

News and Notes

By Walter A. Brumm

In the fall of 2007 I journeyed to Kirtland, Ohio, where I participated in the annual meeting of the Communal Studies Association, September 27-30. The site was selected because of its connection with the first Mormon temple. The temple property is co-owned by the two main branches of Mormonism—the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and The Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, now called the Community of Christ. For those wondering how Mormonism fits with communal studies, I will simply share the titles and program descriptions of several papers given at the conference:

- “Ohio’s Kendall Community and the Genesis of Kirtland Communalism.”

This paper explored “how a group of agnostic social reformers interested in changing the nature of marriage relationships, property ownership, and religious influence in society led to the establishment of the Morley Family.” (Program, p. 53)

- “Approaching Zion 1828-1865: Isaac Morley’s Pursuit of the Perfect Community from the ‘Family’ to the United Order.”

This paper elaborated on the family, its economic system and its outcome. “In February, 1830, a sizeable group of Rigdonites moved onto Isaac’s farm and began a communal order, ‘The Family,’ ... [a] self-contained, common-stock economy based on New Testament principles.” (Program, p. 46)

- “The Order of Enoch At Voree.”

This paper carried the communal ideal from Kirtland to post-Nauvoo. The abstract of this paper states: “From one to two thousand impoverished Mormons came to Voree [after leaving Nauvoo, Illinois] and established a settlement with a variety of manufacturing endeavors. The order of Enoch was instituted under the principle of having all things in common but it ultimately was a failure.” (Program, p. 49)

Historical connections such as these led to a joint annual meeting of the CSA and the John Whitmer Historical Association. The theme of the

conference was “Communal Experiment: Among Latter Day Saints & Other American Communal Groups.”

For mainline Mormonism, experimentation with a communal lifestyle occurred primarily in the religion’s early years, as indicated above. This observation, however, leaves unanswered the following questions:

- What impact did early rapid membership growth have on such experiments?
- What influence did the establishment of a church order outside those experiments have on an emerging “Family” pattern?

In short, the Mormon ideal of cooperation seems to have been more like that of the Amish than that of the Shakers in the formative years. Since one factor in Shakerism’s becoming communal was to “protect” new converts from family and wider social efforts to nullify the hold of the new faith, one can only wonder why the same was not true for converts to Mormonism. Indeed Shakerism had rapid growth in the early years; therefore, other variables may have undercut Mormon communal experiments. Unfortunately, the conference papers were more descriptive and historical than theoretical and analytic, thereby leaving such issues unresolved while beckoning further research and comparative analysis.

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Almost immediately upon leaving Kirtland, I ventured east, my goals being to attend the Willis Henry Shaker Auction in Pittsfield, Massachusetts on October 14, 2007 and to visit the Shelburne Museum’s exhibition “Out of this World: Shaker Design, Past, Present, and Future,” which ran from June 14 through October 28, 2007. The museum in northwestern Vermont is a village-type museum and includes a Canterbury Shaker carriage shed. As an aside, for those acquainted with Canterbury Shaker Village, this is the building which originally stood on the site of the present visitor’s center.

The exhibition included galleries devoted to the following themes:

- The Shakers and Scandinavian Design.
- The Shaker World, “illustrating” classic Shaker furniture design.
- The Spiritual World: a display of gift drawings and items associated with Shaker hymnody.
- The Commercial World.
- The Fancy World.

The quality of the items selected for the exhibit was stellar. Although each gallery had a descriptive on-site guide available to supplement exhibit item labels, no comprehensive and illustrated guide was available for purchase by interested visitors. This is unfortunate since many pieces came from private collections. In effect, an opportunity to record and make the items more accessible to future Shaker enthusiasts was lost.

I learned subsequently from Stephen Miller that the exhibition would be reassembled in New York City at the Bard Graduate Center, and will be on display from March 13 through June 15, 2008. The good news is that Yale University Press will publish a catalogue of the items along with a collection of five or six essays, including a lengthy illustrated essay by Miller. Now, having made this aside let me highlight one aspect of the exhibit which I found both interesting and clarifying.

The exhibits “The Commercial World” and “The Fancy World” present the Shakers as commercially savvy and capable of adapting to their environment, even if they did not embrace it—avoiding the larger question of how much they were influenced by it. Commenting on “Fancy Goods,” the on-site gallery guide observed the following.

[Fancy style] didn’t mean fine or decorated [although the guidebook’s first two topics are graining and stenciling], but rather relied on first impressions that caught the eye and fueled the emotions.... The mind regarded fancy objects as possessing novelty, variety and wit.... Fancy provided a welcome alternative to the restraint of reason expressed in classical taste that had been popular in American life throughout most of the 18th [and early 19th?] century. (*Gallery Guide to The Fancy World*, p. [3])

The guide presented a second and equally interesting observation.

