

COLLECTING SHAKER

HELEN MERRITT UPTON '36



Helen stands, under protest, beside a Shaker red storage chest in her dining room. She consented to appear here when we insisted that only her presence could establish the relative size of this remarkable piece.

THE TITLE might seem to be minus a word or two. Do I mean collecting Shaker furniture, Shaker songs, Shaker boxes, or what? Shaker does appear to be used as an adjective with no noun.

The omission is intentional. While many years ago we did start out to collect specifically Shaker furniture for our home, the project soon grew beyond the collection of things tangible. It became in a real sense that of gathering not only material objects of beauty and utility, but even more important, knowledge and understanding of a people and a way of life. The experience has broadened into one of the most rewarding of our lives.

How could a chair, a table, a chest of drawers be so inspiring? Obviously it is not the chair, table, or chest of drawers. These are only the outward manifestations of the movement that led to their production, the skill and craftsmanship that went into their creation, the ideals that explain the dedication of the Shakers themselves.

But to start at the beginning. An auction, our first, brought forth two rockers which we purchased because we liked them. A friend, more knowledgeable than we, pointed out that they were Shaker chairs but the fact then made little impression. We liked them, had just moved into an old farmhouse, and were interested in appropriate furnishings. When we got them home and put them on our wide-board old pine floors we realized just how appropriate they were. Now we wanted more of this simple, beautiful, utilitarian Shaker furniture. Our first inquiry, however, led to nothing, because we were apparently searching for the unobtainable.

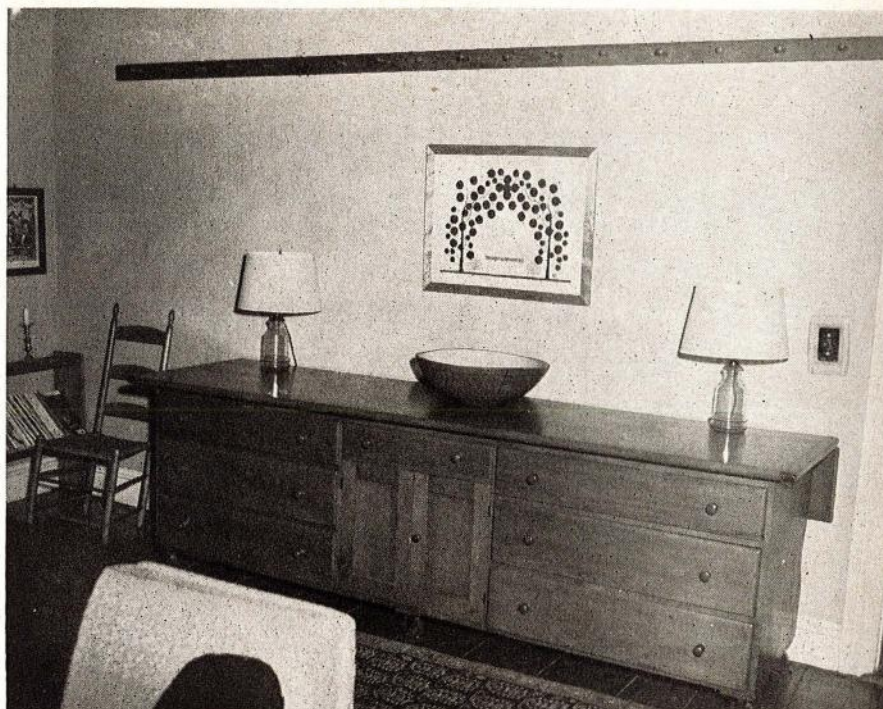
This article is reprinted from *The Shaker Quarterly* with the kind permission of its Editor and of Sister Mildred Barker of the settlement at Sabbathday Point, Maine.

RUSSELL SAGE ALUMNAE QUARTERLY

The next three years, busily filled with other tasks accompanying old houses, produced no more treasures. Although we faithfully attended area auctions and came home with assorted piles of household equipment, none of it was Shaker. Then the turn came; a tour of the Chatham Museum was concluded by the curator's suggestion that we visit Canterbury, New Hampshire.

Sister Miriam Wall was our escort that hot August day. We inspected the various buildings which were open to guests — the kitchen, the workshop, the gift shop, and some first-floor living quarters. We marveled at the great stone blocks and steps cut from solid marble. After some thirty minutes of exciting viewing and enlightening narration by our guide we were taken to the highest point of land where stood the meetinghouse. This edifice, at that time unused, impressed us with its simplicity, its unusual blue-painted woodwork, boxed beams, wide floor boards devoid of nails and as sound as the day, more than a century ago, when they were put down. The meetinghouse stands at the head of a lane bordered by large maple trees, and from its upper windows affords a superb view of the surrounding mountains. We tried to absorb it all, but we were just beginning to see the complicated, many-faceted phenomenon that Shakerism is. At our request, we visited the antique shop located in the old schoolhouse where we were shown the top half of a desk with cupboard and beautifully constructed small drawers; but there was no base. The sisters had never seen one for it, although obviously there must have been. So eager were we for Shaker furniture that we bought it anyway. After studying museum pieces, my father — a nonprofessional craftsman — did such an amazing job of constructing a three-drawer base that observers assume until told that it is all original.

This piece is the only one of our collection which has had to be so reconstructed. From here on, fortunately, we were able to collect complete, though frequently battered, examples. The desk, however, remains one of our most treasured. Its place between the windows of



One wall of the living room, showing handsome chest, which is actually a tailoring counter. Note rollers, for mobility, and drop leaf, for greater area. Picture is a reproduction of a "spirit drawing." Such drawings depicted the mystic visions of these intensely religious people. The originals are priceless museum pieces.

our living room revolutionized the room and gave us courage to keep on searching. Even more important, it introduced us to the Shakers themselves.

