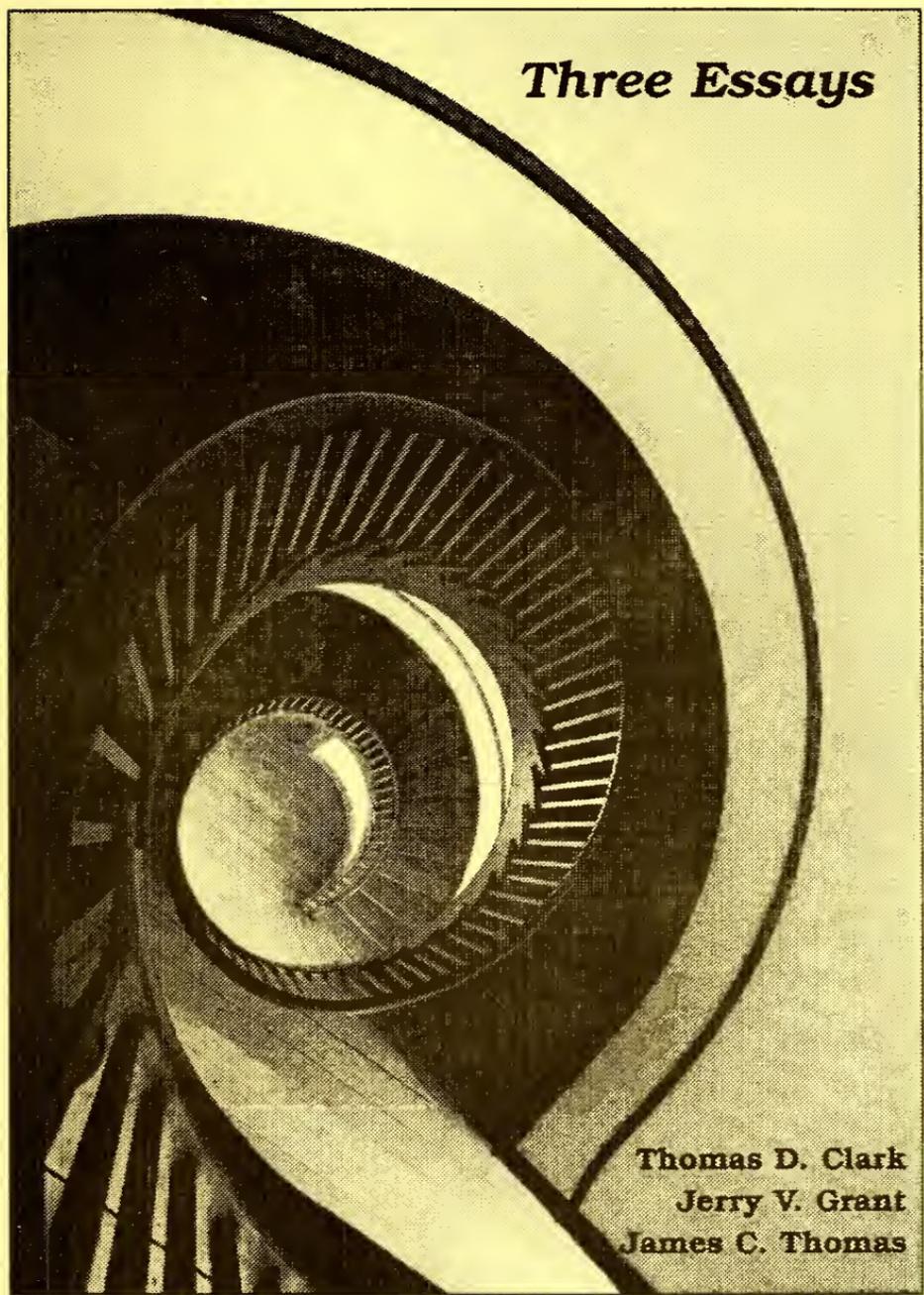


96-29

# IN THE SPIRIT OF SHAKER



*Three Essays*



Thomas D. Clark  
Jerry V. Grant  
James C. Thomas

**John C. Campbell Folk School  
of Brasstown, NC**

with

**The North Carolina  
Humanities Council**

*Makes You Kindly Welcome*

**IN THE SPIRIT  
OF SHAKER**

A week of Shaker lectures, discussions,  
films, exhibits, and food

with

**Thomas D. Clark**  
Professor Emeritus,  
University of Kentucky

**Jerry V. Grant**  
Editor,  
"The Shaker Register", Durham, NC

**James C. Thomas**  
President,  
Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, Kentucky

**October 27 - November 2, 1996**

Cover Photograph: Stairway, 1839, Trustee' Office,  
Shakertown at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky  
Jim Ballard

# THE SIMPLE SPIRIT

James C. Thomas

The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing introduced their utopian belief to Kentucky in early 1805, when Shaker missionaries from New York attended camp meetings in Garrard and Bourbon counties for several days. Then in 1806, 44 Believers signed a family covenant, "Dissolving their former ties and connections with the world and separating themselves from them, being associated and united together in the bonds of union and fellowship... for the benefit of religious worship and protection."

The community's religious system was given order and the building program took form. A permanent Centre family dwelling house was constructed near the crossroads. Now called the Farm Deacon's Shop, the structure utilized the fine-quality limestone from quarries along the Kentucky River Palisades. The intricate housing and governing procedure began to evolve slowly, shaped by doctrine disseminated from the mother colony at New Lebanon, New York. With basic tenets propounding separation from the world, confession of sins, celibacy, and communal living and property, the Shaker community needed temporal management as well as spiritual direction.

In the eighteen communities which were formed in rapid succession, members were divided into semi-autonomous living groups called families, "of different classes, or grades, as to order, government and arranged in things spiritual and temporal, adapted to the different situations and circumstances of members in society." Each unit had its own dwellings, houses, shops, barns, and specialized industries. At Pleasant Hill, the East, West, North, and North East Families were named for their locations relative to the prin-



