

The Miller Collection Comes to Hamilton College Library

By M. Stephen Miller

In early December 2011, lawyers representing Hamilton College drew up contracts detailing the transfer by sale and by gift of my wife's and my collection of printed materials—an important part of the Miller Collection—to the college's library. On December 10, 2011, these documents were executed. This brief essay will outline what the collection consists of, how it came to be formed, and of greatest importance, why it will find a new home in Clinton, New York. This transfer will actually take place over a ten-year period; this will allow the library's special collections to properly catalog, digitize, plan uses for, exhibit, and house all of it.

The collection is composed of more than 14,000 individual pieces of Shaker “ephemera.” The simplest definition of ephemera is “printed material intended for one-time or short term use.” The term ephemera is/are applied equally to single and multiple items. Included in this collection are display cards, broadsides, labels, billheads, receipts, almanacs, pamphlets, brochures, letterheads, and other advertising papers. There are also many containers for a variety of products, made from paper, glass, tin, and cardboard. Almost all of these materials were used to support a wide range of Shaker-grown and Shaker-made products. These products of the communal industries formed the economic foundation for the very survival and then prosperity of all of their communities.

Although this collection was assembled over a period of nearly thirty-four years, it is possible for me to identify the very day it began! On July 15, 1978, my wife and I made our first two purchases of Shaker-produced goods: a simple cherry wood work table and a single, printed-paper wrapper for a can of string beans. We still have both. As our collection of Shaker-made furniture, small crafts, and textiles progressively grew over time, our collection of ephemera increased rapidly. We were often in “the right place at the right time” and were able to purchase entire collections from an earlier generation of collectors. In the early years there was actually little

interest in Shaker ephemera, thus the relatively low asking prices and little competition. These were surely “the good old days”!

A major change took place in 1987 when Hancock Shaker Village approached me and asked if I would co-curate, with their permanent curator, June Sprigg, an exhibit based on Shaker ephemera. The title of this was “Marketing Community Industries 1830–1930: A Century of Shaker Ephemera.” This was a turning point for both me and for the subject itself. For me it meant examining exactly what it was that I had been doing, somewhat willy-nilly, for the previous nine years. I came to see that there must be a difference between collecting and accumulating; the difference being a “philosophy.” A collection should be summarized in a simple, short, and



Miriam and Steve Miller

clear definition of goals. My own philosophy of collecting became the following: to find one best example of every piece of ephemera produced by or for the Shakers; to preserve, and where necessary conserve, all of it according to current archival standards, and to freely share these materials through exhibitions, publications, etc.

The importance of this exhibition, and the subsequent illustrated and annotated self-published catalog, was the

wider recognition of the historical value of Shaker ephemera. Whereas they were too often seen previously as “window dressing” or “eye candy”—colorful items with arresting graphics—they were now regarded more seriously, as essential elements of Shaker culture. More students of the Shaker movement acknowledged that ephemera provided information about the economies of their communal life that simply was not available in any other form, whether it be ledgers, journals, or other manuscript records. Furthermore, the Shakers’ economy was what allowed this communal movement to survive, and at times thrive, for more than two hundred years.

Why, then, did we choose the library at Hamilton College to house the Miller Collection? Once I was able to rationally consider the question of the ultimate disposition of these materials beyond my emotional attachment to them—and I will now switch to the first person “I,” for this was primarily “my baby”—the choice of “where” became clear and, I might add, compelling. Let me flesh this out a bit, for it says a great deal about the college and the personnel who are and were involved.

It was of primary importance that the next guardians of this collection have a philosophy that was consonant with my own. The library at Hamilton College has steadily collected a wealth of Shaker materials, printed and in manuscript, for several decades. Understanding that many of these pieces are one-of-a-kind, and thus irreplaceable, they have taken great pains to preserve, and where necessary conserve, them. I have spent tens of thousands of dollars over the years doing this with my collection; clearly they have done the same with theirs. Finally, in recent years, the library has taken great strides to make their materials accessible through the Internet and have refrained from applying “user fees.” I applaud them for doing this.

I visited Hamilton in February 2011, at a time when I was not at all sure that I was ready to even make plans for the disposition of the collection. I had not been to the library there in almost two years and was impressed by the build-out for special collections that had been completed in the intervening time. There was not only a dedicated space to house these materials but the space was both secure and yet, for those with a legitimate need, welcoming. In addition, environmental factors—light, humidity, and temperature could be better controlled. This then leads to the consideration of two key individuals—Randy Ericson and Christian Goodwillie.

Randy recently retired as Couper Librarian after many years of distinguished service to the college. I have always valued my time spent with him. He has the unusual ability to combine serious scholarship and deep thinking with a light touch and self-effacing sense of purpose. We communicated frequently between March and December 2011; his words were always clear and concise, his vision lucid and logical. He has learned how to keep the science in library science.

Christian and I have been close for about ten years. We have planned exhibits and written a catalog together; we have also contributed essays to each other's books. His intelligence and sensitivity to all aspects of Shakerism, combined with boundless curiosity and energy, uniquely position him for his work with special collections at the library. We are already discussing potential subjects for on-site and on-line exhibitions using portions of the collection.

Perhaps the placement of our collection would have happened without one or the other of these two individuals being at Hamilton. I am certain however, that it could not have happened had neither of them been an integral part of the process.

There is little more that can be added by way of a summary except to say that when the needs of the Miller Collection and the needs of Hamilton College were thoughtfully considered by both parties, it turned out to be a very, very good fit for both.