

Daughter of the Shakers: The Story of Eleanor Brooks Fairs

By Johanne Grewell

From the earliest time of my life, I knew that my mother was brought up by the Shakers. When I was pre-school age she gave talks during the day, and I went with her. While giving her talks, she showed the cape she wore while with the Shakers, her boxes, and her rocker. These were things that were part of our home. In addition, Eldress Anna Case's picture was a part of her "family picture gallery." We used the Shaker boxes for sewing and embroidery floss. I use them as sit about; however, Mom — being brought up by the Shakers — used each of them. For her they were utilitarian items.

Figure 1 is titled "Eldress Anna and Her Girls." My mother is in the front row, center; my Auntie Sue is in the second row to the right of



Fig. 1. Eldress Anna and Her Girls
(Richard Brooker Collection, CSC, Hamilton College)

Eldress Anna; and Aunt Marian is to the right of Auntie Sue (far right in the picture). In this presentation I shall try to explain how the girls got to the South Family, Watervliet, what their life was like when they lived with the Shakers and how that experience shaped their lives after they joined “the world.”

I’m telling the story based on my recollections and on family records pertaining to one girl and her two sisters, orphans who were brought up by the Shakers. The girl was Eleanor Brooks Fairs, and my name is Johanne Fairs Grewell. Eleanor was my mother, and I do so wish she were here to tell her story. My immediate family was composed of my father, John Fairs, my mother, and my sister, Diane, who is almost five years older than I. Diane’s health keeps her from attending the Shaker Seminar, but she has encouraged me to make this presentation in honor of our mother and family.

This is an anecdotal talk — not the usual scholarly presentation to which we are accustomed here at the Shaker Seminar. My mother shared her Shaker upbringing by giving talks to community groups, modeling Shaker values at home, and keeping letters, personal photos, and memorabilia regarding her time with the Shakers.

When my mother showed the picture titled “Eldress Anna and Her Girls,” people often asked if the girls were wearing uniforms. My mother usually answered that the Shakers would buy bolts of fabric and use it until it was gone. She would point out that the applied decorations were all different. She would also say that the girls dressed much the same way as others at the time.

How did the girls get to the Shakers? Here I need to present some family history. All my grandparents were born in Great Britain. My maternal grandmother was born in Northern Ireland to a comfortably well-off family who owned a mill. I don’t know if it was a grist mill or sawmill; all I know is that it was a mill. Her parents had six children when they emigrated to the United States and had two more after arriving here. The family fell on hard times before they left Europe, however, and their oldest son, John Martin, came to North Adams, Massachusetts, and became part-owner of a newspaper, *The North Adams Transcript*. He then bought a farm in Florida, Massachusetts, a little town to the east of North Adams, went back to Northern Ireland and brought his parents and five siblings to the farm on the top of Florida Mountain. John Martin was to play an important role in the lives of his sister’s children.



Fig. 2. The girls playing outside on the Florida Mountain farm. Eleanor is on the right, Susan on the left and Marian with the curly hair in the center. My mother was always embarrassed by this picture.

One of John Martin's younger sisters, Eliza Jane, married James Edward Brooks in September 1896. James was either a plumber or steamfitter by trade, but he was also a volunteer fireman and a marathon runner. Their first child was Susan, born in November 1899, followed by my mother, Eleanor, in early January 1902, and Marian in late December 1903. Eliza became pregnant about two years later, but she felt that neither she nor her baby would survive. Knowing that her husband would need help if anything happened to her, she spoke to her brother John Martin and made him promise that the girls not be separated. Of course, John made this promise. After all, his brother-in-law was a healthy young man. Eliza was correct: neither she nor the baby survived, and within a year after losing his wife and child, James Edward Brooks ran a marathon, caught pneumonia and died. This left Eliza's bachelor brother responsible for three little girls a little older than two, four, and six years of age. John prevailed upon his mother and father to care for the girls.

Another tragedy struck the Martins in that two of John's younger brothers—Robert and James—contracted “consumption” or tubercu-

losis; Grandmother Martin knew she had a responsibility to her own sons so she told John that he would have to find another spot for the three little girls. He placed them with one of his brother-in-law's sisters in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. They were there for a little under two years when health issues had her returning the girls to John Martin's care again. By this time, he'd written an article for his newspaper about the Shaker colony at Watervliet, especially the South Family. So he was acquainted with them.

He went to Eldress Anna and offered to pay for the girls' keep, but she told him that the girls would earn their keep, and that's how they got to the Shakers.