The last Shaker textile industries fall under the broad category of ‘fancy work,’ a term rejected in the 1845 *Millennial Laws* and later embraced in the 20th century to successfully market products that included brushes and dusters, pincushions in various shapes and sizes, as well as an innovation called poplarware. During the Victorian era, the Shakers consciously incorporated style and taste trends of the period into their products. While

some critics may accuse the Shakers of “selling out” to the world in designing their fancy work, this enterprise was a tangible symbol of the Shakers’ ability to adapt to changing times in order to survive. (*Gallery Guide to The Commercial World*, p. [5])

Not only did the Shakers adapt to commercial demands, but in the twentieth century, women’s work contributed significantly to the economic prosperity of the Shakers. I can recall Shaker sisters talking about their fancy goods and the tourist sites where they sold the items. With the declining numbers of men and tough economic times prior to World War II, fancy goods proved to be a good source of cash, whereby the sisters realized the importance of their industries to community survival.

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When I returned home at the end of November, I learned that Dorothy Jones and Carol Medlicott (a professor of historical geography at Northern Kentucky University) on November 30, 2007 interviewed ninety-one year old Owen Edgington, a direct descendant of West Union Shakers William Edgington and Jane Johnson, in his farmhouse kitchen in eastern Illinois, only a few miles from the West Union site. Dorothy writes:

This opportunity came about through sheer serendipity and happenstance. Carol’s mother in central Indiana ran across an article from a newspaper in Crawford County, Illinois, that related the story of 91-year old Owen Edgington, whose family has farmed the same land for 175 years since the “escape” of their ancestor William Edgington from the nearby Shaker settlement of West Union. The article related that William and his young sweetheart, teenaged Shaker Jane Johnson, fled across the Wabash River to start a life together.

The Edgington family tradition added that “the couple crossed the Wabash River in the dead of night, with young Jane clinging to a log and William swimming with his clothing tied in a bundle.”

The family narrative was not specific about the date of this event, and nothing remains in any extant Shaker account about it; however, Dorothy and Carol conjecture that the “escape” and marriage must have

been around 1816. Furthermore, before the interview, Dorothy did some background research on the Edgington name in Shaker records.

William's parents were John and Polly Edgington and came from Eagle Creek in Adams County, Ohio. They moved with other Shakers to West Union, then called Busro, in 1811 with their children, including William and at least two other sons and one daughter. By 1816 Polly Edgington had died, along with young William's sister and brothers. John Edgington was apparently a leading member of the Busro community during its early years. Period letters reflect that when the Busro Shakers prepared to return to the Indiana site after their forced evacuation of it during the War of 1812, John Edgington was one of two men sent ahead in 1813 to assess the site's condition and to ready it for the believers' return.

As interesting as it was to meet a direct descendant of a West Union Shaker family and learn more about the family, Dorothy's interest was captured by two surprises. First, Mr. Edgington showed his visitors some very old photo images of William and Jane Edgington, taken when they were elderly. The second has to do with details of the "escape." Not only did the young couple escape, but they escaped from "a dungeon in the basement of the West Union dwelling house."

This element in the family narrative seemed far-fetched given what is generally known about Shaker beliefs and practices. William and Jane could have run away "in fear, terrified that they would be pursued and dragged back to the village, never to be seen again" but these are subjective sentiments and not necessarily objective accounts of the situation. In any case, connecting the distant and remote accounts of West Union to a present-day person made the history of West Union come alive.

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Another note of Shaker interest concerns the Sabbathday Lake Shaker community. By way of *The Clarion*, the newsletter of the Friends of the Shakers at Sabbathday Lake, Maine, I learned that in January 2007 the Shakers there signed preservation and conservation easements that will preserve nineteen community buildings and prevent future development of the property. The signing was the culmination of a successful two-year

“Shaker Village, Forest and Farm Campaign.” The Friends of the Shakers and its campaign partner organizations raised \$207,106 to protect the Shaker’s current 1700 acres and buildings from future development. (See issues for Spring 2007, p. 1 and Summer 2007, p. 3)

According to an information release on The Trust for Public Land website, dated January 31, 2007, “Under the terms of the completed easements, the Shakers have sold their rights to develop the property, and the proceeds will help them make needed upgrades and repairs on the property and buildings.” The article also states, “The Shakers will continue to own and manage the property.... The historic buildings, including the only active Shaker Meeting House, along with culturally important landscape features, such as the stone walls and archeological sites, will never be significantly altered.” Furthermore, Shaker Brother Arnold Hadd was quoted as saying, “This project will help us to ensure the preservation of the Village for future generations not only for Believers, but for all people.”

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My final news item is an update on Koinonia Farm. At a meeting of the Shalom Mission Communities 2007 Gathering held at the Reba Place Church in Evanston, Illinois, last August, I had the good fortune of meeting Bren Dubay, the current Director of Koinonia Farm. I followed up that meeting with an email inquiry about changes at Koinonia and its current status. Rather than my telling you the essence of that exchange, I am including Bren Dubay’s informative email response which I received in January. (Note: My visit to Reba Place and Jesus People USA, as well as what I learned about the New Monasticism Movement, will be the subject of the next *News and Notes*.)

Good to hear from you, Walter. I enjoyed our visit at the Shalom Mission Communities meeting at Reba Place in August. In response to your inquiry about Koinonia Farm, let me share some news and history with you and the readers of the *Quarterly*.

