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Shaker Meeting House, Sabbathday Lake, 1962. Shaker communities adhered to a philosophy of simplicity and self-sufficiency, but they also responded successfully to the nation's emerging commercial and industrial economy. Thus they forged an accommodation between the demands of the external world and their own philosophy of spiritual self-discipline. *Maine Historic Buildings Survey Photo, Maine Historical Society.*

# SUFFICIENT UNTO THEMSELVES: LIFE AND ECONOMY AMONG THE SHAKERS IN NINETEENTH- CENTURY RURAL MAINE

MARK B. LAPPING

*Community self-sufficiency was an ideal that both defined and informed the Shaker experience in America. During the nineteenth century the Shakers at Sabbathday Lake Colony in New Gloucester, Maine—today the last remaining Shaker Colony in the nation—developed a sophisticated economic system that combined agricultural innovation, a far-reaching market-based trade in seeds, herbs, and medicinals, mill-based and home manufacturers, and “fancy goods” to supply the developing tourist sector. They practiced both selective cluture and a profound degree of market savvy as they confronted the maturing market economy. Mark B. Lapping is Professor of Public Policy at the Muskie School of Public Service, University of Southern Maine, in Portland. He is author of several books and many articles and is currently editing for re-publication Clarence Day’s classic History of Agriculture in Maine.*

**A**MONG THOSE who have studied American socialism, utopianism, and similar social experiments, there has been an ongoing debate as to why the United States has been such a fertile place for these endeavors—and why nearly all have ultimately failed. One school of thought has it that American prosperity, an achievement-oriented value system, and a strong belief in individuality doomed utopianism and made socialism impossible. Cohesion, mutualism, self-sacrifice, and even religious principle melted away in the face of material abundance and the ability of individuals to succeed in the larger culture. The Shaker experience is different from most American utopian experiments in that it stressed the rigors of communal living on a scale largely without duplication in American life, and it was able to forge an accommodation between the emerging market economy and its own agrarian-based communal needs and expectations. Few would deny that the Shakers were anything other than successful—at times, even prosper-

ous—even while their material possessions were modest and their living principles austere and simple. Indeed, the aesthetic style synonymous with Shakerism bespeaks quality, durability, functionalism, and modesty. The Believers still survive, albeit in such greatly diminished numbers that the future of Shakerism is at some risk.<sup>1</sup>

To survive, the Shakers found it necessary to accommodate their “radical form of self-sufficiency,” as Stephen Stein has called their mode of living, to the larger economic world, which supplied some of their basic material needs. This may well be the paradox of all such covenanted communities: self-sufficiency and exceptionalism depended upon a degree of intercourse with the larger outside world. And as that exposure intensified, it brought changes in the fabric of life that created conflict. Early on, self-sufficiency attracted individuals and families to Shakerism because it promised them security and comfort during periods of economic dislocation. But the drive for self-sufficiency was indeed an agent of change. “It was the attempt at self-sufficiency,” notes Shaker historian Brother Theodore E. Johnson, “which gave birth to the almost incredible diversification of industrial and agricultural activity that characterized nineteenth-century Shakerism.”<sup>2</sup>

Much of Shaker prosperity rested upon the productivity and progressive nature of its agriculture and its home-based manufactures. Shaker communities throughout the country were highly successful, even though their productivity was initially oriented toward internal and domestic consumption. Indeed, the Shakers were an inspiration for other utopian experiments. No less an advocate of the associational life than Friedrich Engels believed that the Shakers proved the wisdom of the communist economic system. Robert Owen, the pre-eminent utopian socialist of the nineteenth century, studied and visited Shaker colonies throughout his life.<sup>3</sup>

Shakers were successful in agriculture wherever colonies were established, even in marginally productive farming areas like New England and northern New York. According to agricultural historian Howard Russell, Shakers were “skilled horticulturists.” Likewise, Harold Fisher Wilson noted the especially pivotal role the Shakers played in the early development of the sheep industry. New York’s agricultural historian wrote that “agriculture benefitted by many suggestions from the Shakers.” Shaker contributions were significant as well in small-scale forestry and milling and in the design and fabrication of farm implements, machinery, looms, and other aspects of rural economic life. Until 1820 Shaker practice forbade the patenting of products and innovations as

monopolies, making it nearly impossible to determine with any certainty just which among the many contributions ascribed to the Shakers actually originated with the them.<sup>4</sup> But after a thorough review of the subject, one scholar ascribed to them the following inventions: “circular saw, brimstone match, screw propeller, cut nail, clothespin, flat broom, pea sheller, threshing machine, revolving oven, and a variety of machines for turning broom handles, cutting leather, and printing labels.”<sup>5</sup> This is likely only a partial list. It was inevitable that the Shakers would be engaged in such activities since agriculture and light manufacturing were among the predominant ways in which the young republic accumulated capital and organized labor. The principle of “Tis a joy to be simple” may have kept the Shakers in the country and on the farm, but this aphorism does not accurately explain just how successful they were.

### **Farming at the Sabbathday Lake Colony**

The heyday of American Shakerism coincided with the halcyon days of American agriculture, in terms of the number of farms in the country, the number of people who farmed for a living, and the dependence upon agriculture as a primary source of wealth creation. In the nineteenth century farming was still a way of life as well as a way of making a living. Like many Americans, the Believers grew food to support their own communities and to exchange in the nascent market economy where cash crops, such as flax for linseed oil, broom corn, cotton, tobacco, cornmeal, eggs and butter, and all manner of grains and livestock were important commodities. Agriculture was, as historian Dolores Hayden notes, the “supreme practical art [which] was unchallenged in their [Shaker] communities.” Like other Shaker colonies in Maine, New Hampshire, Massachusetts, and New York, the Sabbathday Lake Colony in New Gloucester was a stunning success in agriculture and other “practical arts.”<sup>6</sup>

