

Shakers cling to life—and no, they don't just make furniture: Only a few members left

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Arnold Hadd is the last Shaker man on Earth. And you can find him and three “sisters” in the dwindling faith group living on the hilly farmland near Sabbathday Lake, southwest of Lewiston, Maine.

A polite man, Hadd is simple in his speech, still utilizing the traditional yay and nay in place of the common yes and no. Yet when the discussion turns to the Shakers’ perceived legacy as craftspeople, his mannerisms change.

“In the vernacular, it pisses me off,” he said. “Everybody comes here thinking we’re a guild of furniture makers, which is about as far away from the truth as it can be.”

But while such a mistake may be the bane of the Shaker tradition, it may also be its salvation.

Hadd, 51, is a member the last Shaker community. In the 19th century the farm housed hundreds, and there were as many as 6,000 Shakers across the country. But now there are only these four, and new members are hard to come by.

The United Society of Believers, as Shakers are formally known, was founded in 1747 in Manchester, England, but followers were forced to move to America soon after to escape persecution. Their name arose from mockery of their worship—like that of the Quakers or even some Methodists—which often involved singing, dancing and even convulsions and speaking in tongues. A semi-isolationist group, Shakers built two dozen communities, mainly between Maine and Kentucky.

Some Shaker villages remain open, run by nonmembers as legacies of the past.

The foundations of the faith include living like Christ, which for Shakers means practicing celibacy and sharing communal property. They also believe in the equality

of the sexes, a life lived peacefully and continuous revelation. But their belief in the sanctity of hard work—embodied by their adage, “Hands to Work, Hearts to God”—has created a predicament in the faith’s twilight.

“The general population associates Shakers with their furniture and a few of their items,” said Leonard Brooks, a nonmember who has lived with the Sabbathday Lake community for 30 years. He directs its library and museum, which displays the artwork of the Shakers, from drawings and songs said to be divinely inspired to intricately crafted baskets and furniture.

“It’s unfortunate that craftsmanship is all people see, as the Shakers are so much more,” Brooks said. “They’re like living psalms. In them, you read how brutal God is, throwing everything at you. Shakers recognize their shortcomings and challenges and don’t overstate their virtues. They are laborers who experience the full range of life experience, just as in the Psalms.”

Thousands of tourists visit the community every summer. But Shakers get upset when furniture seems to be all that visitors see. A well-known quote reflects their frustration: “I don’t want to be remembered as a chair,” said Mildred Barker, a Shaker who died in 1990 after living in Sabbathday Lake for almost a century.

Yet the Shakers’ reputation for woodcraft helps to reveal their faithful lives. Visitors may tour the entire farm, from the fruit orchard to the meetinghouse. And if they come on Sunday, they are welcome to join in worship.

“Our mission is just to make people aware,” said Hadd. “Some people just take away that they’ve seen more furniture, but a lot of people take away that is a living community, which they weren’t aware of.”

And, the Shakers hope, some may decide to join the community to keep the tradition going. Since Hadd became a member in 1978, dozens of people have stayed with the Shakers. But only two have stayed permanently.

[Wayne Smith, who joined six months after his high school graduation, left the community nearly two years ago after a stay of 15 years, Hadd told the Century. “He no longer felt called to be here and after wrestling with that for some time decided to leave,” he said.]

Nevertheless, Hadd has faith that Shakers will persevere as long as need be. “We believe it is the truth, and whether others see it as the truth or not, we have to live and die by it,” he said. “But I have a firm belief that as long as this is God’s work, God’s going to send the hands to keep it going.”

After all, people don’t dedicate their lives to making furniture. Even Jesus gave up being a carpenter, according to the Gospel of Mark. “He saw something else a little higher,” Hadd said. -*Matthew Streib, Religion News Service*