided. It is not considered decorous for a Shaker man and a Shaker woman to even touch finger tips.

For the sake of convenience, each community is divided into different branches called families. These families each have a deacon and deaconess at the head who look after the group and settle all difficulties.

That the members live up to their vows zealously was demonstrated by the story of the sister who slipped and broke through the ice of a pond. A brother seeing her plight, instead of lifting her out, went in search of a broom, one end of which he proffered politely but formally. The fallen one gratefully grasped the handle and succeeded in scrambling to her feet and to safety. But the brother had stood by his Shaker contract; he had not even touched the finger tips of the drowning sister.

**Why Children Are Not Taken In.**

One of the sisters said in discussing the depleted ranks of the Shakers:

"We are often asked why we do not take young children into the order. But where are the young children worth taking? Parents do not want to give up their offspring, and the stray waifs that we could get are not always desirable. In many instances the taking of orphans and deserted children into the family has not worked out well. In the old days children were often sent to the Shaker community when there was no other home for them—when, on the death of the mother, relatives refused to care for them. A good common school education was provided them always by teachers of the faith. They were never sent to public school. Practical training which would later provide a means of livelihood was given them, and if traits of genius were discovered special instruction was arranged for.

"You won't find any children today satisfied with the quiet life we led when we were young or who would be contented with the domestic routine of baking, scrubbing and sewing. No, they want a gay time."

But even the glibest flights of the imagination could not conjure up a twentieth century Shaker flapper in cape and hood doing a fox trot down the scanty length of that repressed and repressing Shaker village. That the novitiates of fifty years ago may have taken out their "flapping" in the grotesque evolutions and undulations of the early religious dances seems not unlikely to the modern mind. As Sister Martha Wetherell said, "Human nature doesn't change much after all."

But a pall seems to be settling down over what writers have called the "rich Lebanon" district. The actors are disappearing one by one. The stage is being cleared. The play is about over.

There was an effort made in 1849 to introduce into the State Legislature of New York a bill showing that the members of the United Society of Believers were not living up to the vows made by them on joining the order. An investigation was made by a specially selected committee. This committee, after visiting the various communities and schools of the Shakers, brought in the report that members were in every way conforming to the usual contract of celibacy, frugality, temperance and religious thinking required of them on entering any one of the Shaker families, and that the children in their schools were contented and appeared to be receiving adequate training in all branches of study.

According to a friend of the society who has lived at various times in several of the communities, the question of inheritance is one which is liable to be raised at any time. Whether the last surviving Shaker will be able to will the property as he desires, or whether it will revert to the State, is a question often asked but as yet unanswered. There has been some recent dissension in the ranks over the management of the property, and it is said that much acerbity has been displayed by several of the old folk over what they call "unwise manipulation of temporal matters." Now that the authority for all "spiritual and temporal affairs" has virtually descended to one or two heads, it has created some jealousy among the critical but less fortunate members.

"There is an amazing amount of 'fight' left in these old people yet, I can tell you," said one of the neighbors of the Mount Lebanon colony.

line, the visitor finds a Shaker village. Curled away under the hill there is a store with a weather-beaten sign, "Fancy Work and Antiques," where honey, nut candy, braided rugs, hand-made baskets and other handcraft are sold. Each community has its small store, where the specialties of the different groups are offered. The South family has the famous Shaker chairs, with their straight backs and hand-woven seats; the Hancock family specializes in nut candy, the North family in delicately tinted basketry, and the Church family sells the Shaker capes and hoods and fine needlework.

That the order is fast dying out does not seem to worry the remaining members. There is apparently no effort to proselytize and there is slight cordiality. Questions are frowned upon and one is given plainly to understand that the Shaker family is like any other family and does not open its doors to any but intimate friends. According to Sister Martha Wetherell, who reluctantly came from behind her counter to show the workroom where she cuts the grasses



A Group of the Few Shakers Remaining at Mount Lebanon. Most of Those There at the Time Are Included. Three of Those in the Picture Have Since Died.

for her baskets, "the Shakers are a quiet people who only wish to be left alone."

"Of course, no one wants to join the Shakers now," said this energetic sixty-five-year-old member. "No one, wants a quiet life or much time to think today. There is too much going on out in the world and we don't offer any attractions here. Nothing but hard work," she added, smoothing her black and white calico apron and sinking down onto a short-legged Shaker chair.

"There are so few of us left to take care of things here we have no time for meetings. No time to talk over experiences or to discuss matters. In the old days there were many of us to do the work. Now, I work in this store all Summer and in the Winter take my turn in the kitchen. We each take over the cooking for a time and, of course, have all the other work to do."

According to the Shakers, "cleanliness is next to godliness," and the surpassing lustre of the floors and linoleums and glistening windows would indicate that they live up to this doctrine. The little sister in her full-skirted black and white calico left no doubt that she had a "nose for dust" and that she found dust in any form intolerable.

**Life of High Ideals.**

"We take the Bible literally," said this sister, who came to live with the Shakers when she was 6 years old. To

sing, too, long before 'harmony' was allowed. Not dancing as they know it now, but each one doing solo steps."

Back in 1839, when Sister Corinna joined the United Society of Believers, members were not allowed to have a picture or photograph in their rooms and all letters were censored.

**Things Are Different Now.**

"Nay," continued the little old lady, who is nearing her eightieth birthday, but who still trips lightly up and down stairs attending to household duties, "no callers could come to our rooms in those days, or to the sitting room. We had to see our friends in the office. Usually some of the other members were present also. Now there are so few of us that the rules are less strict. I don't think my letters are censored any longer. And you see I have pictures," pointing to the photographs on the wall and bureau.

Going back to the beginnings of the society, Sister Corinna told of the injustice done "Mother Ann," as she called the founder, Ann Lee.

"You see, the world is not always right," she said. "They put Mother Ann in prison after the authorities had tried her for witchcraft. There they left her to starve. But several days later she was singing hymns and seemed none the worse for her imprisonment. Later she was released. This story was told to me when I was a young girl and it made a deep impression. Nay, nay, we do not