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William Pillow

His Life Among the Shakers

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THE late 1700's and the early 1800's were a fertile time for new creeds which were a combination of religious and economic doctrines. Many of these originated in New York State or grew to importance here. Mormonism, the doctrines of Jemima Wilkinson, the Oneida Community, are examples. Not the least of the inspirations to flourish on York State soil was Shakerism, a combination word for "Shaking Quakers."

Two of the centers of Shakerism in the United States were at New Lebanon and Niskeyuna in York State. The following article is composed of an actual diary kept by a man named William Pillow who dwelt among the

Shakers at New Lebanon for a time in 1846-1847 and the comments on Mr. Pillow's diary added by the editor. The diary is in italic type, Mrs. Opdahl's comments in Roman type.

In the late eighteenth century, eight Shakers, accompanied by their leader, Mother Ann Lee, emigrated from England. They believed that the woman, Ann Lee, was the Christ in a second incarnation. Their religious doctrine required celibate living; consequently, increase in membership could only be effected by conversion. The Industrial Revolution and the growing materialism of America aided in the rapid decline in the number of converts. We, therefore, find

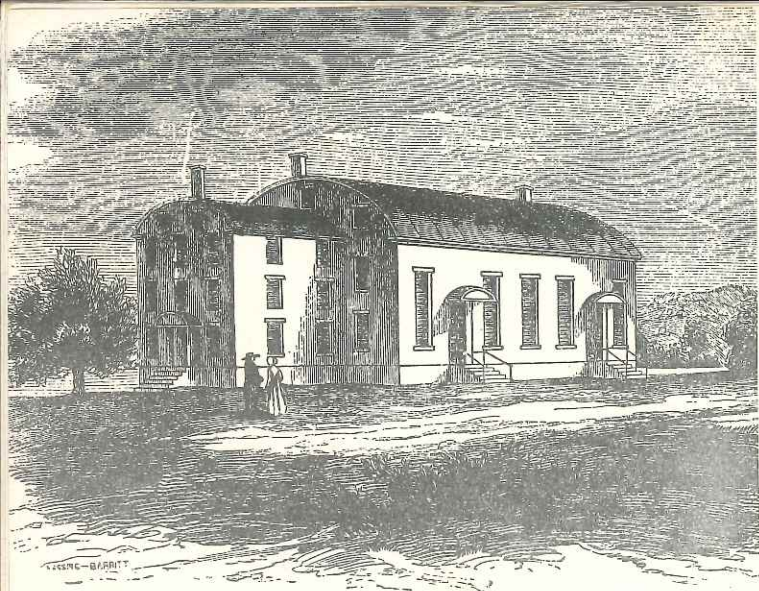
that a society that had been established at New Lebanon and Water-vliet (Niskeyuna) and had later spread to New England, central New

* Mrs. Opdahl wishes it noted that her first five years of teaching were spent at Lebanon Springs within a mile of the famed New Lebanon community of Shakerism. No Shakers have lived in New Lebanon since the 1930's, however. Mrs. Opdahl has been a Yorker sponsor, as Miss Viola Woodruff, since 1953 when she led the award-winning Pochoug Chapter at Patchogue. In 1955 she joined the faculty of Selkirk Union Free School where she organized the Hiawatha and Onesquethaw Chapters of Yorkers. She is presently teaching at Kingston.

The diary came to Mrs. Opdahl from Marion Pillow Bedell of Bellport, Long Island, great-granddaughter of William Pillow.

The Square Order Shuffle, a Shaker Dance





Meeting House, New Lebanon. First Church in background.

York, and the West, is currently reduced to a membership of less than one hundred men and women. These remaining Shakers reside in New England Shaker Communities.

Records indicate that Shaker rigidity and uncompromising adherence to religious doctrine and economic simplicity led many converts to return to their own families and former patterns of living. Such was the case of William Pillow and his family who had joined the Shakers in 1846. William had emigrated in 1827 from England where he and a George Edwards had founded the first European Express Company. Just prior to his journey to America, William had married Ann Leach Parton, a widow of Kent and first cousin to John Leach, a noted caricaturist for the *London Punch*.