The 1809 Farm Deacon's Shop at Pleasant Hill was the first permanent structure within the village.

cial or most spiritually advanced first order family, called the Centre Family.

As all Believers were required to toil either in the fields, shops, work or dwelling houses, and to lessen boredom and to eliminate "worldly" relationships, tasks were assigned on a rotating basis by the Ministry. Within each family, spiritual direction was provided by its own set of two Eldresses, chosen by the village Ministry. Supervision of temporal affairs was relegated to Deacons and Deaconesses, elected by each family's Elders and Eldresses. There were Farm, Garden, and Mechanical Deacons.

Ultimate authority in matters both religious and temporal was vested in the Ministry, composed of two Elders and two Eldresses appointed by the mother church.

Although Shaker recluses welcomed visitors and even maintained a tavern for their convenience, only designated Trustees could conduct business with the outside world. The Trustees were responsible for real estate, personal property, contracts, and all other legal matters.

Pleasant Hill's membership had increased to almost 400 when the East and West Families built massive brick dwellings. These houses, completed in 1819 and 1822 respectively, established the east-west road as the dominant axis.

The enduring characteristic of the Shaker experiment was not the spiritualism, but their belief in the divinity of work. Labor dedicated to the glory of God was not only beneficial to the temporal advancement of the Society, but it established a daily routine of economy and order that kept the hands and mind of each Believer occupied with the community and not the "world." Spring was the time for plowing crops, cleaning the yards, repairing the fences and streets, running the mills; Summer was spent tending to stock, tilling the fields and gardens, painting the buildings; Fall was for the harvest and the kill, production of preserves, gathering and stocking the cellars and sheds with staples and firewood; Winter was spent caring for household chores, shop work, and mending of tools and clothes in anticipation of another season.