Founded in 1794, Sabbathday Lake was one of four Shaker colonies established in Maine. In time the Gorham Colony and the Alfred Colony would be absorbed into Sabbathday Lake. The nearby novitiate community of Poland Hill, long connected with Sabbathday Lake, was also merged into the larger colony in later years. Sabbathday Lake is the only colony in Maine to survive well into the twentieth century, and it is now the only surviving Shaker community in the country. The colony’s population went from a high of 139 people in 1820 to as few as 41 at the

close of the century. Male population as a percentage of the whole ranged from about 41 percent in 1820 to 25 percent in 1890.<sup>7</sup>

Like all Shaker communities, Sabbathday Lake was organized around agriculture, a blend of commercial necessity and communal faith. Farming was more than a form of wealth creation; it had a decidedly theological dimension as well. The enthusiasm for farming originated in the type of communal Christianity to which the Believers adhered: it was a "consecrated industry." It also conformed to the realities of community-building, in that it kept the Believers together in compact units and reduced the divisions between work, meditation, and communal prayer. Work was an all-encompassing theme of Shaker life, and farm work, in its various forms, conformed to the dictum of the founder of Shakerism, Mother Ann Lee, who implored all to "put their hands to work and their hearts to God." Significantly, too, Shaker agricultural productivity required an almost relentless attention to detail and quality, attributes of an intensive agricultural system. This, too, was consistent with Ann Lee's dictum to avoid idleness at all costs, for while "the devil tempts others...an idle person tempts the devil."<sup>8</sup>

The intensive nature of Shaker agriculture, which served the colony well for years, in time came to work against the Believers. Even discounting the efficiencies from the many technological innovations the Shakers introduced, the gradual attrition of adult male labor forced the community to hire outside help. Often, problems emerged: drunken behavior, petty thievery, and arson. This was not serious at Sabbathday Lake, however. In a number of cases several generations of local families worked for the Shakers at Sabbathday Lake, and in other instances, such as those of Otis Campbell and True Merrill, hired hands received land from the communal holdings, upon which they built their homes and continued to work at the colony. Sabbathday Lake Shakers erected a Hired Men's House to board men during winter and when extra labor was needed, such as apple harvesting time.<sup>9</sup>

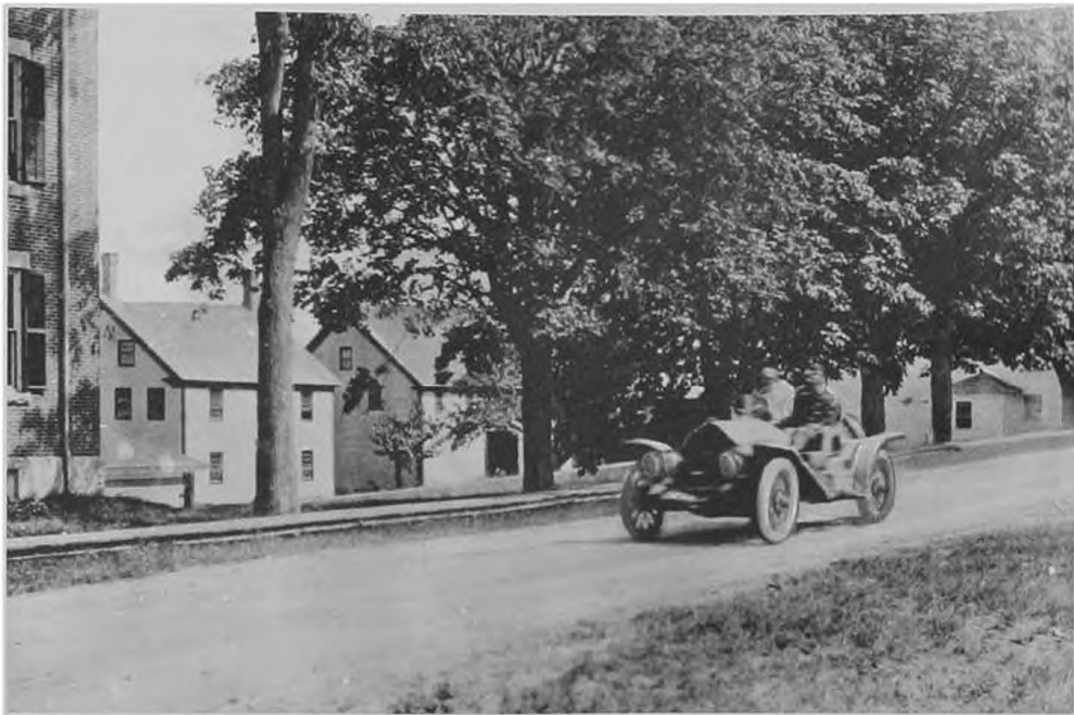
The distinctive features of Shaker agriculture included neat tillage, an experimental approach, democratic work patterns, and diversity. The latter was more or less typical of early American agriculture, where subsistence and self-sufficiency were more common than market specialization. It was particularly pronounced in Maine, where "growing a broad range of subsistence crops to hedge against market or crop failure" was the rule.<sup>10</sup> This complex system of farm production, coupled with forestry, ice harvesting, small-scale manufacturing, and other rural pursuits, was crucial to rural survival. Bartering, sharing work and equip-



At the Sabbathday Lake Colony, farming was a “consecrated industry” – a blend of commercial activity and communal faith. Weeding, for instance, assumed almost metaphysical significance: it promoted community, cultivated the mind, and cleansed the spirit. Pulling weeds was like casting out impure thoughts. *Collection of the United Society of Shakers, Sabbathday Lake, Maine, courtesy Gay Marks, Shaker Library.*

ment, trading work for taxes, and charging below market prices to rural neighbors were also important survival strategies employed by the colony. The relatively large size of Shaker farms helps explain the complexity of their diversification patterns. Initially, however, this was not the case at Sabbathday Lake. As Alan Hall noted, “if one subtracts the extensive timberlands and the large acreage tied up in ponds and bogs, the area of tillable lands and pasturage [at Sabbathday Lake] was actually quite small”—perhaps only half the average for the nineteenth-century Maine farm. To achieve the diversification distinctive of Shaker farms, those at Sabbathday Lake employed intensive farming techniques, and in addition they gradually expanded their land-holdings over the course of the century.<sup>11</sup>