Pillow's first business venture in America was a book-binding shop with which he was unsuccessful. After William experienced a number of business failures, his wife Ann opened an establishment for cleaning Panama hats. Since this undertaking proved to be successful and was expanding, her husband joined her. Very shortly, however, the Panama hat was replaced by the newly popular felt hat and the shop was forced to close.

Since their first-born son, William Pillow, Jr., proved to be a slight, sickly child, the family moved to a little farm at Hanover Neck, New Jersey, with the hope that the country air might benefit all the children, particularly the sickly William.

The family was destined to move once again when, in 1846, Mrs. Pillow, who had always been a deeply religious woman, was determined to join the Shakers at their community in New Lebanon, New York. Finally her husband agreed to accompany her and on November 14, 1846, they, with their three children, arrived at Canaan Four Corners, New York, where two Shakers met them.

William Pillow, the father, kept a record of his experiences with the Shakers, recording his last entry on Jan-

uary 19, 1847, shortly after which date the Pillows left the Shaker Community.

In the diary's first entry, William described their arrival at the New Lebanon Community. *Left New York 5 p. m. in L. B. Fairfield for Hudson arrived there at 10½ a. m. next day, left Hudson in railroad car at 2½ p. m. for Chatham 4 Corners arrived there at 4½ p. m. left for Canaan 4 Corners at 6½ p. m. on arrival there found Brethren waiting for us with two waggons arrived at New Lebanon about 9½ and took up our residence in the visitors apartments at the North Family house.*

At New Lebanon the North Family served as the Novitiate Order. Newcomers resided with this Family until they were ready for permanent membership; they, then, could join one of the other Families of the Shaker Community. At the peak of their membership the Shakers consisted of seventeen societies totaling fifty-one families. The Church Family was considered the most important and possessed the main building of worship. The New Lebanon Community at which the Pillows resided was the parent Shaker Society and, at one time, maintained a membership of as many as eight families.

On Saturday, November 21st, the Pillow family removed to the cottage at the north end of the village where we found everything necessary for our convenience ready for our use. Novitiates who were in family groups upon their arrival were housed in separate cottages until they were certain of their desire to remain in the Shaker Community. Now that the Pillows were settled in their living quarters, they could begin to participate in the various phases of Shaker life. Accordingly, on the following Monday morning, the three children were admitted into the School at the Church family.

This Church Family School, built in 1839, served all the children of the New Lebanon Shaker Community. Although the Shakers developed their own educational philosophy, they rigidly adhered to local and state school laws. Shaker education was limited to religious and vocational training. They believed that too much education could make a person too worldly. This school, a simple, two-story structure, is still in existence.

Since idleness was defined as an evil, Mr. Pillow was provided with employment in the seed shop the day after he entered his children in school. His specific duty was to fill and paste seed bags. The Shakers were the first in the Northeast to package seeds for commercial use and the business proved to be quite successful for several years. In 1836, 150,000 seed bags were printed in New Lebanon; however, by 1841, outside competition was making serious inroads into their profits. The high quality of their seeds almost became a Shaker trademark as did the Shaker wagons that were driven over many a New York State road for the purpose of peddling seeds. Shaker brethren, adamant in their belief and immune to worldliness, served as the seed peddlers to the outside world.

Throughout Pillow's journal there are numerous references to his work in the seed shop and the reader can almost grasp the monotony he eventually felt through the repetition of the phrases *worked in the seed shop today* or *pasted seed bags this morning*.

During the evening of his first day of employment, Pillow recorded that he *attended a meeting where brother Sizer and John Gildersleeve were affectionately taken leave of, in view of their removal to the Church family*. Thus, two novitiates had become avowed and confirmed Shakers and were ready to take up membership in the Church family, the oldest and most respected of the New Lebanon Shaker families.