What was life like for the girls while with the Shakers? The children had chores. They rotated their place of work just as the sisters did at that time. Auntie Sue became a talented needle woman, and one of her tasks was working with the sisters who lined sewing boxes for the Shakers' use and for sale in the Trustee's office. After leaving the Shakers, my mother had a beautiful oval sewing box with an inlaid lid. Mom believed in utilizing everything, including her Shaker boxes; therefore, the lining of her sewing box wore out after over forty years of use. She contacted Sue, sent her the



Fig. 3. The Bell House, South Family, Watervliet, N.Y. On the back of this postcard my mother wrote, "My Shaker home."

box and fabric for lining. Sue had not forgotten this skill as the box came back to Mom beautifully lined. My sister proudly owns this beautiful box lined by our talented Auntie Sue.

Mother was considered “sickly” and in the winter was not allowed to go to the other buildings because of the cold. She worked in the kitchen as that was the warmest place in the dwelling house. She often ran errands for the kitchen sisters. One winter she was sent upstairs with a pot of hot tea for a sister who was ill. The hired men had taken



Fig. 4. Eldress Anna Case

wood for the upstairs stoves shortly before Mom’s errand. Because of the cold, she was wearing long underwear, a long-sleeved dress and a sweater. Unbeknownst to my mother, the hired men left icy residue on the stairs, and she slipped and fell, spilling the extremely hot water on her left arm. Because of all the clothing that had to be pulled away, she carried a five to six-inch diameter scar for the rest of her life. It wasn’t a smooth scar, as all that fabric “puckered” the skin as it was removed.

My mother was often asked to speak about her life with the Shakers. When I grew up most mothers were what we now call “stay-at-home moms.” Before I attended school, I was taken with her when she made daytime presentations. I certainly wish I had listened better. As we lived in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, near what is now Hancock Shaker Village, she was able to answer questions regarding the Shakers for people who felt they should know more about their neighbors.

One question always came up when my mother talked about her time at the Shakers—“What about school?” The school at Watervliet was on the Shaker property, but the teacher, Miss Leary, was provided by the county which had jurisdiction. The students were a mix of orphans from Watervliet and children from the area, many of whom were children



Fig. 5. South Family, Watervliet: Top row, second from the right is Mary Dahm, the sister who was the caretaker of the girls while they were at Watervliet, and far right is Mary's biological sister, Grace. Eldress Anna is seated at the far right, middle row. The girls are in the front row: Susan second from the left, Eleanor third from the right, and Marian is next to Mom, second from the right.

of Shaker hired hands. It was a one-room school so everyone learned whatever was being recited. The students memorized poetry for programs and their elocution assignments.

One of the life-long benefits for my family of all this poetry was that we would read and recite poetry sometimes after the completion of dinner. My parents believed that as a family we would benefit from discussions of current events, readings of poetry, and a sharing of what was going on in each other's lives at the time. So occasionally I would be sent to the living room to get a copy of Mom's favorite collection of poems, a leather-bound book entitled *One Hundred and One Famous Poems*. We each had our favorites to read. My father had lived in Scotland when he was eight or nine years old, and he read Robert Burns with a delightful Scottish burr. My sister and I would read "The Duel" otherwise known as "The Gingham Dog and the Calico Cat," or "Little Boy Blue" or "The Spider and the Fly" while Mom would read "Paul Revere's Ride," "If," or "The Highwayman." I think these family poetry readings helped me decide to be an English teacher.

Because she was sickly, Mom and her younger sister Marian graduated from ninth grade the same year. Marian was salutatorian, and Mom was valedictorian.

The graduation ceremony took place in 1917, after the United States entered World War I. Hence my mother's reading of "Scott and the Veteran." She had copied it in her own hand, and here is the first stanza:

An old and crippled veteran to the War Department came.
He sought the chief who led him many a field of fame;
The chief who shouted "Forward," where'er his banner rose,
And bore its stars in triumph behind the flying foes.

My mother memorized all ten stanzas for this program. She also sang "I've Done My Best Today," and read her valedictory address. Of course she saved it, and here's the first paragraph:



Fig. 6. The students held entertainments for the Shakers and the parents of "world's children" who attended the Shaker school. The Brooks girls were a little older here. My mother, Eleanor, is fourth from the left, Susan is fourth from the right, and Marian is third from the right. There are only girls in the picture, because the boys and girls attended school at different times of the year. The boys helped with the farming which kept them out of school during the spring, summer and fall.

Dear parents, teacher and friends. They say there are people who always like to have the last word. I'm sure I cannot see why they should, for to me it seems the hardest of all words to say, and I would rather somebody else would be the one to say it. For the last word must be, to many, if not to all of us, "Good-bye."

