Radical Living

Canterbury Shaker Village's enduring appeal

by NELL PORTER BROWN

The village grew up around the Meeting House, built in 1792 (above), followed by the Dwelling House (far left), with its simply furnished bedrooms. Behind the "garden barn" and shed (top), are meadows and vegetable crops.

ALAMY STOCK IMAGES

THERE'S NOTHING superfluous about Canterbury Shaker Village. That's just the way members of the separatist Christian sect who lived on this New Hampshire hilltop for two centuries wanted it. The self-sufficient Shaker "brothers" and "sisters" worked hard and lived simply—prizing order, quality, cleanliness, and the common good. "Everything that was done here was done in the name of God," says village tour guide Claudia Rein. "From the minute they got up in the morning to the minute they went to bed at night."

These days, visitors crest that same hill to see the 25 original white-clapboard buildings standing like stalwart parishioners themselves on 700 acres of pastoral land under open skies. Rein calls it "magically spiritual," to see "this place intact, these buildings that have been here for more than 200 years, untouched. You can feel the presence of peacefulness." Panoramic views are unmarred by commercial elements. Out back, rows of vegetable and flower gardens meet hay fields that slope to woodland trails and ponds.

Established in 1792, Canterbury was the sixth Shaker community. The uniquely American movement, derived from Quakerism, was brought from England by a charismatic leader, "Mother Ann" Lee in 1774. Shakers reveled in ecstatic displays during worship—stomping, singing, dancing—that broke with the increasingly reserved Quakers. They also believed in the second coming of Christ, communal living, equality between the sexes, repentance in the form of confession, and celibacy.

Lee was illiterate. Revelatory visions, experienced while imprisoned for her beliefs in England, informed her radical preaching in America, Rein says, but her ideas also likely stemmed from personal disillusionment:

Photographs courtesy of Canterbury Shaker Village, unless otherwise noted

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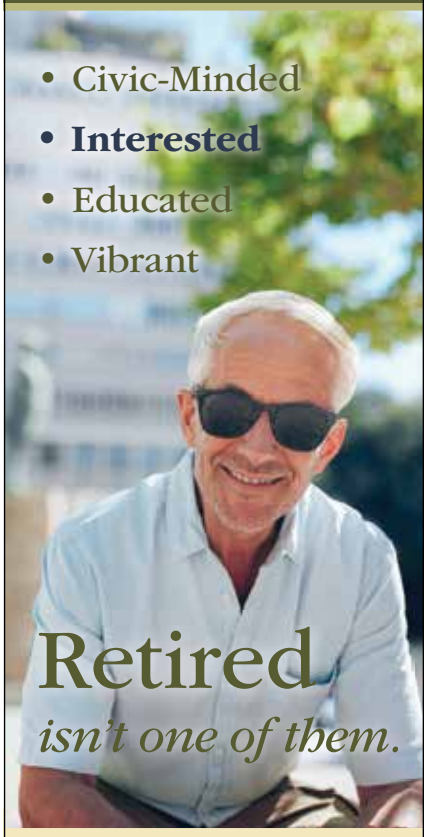

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Lee's four children all died before turning six, and, unhappy in a forced marriage, she "became convinced that God wanted her to do something else with her life." For a woman to declare herself a Christian prophetess was rare enough, notes Sue Maynard, a trustee of Canterbury Shaker Village Inc., the nonprofit that preserved and operates the village as a historic site and museum. But when "she and seven colleagues left England, they were *it*: these eight people who were nobodies, and had nothing, were the origin of this American religion."

By the time Lee died a decade later, she'd attracted dozens of followers, established the first Shaker community in Niskayuna, New York, near Albany, in 1779, and laid the groundwork for the spread of Shakerism. Nineteen Christian-based utopias ultimately developed, most in upstate New York and New England, but some as far away as Ohio, Kentucky, and Florida. And Shaker values, reflected in their elegant yet utilitarian furniture, household objects, and other products, would come to reflect traditional American sensibilities.

Other former Shaker sites, like Hancock Shaker Village (New York) and Pleasant Hill (Kentucky), are also open to the public and help shed light on the sect's enduring legacy. But only Canterbury was "continually occupied by Shakers and has never been shut, or used as anything other than a Shaker Village," notes Maynard. As the site's unofficial historian, she has conducted "exhaustive *and* exhausting research" on all 1,809 people who ever lived at Canterbury, taken oral histories, and written the only full-length biography of the last brother to live there, Irving Greenwood, who died in 1939.

He "made sure they bought a car, a 1907 REO," she reports, "so instead of the long ride in the horse and carriage to Concord, they could drive there much more quickly." The Shakers were not ascetics. They had plenty of food and clothing. Tasks rotated, so nobody got stuck with the dirtiest jobs for long. And everyone had free time, Maynard points out, and enjoyed "entertainments" in the form of community plays and concerts: "They were trying to make as good a life as they could."