Livestock production was an integral part of the Pleasant Hill economy. At mid-century, about 5,000 acres, worth \$50-\$100 an acre, had been enclosed and subdivided by some 40 miles of stone fence, costing about \$1,000 per mile. Some 500 head of shorthorn cattle, mostly English Durham, were fed a special corn and rye mixture in barns designed for that purpose. Leichester and Saxony sheep provided wool and "Russian pigs" were introduced to their pastures at \$30 a head. "From these our tables are abundantly supplied with beef, pork, and mutton, milk, butter and cheese. While our farms, orchards and gardens furnish bread, fruit and some in abundance." The Shaker brand name as recognized as a standard of quality and value, both on handmade products and for animals or crops sent to market.

Always frugality was present. Clothes were seldom discarded, but "passed over" or redone for another to use. Buildings were never destroyed, but moved to other locations.

Before the advent of mass production machinery, Shaker manufacture was competitive. In 1841 their output produced an income of almost \$8,000 from sale of flax, oil grist, cattle, and most importantly, garden seeds. In the winter of 1860, 20,000 broom handles were turned; 20,370 jars (35 tons) of jellies and preserves were prepared; and 81,400 envelopes of garden seeds were made by the East Family alone. Salable items also included tubs, buckets, churns, keelers, shoes, carpets, tanned skins, baskets, bonnets, silk, medicines, pocketbooks, clothing, and tape.

In the fall of 1862 the Pleasant Hill was beleaguered by advancing and retreating armies embroiled in the Civil War. For the most part, the Believers' pacifism was respected by both the North and South, but in return their troops were fed as they passed and repassed through the village. This courtesy not only exhausted their own inventories of foodstuffs,

but depleted their stock of horses and wagons.

The long standing Shaker antislavery policy probably precipitated much of the harassment by Confederate sympathizers. Although this policy was humanistic, it had other overtones. The Believers befriended the homeless and needy, widows and orphans, black and white out of a necessity to propagate the sect with a constant infusion of converts. But blacks were of particular concern. Prior to the Civil War, they had purchased slaves and set them free.

Once the post-War prosperity got rolling in the 1870's, the loss of brethren and potential male converts to urban factory jobs was decisive. The number of departures caused one Believer to lament, "of the great numbers, we may say hundreds, m of children and young people who have been gathered in and reared up under the benign auspices of the Society, but few remain..."

To utilize the collective wisdom and experience of the rapidly diminishing band of older Believers, the Ministries of both Kentucky communities, Pleasant Hill and South Union were merged. South Union had acquired considerable land holdings, but isolation limited its membership to about 350, slightly less than at Pleasant Hill. However, South Union outlasted Pleasant Hill by twelve years (1910-1922). As the two most western communities in Shakerdom, they relied on each other for advice and support.

The Believers were well aware of their movement's pending demise. The passing of Micajah Burnett in 1879, was particularly disheartening in view of his achievements. His initial training as a carpenter enabled him to become the principal architect and engineer of the village's major buildings, specifically the Waterworks with its early use of a central reservoir and the Trustee's Office with its graceful twin staircases. He traveled more extensively than any other Believer, purchasing items for the village and selling cattle and wares throughout the middle West. In later years, rheumatism and failing eyesight curtailed his movements, but he managed to operate the village Post Office. He was remembered also as "An accomplished Civil Engineer, a Masterly Mathematician, A Competent Surveyor, A Mechanic & Machinist of the first order, and a good Mill Wright, etc. And with all a firmly established honest hearted Christian Shaker, beloved, respected, and honored by all who knew him."