Inspired by the description of the early church in the Acts of the Apostles, Clarence and Florence Jordan and Martin and Mabel England founded ***Koinonia Farm*** (ancient Greek for “loving community”) in 1942 in Americus, Georgia as an experiment in Christian living. We continue that experiment today.

In the early days, the members of Koinonia farmed the land for their livelihood and did all they could to be good neighbors to those around them — mostly African-American sharecroppers and tenant farmers. Koinonians sought to demonstrate, through their shared life, an alternative to militarism, materialism and racism. In the Jim Crow south of the 1950s, these practices were unwelcome, and bombs, bullets, sabotage, and a boycott threatened the community. To stay afloat, Koinonia began selling pecans to friends through the mail. In 2008, our livelihood still comes from our pecan trees and mail order business. And we still use the advertising slogan good-humored Clarence coined at the time — “Help us ship the nuts out of Georgia.” Today’s products include pecans, chocolate, peanuts, granola, Fair Trade coffee and chocolate, wood-crafted items, ceramics, art, books, CDs and DVDs. We sell

through our catalog, online, and from our store on the farm. Sales support those of us called to this way of life, and donations support our outreach ministries.

Agriculture still plays a significant role in our community. As in 1942, we want to conserve the soil and nurture the land. In 2005, we launched a project to revitalize the pecan orchards. The results have been gratifying and remind us how we are surely being watched over. The bountiful harvests call to mind an old story



Pecan trees growing in red Georgia clay, with organic grapevines in background.
(Courtesy of Koinonia Farm)



A group of community members and friends gather during a fall festival to celebrate Koinonia's anniversary
(Courtesy of Koinonia Farm)

about Clarence Jordan, out on a cold, rainy Christmas morning planting pecan trees. When asked why he was doing such a thing on such a day, he said, "I'm planting them for the people who are coming after me." In the wake of our success with the pecans, our attention now turns to restoring our organic blueberries, grapes, and kitchen garden to full health and productivity.

In 2007, we celebrated our 65th anniversary. There have been ups and downs in these years—it has never been easy. During the mid-1990s, Koinonia moved away from its original intention of communal living. Some believed Koinonia's primary purpose should be to offer employment in this underemployed region. The common life was set aside in favor of putting all members on salary and hiring an executive director to make decisions. But abandoning our roots did not work. There were no bombs, bullets or boycotts, but many would say it was a far more dangerous time. Spiritually and financially challenged, Koinonia's existence hung in the balance once more, but God remained faithful. In 2005,

Koinonia recommitted itself to the original vision and began to rebuild. There are 26 adult community members and 9 children. Currently, two apprentices explore full membership, and six interns will soon arrive to experience community life for three months. All of us, along with our visitors, share a life of prayer, work, study, service and fellowship.

Koinonia is still called to hospitality and service. Our current ministries include:

1. *Hospitality*: For sixty-five years now, individuals, families and groups of all faiths have come to Koinonia to engage more deeply in a life rooted in Jesus' teachings.
2. *Education*: Koinonia hosts regular workshops and seminars on a wide variety of topics, from organic gardening to non-violence, from Scripture study to nutrition.
3. *Heart-to-Heart Home Repair*: We partner with neighbors of limited financial means to help keep their homes in good repair.
4. *Programs for local youth*: We provide homework help, snacks, activities in creative arts, gardening, and computers—and just plain fun.
5. *Summer Camp*: Every June, Koinonia Community Outreach Center hosts a day camp for area children.
6. *Circle of Friends*: Our Thursday morning elders' gathering is a time to share readings, music, physical exercise, classes on a variety of subjects, and field trips, as well as to share personal joys and concerns often while partaking in a delicious meal.
7. *Organic Crops*: We have a strong interest in locally grown food. There is a health crisis in Sumter County and much of it can be directly tied to diet. We are working to grow healthier food and share it with our neighbors.
8. *Adopt A Tree*: After the rough times in the 1990s, there has been need for revitalization of our orchards and fields. We seek to demonstrate good stewardship of God's holy earth. Many friends from around the country have adopted our pecan trees to help pay for the revitalization, ongoing care of the orchards, the pecan processing plant and bakery. These funds also help us to share with others what we learn about caring for the earth.
9. *Peace Action Team*: Koinonia and area students, parents, teachers, neighbors and friends work together to show young people that

they have a variety of career and service options after high school. Sumter County is one of the poorest in Georgia and some believe this is why there is aggressive military recruitment in the schools. PAT works to present youth with alternatives to the military.

10. Individual Service: Many of us serve regularly in the wider Sumter County community, whether teaching English as a Second Language, mentoring a local high school student, serving in the Sumter County Area Ministerial Association, or other activities.

I conclude by inviting you and your readers to come visit us: families, children, elders, people of all backgrounds and faiths. All are welcome to experience Koinonia. Contact us at 1-229-924-0391; info@koinoniapartners.org; 1324 GA Hwy 49 S, Americus, GA, 31719. Or visit our website, www.koinoniapartners.org. Stay in touch.

Bren [Dubay]



Bren Dubay
(Courtesy of Koinonia Farm)



The Koinonia dining hall bustles with fellowship during a Thanksgiving dinner.
(Courtesy of Koinonia Farm)