Unlike the Amish and Mennonites, Shakers also explored and gamely adopted—and often improved on—outside technology and material goods. Canterbury Shakers developed and patented a commercial-sized washing machine, put it on display at the 1876 U.S. Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, and

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went on to sell models to hotels and other institutions. In 1898 they bought telephones, and 12 years later they installed electricity—even before New Hampshire's capital city, Concord, did. Greenwood brought in a radio set in 1921, at the dawn of that era, and several years later, as modern household appliances began to appear, the Canterbury sisters eagerly purchased a KitchenAid mixer. "Then they got an electric refrigerator—and a Maytag washer," Maynard notes.

This creativity and adaptability—and a series of talented elders—she says, made Canterbury one of the most successful Shaker communities. Yet what about it today draws 35,000 annual visitors, many from around the world? Why is there abiding interest in the Shakers, a religious sect that, at its mid-nineteenth century peak only had about 5,000 members? Some people who come are spiritually minded, others are utopian-seekers, who "see this alternative communal organization as a model for the way that everyone could live," Maynard says. Many are "struck by the achievements of these people who were basically uneducated in any formal way, but who designed and built these buildings, these objects, these businesses, simply from their own inspiration," she continues. "From their own determination and imaginations, they created what they regarded as 'Heaven on earth.' It's a very American idea."

Even the views (here populated by cows) have likely not changed much in 200 years.

Visitors can roam the site on their own, or take a guided tour. Those who share in the Shakers' devotion to craftsmanship might learn from artisans' daily demonstrations of traditional Canterbury Shaker activities: spinning and weaving, letterpress printing, and constructing brooms and the famous oval storage boxes. Seasonal workshops for making chairs, rugs, and folk-art dolls run through November, and several events are planned: the Canterbury Artisan Festival (September 16), Vintage Car Show (October 14), and Ghost Encounters (October 28). Walking trails good for all ages wind through woods and meadows, and skirt ponds marked by remnants of the Shakers' elaborate mill system.

Two different tours—one geared for adults, another for families—offer a grounding in Shaker history, and a sense of how the Canterbury community evolved over time. The village began with new convert and farmer Benjamin Whitcher and 43 other believers intent on transforming his 100-

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The Dwelling House, built in 1793, is where Shaker "sisters" and "brothers" lived in separate quarters; the chapel, below, was added to the building in 1835.

acre homestead into a communal agrarian utopia: "Heaven on Earth." First to rise was the Meeting House. There, devotees eschewed ministers and fire-and-brimstone sermons in favor of listening to community elders offering relevant lessons or reflections during meetings for worship. Singing was prevalent; the Canterbury Shakers alone composed about 10,000 hymns, along with dances and music, Rein said during a recent tour. A few people in the group knew the song "Simple Gifts," written in 1838 by Maine Shaker Joseph Brackett (it became famous after Aaron Copland incorporated it in his orchestral suite *Appalachian Spring*); they sang it along with Rein at the end.

Shakers took their singing and fervent worshipping public to recruit converts, but not surprisingly, they were not always embraced, even in America. "In your town, if you saw a bunch of people in black hats and dark clothes shaking and throwing themselves on the ground, and saying, 'You are a sinner, come join us! Throw your lust away! You—leave your husband and join our sect!'" Rein asked, "wouldn't you pick up the phone and call the police and say, 'Get these people off the street. They're disturbing the peace!'?"

Within the Shaker communities themselves, sisters and brothers never touched. In 1793, the Canterbury Dwelling House was built, and the gender groups came and went through different doors, and stairways, and slept in separate quarters.

Yet they worked closely together, mindfully divvying up workloads and decision-making powers, even around finances. Always "entrepreneurs, inventors, and businesspeople," Rein noted, they pooled their worldly assets upon conversion and worked collectively to earn money and sustain their communities. At Canterbury, a range of ventures developed over the years, from selling farm products, patented medicines, and clothing to cookbooks, household objects, and furniture.

Visitors see artifacts from their commercial ventures, like brooms, bonnets, boxes, and baskets, and from their daily lives, at the exhibition hall. Furniture is also on display—wardrobes, corner cupboards, chairs, tables, and a ingeniously designed double-sided sewing cabinet and desk, and the Ken

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Burns documentary about Canterbury, *The Shakers: Hands to Work, Hearts to God*, is shown. The Shakers established their own communal economy "that challenged the basic tenets of an emerging American capitalism by rejecting individual ownership in favor of joint interest," reads an exhibition panel about the 1842 visit to the village by Ralph Waldo Emerson, A.B. 1821, LL.D. 1866, who called the Shaker economy a "peoples' capitalism."

A carpenter's workbench, tools, and furniture, displayed at the Dwelling House

Canterbury was among the Shaker villages credited with pioneering commercial crops grown for seeds, which they packaged and sold throughout much of the nineteenth century; it also produced tens of thousands of flat brooms, another Shaker invention. Canterbury physician Thomas Corbett (1780-1857) spearheaded the village's packaged-herb business, but more importantly, developed popular cure-alls, like his sarsaparilla-syrup compound, which residents produced, marketed, and sold for 60 years.

