

HOW I CAME  
TO BE A  
**SHAKER**

By Brother George M. Wickersham of  
the First Order in the  
Church at New Lebanon “Holy Mount”

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## How I Came To Be A Shaker

WHILE attending the memorial service of Elder Giles B. Avery, January 4, 1891, I felt impressed to ask myself this question,—How came I to be a Shaker? Why I was so impressed I cannot tell; I hope it will do no harm.

In the year 1824, while in the fourteenth year of my age, there was quite an agitation among a large class of people in relation to living a Community life. About this time, Robert Owen, the great philanthropist from Lanark, Scotland, came to Philadelphia on a lecturing tour, and advanced the principles and advantages of a life in Community. My father, at that time, was much interested with his theory, and I was highly pleased while attending his lectures. I thought I could see more happiness in a Community, than in the common way of living. The first time that I heard the name Shaker mentioned, was in one of his lectures. Robert Owen gave an account of a visit to Union Village, Ohio; where he spent three days. He was much pleased with some things that he saw among the people, and thought if the Shakers could live in Community, and in peace and harmony, so long as they had, he could see no reason why the society that he was trying to build up in the state of Indiana, should not succeed and hold together, in like manner.

He exhibited a model, showing his plan in the form of a square and enlarged for a village or town, to be built as the society increased. The arrangements were very complete; the model could be taken apart, and all the interior rooms and different apartments presented to view. The cooking and laundry establishments were placed in the center, and were designed to accommodate the whole square. Steam was to be used for washing and cooking, which was quite a novel idea in those days. But all do not see alike: some thought they saw room for improvement, and proposed starting a society nearer home, and making all the improvements that their wisdom could devise.

They looked for a place upon which to locate and finally concluded to settle at Valley Forge, the noted place which General Washington chose for his winter quarters, in the time of the revolutionary war. The price agreed upon for the estate was sixty-five thousand dollars. My father was one of the first to move his family into the place, and was the last to move away. The number of members belonging to the society was about three hundred. They did not all move to the new settlement but intended to do so as soon as buildings could be prepared. But as a house built upon sand has a poor foundation, so it was with the Valley Forge community. The fall of that society, however, turned to the up building of the Church at New Lebanon in some degree.

Brother Abel Knight, a prominent member of our Community, saw a letter written by one of the western Shakers to a Quaker preacher by the name of Mott, of New York, and after hearing of the Shakers, Abel could find no rest until he had made a visit to the Church at Watervliet, N.Y. and another to the Church at New Lebanon the following summer. When he returned, he brought some of the publications of the Believers, "*Christ's Second Appearing*" and "*Millennial Church*."

But to return to the subject, I lived at Valley Forge about one year, and worked in the machine shop most of the time. My father concluded to start again in his former business, which was wire-working. He took me to the city, where I boarded nearly a year and looked after the business in the shop when he was absent. About the latter part of October, my father moved his

family from Valley Forge to the city again, and I went home to live with my mother, brothers and sister. By this time, my father, being intimately acquainted with Abel Knight, had received from him some knowledge of the Shakers, and obtained some books. In the evenings he got the family together and read to us from "Christ's Second Appearing", or the "Millennial Church." I was interested on account of Community life, and I often felt sorry that our Community had proved a failure. One day, in conversation with my father, I said to him I wished he would let me go to Indiana and see Robert Owen's community. He replied, "They are breaking up; they are scattering; it would be useless to go." I had heard my father tell much about the Society at Economy in the western part of Pennsylvania, founded by George Rapp. I had passed through the place myself when about ten years of age, had seen their large buildings and pleasant location; and I asked him to let me go and see them. He said, "They are all Germans. Their society does not increase in numbers and will not be what you are expecting." I concluded that I would have to stay where I was.