In the Shaker Communities only holidays of a religious nature were observed. Observance took the form of religious worship and all but the very essential work activities were omitted. Thanksgiving Day was the first religious holiday with the Shakers that the Pillows experienced. The diary entry for this day simply reads *Thanksgiving Day, no regular work done, meeting in the forenoon*. Worship and work were the integral features of Shaker living and reflected Mother Ann Lee's saying: "Hands to work and hearts to God." Sundays, as well as holidays, all work was laid aside and singing, dancing, prayer, and praise became the order of the activities. Sunday ritual varied but there was always music and the march, or the dance, for, after all, were not these their God-given gifts to use? Worshippers either gathered in the large meeting house located in the Church Family or met in the separate family units for worship—or sometimes in both places, one meeting following the other, as described in the following notation from the diary: *Attended meeting in the meeting house. Afternoon, attended meeting in the family*. Saturday evening meetings were generally devoted to worship, since the Shaker Sunday began at sundown on Saturday and continued until sundown on Sunday. William Pillow made reference to such Saturday meetings in his journal.

After working in the seed shop for most of the day, William Pillow attended a general meeting on the evening of November 30, 1846. Since this was held on Monday, the meeting was devoted to the reading of newspaper articles so that the Shakers could keep informed on world events, political science, and economics.

Wednesday, December 9th, marked the end of Pillow's first three weeks with the Shakers. His initial impression of the Shakers, as noted in his diary on that date, does not bear out his later decision to leave the Shaker Community. He wrote in his diary: *This evening completes three weeks which I have spent among believers, during the time I have seen nothing to condemn but much to approve and after counting the cost with as much care as I am able I have come to the conclusion to cast my lot amongst them and go with them in the narrow way that leadeth into life. I intend by the grace of God to hold*

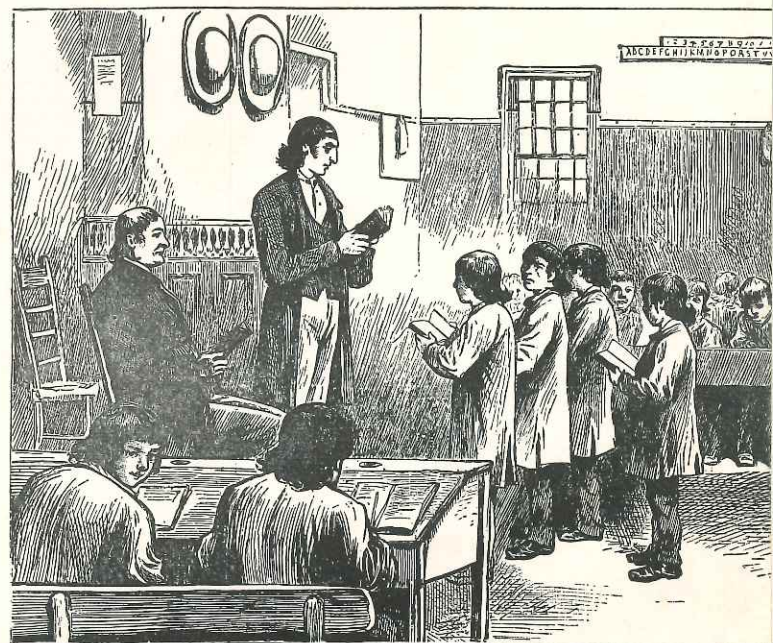
myself in readiness to bear whatever cross may be laid upon me in following Christ, and I hope to realize that oneness with the Lord's people with Christ and with the Father which I believe to be the privilege of every willing soul. Amen.

Although the Shakers were celibates, and therefore, did not produce children of their own, they very willingly fostered children brought to them from the outside world. Many orphan children, as well as children of those who came to join the Shakers, were indentured to the Shakers. Accordingly, on Wednesday, December 16th, William indentured his boys. He wrote: *This day I have indentured my three boys to Edward Fowler, trustee of the Church family, to continue with him by their own consent until they are of age. May they be trained up for heaven*. Indentured children were assigned employment most suitable to their ability. This relationship between occupation and ability was actually written into the agreement made between the Shakers and the parents or guardian of the child, thus, indentured. Shaker caretakers were directly responsible for certain children apprenticed to them. The Shakers agreed to provide food, clothing, education, a new Bible, and two outfits of clothing to the indentured minor.