The Sabbathday Lake Shakers grew a variety of high-yield crops, including grains, vegetables, fruits, herbs, and other staples necessary for the kitchen and the home. Various forms of animal husbandry, especially raising sheep, horses, and oxen, were important. Dairying became significant in the latter part of the nineteenth century, both as a response to the dearth of adult male labor available to the colony and to the suc-



Sabbathday Lake, Maine. Shaker inventions, like Shaker farm products, found their way into the broader community. *Maine Historical Society photo.*

cessful introduction of key labor-saving technologies—among them the De Laval cream separator, brought to the Sabbathday Lake Colony in the late 1880s soon after its initial entry into the marketplace.<sup>12</sup>

If diversity in production was crucial, then attention to detail, a commitment to quality, and a sophisticated understanding of how to market and distribute products were also important ingredients for Shaker agricultural success. The Shakers were, quite simply, exquisite in their approach to farming. They were hard-working, inventive, and guided by a strong belief system that reinforced their approach to literally everything they did in the garden, the field, and the forest. These ideals appeared in such forums as *The Gardener's Manual*, which was widely circulated and read, and in many other Shaker and non-Shaker publications. The principles were practiced daily on nearly every colony in the country. The Shakers were early proponents of what in our times is termed “sustainable agriculture.” They may have been among the first in the country to incorporate composting on a large scale, and their control of soil erosion was well ahead of the times. They were also committed to practicing manual rather than chemical control of weeds, insects, and diseases. Weeding assumed an almost metaphysical power; reading



through Shaker diaries and logbooks indicates that it was a major community activity, consuming hours of labor, especially that of women and children. As historian Ruth Buchanan has written, "one explanation for this emphasis is that the Shakers compared cultivating a garden to cultivating the mind, and regarded weeding as a metaphor for spiritual cleansing. Pulling out weeds was like casting out impure thoughts. In that sense, the act of weeding was as beneficial for the gardener as it was for the garden." Shakers used tools to good effect, took great care of their draft and work animals, and read widely in the literature of agricultural innovation. They developed new varieties and strains of seed—sweet corn for example—and exchanged views on all agricultural matters, both within the system of colonies and beyond.<sup>13</sup>

A specialty of the Sabbathday Lake Colony was fruit production, especially apples. Apples were the leading fruit in Maine orchards generally, and so it was at Sabbathday Lake. A traveler passing through New Gloucester in the autumn of 1836 found the landscape "a succession of fine orchards and thrifty apple trees, interspersed with a few plums and pears, and here and there an effort to raise a peach."<sup>14</sup> Doubtless the Sabbathday Lake Shakers contributed substantially to this idyllic atmosphere.

Early apple cultivation at Sabbathday Lake was oriented to varieties good for baking and cooking and capable of being kept over time. Cider was an important beverage at the colony, and some of it was hardened for consumption as well as for vinegar. In 1845 the colony built a large cider mill with space allocated for apple drying and for "apple peeling bees." These bees, which absorbed a great deal of the sisters' labor, were held "several times a week until the entire supply was prepared for drying"—sometimes as much as 1,200 pounds per season. Hundreds of barrels of apples were harvested for sale or for applesauce firkins, or casks. During the 1870s and 1880s the sale of the fruit alone earned the colony between \$300 and \$800 annually. Applesauce sales earned an additional several hundreds of dollars each year. Apples were, then, an important cash crop, even at a time when orchards were being developed elsewhere in the state. Beyond the task of harvesting, considerable labor was spent on grading and evaluating the fruit, all by hand. This must have been a considerable task; during the 1870s, the Shakers processed between 800 and 1,000 bushels of apples each year.<sup>15</sup>

Elder John Coffin managed the orchards from the 1840s until his death in 1870. He expanded both the size of the orchards and the varieties of apples, including two he developed, the James Sweets and the

Oliver Sweets, named after two brethren of the colony. His successor, Elder William Dumont, further expanded the orchard to approximately fifteen acres. He, too, introduced new varieties, including Baldwins, Pippins, and Gravensteins, and he installed an apple drying kiln and an evaporator to make cider production more efficient. Dumont—who also managed the colony’s lumber business—served as Highway Surveyor for the Town of Poland and was active in town affairs in other ways. He also participated in the Maine State Pomological Society, as has Coffin. Dumont mentored and trained his own successor, Brother Delmar C. Wilson, who again expanded the orchards to nearly thirty-five acres. During his time, Baldwins, Northern Spies, Cortlands, McIntosh, and Winesaps were popular colony offerings. Wilson was deeply involved in various aspects of horticultural science and maintained an active correspondence with the State Agricultural Experiment Station in Orono and with Cornell’s fruit science research center at Geneva, New York. He even hosted a meeting of the Maine State Pomological Society at Sabbathday Lake. This level of involvement in scientific organizations was far from exceptional. The Shakers, unlike some Millennialist communities, embraced the latest breakthroughs and innovations in agricultural science and technology. As Edward R. Horgan remarks, “the Shakers believed in progressive revelation in matters spiritual and could not see why temporal enlightenment should not also be welcome. Their own economic structure, in fact, was a crucible of inventive creativity.”<sup>16</sup>

Shaker productivity was underscored by the care they exhibited for the land. While Shaker farmsteads may not have been renowned for colorful flowers and ornaments—though that came with time—they were clean, well-built, efficient, fertile, and beautiful in their own way. Of the Shaker colony in Lebanon, Ohio, a foreign visitor wrote: “The fences were higher and stronger than those on the adjacent farms; the woods were clean of underbrush; the tillage was of extraordinary neatness; the horses, cattle, and sheep were of the best breeds, and in the best condition.”<sup>17</sup>