When about sixteen years of age, while in conversation, I told father that I thought I was about old enough to learn a trade. "What trade would you like to learn?" he enquired. I replied, to be a carpenter or machinist. After further conversation, he thought working among machinery would be most agreeable to me, and if I could find a place that would suit me, he would make no objection. Then I turned my attention to the finding of a place such as I had desired. By inquiry I found a situation within a few days which I thought would suit me to perfection. In the establishment of my choice, they manufactured from the heaviest engines to the lightest running, machinery; and I felt that my chance for a start in business was about complete. I informed my father of my success and asked him if he would go with me and see the proprietor and make a contract of apprenticeship. He proposed going the next forenoon; and we went accordingly, to see the head of the firm. As there were no street cars in those days, we walked about two miles and found to my disappointment that the proprietor was not in. The foreman, when informed of our object, was very helpful, showed us through the establishment and informed us that if we would call in the afternoon at two o'clock, we would find the proprietor in his office, as he would inform him of our business. After dinner we started again on our two mile walk. As we drew near the place, my father seemed to slacken his pace; while I was in a hurry to reach our destination. When we were within a few yards of the office he stopped and observed "I have another thing in view. Before you are bound and cannot get away, if you wish to go to Lebanon and see the Shakers, you may go. If you only make a visit and return, or if you wish to stay until spring, do so. If you would like to make it a permanent home you may; but you must get the consent of your mother if you conclude to stay when you get there." I replied, I should like to go and see the Shakers, but I have not mentioned it to you because I received so little encouragement when I wished to go and see Owen and Rapp's societies. The evening was spent in visiting a Shaker Brother who was in the city and expected to stay for one day. He was the first Shaker that I ever saw. I intended to go home with him if I could get ready, but had not yet obtained the consent of my mother. From her I received a positive denial; it was "you shall not go." She had just returned from an experiment which had proved a failure, and was satisfied that a community could not hold together. I could not blame her feeling as she did, neither was I discouraged. The next morning I began pleading for her consent to go to Lebanon. I did not leave the house all day but kept on pleading till about four o'clock in the afternoon when she gave her consent. It was too late to leave the next morning which was Wednesday. In course of the day I

learned there was a man in town by the name of John Shaw, who wished to settle some business and go to Lebanon. He would be ready to take the boat on Saturday at noon, and we might be company for each other. At the appointed time, Abel and my father accompanied me to the boat to introduce me to John and see us safely off. Here disappointment again awaited me; John did not make his appearance. Then I was asked "Will you wait till another opportunity presents?" I replied, I have had such a time getting away from mother, that I prefer to go alone. I think there will be no trouble in finding the way.

In those days we could not go from Philadelphia to New York in two hours as we can at the present time. We left at noon, and arrived in New York about one o'clock the next day. The fog was so thick in the bay that we could not see the length of the boat until nearly noon. They rang the boat-bell every few minutes and finally we heard a bell ringing to the left of us. Our pilot steered toward it, and it proved to be a steamboat which had struck on a rock the night before and lay with its deck about one third under water. We took a number of persons from the wreck, but some chose to remain.

When we landed in New York I was surprised to see the same Shaker I had seen a few days before, expecting to meet John Shaw and myself; he had business in the city for three or four days longer and I told him I would remain there until he left for home, as it was my first visit and I wanted to see the city. I went to the same hotel where he was stopping and traced out a route, on a map of the city, which I thought would fill up my time in the forenoon to explore, and another for the afternoon, and I employed myself in this manner for three days. We then took the night boat for Hudson, where we found a team which brought us out to Lebanon.

We arrived at the North Family about seven o'clock in the evening and had a short visit in the Deaconesses' room with some who came from Philadelphia. I there saw a sight I never beheld before. Some of the Sisters sat smoking pipes with stems sixteen or eighteen inches long, and the room was so filled with smoke that everything looked blue. I suppose it appeared stranger, because I had never before seen but one woman smoke a pipe, and that was not more than three inches long. Thank God that the day of Shakers smoking has passed away to return no more. It was Thanksgiving day (December 12).

After our visit we went to the Hill Family and stayed overnight. I slept so soundly that I did not awake until someone came to me and said that breakfast was over long ago. They gave me breakfast however, and I returned to the North Family and remained there twenty-five years. The kindred feeling and sympathy which existed between the members of the Valley Forge community, was with many, more than an outside show, or an internal selfish personality; it was a religious feeling that seemed to bind them together. When a few of them found something better than they possessed through Shakerism, they wanted those with whom they had been united to come and share with them.

Owing to this mutual interest, there were nearly fifty in this Society at one time who were gathered through the influence of one member acting upon another whom they were already acquainted with, and the Elders working with that influence at the right time. Eight from that group are now living in the Society after a period of sixty-three years, and within a short time the following have passed to the Spirit land: Sister Elizabeth Justice, Sister Jane D. Knight, Sister

Ann Busby, Sister Sarah Woodrow, Brother William Justice, Brother John Shaw and Brother Clawson Middleton.

