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A Thread of Evidence: Shaker Textile Industries at South Union, Kentucky

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

The Shakers, or the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, were a communal religious group which evolved from eighteenth century English Quakerism. They believed in celibacy, communal ownership of property, pacifism, a liberal approach to Biblical interpretation, and simplicity in their daily affairs and their crafts. These industrious people were known as Shakers or as Believers; those outside their communities were referred to as "the World" or "the World's people." Ann Lee and a small band of Shakers migrated to the American colonies in 1774. By the 1830s, the Shakers had established nineteen communities, ranging from New England to Kentucky. Two communities were founded in Kentucky: Pleasant Hill near Harrodsburg founded in 1805 and South Union near Russellville founded in 1807. Started by missionaries, South Union was the sect's westernmost colony. Committed to communal living, the early converts quickly adopted the doctrines, dogma, and theoretical hierarchy of the sect's eastern communities, although subtle differences existed from site to site. During the Civil War the Logan County Shakers suffered from constant demand on their resources by both Confederate and Union armies. The community never regained its ante-bellum stature, and after waning for years, disbanded in 1922.

Textile production was one of many routine tasks performed in the early American home, a practice which continued well into the nineteenth century. Women, relying on their own skills as well as those of servants and neighbors, furnished their families with necessary fabric for clothing and household use. Those who joined communal groups, like the Shaker converts at South Union, Kentucky, brought special expertise—such as textile production—to each colony, leading one Shaker historian to remark that "the early Shaker community was but an enlarged colonial household."¹ Shakers manufactured fabric—linen, silk, and woolens—in about the same manner as most of their contemporaries, only on a larger scale. However, few of their contemporaries left such detailed documentation regarding the tedious tasks involved in textile production. The South Union Shaker community, located in Logan County, kept intimate accounts of daily activities through journals, diaries, day books, and correspondence. Surviving Shaker records provide an interesting background for a study of nineteenth-century textile production, and specifically how the South Union sect met its own fabric needs and used the excess for economic gain.

While endeavoring to be self-sufficient, the Shakers relied on the "world's people" as a market for their products and purchased goods from the world when it proved to their advantage.

Most researchers concur that the Shakers "principally manufactured items that they needed and could not otherwise acquire" at reasonable prices. "When someone else began to manufacture an item of equal quality and less expense than the Shakers manufactured, the Shakers would usually stop producing the item."² This precedent certainly held true in their textile industries.

The three textile industries at South Union did overlap one another. The first industry, linen production, began immediately after the South Union converts united in 1807. It continued until the late 1840s. Almost simultaneously wool production was started. Once the first carding mill was installed in 1819, the wool industry developed a frightening momentum that seemed to speed out of control until the 1870s. The first evidence of silk production is mentioned in the 1820s, and it continued through the 1860s. Temporarily halted by the hard times following the Civil War, the silk industry re-emerged in the 1880s and appears to have been short lived. Cotton was purchased to make some fabrics and to blend with other fibers, but it was never an important fiber by itself at South Union. Old Society daybooks list the amounts of cotton purchased from the world's people for the sect's use. The Shakers appear to have experimented with cotton cultivation, but they did not experience success.

By examining the documentation related to the three South Union textile industries, the patterns of development and demise of the industries appear rather matter-of-factly, leaving us to only imagine the hard labor, frustrations, triumphs and personal gratification related to these important enterprises.

E N D N O T E S

¹Edward D. Andrews, *The Community Industries of the Shakers* (Albany: The University of the State of New York, 1932), 184.

²John M. Keith, Jr., "The Economic Development of the South Union Shaker Colony, 1807-1861," (Thesis, Western Kentucky State College, 1965), 50.