Some of this may be explained by the fact that the Shakers were committed to “staying put.” Unlike many Americans who were forever in transit from one place to another, the Shakers built colonies to last: the community was the farm, and the farm was the community. Shakers differed from other Millennialist communitarians in that Shakers believed that a Second Coming, of sorts, had already occurred in the fulfillment of revelation to Sister Ann Lee. More accurately, Shakers sought transcendence “by creating a world which would no longer be ‘of this world,’

yet nevertheless would be here, now, and real.” As Sister Ann Lee herself declared, “Live like angels and insofar as you do, you shall see that the end of the world is already here.” Shaker colonies were not transitional geographies on the way toward the Second Coming; they were permanent and consecrated spiritual sanctuaries, where Believers could live their faith and receive salvation on a daily basis. This reinforced Shaker notions of community and of agrarian stewardship. Shakers treated one another with respect and dignity, and this ethical stance generally extended to their land, their animals, and their tools. Historian Carolyn Merchant explains this interplay between people and nature by stressing that Shakerism was an “alternative to the gender inequalities of market production, property ownership, and patriarchal religion....[at the same time] the Shaker utopian model represented a viable ecological alternative to the environmental depletions caused by commercial expansion.”<sup>18</sup>

### **The Seed Industry at Sabbathday Lake**

Like other forms of agriculture, the Shaker seed industry was crucial both to self-sufficiency—mandated by a theology of self-reliance—and to commerce with the outside community. Even as they strove for some degree of separation from others, the Shakers sought to maintain a controlled openness, and seed production and trade was one of the intermediaries between communities. Unlike some communitarian groups, the Shakers did not hesitate to purchase goods or technology from the outside world. They used their seeds, the food they grew, the herbal preparations they developed, the wool they raised, and the furnishings they produced as sources of external earnings and a point of contact with others.<sup>19</sup>

Maine Shakers started selling seed commercially at the end of the eighteenth century when, like so many of their neighbors, they began to turn to the maturing market economy for a portion of their prosperity. The Shaker seed industry—America’s first—was an accommodation to this new economic reality. As the industry grew in sophistication and profitability, it became the source of considerable capital and also one of the key elements in establishing the Shaker reputation for honesty, quality, and excellence. Early on, the Shakers sold seeds door-to-door, but after a time they established an elaborate sales and distribution network involving dealers, general stores, and ultimately mail-order catalogues.

The Shakers invented the practice of selling seeds in small paper envelopes, or papers as they were called. Prior to this, seeds were sold in large amounts out of barrels in stores or in heavy cloth bags. The first shakers to sell seed packages, in the late 1790s, were Deacon James Holmes and Brother Josiah Holmes, natural brothers from the Sabbath-day Lake Colony.<sup>20</sup>

The Shakers created a pleasing and space-economizing display box, which could be placed on a sill, a table, a bench, or a counter. It contained numerous paper seed packets, each with a specified amount of seed. This system allowed the gardener or farmer to purchase just the amount of seed needed. The one-ounce size was the most popular packet. The Shakers dropped off the display boxes at stores and other points of distribution and worked on consignment rather than force merchants to purchase seeds outright. Merchants paid for only for the seed they sold, usually retaining one-third of the sales price. Shaker salesmen spent a great time on the road, but they also used broadsides, advertisements in farm journals, and catalogues to bring their products to the attention of potential customers.<sup>21</sup> These advertisements were attractive, easy to read, and full of the information a consumer required to make an informed purchase. Known for its freshness, purity, and cleanliness, Shaker seed was of the highest quality, and it came with the promise that any unsold stock could be returned at no cost. The timing of this Shaker innovation could not have been better; as the country expanded westward, the demand for quality seed grew dramatically.

The Shakers proved to be extraordinarily good marketers, with a savvy sense of what the market demanded and what they would have to do to remain competitive within it. Sometimes this bred a degree of competition between them and others and, sometimes, between one colony and another. Thus trade routes were carefully laid out to avoid competition between colonies. In Maine, the Alfred Colony had the “mountain route” in New Hampshire and Maine and also much of the “seaside route” in the latter—known as the “Great Eastern Route.” The Sabbathday Lake Colony also had a “coastal route,” but it was relegated to the eastern Maine coast, including the lucrative Mt. Desert Island-Bar Harbor market. The two Maine colonies agreed to a boundary between them in 1837, but some degree of competition was perhaps inevitable, and “territories” were not always inviolate. Correspondence from 1838 indicates that the Alfred Colony was selling seed in several New Hampshire communities which the Canterbury (New Hampshire) Colony claimed as their territory. Two members of the New Hampshire colony



Farm activities at Sabbathday Lake. The Shaker economy embraced a system of diversified farming, supplemented by other rural pursuits like seed manufacture and distribution, sawmilling, and poplarware production. *Maine Historical Society photo.*

wrote to Deacon Nathan Freeman of Alfred: “without doubt you will at once say with us that it is not only convenient but absolutely necessary in this world to have *Elbow Room*. This admitted, we will endeavor to show to you that we have not this desirable and necessary requisite on our seed route....Now beloved Deacon, do you think that we stand in a rather squeezed situation and without any means of enlarging our route hedged on all sides by bounds which we consider sacred and inviolable until removed by mutual agreement....What if the state line be made the division (which we think of right ought to be) it makes all straight and gives us the desired *Elbow Room* of which we so much need [and] which we confidently believe you can spare.” This protest aside, the letter ends with a postscript offering to sell the Alfred Colony cucumber, beet, parsnip, and carrot seeds. Attempts to mediate the trade territory disagreement appear to have failed, and discord among the colonies’ leadership continued for years.<sup>22</sup>

One reason for Shaker success in the seed industry was the vertical integration of their industry. They grew the seed, processed it, packaged

it, distributed it, and financed the risk of others who sold it. This proved to be a powerful system that continued to grow, reaching its zenith just after the Civil War. Thereafter competition, sometimes from former members of the Believers, pushed the Shaker industry into decline. By 1860 the once robust and lucrative seed industry at the Alfred Colony was no longer, and at Sabbathday Lake emphasis had shifted from marketing to individuals and through stores and merchants to supplying the large seed warehouses located throughout the region, such as the Shaker Seed Company in New York.<sup>23</sup> The transformation of a home-based industry serving local and regional needs to one integrated into the mass national market was complete.