Through the influence of Elder Richard Bushnell and others, I was persuaded that a community cannot exist merely by holding their land and property in joint interest, while in all other respects the associative members live according to the ways and customs practiced in the common course of the world; but all must come together and live as Brothers and Sisters of one family, and consider the happiness of others equal with their own. I had no faith in the confession of sin as it was practiced in the world. The custom was, to go to some private place and tell God that they were great sinners, and they hoped he would forgive them; but they never mentioned one crime they had committed, for they supposed he knew their sin already. As this brought no power over sinful desires, nor stopped the sinner's career in sin, I saw no good sense in it. When I understood that the object of confession was to bring the state and condition of our life to judgment through a living witness and to expose the wrongs and follies of human nature as they exist in us, to the light of truth, by an honest confession before those whom we believe have more wisdom and knowledge, or are nearer to the fountain of goodness than ourselves, and are able to teach and advise us regarding how to shun the snares and temptations to which we are exposed, I was satisfied and made up my mind to be a Shaker. Notwithstanding the many crosses and trials I have encountered, I have never had the first thought of turning back to find comfort and satisfaction in the ways I had forsaken. By carefully maintaining my union and confidence with those who have been appointed to officiate as Elders over the spiritual interests of our family, I have been abundantly protected from the sins of the world and have also secured the union and blessing of my gospel Brethren and Sisters, In this I have learned the important lesson, that "Obedience is better than sacrifice."

It was during the days of the great outpouring of spiritual manifestations that an impression came over me which I could not resist. I sought an interview with Elder Richard Bushnell, who at that time was senior Elder of the North Family, and asked of him the privilege to open my whole life, before I came among Believers and since. A corresponding ministration had occupied the mind of good Elder Richard, and he remarked, "I have asked the same privilege of the Ministry, and after that is granted I will walk in prayer with you." Perhaps it may not be especially interesting to all who may read my simple story to know how this gift influenced my mind. After retiring to rest for the night, I soon found sleep had departed from me and my mind was actively engaged in meditating on my past life that no transgression or deviation from the light of truth in my soul might escape my careful correction.

Now I shall return to my younger days. After living here about two years and a half, Brother Abel Knight had business which called him to Philadelphia. The Elders proposed for me to go with him to be gone two or three weeks, and I accepted the offer. When we returned home to New Lebanon, we found that there were sixteen of us instead of two. My mother had changed her opinion, and felt differently about the Shakers. She said she felt better satisfied with my being with the Shakers, than she did with the situation of any of the rest of her children and used no influence to persuade me to remain with her. But my grandmother wished me to remain with them and not go back to the Shakers, and as an inducement proposed to set me up with a good shop and a full set of tools. She also proposed for me to start by erecting a building for hey, which she contemplated having put up for a dwelling. I was in my twenty-first year, and no

doubt it would have been a great temptation, had not my mind been settled to spend my days among Believers. As it was, it had not the least effect upon me. I thanked her for her kind feelings toward me, and told her that I had made my choice for life and must return home. And this is "How I Came To Be A Shaker."

Those who were gathered through the influence of the Valley Forge community and have passed to the Spirit land are: Brother John Dodgson, Brother James Wilson, Brother Theophilus Wilson, Brother Israel Knight, Brother Abel Knight, Brother William Justice, Brother John Shaw, Brother Clawson Middleton, Sister Deborah Dodgson, Sister Hannah Rich, Sister Margaret Wilson, Sister Nancy Wilson, Sister Sarah Knight, Sister Jane D. Knight, Sister Ann Busby Sr., Sister Ann Busby Jr., Sister Elizabeth Justice and Sister Sarah Woodrow.

Those still living, are: Brother Levi Shaw, Brother George M. Wickersham, Sister Anna Dodgson, Sister Tabitha Lapsley, Sister Maria Lapsley, Sister Hannah Wilson, Sister Elizabeth Sidel and Sister Eliza Davis.

## Shaker Communities

### **THE PROPHECY**

A Worldwide Kingdom of God and Zion of His Likeness on Earth (Daniel 2:44).

### **FOUNDER**

Ann Lee, the Bride of Christ (1736-1784) of Manchester, England.

### **BASIC PRINCIPLES**

**Virgin Purity, Peace, Justice and Love**

Expressed Through: Celibate Life, Complete Confession and Forsaking of all Sin,  
Non Resistance, Community of Goods and Divine Order.

### **BELIEFS**

Duality of the Deity, Father and Mother God (Power and Wisdom). The Mighty Dual Spirit, Creator of Life, Light, Truth and Love. Duality of the Christ Spirit, as manifested by Jesus Christ and Ann Lee, Immortal Life, Progress of the Soul, Faithfulness, Lawfulness, Equality of the Genders, Equality in Labor, Equality in Property, Temperance in all things, Justice and Kindness to all Living Beings.

### **GOVERNMENT**

The Head of the Shaker Order is Christ.  
Represented in a Dual Order of Leaders, Ministry Elders and Trustees.

### **COMMUNITY**

Serious Minded and Competent individuals who vow to never deny the Father God, the Mother Wisdom, the Son Jesus Christ or the Daughter Ann Lee.

### **SHAKER MOTTO**

Hands to work, and Hearts to God.—ANN LEE

### **Zion's Center Of Union**

