



## *History of the Shakers*

Who were the Shakers? How could a religious group last for over 200 years when its basic rule was celibacy? With no heirs to carry on, winning converts was the only method of perpetuating this austere, sex-free order. The Shaker religion was founded by Ann Lee, known as Mother Ann to her followers. Born to impoverished parents in Manchester, England, about 1736, she was familiar with the abuses of child labor and the sufferings of lower class English society during the early days of the Industrial Revolution.

Originally known as the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing, the faith included communal living, celibacy, pacifism, confession of sin and the belief that God was a dual personality. This personality was conceived as a masculine spirit embodied in Christ and a female element manifested in the spiritual presence of Mother Ann. As a result of this conception the Shakers practiced equality of the sexes in all their activities and responsibilities, putting them far in advance of their time. Persecuted in England, Mother Ann led a little band of eight loyal followers to the British colony of New York in 1774. Arriving on the eve of the American Revolution, they were greeted with suspicion and they continued to be persecuted.

Their first permanent settlement was established near Albany. Others followed in New England, Kentucky, Ohio and Indiana. The religious movement of the early 19th century, especially in the West, provided a hospitable environment for this self-denying sect. At their peak they counted 6000 members, located in 19 communities. It was the largest utopian society in the United States and the longest surviving communitarian group in the world. The Shakers excelled in agriculture, marketing, furniture making, spinning and weaving. Their inventions include the common clothes pin, washing machine, rotary harrow, circular saw, flat broom and rotary oven.

It was the Shakers who originated the sale of seeds in packets rather than in bulk. Shaker furniture, distinctively sturdy, light and utilitarian, is admired today because its simple, functional lines hold enduring appeal. Shaker ingenuity grew out of their life style, necessitated by their nearly self-sustaining communities as well as their religious fervor towards all work. They labored diligently and skillfully to achieve perfection in all their tasks. Mother Ann's counsel to 'do all your work as if you had a thousand years to live, and yet as if you were going to die tomorrow', along with her better known maxim, 'Hands to work and hearts to God,' served as spiritual guidelines. This was the essence of their 'consecrated industries'. Following the Civil War the Industrial Revolution had a devastating impact on the Shakers. They could not compete with cheaper factory made items.

With the advent of railroads and telephones the Shaker communes no longer offered companionship and protection against a hostile environment. Declining interest in religion made it increasingly difficult to win converts. Today there is only a tiny handful of surviving Shakers. Although Shakerism as a viable institution is a thing of the past, their philosophy and ideals still have an influential impact.

To quote Sister Mildred of Sabbathday Lake in Maine, 'The principles and ideals which the Shakers were first to expound have gone out into the world and, like a pebble dropped into

the water, we cannot measure the distance of their influence they have borne. First in so many things we now take for granted - sex equality, religious and racial tolerance, and so forth - Shakerism is not dying out, nor is it a failure’.

### ***How are the “Oval Boxes” made?***

There are some **18 steps** in making an oval box. The bands are made from air-dried quarter sawn wood for stability. The fingers (swallowtails) are cut by knife to a bevel. The bands are bent around a form/mold after heating with steam or hot water. Copper tacks are used to hold the bands together.

#### ***The marks of a Shaker oval box, or a true reproduction, are:***

- A pleasing elliptical shape. An oval shape fits better in the hands and makes it easier to remove the lid. It also uses less shelf space than a round box of the same size.
- A graceful "gothic" arch is formed between the fingers or "swallowtail" joints. The fingers most often point to the right as you look at the box. The edges of the fingers are almost always chamfered instead of squared off. They are cut with a knife along the sides and at the tip.
- Copper tacks (they won't rust) form neatly aligned rows up the side of the box.

Shaker box makers used tiny copper, iron or wood points or pegs to hold the sides and lid rim to the top and bottom. There is no glue in a Shaker box. (Now a’ days some glue may be used but only in the smallest boxes.)