### Medicinals at Sabbathday Lake

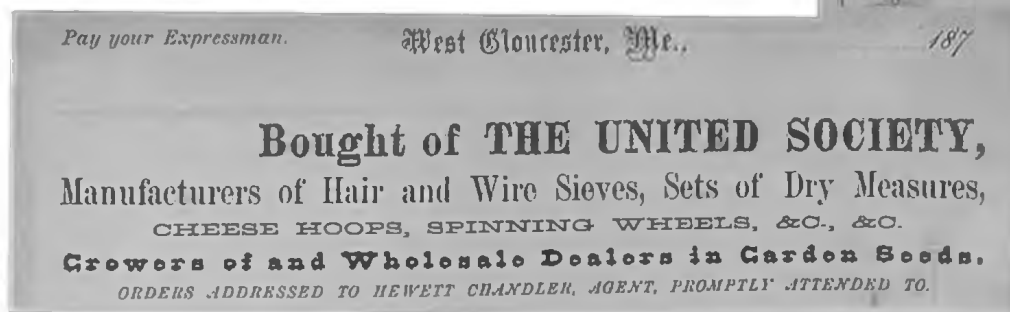
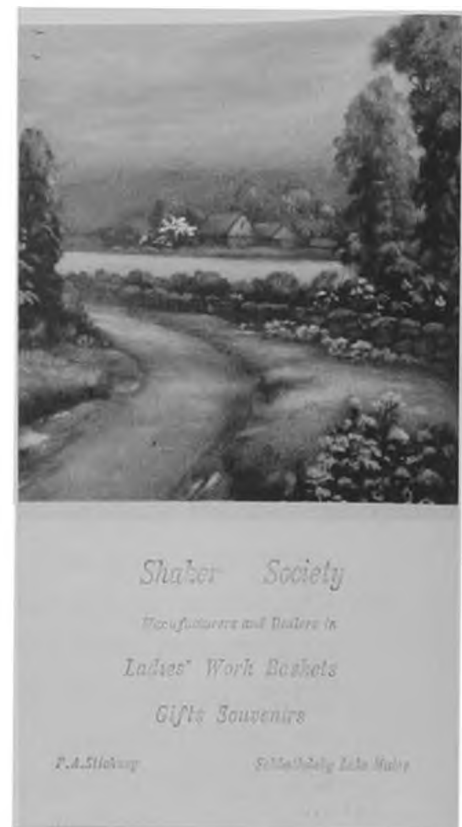
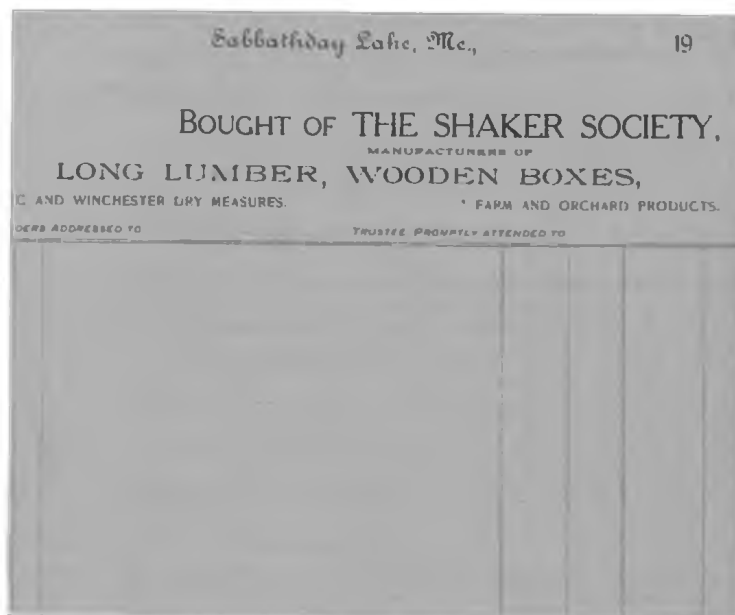
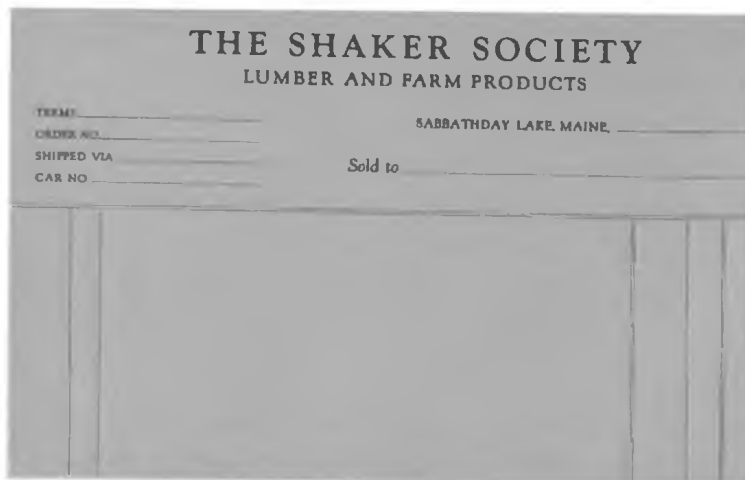
Closely tied to the seed industry was the medicinal plant, or herbal industry. This, too, had its roots in the Shaker community with its accent on preventative health interventions, proper dietary habits, and the use of native plants, herbs, and tree barks as sources of necessary medicinals. Herbs not only had a place in the medicine cabinet but in the kitchen. Culinary herbs like sage, summer savory, sweet marjoram, thyme, cayenne pepper, caraway, coriander, dill, fennel, lavender, and rosemary were well-known Shaker contributions to the dinner tables of America. A separate herb house was built at Sabbathday Lake in 1824 to facilitate this very labor-intensive and time-consuming industry. During this period the colony had over thirty acres devoted to herbs and other crops, located on terraced plots rising up the hill toward the colony from Sabbathday Lake itself.

