

1994

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Recommended Repository Citation

Parker, Donna C.. (1994). "Ho! for Drakes Creek': Something Ventured, Nothing Gained. *Communal Societies*, 14, 113-122.

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"Ho! for Drakes Creek:" Something Ventured, Nothing Gained

By Donna Parker

In 1875, Shaker Elder Frederick Evans, of Mt. Lebanon, New York, remarked to Charles Nordhoff that "If every [Shaker] outfarm were sold, the society would be better off." Evans thought these farms, sometimes distant from their home villages, were of "no real advantage" to the Shakers. Though they gave the society a "prosperous look," he felt the farms drained communities' resources. Farm management necessitated hiring non-Believers and required valued brethren to direct their energies away from the main communities. Shakers, Evans believed, should not be wealthy, but "make no more than a moderate surplus . . . to lay by something for hard times."¹

In the early years of Shaker history, prior to the mid-1820s, leaders concentrated on universal organization of the sect and the establishment of individual villages. Acquisition of property was essential for the society's growth. Newly organized groups acquired their first buildings and land through donation by eager converts. The Shakers' communal structure required those in full membership to give all their possessions to the society. As more and more people joined, land holdings grew. They planted crops, orchards, and gardens on cleared land and harvested timber and tan bark from woodlands. They quickly established industries and built mills to service the society and the public and reinvested profits in additional acreage.² Stein notes that "The Shakers paid dearly for their success with heavy investments of time, energy, and resources as well as with physical hardships, internal conflict, and external persecution."³ The community at South Union, Kentucky, followed the general pattern of development of other Shaker societies.

The first Shaker missionaries to the "western country" arrived at the Gasper River region in Logan County to spread their teachings in 1807. In the fervor of the "Great Revival" many were ripe for conversion. Followers formed a community called South Union. Members quickly worked towards improving the land, constructing mills, building structures, and forming

industries not only to support their current membership but to provide for future growth.⁴

Making shoes and tanning leather were two of South Union's first industries. By 1815, they had in operation one fulling mill, one gristmill, and two sawmills at the Logan County site.

From an early point, the South Union Shakers maintained an active program of land expansion, and soon looked beyond their immediate boundaries. In 1813, they situated a sugar camp about three miles from the main village.⁵ Family members living at this farm, called either Black Lick or Watervliet, made molasses, grew flax and wheat, harvested timber and raised cattle.⁶ Several years later they ventured farther afield. Shakers not only looked for land to till but also land with timber and streams to support their mill industry.⁷ On a January day in 1817 three men rode from South Union to a place in nearby Warren County called "the point." Joseph Allen, Benjamin Youngs, and John Rankin traveled sixteen miles to examine the Drakes Creek mill seat. From the bluff above the creek, they could see the meandering waterway, fertile bottomlands, abundant timber, and the promise of a prosperous new enterprise. Seventeen days later they bought the site and 300 surrounding acres.⁸

The Drakes Creek purchase initiated more than a decade of Shaker residency in Warren County. Trustees continued to buy land along Drakes Creek and by August 1817, had purchased an additional 841 acres. In 1820, they owned 1,274 acres in Warren County costing \$8,780.00. They called their new farm Mill Point.⁹

With the Drakes Creek procurement, they embarked upon a new business venture. Leaders planned to open a gristmill and a sawmill at the site. Success of the home mills had prompted them to geographically expand their operations. Financial gain, rather than spiritual growth, was the primary focus of the Mill Point endeavor. The establishment of mills benefited both the society and the outside community. Mills, whose products were so essential to daily life, were often the first buildings constructed in a new Shaker village.¹⁰

On May 6, 1817, the Warren County Court gave "the people called Shakers" permission to build a dam and a grist mill on Drakes Creek.¹¹ In order to run the mill and work the land, a number of members would live at Mill Point. The Society made a "proper big move" in April of

1818. Of the event, South Union's journalist wrote: "Ho! for Drakes Creek . . . Three Sisters go to cook . . . [with] Two wagon loads of furniture & provisions - Also Saml Shannon & Black Matt." Within two months 30 brethren were at work there. John Rankin planted an orchard that spring.¹²

Members brought to the society a gender-oriented division of labor system. Men performed the more arduous chores of farming and construction and also ran numerous industries. Women, who did the domestic chores of cooking, sewing, washing, and textile production, also helped with farm work.¹³ Shakers relied on hired labor to help cut wood, work the land, and operate the mills.¹⁴