By 1878, the governing Ministry at Pleasant Hill had become so ineffectual that the West and East Families elected to seceded and operate independently. This dissolution marked, for most purposes, the demise of the Society. A decade later the vacated properties were rented to tenants and sharecroppers. In 1896, the Believers lost a law suite and were forced to mortgage a 3,334 acre portion of its land holdings. The East Family was dissolved and when its members moved into the Centre Family, the brick dwelling house was rented and operated as The Shaker Hotel. The West Family prospered through land lease agreements and diversified interest in livestock and farming. The last surviving male Believer, William Pennebaker, died in 1922. Colonel George Bohon of Harrodsburg had purchased the remaining land, houses, and stock of Pleasant Hill in 1910, and contracted to care for the twelve surviving covenant members, the last of whom, Sister Mary Settles, died in 1923.

Theirs was a spirit of which we can take some heed. "The Simple Spirit" - the concept conjures an aura of religious serenity and utilitarian design, an attitude of a believing people needing a disciplined pace and tranquil refuge to exercise their trust and faith.

---

*James C. Thomas is president of the Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, Kentucky*

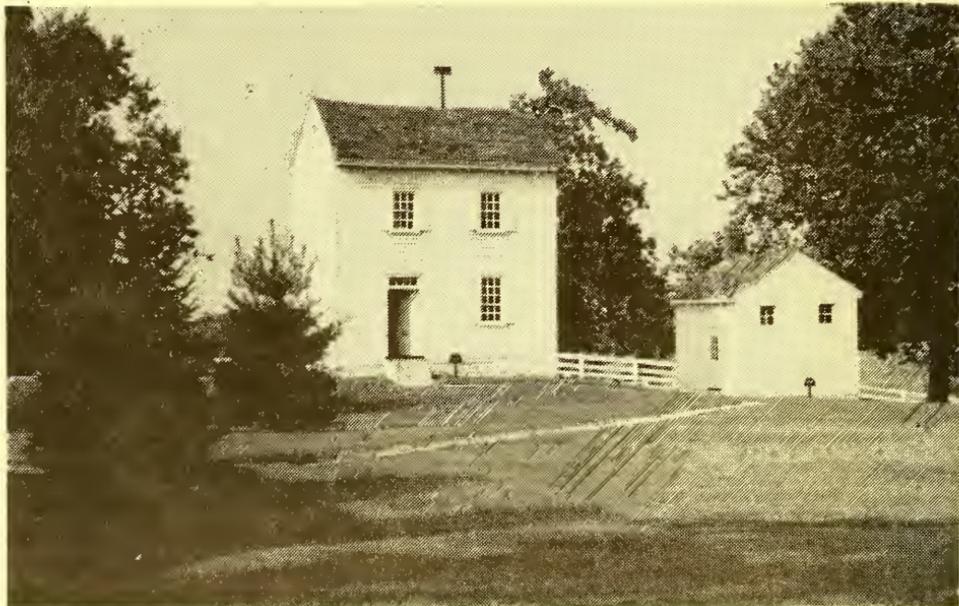
# PLEASANT HILL THE GARDEN OF SHAKERISM

Thomas D. Clark

The Shaker experience in Kentucky paralleled the history of a region which in 1805 was rapidly emerging from a raw frontier condition. At the turn into the nineteenth century there converged in the Kentucky country an era open to the forces of politics, economy, and religion which expressed itself in the great revivals, and especially the one at Cane Ridge in 1801. The opening of the frontier to settlement, and to the spread of religion offered strong human challenges. This the leaders of the religious groups realized. Thus it was onto this frontier of emotional arousal that the disciples of Mother Ann Lee's exploratory disciples arrived in Kentucky at just the right moment to gain a foothold on the land.

Converts such as John Dunlavy, Richard McNemar, Malcolm Worley and other "New Lights" were open to conversion. They also had the necessary frontier experience to aid in the establishment of a functional community. The establishment of a community of Shakers on Elisha Thomas' Shawnee run 140 acre farm was a successful beginning. From that rather limited beginning on the lateral Kentucky River stream proved a base of operation which enabled the Shakers to gather in converts and to expand their land hold.