The trade in medicinal herbs paralleled that of the seed industry, though in this case many of the products were identified personally with their creators. Identifying a product with a Shaker “chemist” may have been strategic, given that this was a period in which quackery, patent medicines, and “toadstool millionaires” abounded, to use J. H. Young’s colorful but accurate phrase. Shaker herbal catalogs also carried scientific references for the ingredients in their preparations and thereby helped to make standard the practice. At Sabbathday Lake, Trustee William Dumont became famous for a tamar laxative advertised under his name. This product was made exclusively at Sabbathday Lake, although it was not wholly developed at the colony. The laxative was announced as a “medical Lozenge the formula of which was gotten up by

Dr. Benjamin Gates of Mt. Lebanon and Dr. A. J. White, 29 Mumay Street, New York City, which business with a large quantity of material was presented to the Church with a hope that the manufacture of the medicine would prove a lucrative business.” This proved to be the case, as the tamer was probably the most significant herb medicinal made at the Maine colony. Orders came from as far away as Australia.<sup>24</sup>

In 1864 Brother Charles Veining published an entire *Catalogue of Herbs, Roots, Barks, Powdered Articles, Etc., Prepared in the United Society, New Gloucester, Maine*, listing over 150 medicinal and cooking herbs for purchase. Some of the most famous of those available through the Sabbathday Lake Colony included belladonna leaves, which relieved pain, induced sleeping, and acted as a diuretic; boniest, which produced vomiting and sweat and provided “permanent” strengthening; coltsfoot root, beneficial in diseases of the chest; fleabane, an astringent which arrested bleeding; wild indigo root, an antiseptic; maidenhair, useful for expelling worms; and skunk cabbage root, which relaxed spasms and calmed nervousness. Gerald C. Wertkin noted that the Mount Lebanon Colony in New York marketed nationally such products as the Shaker Asthma Cure, Mother Seigel’s Curative Syrup, Shaker Hair Restorer, Shaker Digestive Cordials, Shaker Family Pills, and Shaker Soothing Plasters. The name Shaker, tied to seeds and medicines, was so synonymous with purity, quality, and wholesomeness that it became something of a trademark. Yet one student of Shakerism noted cryptically that the popularity of Shaker medicinals may have had something to do with their alcoholic content.<sup>25</sup>

The use of such medicinals constituted something of a challenge to the medical profession, and unfortunately some of the Shakers were not above making outrageous claims for their herbs, which were shipped everywhere and sold directly to individuals, to retail druggists, and to not a few physicians. Amy Bess Miller, who wrote the definitive history of the Shaker herb industry, points out that the Shaker colonies she studied each averaged \$150,000 in sales annually from herb sales during the early nineteenth century. As she notes, “the Shakers became the first people in the country to produce herbs on a scale large enough to supply the pharmaceutical market, netting many thousands of dollars annually.”<sup>26</sup> The preparation of herbal and medicinal products still takes place at the Sabbathday Lake Colony, reintroduced in 1969 by Brother Theodore Johnson as a mail order business.



Sawmilling and a number of other commercial activities linked the colony to the wider non-Shaker world. *Maine Historical Society Collections.*



## The Mills at Sabbathday Lake

The Shaker colonies were involved in small-scale manufacturing as well as agriculture. With the development of several small reservoirs and dams, the Sabbathday Lake Colony powered a series of mills. A gristmill, built in 1786, was renovated and expanded into a multi-purpose facility by Deacon James Holmes in 1808. It processed wheat, rye, corn and other grains into meal and flour for local use and market exchange. A sawmill, built in 1796, produced lumber, hogshead staves, shingles, and, in time, wooden-ware, tubs, pails, churns, dry measures, spinning wheels, and other wooden products. Processing wood and grain for others, the mills allowed farmers around Sabbathday Lake to participate in larger markets using Lewiston's rail connections. As Sister R. Mildred Barker wrote, "a great many farmers living in the back towns of Norway, Hebron, Paris, and Poland would bring their grain, have it ground, then take the meal to the Portland market." By the turn of the nineteenth century New Gloucester, already considered something of a prosperous agricultural town, was an important stopping-off point for pioneer movement into western Maine.<sup>27</sup> Undoubtedly the existence of the Shaker mill complex was an incentive for settlement in the area. In this and other ways the Shaker colony was an important component of the economic infrastructure in this part of the state.

Over time the mill works were renovated and expanded, and textile production became an important mill-based activity for the colony. Cotton carding was introduced in 1808 with the installation of a power carding machine at the mill complex. This was likely one of the very first such machines in Maine, since this technology was only introduced into the United States in 1788. The colony purchased raw cotton in Portland and returned to Portland with finished cloth. By the 1820s, Shakers no longer produced cotton goods, due to competition from large-scale textile mills elsewhere in Maine and New England, but wool carding remained an important feature of colony life. By this time Portland, the most important market town for inland Maine, was a jumping-off point for Shaker goods of all sorts.<sup>28</sup>

While male and female members of the colony had different roles, the textile economy brought them together around the full cycle of product development. This helped to maintain community solidarity, coherence, and a clarity typical of the household economy model. This is perhaps best illustrated in the development of another unique Shaker product: poplarware boxes and accessories.