The following year neighbors saw considerable activity on the road between South Union and Mill Point. Both Brethren and Sisters journeyed to Drakes Creek fulfilling new job assignments and helping with many tasks. Three Sisters accompanied the first wagonload of supplies to prepare meals. During harvesttime a number of members went to gather and haul crops home. A June 27, 1821 entry notes: "The brethren from the two families, - Brick & frame, start in two wagons to Mill Point to take the Harvest." Two days later, "one wagon & two carriage loads of Sisters, 22 in number" traveled to Mill Point to assist in harvesting the flax. On a cold day in December of the same year, Eldress Mercy Pickett, Hannah Rankin, and George Rankin helped the members with the hog killing.¹⁵

Leaders sent specific people to work at the farm. Eldress Molly Goodrich noted in South Union's journal when a "change of Sisters" took place. On July 3, 1818 Rebecca Davis, Volumnia Miller & Nancy Cooke went to Drakes Creek replacing Jenny Dillon, Lucy Shannon & Asenath who returned to South Union. Managers also hired non-Believers to work at Mill Point. Between 1825 and 1827, twenty separate individuals, one of whom was a woman, had worked there, earning from eight to twelve dollars per month.¹⁶ Due to extensive Shaker holdings and a declining membership, many Shaker villages found it necessary to engage the services of outsiders.

Shaker societies organized members into families according to their level of commitment. For example, South Union's Church Family included those who had given themselves totally to the faith, signed the covenant, and turned over all property to the group. The East Family embodied the newest converts to Shakerism. The ministry, Benjamin S. Youngs, Joseph Allen, Molly Goodrich, and Mercy Pickett, had charge of the entire South Union Society. To each family, they appointed both spiritual and temporal leaders.¹⁷

Though the Shaker communal group was organized into three classes, each colony had a varying number of "families." For instance, the New Lebanon, New York, community maintained eight families whereas Sabbathday Lake, Maine had only three.¹⁸ In addition to the Center and East families located at the main village, South Union also had a North family, a West family, and several groups located on outlying farms; Black Lick, Drakes Creek, and East Section families. Individual contribution rather than society standing determined the make-up of these adjunct groups.¹⁹

The ministry made no appointments of leadership at Mill Point in its first few years of operation. John Rankin seems to have been the group's spiritual guide. One of the first converts to Shakerism in the Gasper River area, Rankin remained true to the calling his entire life. This faithful and "zealous" disciple walked to South Union every Sabbath for worship service. That first summer, Rankin sowed three acres of grass seed in the newly purchased ground. Mill Point, though, was not without an overseeing eye. Elder Benjamin S. Youngs visited the mill once a week to inspect the new work. His diligence prompted one member to comment: "He seems to be every where, sees & knows every thing just how it is getting along - At Black Lick, Drakes Creek & at home."²⁰

In 1824, the ministry appointed Mill Point's first Elder -- Jesse McComb. Along with McComb they designated Absalom Chisholm as trading deacon and placed Solomon Henson in charge of the farm. In 1826, the ministry reorganized a portion of the South Union community and established a small family at Mill Point. Sarah Lowry served as Eldress. Five months after

the 1826 appointment, Hannah Rankin replaced Lowry, who returned to South Union to the duties of a nurse.²¹

Stein describes Shaker life in the mid-1820s as “highly structured, involving multiple levels of subordination and established patterns for making decisions.”²² Certainly, anyone who has read South Union’s journals quickly realizes the complexity of their social structure. Typical of western organization, the colony, in its first twenty-five years, was headed by a ministry of “eastern Shakers.” The lower levels of leadership were filled from the local membership. Wolford, writing of the social stratification of the South Union group, concludes that the “prominent families of the region who entered the Shaker faith tended to fill the prominent positions within the Shaker village’s socio-political hierarchy,” and suggests this may hold true for other Shaker villages. He further contends that the number of family members who joined the society and their continued commitment to the sect was a determining factor in an individual’s status within the group. The continual shifting within South Union’s organizational framework of leaders and individual members, whose surnames were many times the same, makes identification of Shaker family membership difficult.²³