Remarkably this unorthodox social and cultural religious body was able to organize and function in the midst of a resistant strong protestant orthodox region. Perhaps one of the most startling historical facts was that Kentuckians, including nearly all the early governors, were fecund people producing families of ten and twelve children. The doctrine of rule of celibacy actually contained a germ of ultimate defeat. Nevertheless the community at Pleasant Hill had the fortune of triple blessings. First, they ultimately planted their



The Water House, 1833, and the Men's Bath House at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky.

village atop a fertile land hold atop the Kentucky River plateau, second, from the beginning there developed good land management and village administration, and, third, the Shaker craftsmen were dedicated to perfection, and the herdsman were ever alert to the great potentiality of the domestic livestock economy of the region.

Few, if any, Kentucky agrarians were so closely wedded to the rhythms of the land as were the Shakers. They became gatherers of the first order, gaining and using knowledge of the fauna on their land, sensing the responses the land made to certain modes and principles of management, and, above all, the responses the land made to industry and attention. All this required a sense and application of order. Aside from the day-to-day internal village human relationships and discipline, there is no better example of the sense of order than in the buildings raised in the village. The imagination, sense of design, and the practical adaptation and use of native materials by the youthful Micajah Burnett constitute the mark of genius. One can hardly walk through the village without sensing this fact, and certainly a detailed examination of structural features produces a confirmation.

In the workshop, whether producing farm implements or domestic vessels, the strict adherence to design, steadfastness of quality, and a practical utilitarianism gave the label "Shaker Made" a high dependability. The sense of order and care carried over into the creation of Shaker fabrics, the selectivity of garden and field crop seeds, and their marketing was a pioneering act too often overlooked by historians of the communal society in America.

In no agricultural area did the Shakers exhibit more daring in experimenting, and the seeking after quality than in the field of livestock breeding and management. This was especially true in the breeding of hogs, sheep, cattle, and work horses. As the livestock industry advanced in the Bluegrass area of Kentucky and stock sales became a common practice, Shakers from Pleasant Hill were on hand to buy and sell prime breeding stock.

The garden of Shakerism in Kentucky had its serpents. The matter of community relationships with the outside neighbors were strained at times. The matter of withdrawals of members and disputes over property cessions created court problems. There were the "Winter Shakers" who imposed on the order. Finally the rising competitiveness of outside institutional America robbed the community of its favored position in crafts, the marketing of garden seeds, and, even, in the religious area. The period 1820-1860, may well be considered the period of most stability and order in the Pleasant Hill Community.

There came that dark moment of national disruption and the Civil War which ultimately sowed the seeds of destruction of the Society at Pleasant Hill. The Shakers were loyal to the Union, and to the political order. They observed the presidential appeal for a public thanksgiving, remained largely aloof from the slavery controversy, and certainly were pacific in their attitudes toward war.

In the summer and early autumn months of 1862 life in the Shaker community at Pleasant Hill was badly disrupted by troop movements into and through the village. There appeared the Confederate brigades and groups under the command of John Hunt Morgan, W.C.P. Breckinridge, Kirby Smith, and others. All came hungry and demanding. Then there came the federal troops. They came to camp on the village grounds, to demand generous hospitalities. For instance, the Pleasant Hill Shakers went to bed late on the night amidst hundreds of soldiers, the gear of war, and horses and mules. Then there came that bloody holocaust at Perryville on October 8, 1862. The roar of cannon could be heard in the village, and then came the wounded, the battle worn, the hungry, and the devastating demands for food, demands which exhausted the carefully garnered winter supply for the village. There followed the ever unsettling marauding guerillas who assaulted the village.

From 1862 the fortunes of Pleasant Hill faded. A changed America, dwindling mem-

berships, a dwindling market for garden and field crop seeds, a rising American commercialism, debt, and loss of religious and leadership momentum brought about and eventual end of a historical phase of the Shaker experience at Pleasant Hill, but not before the community had carved out a vivid and lasting chapter in Kentucky's economic and social history.