The technology to create poplarware was introduced to the Sabbathday Lake Colony in 1869 when Elder Otis Sawyer brought it back to Maine from the Mt. Lebanon Colony in New York.<sup>29</sup> Sharing technological innovations and other discoveries was commonplace in Shaker society, just as they shared theological precepts, songs, ceremonies, leadership, and communicants. Brethren harvested poplar from the extensive forest lands on the colony and then milled the logs into “sticks,” which were planed and shaved into thin “curls.” Sisters ironed, dried, and shaved these into strips one sixteenth inch by twenty inches, which were then woven into a fabric. Much of the weaving was done by young girls. The fabric was cut into smaller pieces and applied to the sides of pasteboard, which was then fashioned into boxes and lids. Satin was applied to lids and sides, and kid leather covered the edges and corners to make a smooth surface. Satin ribbon fasteners were attached to hold small accessories and handles, and a community trademark was stamped onto the bottom of the box to identify it as Shaker-made. The entire process consumed the labor of many members during the long winter months when most other activities were in abeyance. Poplarware items became a mainstay of the “fancy goods” trade of the Sabbathday Lake Colony, the labor-intensive industry bringing the entire community together into one integrated home-based production system. By one estimate, Sabbathday Lake produced between 2,500 and 5,000 pieces of poplarware annually at the turn of the century. At first, boxes were sold to consumers who visited the colony; later Shakers distributed poplarware on their trade routes and through catalogs. They also displayed their crafts at fairs and craft exhibits. In 1875 Elder Otis Sawyer brought back a bronze medal won for “Ladies Fancy Work” at the New England Agricultural Society Fair. Going to fairs and exhibits was a favorite Shaker pastime, especially for the children, but they were marketing opportunities as well.<sup>30</sup>

Contrary to usual practices, poplar was not harvested in a sustainable way. This may have been a response to fiscal difficulties in the colony, brought about by a long-term decline in overall communal membership and debts acquired through poor investments in western land speculation. Over time, the poplar simply ran out, and by the turn of the century the colony was forced to substitute imitation leather and other fabrics to keep production going. But by then the market had declined substantially, and the colony limited sales of the imitation poplarware to mail orders.<sup>31</sup>

In 1853 a communal decision was made to expand the mill complex

at Sabbathday Lake, and the colony built what became known as the Great Mill. Its establishment coincided with the coming of railroads into the region, thus making it possible for farmers to develop more commercially viable products, such as eggs, dairy items, fruits, and berries. The railroad also coincided with the rise of a stronger entrepreneurial spirit on the part of several younger colony trustees.<sup>32</sup>

By 1892, the colony sawed 254,000 logs, with the majority belonging to the colony's neighbors. It also produced sieve and dry measures and other wooden products. In time, dimensional lumber replaced the wooden products at the mill, as lumber was shipped from Sabbathday Lake to companies in nearby village and urban centers, such as Yarmouth, Freeport, Lewiston, Auburn, and Portland. Using a new metal-working facility, Brother Hewitt Chandler developed a hay mower, which he patented. He and his team of workers, some of whom were hired hands, producing one hundred machines in a year. Chandler developed other machines as well, including one that made oak staves into shooks for use as hogsheads and barrels. Significantly, these products were designed and made for an international trade, shipped largely through Portland. As Sister Aurelia Mace observed, mill products, seed and farm products, fancy goods, and other products made the 1850s and 1860s "our prosperous days."<sup>33</sup> Finances were secure enough to permit several land transactions which expanded the colony by some 200 acres.

Without consulting the elders of the colony, Brother Ransom Gilman and several of the other trustees who managed the Great Mill borrowed funds to finance a speculative grain venture. That this could occur was the result, in part, of the growing separation of temporal and theological leadership in the community. Concerned about this development, the colony elevated Brother Otis Sawyer to eldership to restore control and provide greater coherence and continuity in all colony matters. The effect failed, leaving Gilman and his assistant, Charles Vining, with even less supervision. Like other Sabbathday Lake Shakers, they were caught up in an enthusiasm for growing and milling wheat that was gripping Maine and New England. Gilman moved aggressively, purchasing several train-car loads of western grain in Chicago for shipment to Sabbathday Lake for milling. The timing was wrong, and the flour sold for a significant loss. The colony was forced to borrow more money, and the Shakers found themselves in a cycle of debt, borrowing, greater debt, more borrowing, and finally, collapse. In 1859 delegates from the home church in Mt. Lebanon arrived in New Gloucester to take over the grain debt, to the great embarrassment of the Sabbathday Lake trustees. This

embarrassment was exacerbated when Gilman's assistant, Vining, quietly sold off some of the colony's land assets, pocketed the \$5,000, and left for Portland. Later the colony discovered that Vining had put the colony in debt by another \$9,000. To make matters worse, speculative activities by another brother, Isaiah Wentworth, brought additional financial burdens. Through hard work, sacrifice, several gifts of cash from other Shaker colonies, and profits from some of their successful speculative ventures, the debts were paid off in 1871.

By the end of the 1870s stability had returned to Sabbathday Lake. The colony population rose to 65 adults, debts were retired, farm operations stood in good form, and Elder Otis Sawyer regained control over both spiritual and temporal life. The Great Mill represents the Shaker's first full immersion into the world of modern market capitalism. It was not an entirely satisfactory experience, but the Shakers realized certain important benefits from their participation in the larger economy. As with most things in Shaker life, finding the appropriate balance between agriculture, manufacturing, and trade for local consumption and far-away markets became a key to community survival during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

### **Provisioning the Tourist**

The tourist industry, growing in Maine as elsewhere, proved especially fortuitous as a counterbalance to the declining fortunes in the more traditional Shaker farm and timber economy. In the late 1870s Brother Otis Sawyer recorded in his farm journal that "the farm especially was in debt which seems not to speak well of the present system of farming. . . . A farm properly managed can be made a profitable business. There is something amiss that is not as it should be and shows a need for a little more brain power."<sup>34</sup> The tourist supply and market routes tended to mimic the previously developed seed sales routes. The Alfred Colony helped supply the seaside resorts on the New Hampshire coast and up through Kennebunkport in Maine, while the Sabbathday Lake Colony provisioned coastal hotels and resorts from York to Bar Harbor, the islands of Penobscot and Casco bays, and in Maine's interior, including the Moosehead Lake region.

Besides fresh foods, Shakers offered "fancy goods" like vinegar, apple-sauce, pickles, and tomatoes. They also sold poplarware boxes and turkey feathers, used in fans, baskets, shawls and other women's wear.