She goes on to thank those who helped them—the trustees, district superintendent, parents and friends, but especially her teacher. "Dear Teacher, you must know how deeply we feel this, and can realize how much we mean by the only words we can find to say ... God Bless You!"

People often asked about holidays. Mom would remind them that as Christians, the Shakers celebrated church holidays such as Christmas, and they exchanged Christmas gifts, such as the Bible which Eldress Anna gave to my mother in 1916. In addition to the Shaker celebration, my mother and her sisters had "world" connections who would send small remembrances at holiday time. One year John Martin sent a lovely bookmark, which my mother saved. Another year he sent a card with a nice note: "To Eleanor, This is from Uncle John just to have you understand that you are not as far

P R O G R A M .	
Opening Song: America,	Class
Salutatory Address:	Marion Brooks
Song: Rose Song,	Class
Recitation: Abraham Lincoln,	George Willey
Solo: Blossom Bells,	Helen Hubbard
Recitation: Scott and the Veteran,	Eleanor Brooks
Recitation: Little Boy Blue,	Marion Brooks
Song: Work and Win,	Class
Violin Solo:	George Willey
Recitation: The Picket Guard,	Helen Hubbard
Address:	Walter S. Clark
Song: How Betsy made the Flag,	Class
Essay: Patriotism,	Marion Brooks
Solo: I've done my best to-day,	Eleanor Brooks
Presentation of Diplomas,	Marie T. Leary
Valedictory Address:	Eleanor Brooks
Commencement Song,	Class
Star-Spangled Banner.	

Fig. 7. Graduation program, designed by another of the Shaker orphans, Helen Hubbard.

from my thoughts as you may seem to be. I do wish you a merry Christmas, and I am sure you are much happier in your home and much merrier than if you were out here in the much disturbed world. Be good and be content and you will be happy.” It was signed “Uncle John.” There was no date on the card.

They also received prizes for games. Mother has an envelope marked “While at the Shakers, received this prize from Shaker Sunday School.” The envelope contained ten postcards, each an illustration of one the ten commandments.

Each of the three Brooks girls left the security of the Shakers when she was eighteen or nineteen years of age. That meant, of course, Susan left first. Their Uncle John made arrangements for Susan to board with his younger brother, Samuel Martin, his wife Angie, and their daughter Ruth in North Adams, Massachusetts. John felt that the girls needed someone from the family to oversee them as they entered “the world.” I’m not sure what



Fig. 8. The graduates: (from left to right) Marian Brooks, Miss Maria Leary, Helen Hubbard, and Eleanor Brooks.



Fig. 9. Susan (far right) with Eldress Anna and friends. The Shakers always knew they had to rely on “worldly people.” As Eldress Anna was previously the village trustee, she had made friends with many people.



Fig. 10. Mary Dahm is sitting behind the wheel of the car with her girls. The girl standing on the left is one of the Brooks girls. I believe it is my Aunt Marian.



Fig. 11. Marian at the Watervliet Shakers.

Sue did immediately after leaving the Shakers, but she became a telephone operator and later in life was voted “The Voice of New Jersey.” My Auntie Sue did return to visit the South Family and her two younger sisters.

In Christian Goodwillie and Mario De Pillis’ book, *Gather Up the Fragments: The Andrews Shaker Collection*, it was noted that Edward and Faith Andrews “were frequent visitors at the South Family of Watervliet, New York, where they became great friends with Eldress Anna Case”—such good friends that she trusted them with a fragment of Mother Ann Lee’s dress for their collection.

When my mother decided to leave the Shakers, it was with mixed feelings. She wanted to experience the world, and she knew her sister was there to help her make this transition, but Eleanor was leaving the security and friendships she made while at the Shakers. During her exit interview with Eldress Anna, she remembered that Eldress Anna said to her, “I wish you had taken,” i.e., stayed with the Shakers. Mother, like Sue, rented space in her Uncle Sam’s home. She attended McVeigh Business School in North Adams. She went through a number of jobs until she was hired to work at the North Adams Public Library, a job which she loved.

Even though Sue and Eleanor were no longer living with the Shakers, their younger sister Marian was still there, and they both visited as often as they could. They wrote, sent presents, and kept communication open.

A note from Eldress Anna to the girls was sent to them at their Uncle Sam’s address some time before 1929 when my parents were married. It accompanied a lovely thank you card with this sentiment:



Fig. 12. Marian, Eleanor, and another former orphan, Pauline Bruce. We can tell they are now from the world because of the style of their dresses and they are wearing necklaces!