The village even had its own printing operation under the dynamic leader and Renaissance man Henry Blinn. It became the locus of published materials for all of the Shaker communities, printing the monthly *Manifesto,* and accepting jobs from outside the community as well. Visitors can explore the equipment used and learn about the arduous process that, by the 1890s, included typesetting done by some of the sisters.

Shakers were perfectionists, Rein noted, and their products are "synonymous with quality." Tours highlight how their labor, work ethic, and aesthetic are linked to spirituality. Lee reportedly preached: "Do all your work as though you had a thousand years to live; and as you would if you knew you must die tomorrow." But Joseph Meacham of the Enfield, New Hampshire, Shaker village, is credited with writing, more practically: "All work done, or things made in the Church for their own use, ought to be faithfully and well done but plain and without superfluity."

The work of God extended to nurturing children. The Shakers had none of their own, but before the era of official orphanages, they routinely acted as foster families for children in need. Canterbury helped hundreds of children over the years, raising and educating them until age 21, when they could choose to sign the Shaker covenant and stay on, or join the "World's People," as outsiders were called.

This was decades after the number of Shakers overall began to decline, starting in 1850 (around the time Canterbury's own population peaked at 250). Male converts were the first to ebb, with the onset of the American Industrial Revolution. Women soon predominated, playing even larger roles

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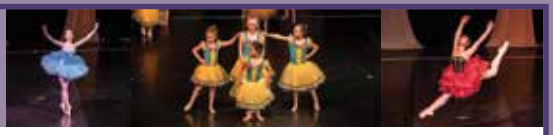

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in financial matters. At Canterbury, Dorothy Durgin, who arrived at age nine, in 1834, rose to become an eldress. The multitalented leader, among other pursuits, designed the "Dorothy Cloak," a wool shoulder cape with a hood (there's one at the exhibition hall) that became a trend among society ladies. (In 1893, first lady Frances Cleveland wore one at her husband's second inauguration.) That entrepreneurship and the clothing line itself expanded during the early twentieth century. Other sisters formed the Hart and Shepard Company, going on the road with trunk-loads of cloaks and other handmade goods, traveling as far as Florida, to resort hotels, Maynard says, "then working their way up the coast, selling thousands of dollars' worth....They were dressed in their Shaker bonnets and dresses and cloaks, but they had independence and were businesswomen."

Then, as earlier, Shaker life could offer women "a sort of sanctuary—a safe and comfortable life where what they did was appreciated," Maynard adds. In the outside world, options for an uneducated single woman were sparse. "She could work as a domestic, an unpaid servant in the home of a married sibling, or stay home and take care of aging parents," Maynard adds. "But what then? What happened as she grew old herself? At the village, as people aged, they were given tasks they *could* do, and if they became infirm, they were cared for."

Clockwise from top left: Dorothy Durgin; Henry C. Blinn (tending his bee hives); a sister using a KitchenAid mixer, c. 1926; hundreds of children were fostered at Canterbury, and some joined the community themselves. This image is from 1916.

The sisters nursed Irving Greenwood until his death in 1939. There were only 30 women left then, and no new converts permanently joined after that. Most of the

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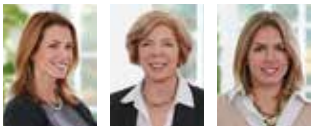

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Arriving at Canterbury Shaker Village, north of Concord, New Hampshire

other villages had closed or consolidated, and the flow of potential youthful converts ended as governments and charities developed orphanages and foster care. Among the last sisters to arrive at Canterbury and stay—Ethel Hudson, who came as a child in 1907—was the last sister to die there, in 1992.

By 1965, with eight remaining Shaker sisters in Canterbury, the covenant was effectively closed. Leaders there "recognized that the era had passed for the original intent of the villages," according to Maynard, "and that this was just the natural way of things." (Two people still live at Sabbathday Lake Shaker Village in New Gloucester, Maine, which is also open to the public.) Fours years later, in 1969, a handful of Canterbury sisters laid plans to preserve the Shaker legacy and property by founding Canterbury Shaker Village Inc.

Village visitors come across the country, and from all over the world, to see the restored, original buildings and some of the thousands of photographs, artifacts, and documents that help explain who the Shakers were and what they might mean for the contemporary world. The BBC was there this spring to film the village and interview Maynard for its series, *Utopia: In Search of the Dream.*

Around that time, a tour included New Englanders and visitors from Maryland, Georgia, and California. What did they find compelling? "They were very spiritual people and they knew their purpose," answered Mary Street, of North Reading, Massachusetts. For her husband, Scott, it was the "simple beauty" of the place, the furniture, and their relationship to spiritual beliefs. "That they were progressive, and also part of the world—and being celibate," he paused, considering the fact. "It's strange, and sort of fascinating how they pulled that all off."

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