Shakers sold farm produce, mill products, poplarware, and “fancy goods” like vinegar, applesauce, pickles, and tomatoes. To counterbalance the declining market in traditional farm and timber items, the colony turned to the tourist trade, serving customers, for example, in Bar Harbor or at the nearby Poland Spring House resort. *Maine Historical Society photo.*

The most lucrative sales route included Bar Harbor, already an important tourist destination. Likewise, ships putting into harbor at Portland received provisions from local Shaker colonies.<sup>35</sup> Perhaps the most curious tie to the expanding tourist sector was the link between the Sabbathday Lake Colony and the nearby Poland Spring House resort, owned and managed by the Ricker family. This unique relationship reflected the ongoing relationship between the Shakers and the Rickers, which spanned generations. In the 1790s Jabez Ricker exchanged land and a valuable mill site in Alfred to the newly established Shaker colony in that community. In return he took possession of a large piece of farmland in Poland, approximately one mile from the Sabbathday Lake site in New Gloucester. In addition to providing a local market, the Rickers loaned farm equipment and were, on more than one occasion, important political allies for the Shakers in their dealings with the State of Maine. They

also helped the colony by purchasing the former novitiate community site at Poland Hill. This provided a source of capital for some long-term community investments.

The Rickers built a hotel on the Poland site as early as 1797. In the subsequent generation, this became the Wentworth Ricker Inn, and by midcentury the Ricker family was on its way to becoming pre-eminent among Maine hoteliers and a driving force in both tourism and Progressive-era conservation. The inn was replaced in 1856 by the Poland Spring House, a spa capitalizing on a nearby mineral spring the Rickers developed earlier. The Rickers enticed guests with the exceptional quality and “curative powers” of the spring waters, and with a set of outstanding facilities. The resort complex was expanded several times, and by the turn of the century it had become a massive complex, consisting of a huge hotel, a golf course, a library, a music and art hall, a conservatory, and a museum—one of the East’s greatest resorts. It had, as characterized by several Maine historians, a “distinctive blend of opulence and rusticity that was the hallmark of Maine tourism.”<sup>36</sup>

Initially the Sabbathday Lake Shakers provided the resort with produce, meat, cream, and eggs, as well as greenhouse seedlings and materials. Then, as the bottled water business grew, the brethren made wooden cases to hold water bottles for shipment in a worldwide market. A direct result of business with the Rickers, this was the only new mill venture introduced at Sabbathday Lake in the 1890s.<sup>37</sup> As Poland Spring House became more self-sufficient—it created its own creamery in 1899 for example—the Shakers shifted to providing fancy goods and services. Several times a week during the summer tourist season, the sisters of Sabbathday Lake made trips to the resort to show and sell their wares, which included fir balsam pillows, flowers, rugs, and other sundries. They also took in laundry for the resort.

Sister Aurelia Mace, one of the colony’s leaders, visited the resort to explain Shakerism to the curious among the hotel’s guests. In a very real sense, she was, as Michael Graham called her, “an ambassador for the Sabbathday Lake Shakers.”<sup>38</sup> She sold fancy goods and entertained guests with readings from her book, *The Alethia: The Spirit of Truth*, a compilation of some of her newspaper essays, letters, speeches, and poems on Shakerism and related topics. On one occasion in 1897 she addressed an audience of over 500 at the resort. Though she visited the Poland Spring House frequently, she did so with some degree of ambivalence. As she wrote in 1895, just prior to the beginning of another hectic summer season, “this is but the beginning of hurry and work but we



Hay time at Sabbathday Lake. *Collection of the United Society of Shakers, Sabbathday Lake, Maine, courtesy Gay Marks, Shaker Library.*

must go through with it in order to have the means to live next winter.” So crucial was this relationship that in fall 1885 the Shakers took the unprecedented move of allowing a hotel photographer to record a Sunday meeting at the colony.<sup>39</sup>

Expansion into the tourist trade was but an extension of earlier Shaker commercial forays “into the World.” Whether the seed trade, the mill activities, the sale of medicinals, or the catering to Victorian-era vacationers, the Sabbathday Lake Shakers adapted to, and embraced the growing market economy to sustain their way of life and their fundamental beliefs.

### **The Economy of Life at Sabbathday Lake**

During the nineteenth century the colony pursued a complex multi-dimensional and multifaceted economic strategy built upon agriculture, forestry, milling, and home-based production. The colony traded in

both local and international markets, while at the same time bartering, job-trading, and sharing equipment and information—what Thomas Hubka called the New England farm family mutualism.<sup>40</sup> The Shakers' two-tier approach—maintaining some insulation and autonomy while engaging selectively in local and regional markets—is a central component of the “moral economy” Christopher Clark discovered among ordinary farm families in the Connecticut River valley. If one defines self-sufficiency as a *relative* isolation from the market economy, as Rodney C. Loehr did in a seminal paper on the topic, then the Sabbathday Lake Colony exhibited many of the attributes of the classic self-sufficient New England farm for the better part of the nineteenth century. This approach mirrored the rural Maine experience, as it “assured a family of a diversified source of income and fostered a sense of independence, ingenuity, and self-reliance that became proverbial when applied to the northern New England farmer.”<sup>41</sup>

Yet throughout the nineteenth century the Maine Shakers exhibited a strong and growing commitment to market exchange, even while attempting to maintain the rudiments of a rural household economy. They clearly understood the dynamics of the price system, and they made decisions based in part on price signals. They innovated products that promised them a secure market niche, like medicinals and fancy goods, and they exhibited a genuine market mentalité.<sup>42</sup> In the case of the seed industry, the Shakers developed a prototype of a sophisticated vertically integrated production system. At Sabbathday Lake, self-sufficiency and market trade co-existed and even complemented one another as strategies for maintaining the colony. Even with tourism, where they “traded” their own curiosity value as much as the fancy goods they produced, the goal was always the same: to maintain the viability of the unique Shaker vision within its agrarian, communal context. This they did, and still do on a farm beside a lake in a small Maine town.

## NOTES

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