Fig. 13. A visit to Watervliet in 1923: "In front of Men's Shop, South Family Shakers, West Albany, N.Y." Marian is third from the left.

MY THANKS

From my heart I thank you,
And hope you'll see
How much all your kindness
Means to me!

Eldress Anna's note said:

My Dear Girlies, Susan and Eleanor,
The card will express my thanks. I was surprised with the lovely stockings.
I shall wear them and think of my dear girls.
I got a card from Helen Pearl [Hubbard, another orphan who was at the Shakers with Mom, Auntie Sue and Aunt Marian]. She is married. Just think where they are all gone, my lovely company that I was so proud of. I don't know where Marie [Meyer] is. Do you, Susan? I wish I had Uncle John's [Martin] address. I just have to thank him for the lovely box of candy that he sent me. Know, my Dears, my best wishes for health and prosperity for the coming year. Your Shaker Mother

Cards and notes continued to go back and forth between "the girls" and both Eldress Anna and Sister Mary Dahm. After Marian left the Shakers, pictures from my mother's photograph album indicated a number of return trips.

The fact that my mother took my father to meet Eldress Anna on the way to New York City on the first day of their honeymoon lets us know how much she cared for the Shakers who reared her. When my sister was born in 1933, my parents proudly took Diane over to meet Eldress Anna and Sisters Mary and Grace Dahm. My parents made annual visits to the Shakers. Being five years older than I, my sister Diane remembers visiting Watervliet. I don't.

As a little girl my sister Diane thought that "Eldress Anna" was pronounced as one word—"Eldressanna"—and was her first name such as a friend of mine whose name is one word—AnnaMarie. I'm not sure how old Diane was when she realized that the first name was Anna and that "Eldress" was her title.

My mother was hit by a car on North Street in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, in early February 1935. At that time hospitalization was the treatment as her leg was broken in multiple places, and she was placed in traction. Auntie Sue, who by this time lived in Springfield, brought her six-month-old son, Clark, to Pittsfield to look after two-year-old Diane and keep house and cook for my father.

Eldress Anna sent my Mom a card and letter with the following message.

March 6, 1935

My Dear Sweet Eleanor,

How sorry I was to hear of your accident, and I have been so long in answering you. I know you longed for a message and have thought of you every day. I've so many ways to go as you know Caroline is away, and she expects me just so often. I was there last Wednesday and expect to go today. She looks as if the last visit might take her away. Still if she goes through March, she may enjoy the warm weather when summer comes. Well, how are you doing, do you suffer much pain? They say when a bone knits, it is painful. Now you must be patient and if it comes out all right, you'll be thankful. It is fortunate that Susan could go and take care of Diane. With two babies to look after, she will be quite busy. I always liked the way you girls did in the way you helped each other out, and Susan was always looking for someone to help, and my dear Eleanor was just the same. I do hope you feel some comfortable.

The letter goes on about the Watervliet sisters all coming down with colds on the same day and asked if some of mother's relatives had been in to see her. She asked to be remembered to both my father and Auntie Sue and her husband. She ended with: "Lots of love from your Shaker Mother. P.S.



Fig. 14. After Marian left Watervliet, the Brooks girls had their picture taken. Left to right: Susan, Eleanor, and Marian.

Write me when you feel like it.”

I was born shortly before Eldress Anna died, and I believe my parents took me to Watervliet to be introduced to her, but of course I don't remember. This was probably the last time Mom visited with her “Shaker Mother”; however I always knew about her as Mom had a picture gallery of photographs next to her bed. It included pictures of my parents' brothers and sisters, both sets of grandparents and Eldress Anna Case. So I knew how important she was in my mother's life and that she considered her a member of our family. I heard stories and saw pictures from the Shakers my entire life.

Watervliet was closed when Eldress Anna died, and the remaining sisters and brothers were sent to Mount Lebanon. This included the Dahm sisters. When Mount Lebanon closed in 1947, the remaining Shakers were sent to Hancock. Again both Mary and Grace Dahm were included in this group. I remember visiting Sisters Mary and Grace at Hancock more than once.

As a young girl I was most impressed with Grace's talking parrot. We played in the corridors at Hancock and one time Mary took us from the attic to the kitchens in the basement at the dwelling house at Hancock. Our family was very impressed with the lack of dirt and dust even in the unoccupied parts of the dwelling. Toward the end there were, as I remember, only nine ladies in their eighties and nineties who kept this dwelling so clean. It made me realize why my mother was so compulsively cleaning all the time! Sister Mary encouraged Mother to take anything she wanted from the dwelling. Mother, being brought up in the Shaker fashion, wouldn't take anything for which she didn't have an immediate use, and that included anything for just decorative purposes. So she told



Fig. 15. Eldress Anna Case in 1935.