The same week brought about a change in their living quarters as described by William in his December nineteenth entry. *Removed from the North cottage to the Second House and took supper with the family for the first time. May I find oneness with Christ's people and with him.*

Accordingly, the Pillows lost their identity as a family unit and commenced the life of Shakerism. They would no longer live, eat, or meet together, for Shaker Dwellings were divided into two sections. The left side of the building housing the Shakers was reserved for male members and the right side for women. There were often two sets of stairways and two doors leading to the dining room and the meeting room. In the dining room men and women sat in groups of four, each sex being

Schoolroom, Niskeyuna Community



duly separated. After having partaken food in complete silence, the Shakers rose, gave silent thanks, and returned to work. The workday began at 4:30 a. m. in summer and at 5:30 in winter.

In the evening of the same day in which he was moved to the Second House, William attended a meeting at which he observed the famous shaker dance.

This evening at meeting, Elizbh Bullard expressed her desire to be like God; that is, good. She expressed her thankfulness for having those elder than herself to reprove her and direct her in her way. She then asked Eldress Antoinette if she might be permitted to make a sign expressive of her indignation against all sin and her desire to have it removed from her. She, then, and the whole company shook themselves violently after which was sung "I'm Glad That I Am A Shaker." May I feel a constant abhorrence of all sin and labour continually to be delivered from it. This dance was stimulated by religious fervor. As erratic as the dancing may have

often appeared to a non-Shaker, patterns, accompanied by the singing of hymns, did emerge.

On December 20, Pillow noted that he was able to worship in the meeting house with the believers for the first time. At this gathering *Elder Frederick spoke of that prophecy by Jeremiah relative to the Lord choosing Israel for his Battle axe, with which to break in pieces the nations and kingdoms, the horse and his rider the man and woman, the young man and maid, the husbandman and his yoke of oxen. Chapter 51, as illustrative of the present work of God.*

That same afternoon "at 2 we had a labour meeting for young believers to practice the manner in which elder Frederick gave an interesting accounting of its being revealed to Father Joseph in a vision. The youngsters living with the Shakers were trained at an early age in the meaning of Shakerism but could not become members until they came of age and were able to make their own decisions. The appellation, *labour meeting*, points up the fact that the Shakers laboured to get good through song and dance.

Pillow further described the Shaker Dance in a diary entry made on the same day. The *loving* referred to in this description meant in a religious and brotherly sense.

In the evening at 6 had a regular meeting for worship during which Elder Richard expressed his desire for more love, and suiting the action to the word he embraced Elder Frederic; then all the brethren embraced one another. Soon after which in marching John Robe was operated on so as to jump about in all directions; then the whole company commenced jumping about in all directions; and irregularly with all their might. This was an extraordinary meeting; and much loving prevailed.

Marguerite Fellows Melcher in describing the dance in her book, *The Shaker Adventure*, writes that this ritual was open to the public. People from the outside world too often regarded the Shaker dance as a stage show put on to entertain or amuse. There was, however, one im-

portant difference between this ritual and a stage show. The Shakers were oblivious of their audience and regarded them as a source for new converts.

According to Pillow's diary, this regular meeting of December 20th, was immediately followed by a Union Meeting. At these meetings, men and women were allowed to converse on a social basis. Three or four men were seated on chairs facing three or four seated women. Conversation centered around Shaker small talk or sometimes they sang. The two rows were five feet apart and the hands of the men and women rested on white handkerchiefs that were spread over their laps. Social contact between the sexes was thus limited.

On the following day, a *Thomas Eustace and Douglas set out on the Western Journey*. During Jefferson's administration and a few years following, Kentucky, Tennessee (then called Cumberland), and Ohio experienced one of the most feverish revivals ever to occur in the United States. The Shakers were positive that this revival was a sign to spread Shakerism to the West as had been prophesized by Mother Ann Lee.

The record for December 22 reveals a particularly significant doubt in Pillow's mind concerning his own conversion to Shakerism, for he wrote *my mind (is) impressed that I am stopping short of being baptized by the Holy Ghost, and seeking my chief enjoyment in spirituality of the mind*. His later decision to leave the Shakers comes, then, as no surprise to the reader of the diary.

Christmas Day was observed until evening same as Sunday. *The Canaan families came and united with (the New Lebanon group) in worship at 10 a. m.* The Canaan Shakers lived a short distance from the New Lebanon Community. The two families at Canaan were actually branches of the North Family at New Lebanon. The Cannan buildings were abandoned by 1897.