Travel between the two locations proved hazardous on occasion. The Shakers called it a "Sad Casualty [when] Soloman Henson coming from Mill Point last night with an ox team - in the snow got both his feet badly frozen - Were cured however after many days of suffering." Spring rains made traveling near waterways particularly difficult. On a March day in 1826, Houston Shannon, a Believer going to Mill Point with three Sisters, attempted to drive over a flooded road. As Shannon pushed his team into deeper water, the carriage bed floated off its frame, dumping the three Sisters into the swollen creek. Fortunately, they managed to grab "the limbs of a beach tree" and "clung [there] for an hour" in the cold water until the Brethren rescued them. The tree, observed one member "was all that saved them from a watery grave." One of their horses drowned.²⁴

Much to the approval of the ministry, members of the Drakes Creek group traveled frequently to South Union for Sabbath meeting, many times walking the sixteen miles. Eldress

Molly, while pondering one brother's customary treks each Sabbath, observed that "this is the way to prosper." Christmas of 1818 brought all the members "home" to a service Elder Benjamin described as a "joyful & powerful meeting" and where "all seemed happy & Thankful - Indeed were so." Even so, some members lost their faith. Years later, Elder Harvey Eades commented: "It would seem, Brethren so zealous as to come 16 miles almost every Saturday for worship ought all to have been saved - But alas! 5 out of the above dozen turned away."²⁵

Universally, Shakers saw considerable decline in their membership by the mid-1830s. Younger members, particularly, were abandoning the society.²⁶ South Union, ranking in the top third in both size and longevity of all Shaker communities, suffered the same loss of membership happening throughout the sect.²⁷ In 1836, South Union membership had declined to 214 from 349 in 1827.²⁸

As the primary purpose of the Mill Point work was to open two new mills, the Brethren soon faced the task of building a dam. Only two months after the Society purchased the site, the court examined and condemned the mill seat, keeping the creek open to traffic. In January 1818, Samuel G. Whyte, armed with a petition of 1,200 signatures, traveled to Frankfort and appealed the decision. On January 28, Kentucky's General Assembly repealed any acts declaring Drakes Creek navigable, thus clearing the way for the Shakers to build their dam.²⁹ Area residents, particularly those owning land and property upstream, continued with their fight and petitioned the Legislature to reopen the stream, but to no avail.³⁰

With the way now cleared, brethren began to lay stone for the dam in August when the creek was at its lowest level and completed the dam a year later. The men "raised" the mill house in June of 1819 and brought the mill stones from Bowling Green that August.³¹ Twenty-three days after they finished the dam, South Union's journalist recorded the "Drakes Creek Mills - A failure!!" Brethren discovered sinkholes in the land above the mills. In dry weather the sinks took precious water into the ground and under the mills. Elder Benjamin writes of the problem in more detail:

“above three miles up the creek a sink of about 200 yards in length on the edge of low water mark so that before the water could be raised high enough to get into the race & forebays the whole current of the creek would run in under the shelving rocks & come out from under the clefts . . . about a quarter of a mile below the Dam.”³²

The presence of the sinkholes, which characterized much of Warren County, made the mills a seasonal operation. In his journal Elder Benjamin noted: "If these cannot be stopped, The whole thing All our expense of precious time & means must be mostly lost -- all of which we can so little spare."³³

Sinkholes continued to be a problem. The leadership was in a quandary. They had invested too much capital in the enterprise to abandon the project. Members tried to stop the diversion of water by throwing brush and dirt into the holes. Benjamin reported: "Brethren & hands [were] still working at the great Sinks at Mill Point - It so far swallows all that is done." He determined that: "a more solid material, or else nothing will finally be effected - & the results of our worst fears be realized."³⁴

With the discovery, the tone of South Union's journal changed. In October after the dam was finished "a Yoke of Oxen & Cart [were] swept over the Mill dam . . . [and] killed of course." The waterworks were perilous to humans as well. Crossing the creek on a February day, Robert Paisley accidentally steered his skiff close to the dam's overflow. Luckily, he noticed his predicament and "went over safely & kept right side up!" James Gorin, a hired youth, was not so fortunate. Purposefully steering over the dam on a December day, Gorin's canoe was "battered to pieces." Members found his body several days later. The Shakers viewed this as a "reckless death."³⁵ Elder Benjamin explains the circumstances surrounding the formation of this pool:

“before the Dam was finished, the fresh took many of the great stones one after out of their beds, nearly to the bottom of the Dam & threw them into the gulf it had made . . . tore away part of the Island facing the Dam & threw up the gravel nearly all round in the form of a Bason. We can not discover as yet that this gulf or Bason of water will do any essential injury.”³⁶

This location on Drakes Creek has remained a dangerous spot to the present day. The “Bason of water” Elder Benjamin describes has become a large whirlpool, located directly below the mill site, which creates strong opposing currents hazardous to the fisherman, boater, or swimmer.