After meeting them and visiting their home, we began to sense the quality that pervades their lives and hence their craftsmanship. It made the pursuit of their work even more exciting. During the next few years we used our available leisure to search. For the earlier part of the period we were not very successful; it seemed that many people years before had frequently come across it, but no longer. We were too late.

But we kept trying anyway and we began to get results. A battered chest covered with many coats of paint, an unexpectedly rare small table, a double wash bench, a gray-painted woodbox gave us hope. And as we put these in shape and

used them, our dream grew. Now we had the audacity to aspire to a whole house furnished in Shaker. Of course, it was impossible but a pleasant dream. And we kept on dreaming, because each acquisition made us more appreciative of the artistry and dedication involved.

When we found a seven-foot laundry table with beautifully proportioned legs and dated 1822, our enthusiasm grew. Purchase meant that we could not make a planned trip that summer, but none of us hesitated or felt that there was any question of choice or any hint of sacrifice. A friend expressed puzzlement that we would gladly substitute a table for travel; she could not understand that this was not a table.

This acquisition led us to believe that we might find more. We resumed our

(Continued on Next Page)



Beauty and utility of Shaker carpenter's workbench are shown in the Uptons' study. This piece came through an Elder in the Lebanon settlement.

canvass of antique shops; we kept returning to the same ones so often that the proprietors knew at a glance our demands. Only infrequently did these visits lead to anything. More often than not, miles of driving and hours of time produced nothing. There was the occasion when we learned that the dealer, though well acquainted with our desires, had sold a piece without telling us because he thought it probably was too large. This acute disappointment touched off a chain reaction which did lead to a source of several pieces, and so, no doubt, was a blessing in disguise. In another instance, our repeated calls brought results. We had discovered in the dealer's workshop a long counter with sliding doors that we very much wanted to buy. No, it was much too useful for storing paint cans and was not for sale. We kept going back to see if he would change his mind.

Suddenly, one day he did — possibly to get rid of us. When we came to pick it up, he greeted us rather unhappily; not only had he been up till midnight clearing it out, but he realized how useful it was and was sorry he had sold it. He kept his bargain, however, and we brought it home atop our car while the remnants of one of the late summer hurricanes rocked it back and forth. When we got it home we realized we had measured the counter and the space where we intended to put it only with our eye. Yet obviously we were meant to have it because it fit perfectly with only about three inches left to spare!

And so our hunt continued. Each find provided excitement, pleasure, and usually work of restoration. Our efforts received great stimulation from the friendly cooperation of Sister Frances Hall at the Hancock settlement. She made it possible

for us to acquire many beautiful pieces: a nine-foot work bench with a vise at either end; an eight-foot built-in counter with eight drawers and two cupboards; a cherry drop-leaf table; and numerous small items. The year before she died she visited our home and saw for herself what we were doing; her reaction was one of great surprise and satisfaction.

In Maine we found a tall yellow chest, a lovely Shaker blue wall cupboard, a red-painted sewing stand. In each instance, the Shaker sisters, though somewhat reluctant to part with their few remaining treasures, knew we were going to care for them and enjoy them and so they felt comforted.

The story is too long to relate in detail. It became, as I have indicated, not just a search for things. It became a creative project, a study of a facet of our history, a collection of experiences meet-



Another corner of the study shows some pieces mentioned in the article, such as the stove and the sewing stand under the window. The stand comes from the Sabbathday Point settlement. The round sewing table is very rare, being one of only four or five ever made, at the Lebanon settlement.

ing and talking with many interesting people, but particularly with the Shakers themselves. Our collection includes not only the ten-foot harvest table, the bright blue bench with typical Gothic arches, the chairs that slope slightly backward and need to be sat in carefully, but the hour's visit with Brother Delmer Wilson in his workshop, the lovely carrier he made, inscribed and sent to us; the afternoon listening to Brother Ricardo Belden reminisce while he tinkered with his clocks; the duet on piano and organ by Sisters Lillian and Aida on a summer afternoon at Canterbury; picnic lunches under the fruit trees there; visits with Eldress Emma King and her memorable visit to us when we showed her our home; suppers with Sisters Mildred, Ethel, Frances and Eldress Gertrude Soule. These are the "pieces" in our collection which make the chairs, tables and

chests of drawers invaluable. They explain the serenity, dignity, and artistry of the material objects. To appreciate the tangible you must understand the intangible.

Shakerism, as is being discovered, is an important contribution to our culture. We have much to learn and intend to keep on doing just that. We believe that in our small way we are helping to preserve and make available for study a valuable portion of Americana. In a very real sense we realize we have been privileged in our experiences. We have long since accomplished our original objective; in fact, we have already made two additions to our home. But in no way do we live in a museum — we live *with* Shaker. We study at the laundry table — it makes an ideal double desk; we eat on a Shaker table — it is one-half of a ten-foot trestle table that had been sawed in half and

stored in a damp cellar, but restored by my father — and we sit in the slanting ladder-back chairs. We sleep in Shaker beds. The red-painted sewing stand is *my* sewing stand; a starch table is my baking center; a seed box holds silver; the stove gives us quick warmth in our study.

We believe that we have created something much as an artist paints a picture. And we are sharing the fruits of our labor. We have been glad to show interested people and explain if they do not know — and a surprisingly large number do not — what Shaker means. Three years ago our home was one of those included in a tour of interesting homes of the area and open to the public for the benefit of a local private school. Thus in a small way we think we are helping to preserve and keep alive a part of our American heritage.