Mary, “No, I don’t need anything.” Both Diane and I encouraged her to select something as we both had admired many items in the kitchen areas. But our entreaties were to no avail. I suppose the folks who opened Hancock Shaker Village would appreciate Mom’s refusal—if they knew this story—as these items might now be a part of the Hancock Shaker Village artifacts.

My mother felt guilty that during World War II she couldn’t buy my sister and me new dolls for Christmas. One year she bought me a second-hand baby doll for the holidays. Auntie Sue made a full layette for this baby. It was a wonderful gift. Another Christmas, Mother embroidered, sewed and dressed lovely cloth dolls for both Diane and me. Another year we went without dolls altogether. After the Shakers were moved to Hancock and the war was over, one of our visits was made during the fall. While we were there, Sister Grace took my sister and me to teach us how to weave on a big loom. I now realize that she was taking us away so my mother could give Mary four dolls that she had agreed to dress in Shaker clothing. My mother purchased the dolls for Diane, Auntie Sue, Aunt Marian, and me for our Christmas presents that year. We each received a doll dressed in a different colors. Diane’s was dressed in a blue jewel tone, and mine was dressed in gray. At the time I was ten or eleven years old and was so annoyed with Mom because she gave me the doll but she wouldn’t let me play with it. Now, I’m so glad she wouldn’t because I have this beautiful doll dressed by Sister Mary Dahm especially for me. She sits in a Victorian glass dome on my living room mantle.

In 1953, my father was transferred by General Electric to Decatur, Illinois, so my family said good-bye to the Shakers and reluctantly moved to the Midwest. Sister Grace died while we lived in Decatur. Each summer my family visited Berkshire County, Massachusetts, as all my relatives lived in East Coast states. And of course Mom made an effort to visit Hancock each summer as well. In 1959 General Electric transferred my family back to Pittsfield when the Decatur plant was closed.

In 1960 Hancock was closed, the remaining sisters were to be sent to Canterbury, New Hampshire, but Sister Mary Dahm refused to go. Instead she rented an apartment on South Street in Pittsfield. Mom and Dad entertained her, took her to church activities, and tried to keep in touch with her as this new life was so different from living in a communal society.

As my mother had given talks on the Shakers before we moved to



Fig. 16. Sister Mary Dahm

Decatur, some program planners asked her to do so again for a new audience of listeners. In one case, there was an article placed in the *Berkshire Eagle* stating, "Eleanor Brooks Fairs was going to talk on the Shakers at the First Methodist Church on Fenn Street, Pittsfield." Because of this article, my mother received a telephone call from Amy Bess Miller asking if it would be all right if she attended the program. Mother told her of course she could. Mrs. Miller told Mother that a group of citizens were trying to gain her support in opening a Shaker museum at the vacant Hancock Village,

and Mrs. Miller was trying to decide if this was something in which she should be involved.

Amy Bess Miller attended the program, wrote a lovely thank-you note to Mother, and went on to involve herself in the development of Hancock Shaker Village. When invitations were sent out for the Grand Opening, one was sent to Mr. and Mrs. John H. Fairs. On the bottom of the invitation was a special handwritten note from Mrs. Miller saying, "It's because of you, Eleanor, that Hancock Shaker Village has been developed. Please come." My sister has this invitation. My parents both belonged as Friends of Hancock Shaker Village and both served as docents before they died. Now my sister and I think Hancock Shaker Village is our museum, after all.

My last story about my direct connection to Watervliet and the Shakers took place when I got married. Of course, Mom added Mary Dahm to my invitation list for my wedding which was to be held in Pittsfield. After Sister Mary received the invitation to the first and only wedding she ever attended, she went to the Berkshire Athenaeum (public library) to look up wedding customs. She then called Mother to ask questions about my wedding as she found that it was appropriate to give gifts. Mother assured her it was not necessary, but Mary insisted. She also—remember this was 1961—understood that china, crystal or silver were the appropriate gifts and that brides registered at jewelry and other stores. As I was going to move back to Illinois after the wedding, she felt that silver was most appropriate. So Mom gave in and suggested that a teaspoon would be sufficient and informed her that I was listed at Denno's Jewelry on Fenn Street. Much to my surprise when I opened Mary's gift, she had not given me a teaspoon but had given me a full place setting of sterling silver!

Finally, my mother and father purchased a Shaker rocker before the birth of their first child in 1931. They went to the Mount Lebanon Shakers and special-ordered the webbing for the seat from Sister Sarah Collins.