Many of the Brothers and Sisters at Mill Point fell sick during the summer of 1826. Jefferson Shannon and Cyrene McLean brought Hannah Rankin home in the ministry's carriage. Very ill members generally returned to the main community and placed themselves in the nurses' care. Rankin, at age 37, died just five days after her arrival at South Union. Harvey Eades noted that: "the place seems disastrous in more ways than one."³⁷

On October 30, 1819, the sawmill began operation. The Shakers, apart from the regular business, supplied materials for South Union's building projects. In 1825, two Brethren "went to Mill Point to cut and saw timber & procure lumber for a House for Genny Neely." The ministry allowed Neely to live alone because "she was nervously disposed - & was thence annoying & easily annoyed but in no criminal manner - her afflictions being entirely out of her control." Other construction projects benefited from the Warren County farm. In 1824, Brethren split over 60,000 shingles for the main community's Centre House. In September, three ox teams carted the black oak shingles from "Shingle Town" to South Union.³⁸

1826 Mill Point accounts reveal that, in a seven-month period, the Warren County mill ground 675 bushels of corn and wheat for the home village. The Center House received 374 bushels of this amount with the remainder going to the North, East, and Watervliet groups. Despite its seasonal operation, the mills continued to run. On July 15, 1828, two Brothers returned from Mill Point “with a load of good flour,” prompting the community's diarist to comment: "the Ox not now to be muzzled." By the following October, leaders reversed the decision to keep the mill open and settled their original debt. On April 16, 1829, Elder Benjamin Youngs and Eli McLean sold the property to Asa Mitchell for \$8,000. In all, the Shakers spent \$30,000 on the enterprise.³⁹

By May 15, trustees made arrangements to have the sum paid in five annual installments. The Shakers would accept "good suitable plank & scantling" as part of the payment. Members were now free to come home. When they completed the move four days later, one leader, in a tone of relief, noted: "All at Home! Every soul now at home from Mill Point." Asa Mitchell took possession the very same day. The Shaker journalist's "good by" was not the end of the story. A year and a half after the sale, they repossessed the property when Mitchell failed with his payments. In 1832, a court-appointed commissioner, at public auction, sold the 500 acres back to the Shakers for \$350.⁴⁰ Forty years later, Harvey Eades aptly summarized the Drakes Creek venture:

"The purchasing . . . was a magnificent blunder - It has cost immense treasure, to build it up - But the fact early discovered, that the water escaping under the Bluff for 1/4 mile should have deterred further prosecution of the Work - In loss of souls - by sickness & estrangement & loss on Money all together is not easily computed."⁴¹

Mill Point was the first of South Union's few financial losses. Another occurred in 1870 when a Bowling Green bank employee embezzled a large sum of money. The Shakers described themselves as "among the worst of the sufferers" losing about \$63,000.⁴² In 1883, though membership was declining, South Union unwisely invested in the construction of a West House. Fifteen years later, unable to maintain the property, the West family joined with the Center family, selling the house for building materials.⁴³ South Union was not alone in making financial blunders. Other Shaker villages experienced business failures due to bad judgement, mismanagement, or even natural disasters. In 1835, floods caused \$25,000 worth of damage to Union Village's buildings and land. The building of a cotton mill in 1849 at Shirley Massachusetts, cost the society \$32,648.⁴⁴ What looked to be a promising venture in 1819, actually cost the South Union Shakers a vast amount of time and money, and a loss of members. By 1850, the Western Kentucky group had largely disposed of the property. With an "Adieu to Drakes Creek!" they sold the last 300 acre tract in 1863, ending a chapter in the history of the South Union community.⁴⁵

NOTES:

¹ Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States; from Personal Visit and Observation: Including Detailed Accounts of the Economists, Zoarites, Shakers, the Amana, Oneida, Bethel, Aurora, Icarian, and Other Existing Societies, their Religious Creeds, Social Practices, Numbers, Industries, and Present Condition* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1875; reprint, New York: Hillary House, 1961), 161-62.

² Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 40, 98.

³ *Ibid.*, 40.

⁴ John Brenton Wolford, "The South Union, Kentucky, Shakers and Tradition: A Study of Business, Work, and Commerce" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1992), 225.