A few days after Christmas, William Pillow made mention of the frequent visitors who came to observe the



A Shaker Singing Meeting



Dining Room, North Family, Niskeyuna

Shakers out of curiosity. Pillow observed several of the patients from the water cure establishment among the spectators. This water cure establishment was the once famous Lebanon Springs near the foot of the Shaker mountain. According to local records, this spring was bequeathed to the people of the valley to be used freely by them as long as sky, grass, and air exist. This bequest was made by an early settler who once owned the land in the area of the spring. Some of these water-cure patients thought of the Shakers as objects for tourist attraction.

The last entry was made on Tuesday, January 19. The comments for this day are as brief as was his stay with the Shakers: *worked on seed bags and whips, went down to the post office. Union meeting in the evening.*

Neither the diary nor family records reveal the actual reason for the Pillow family's departure from the Shaker Community. In 1858, however, a Shaker, Isaac N. Youngs, who had been "caretaker" for the Pillow children while with the Shakers, wrote a letter to the eldest son, William, Jr. William, Jr., was planning on marriage in that year and was, then, residing at Hanover Neck, New Jersey. Isaac N. Youngs, being a Shaker, was obviously opposed to the marriage. The Shaker attitude toward marriage is made clear in this letter. Isaac N. Youngs' deep grief at the loss of a potential convert to Christ is also obvious.

The letter, postmarked Canaan Corners, New York, March 1, reads:

*New Lebanon, Feb. 21, 1858
Affectionately remembered William,*

Thousands of times have I tho't of you since last I saw you; and have desired to have some communication, but no time, for more than nine long years, has presented itself, so favorable as the present. As your brother, Edward, is here on a visit, I am much pleased to see him, and so are we all; and it awakens in me a fresh remembrance of you, and I cannot forbear from embracing the opportunity, by him to address a few lines to you.

We have entertained some fears

that thro means of your long absence from us and the inducements held out to you, by those who were opposed to your being with us, your feelings would become alienated from us; and then again considering how admirably you stood your ground, when you were taken to New York and maintained your choice to remain with us, we fondly cherished a hope that you would still maintain the same feeling, until you returned again to us.

But we learn that it is probable you are calculating to put yourself in that condition in which, as the scriptures say, you "cannot come" (i.e. marriage).

Now, my beloved friend, William, if you will suffer me to counsel, or entreat you, then I counsel you to consider this matter wisely, count the cost, reflect upon the consequence, I entreat you.

In what manner of life can you live the most acceptable to God, and be the best prepared for Eternity? On which condition would you rather trust your future state, could you know that you were to die the next day, that of a true honest-hearted Shaker, who has confessed and put away all sin and had lived a life of self-denial and abstinence from all carnal propensities, or that of a common worldling, an acknowledged sinner, whose sins still remained upon him, yet to be brought into Judgment?

Receive with this the assurance of my heartfelt love and best wishes for your present and future happiness and prosperity. Please address me an answer to this at your convenience.

Your friend

Isaac N. Youngs

Isaac Youngs' attitude toward marriage is not new to the student of Shakerism. Celibacy was a basic tenet of the Shaker religion and Shaker writers avowed: *Christ declared 'I am the resurrection and the life'. If his words have any meaning then the children of the resurrection are in his life and live in him; hence it follows conclusively, that all who are in Christ neither marry nor are given in marriage. And it is equally proved*



Girls' Clothes Room, Church Family, Niskeyuna



Sisters' Everyday Clothes

that all who marry are not in Christ, but are in the life of the world.

William Pillow, the writer of the diary, never returned to the Shakers. Nor did his son, William, Jr., who disregarded Isaac Youngs' warning against marriage. After his marriage, he moved to Rochester, New York. Within a short time at Reed's Corners, near Canandaigua, he was the first to introduce the strawberry business into western New York State. His variety of enterprises in the fruit business won him many medals. His pears and plums won him a bronze medal at the Paris Exposition. He also won gold and silver medals at the Pan-American Exposition and at the St. Louis Exposition.

In 1870, twenty-four years after he had taken his family to live with the Shakers at New Lebanon, William Pillow died. His eldest son, William, Jr., in making such progress in the fruit business, became one of western New York's most famous citizens. He died on April 1, 1906, at the age of seventy-three.