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Visitor's Account of the Shaker Community at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, by Clara von Gerstner

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Originally published in: Clara von Gerstner, *Beschreibung einer Reise durch die Vereinigten Staaten von Nordamerika in den Jahren 1838 bis 1840* (Leipzig: Verlag der J. C. Hinrichs'schen Buchhandlung, 1842), 377-385.

On the 14th of June we departed romantic Frankfort for Lexington via train. This railroad is only a portion of the Lexington and Ohio railway, which is to extend from the former city to Louisville and Portland, and attain a length of 91½ Miles. The distance between Frankfort and Lexington covers 28 miles by rail, and the price of a ticket for that stretch is around 1¼ dollars. Since this railroad is one of the oldest in the country (construction began as early as 1831), its equipment and facilities lag behind others, and is only used by horses due to its simple construction. And since there is a good country road between both cities, which is easily traversed by stagecoaches that bring travelers from one inn to another for 1½ dollars, the latter is still frequently used. The railroad company will have to wait before it can expect a return on its invested capital of 545,000 dollars, at least until the extension to Louisville is built. Around Frankfort, the railway has a slope of around 4000 feet in length with a 240 foot decline. We covered the distance between Frankfort and Lexington in 3 hours and 20 minutes with the railroad, during which the stopover took 23 minutes. Without knowing, one immediately realized how negligible the trip on this train must be, since the railcars were all old and uncomfortable, and that besides us only six other people occupied the coach.

The city of Lexington is one of the most important in the state of Kentucky, but as the city offered nothing of particular interest and my husband's business was also quickly concluded, we decided to embark our travel soon. However, it was impossible for me to depart this city without

visiting the nearby Shaker Settlement, as I wasn't able to see this sect, of which much had been reported to me, during my stay in Albany. On the 16th of June, we rented a coach and drove off to the settlement known as "Pleasant-Hill," bearing a letter for the representative of the shakers. The road took us through friendly Nicholasville, where we ate breakfast. From here onward the countryside became more and more beautiful. We rode downhill, until we arrived at the Kentucky River, which flows ever so romantically past the foot of a mountain. We set forth crossing said river on a ferry; upon reaching the opposite shore, we saw an almost vertical cliff before us, which we had to climb on foot, since the ride in the carriage would have been too difficult for the poor horses. We frequently paused and looked upon the wildly romantic landscape, which is one of the most beautiful I saw in the United States. On the highest peak of this cliff, the large friendly homes of the Shakers came gradually into sight, until our carriage came to a halt before one of them. After our coachman's repeated knocking on one of their cute front doors, a Shaker with his big, broad brimmed hat emerged. As my husband asked him about Mr. Bryant, the representative of their society, the man responded that it was him.

My husband gave him the letter along with the remark that we wished to tour the settlement. He only responded to us with fairly cold words that their church service was already over, that for some time they have ceased to be available Sundays, and that they only take visitors on weekdays. Despite all attempts to explain to him that we were from Europe, and had taken the trip from Lexington just to visit them, the Shaker stood by his explanation. We departed telling him that we intended to come back the next morning.

Where should we go? There was no inn in sight. We didn't like the idea of returning to Nicholasville. Therefore, we decided to drive to the beautifully situated Springs by Harrodsburg, in order to view the countryside there, which were supposedly very lovely. We turned in at the Bath house, where the innkeeper seemed surprised to receive guests so long before bathing season, and no one else was there aside from his family and several boarders. We were right in time for lunch, which left nothing left to be desired. In near vicinity of the bath house was the spring, over which a simple roof was built. Here several black persons sat taking their Sunday baths and amusing themselves, thereby making a considerable commotion. That evening we took a long walk through the beautiful neighboring forest, in which I admired the lovely trees, on which wild grapevines twisted all

the way up to the treetops.

The next morning, at the crack of dawn, we found ourselves back on the way to Pleasant Hill, where we were greeted much friendlier this time. Mr. Bryant guided me from his room to an adjacent chamber, where he introduced me to several female Shakers. I can't explain the impression that these people made on me, and I had to make an effort to maintain a serious expression. The Shakers as well as their women were clothed similarly amongst themselves. The former wore a dress coat of a cinnamon brown color, dark trousers, white ties, and a very broad-brimmed hat, as well as white socks and shoes with buckles. The latter wore tightly fitted gray dresses, a white bonnet of a unique cut, a little white scarf worn crosswise across their chests, and an apron. I found that the men all appeared strong and well-fed, only the women seemed almost pale and emaciated. Later, I heard that they considered a strong build unbecoming. When the Shaker women heard that we had not yet had breakfast, they served us immediately. This was very amusing to me, since everything was extremely daintily prepared, so that one could have been led to believe that everything had been measured out and arranged with the help of a compass. For breakfast we were given coffee, cake, soft-boiled eggs, and then an apple tart. The exaggerated neatness everywhere attracted my attention. The tablecloth was stretched across the table so that not a single crease was visible. The tableware was placed in accordance with the rules of symmetry. The eggs were placed and the cake was cut just as symmetrically.