*Thomas D. Clark, professor emeritus, University of Kentucky,  
is founder of the University Press of Kentucky.*

# Hands on the Plane: The Myth of the Anonymous Shaker Cabinetmaker

Jerry V. Grant

Have you ever walked into an antique shop, spotted a simple straight-backed chair in the back corner of the shop and said, "Look at those finials, the shape of those back slats, that woven cloth seat, and those tilter balls in the back legs - I know exactly who made that chair - Shakers."

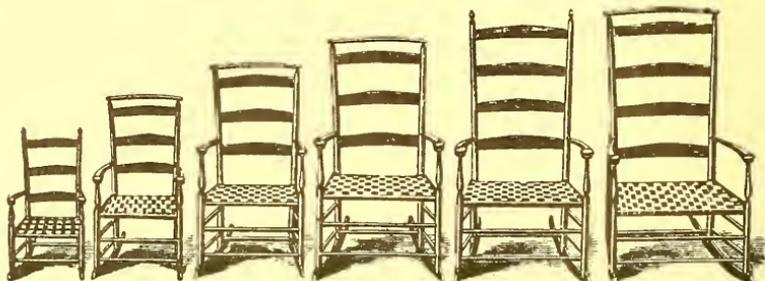
Feeling the subtle waviness of the hand-planed top of a New Lebanon dining table, I was struck by the possibility that I knew whose hands held the plane that left the long nearly flat furrows running the length of the three board pine table top. A century and a half of use - setting, clearing, and washing - had not removed these marks left by the woodworker on the day the table was finished. In considering this possibility, I was swimming against the current thinking on the nature of Shaker craftsmanship.

*"No one should write or print his name on any article of manufacture, that others may hereafter know the work of his hands."*

Millennial Laws (Part II, Section XII, Number 5, 1845)

## The Shakers' Slat Back Chairs, with Arms and Rockers.

WORSTED LACE SEATS.



No. 0  
\$3.50

No. 1  
\$4.00

No. 3  
\$5.00

No. 5  
\$7.00

No. 6  
\$8.00

No. 7  
\$8.50

A belief in the anonymity of Shaker work has been built from statements and sayings such as the above "law." Items known to have been marked by their makers were viewed as "innocent aberration(s) from the Shaker code" and the act of signing a piece of furniture was seen as antithetical to the humble nature of the Shaker. In the age of the "me generation," some look longingly for a return to the seeming selflessness of the cooperative communal spirit of Shaker work they think is echoed in above "law." But is anonymity a necessary part of humility?

We fool ourselves if we think that within a Shaker family of sixty or even one hundred Believers - a family which may have had a stable membership for fifty years - that anonymity was possible. It was certainly not possible until the communal memory of "who made what" began to face with the aging and death of the Believers - until only those "aberrant" penned and penciled scripts and those marks incised by steel stamps were left to inform furniture collectors and museum curators about something that was once common family knowledge. One need only to visit and talk to the Shakers living at Sabbathday Lake, Maine, to know the depth of the Shakers' interest and commitment to preserving their family history. A substantial portion of the history of the objects with which that family lives was passed down only by word of mouth. To believe that the work of Shaker cabinetmakers could be performed anonymously runs counter to our knowledge about their well developed oral history and the meticulous chronicle of Shaker life recorded in their diaries, journals, and letters.