⁵ Julia Neal, *By Their Fruits: The Story of Shakerism in South Union, Kentucky* (Chapel Hill: The University Press of North Carolina, 1947), 47, 48.

⁶ Tommy Hines of Shakertown at South Union, interview by author, South Union, Kentucky, 16 July 1993, telephone interview.

⁷ Julia Neal, *The Kentucky Shakers* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1977), 13.

⁸[South Union Shaker] Record A, 1807-1836, 25 January 1817, 11 February 1817. Department of Library Special Collections Manuscripts, Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, hereinafter cited as WKU; Warren County Order Book E, 7 April 1817; Record A, 11 February 1817.

⁹Warren County Deed Book 8, 12 August 1817, 25 January 1820; Record A, 20 February 1817.

¹⁰ Stein, 139.

¹¹ Order Book E, 6 May 1817.

¹²Record A, 14 April 1818, 25 May 1818.

¹³ Rosemary D Gooden, "A Preliminary Examination of the Shaker Attitude Toward Work," *Communal Societies* 3 (Fall 1983), 6.

¹⁴ Stein, 147.

¹⁵Record A, 14 April 1818, 27 June 1821, 29 June 1821, 31 December 1821.

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- ¹⁶ Ibid., 3 July 1818; Mill Point Account Book, 1825-1827, Shaker Manuscripts, Western Reserve Historical Society Library, Cleveland, Ohio, II-B-66, microfilm, hereinafter cited as WR.
- ¹⁷ Neal, *The Kentucky Shakers*, 1977, 18, 19.
- ¹⁸ Priscilla J. Brewer, *Shaker Communities, Shaker Lives* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1986), 228, 238.
- ¹⁹ Hines interview, 16 July 1993.
- ²⁰ Neal, *By Their Fruits*, 36; Record A, 25 October 1818, 28 August 1817, 10 April 1819.
- ²¹ Record A, 30 December 1824, 9 January 1826, 11 January 1826, 5 June 1826.
- ²² Stein, 133.
- ²³ Wolford, 212-171, 285.
- ²⁴ Record A, 4 January 1822, 3 March 1826.
- ²⁵ Ibid., 13 June 1818, 25 December 1818, 18 February 1821.
- ²⁶ Stein, 164.
- ²⁷ Wolford, 6.
- ²⁸ Neal, *By Their Fruits*, 73.
- ²⁹ Record A, 5 January 1818; Gabriel Slaughter, *Acts Passed at the First Session of the Twenty-Sixth General Assembly for the Commonwealth of Kentucky* (Frankfort: Commonwealth of Kentucky, 1818), 395.
- ³⁰ Petition, n.d., Day Collection (WKU).
- ³¹ Record A, 15 August 1818, 22 June 1819, 26 August 1819.
- ³² Elder Benjamin Youngs, South Union, Kentucky, to Ministry, Pittsfield, Massachusetts, 16 March 1820 (WKU). Original housed in Yale University Library.
- ³³ Record A, 15 September 1819.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 4 September 1827, 1 November 1822.
- ³⁵ Ibid., 12 October 1819, 18 February 1820, 24 December 1822.
- ³⁶ Elder Benjamin Youngs to Pittsfield Ministry, 16 March 1820.
- ³⁷ Record A, 31 October 1826.
- ³⁸ Ibid., 30 October 1819, 18 June 1825, 2 March 1824, 3 September 1824, 9 September 1824.

³⁹Mill Point Account Book, 31 May 1826 – 23 November 1826, II-B-66 (WR); Record A, 15 July 1828, 20 October 1828, 2 May 1829.

⁴⁰Warren County Court Records, Equity Case 874, 27 November 1832 (WKU); Record A, 14 May 1829, 19 May 1829, 19 November 1830; Warren County Deed Book 16 1/2, 27 November 1832.

⁴¹Record A, 2, May 1829.

⁴² [South Union] Record Book C, 1865-1878, 1 December 1870 (WKU).

⁴³ Neal, *By Their Fruits*, 226.

⁴⁴ Stein, 143, 145.

⁴⁵Warren County Deed Book 20, 26 May 1845; Warren County Deed Book 21, 8 February 1847, 7 April 1847; Warren County Deed Book 23, 28 April 1848; [South Union Shaker] Record Book B, 1836-1864, microfilm, 21 November 1863. Original housed in the Shaker Museum, South Union, Kentucky.