Before I carry on with my account, I wanted to add a little bit about the origin of this sect, as well as their lifestyle. Currently, fifteen of these settlements exist within the United States, which adds up to around 5400 souls. Their founder was Anne Lee, who arrived in America in the year 1770, where she found many followers through her eloquence and prophetic spirit. Even though she was the wife of a blacksmith, she preached about the indispensable necessity of a completely celibate society. She also recommended the joint possession of goods and reclusion from all earthly pleasures. Since the young and the beautiful didn't feel attracted to these lifestyle choices, of course, she gathered a host of spinsters and older bachelors around her, who found her teachings most appealing. The Shakers honor the divine through dance. In their church the women stand on one side, next to each other in rows, and on the other side men stand in the same order, their faces turned away from them. Then they dance

toward one another, and around in a circle, during which they emitted various songs while holding out their hands horizontally in front of them, shaking them continuously, which is where they get their name “Shakers.” In these Shaker-villages there are several larger dwellings, in which men and women live separately. However, they do take their meals together. On one side of a long dining table the women sit, the men sit across from them.

These Shaker-communities are all quite affluent. They own beautiful land and livestock, which they cultivate with great care. They sell their agricultural products, as well as different other items, which they fabricate and bring to market themselves, all of which is characterized by a unique neat appearance. After we took in breakfast, we wished to view their land, which seemed of particular interest to my husband. The Shakers took my husband in their midst and I followed arm in arm with a kind female Shaker. The profits the Shakers draw from the land must be significant, because Mr. Bryant told us that the average harvest consists of ...

wheat per acre	22 to 25 bushels
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Oats per acre	40 bushels
Maize per acre	50 to 60 bushels

I must note here, that a bushel = 6/10 of a lower Austrian measurement.

The Indian-corn (maize) is planted four feet from another, so that one can plow the field diagonally in two directions; and plowing must occur five times every summer.

Furthermore, the Shakers in Pleasant-Hill have exquisitely fine cattle, which was brought from England to New Orleans. It is this Durham Breed, or short horned cattle, of which one cow cost between 2000 to 3000 dollars, that was introduced to America. One such cow gives 5 to 6 gallons of milk every day, some as much as 8 gallons. She weighs 1600 pounds and provides at least 800 pounds of meat, tallow, and hide after four years. Currently, the price of a four-year old cow is 100 to 125 dollars, and the price of a steer between 600 and 1200 dollars. Additionally, the Shakers own pigs from Berkshire and Lancashire in England. A boar costs 200 dollars, and we saw three mothers (sows), which had 30 piglets together. They are fed with Indian Corn, buttermilk, and oil cake.

On the way home, we toured a few more buildings as well as the hall where their worship is held. Everywhere the same high standard of

cleanliness, in which the Shakers excel, was evident. The Shaker woman, who had accompanied me, and to whom I had expressed my liking of their entire establishment, soon began to trust me, and now told me that they (the Shakers) found it awful that so many visitors mocked them for their religious celebrations; therefore, they had decided to prohibit outsiders from attending their worship. The Shaker woman's story was in accord with the account from the Innkeeper at the Bathhouse, who had already reported to me the cause of our cold reception. Namely, that several weeks before our visit, the Shakers had held a revival, which had attracted a number of spectators from the vicinity. During this revival the Shakers believed, out of their religious enthusiasm, that the devil was in their midst, and in order to liberate themselves of his presence, they chased him to the river in all their imagination. With this aim in mind, they ran down the very steep mountain brandishing spades, brooms, rakes, and all manner of instruments. The observing Americans are said to have broken out in such a laughter at that sight, that the Shakers became offended, and therefore reached the conclusion to no longer allow the company of strangers during their worship.

Upon our arrival back in the village, my husband purchased several kinds of seeds, and I bought a few small handicrafts, for which the good Shaker women pocketed a considerable sum of money. For example, I had to spend a half dollar for a small, very simply stitched pincushion. Nonetheless, since these works were made by the Shaker women themselves, I brought back several of their wares because of their peculiarity, such as some colorful sewing silk they produced from cocoons they had raised themselves, although the quality of which left much to be desired. Mr. Bryant kindly invited us for lunch. However, now that our curiosity had been satisfied and we wanted to return to Lexington by evening, we bade farewell and took our leave. As a memento, he gave us a small brochure, and a thick pigskin bound book, which contained treatises about Shakerism. He would have had a hard time convincing me about its advantages, since I found so little naturalness and so much egoism in their manners. I was actually quite happy as we were sitting again in the coach with our backs toward their settlement. In Nicholasville we ate lunch. Here, the whole town was in a commotion, because the court was in session. That evening we found ourselves safe and sound again in Brennan's Hotel in Lexington.