Three possible scenarios, supported by some historical fact, may be helpful in understanding how this information may have been passed on. First, history was certainly recalled in casual conversation. We might imagine a New Lebanon brother talking to a new Believer as they walked along the village road driving home a team of oxen. "That small man is Brother David and the tall one Elder Frederick, the Noviate Family's public preacher. The same year Elder Frederick came to live at the North Family, Brother David moved from the North here to the Church to be our cabinetmaker. He made most of the cases of drawers and tables in the Great House - he made the bed you sleep in. He taught me the cabinetmaker's trade when I was young, but since I was needed so often on the farm, I've done little in that line since I learned it." Second, members of the family were participating witnesses to much of this work. Certainly all one hundred members of the Church Family at New Lebanon were aware that, as their family journal recorded, the two new dining tables that appeared in their dining room on February 24, 1837, had been made by Brother David Rowley. Undoubtedly the combined memory of the Believers eating that day at those new tables included the identity of the maker of every piece of furniture in that room - or in the whole dwelling house for that matter. Third, the Shaker cabinetmakers signed their work more often than did the vernacular woodworkers of the towns surrounding Shaker villages. Orren Haskins was a New Lebanon Church Family cabinetmaker who signed more than a dozen known pieces of woodwork. He, like some other Shaker woodworkers, apparently felt that writing his name on the bottom of a drawer or the back of a cupboard as natural as placing a period at the end of a sentence - it noted that it was finished.

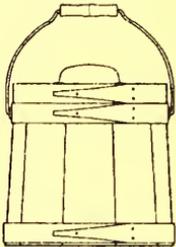
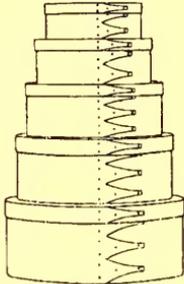
What then of the Millennial Laws? How are we supposed to read this admonition? We might begin by questioning what was meant by the phrase "article of manufacture" and by questioning who was included as "others." In support of anonymity, we might assume that this meant that nothing fabricated by Shaker hands should be signed by its maker so that nobody - Shaker or non-Shaker - would ever know who made it. Or, we might interpret this to mean that articles of manufacture, that is items made for sale to the outside world, should not be signed by individual so they would be seen as "Shaker work" instead of the work of an individual Shaker. This second reading leaves some room for the numerous Shaker-made items bearing the name of their makers - items that nearly universally were made for community use rather than for sale.

While some are attracted to the work of Shaker cabinetmakers by the image of selfless arti-

sans - the work of nameless angels building heaven's furniture - I have been drawn to the work by exactly the opposite reason. As more signed pieces of Shaker furniture come to light; as Shaker records give up the names of more brothers who made furniture; as relationships are established among pieces sharing particular design, construction, and finishing details; and as we better understand the importance of the nearly lost Shaker oral history tradition, the myth of the anonymous Shaker cabinetmaker will give itself up to a belief in the possibility of learning the identity of a cabinetmaker who made very extant piece of Shaker furniture. As we learn more about these individual Shaker cabinetmakers and we realize that being able to recognize that a piece of furniture was made by "Shakers" is only the beginning of our understanding of Shaker furniture. We next need to ask the question, "Whose hands were holding the plane?"

---

*Jerry V. Grant is editor of "The Shaker Review"*



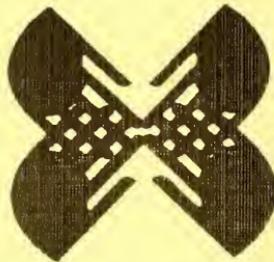
Centre Family Dwelling, 1824, South Union, Kentucky.

Put your hands to work  
and your hearts to God,  
and benefits will befall thee.

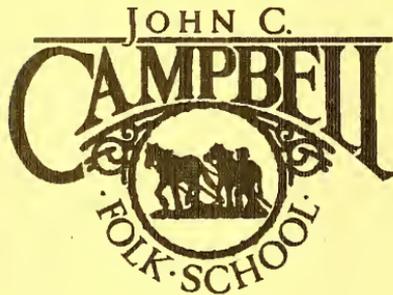
*Mother Ann Lee*

Do all your work as though  
you've a thousand years to live,  
and as you would if you knew  
you must die tomorrow.

*Mother Ann Lee*



**North Carolina  
Humanities Council**



**RT. 1, BOX 14A  
BRASSTOWN, NC 28902-9603**