

19th Century Childhood: The Lives of Children among the Shakers and the World's People

Introduction

America was in the midst of change in the mid-nineteenth century. Women were beginning the struggle for their rights; children were becoming important to the family in a way that was new, industry was changing, and immigrants were numerous. The issue of slavery was becoming increasingly central to the country's definition of itself. The country was reflecting and evolving as it completed its first fifty years, and looked forward to celebrating the first century of this experiment.

The nineteenth century was an era of maturation, revitalization, and the first signs of decline for The United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing (Shakers).¹ The society experienced changes in leadership, complex financial and legal dealings with the general American society (world's people), social conflict within, and alternating periods of spiritual vitality and stagnation.² The increase of the population of children is an important part of this time in the community's history. By 1860, about a quarter of the entire eastern Shakers' communities were less than 16 years of age.³

Shaker research about children has often focused on the population of children, the issues of adoption, apprenticeship and the lawsuits as result of apostates or guardians attempting to get one's children back from the society.⁴ Information about the lives of

¹ Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America*, (Yale University Press, 1992), 100.

² Ibid, 153.

³ Metin Cosgel and Bradley B. Andrew, "The Shakers, 1850-1870", *Explorations in Economic History*, 38, (2001): 273-295, 4.

⁴ Barbara Taback Schneider, "Prayers and Prosperity at Court: Shakers, Children, and the Law". *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities*, Vol. 4, Article 5, Issue 1, (1992), 17

children living with the Shakers derives mostly from adult journals, apostates who wrote as adults about their experiences when they lived with the Shakers, and a few diaries and journals kept by youth.

Amongst the world's people, families are moving to cities in greater numbers with more and more children no longer necessary for the economic survival of the family. Children are becoming a burden to society. The nation's unclaimed children became an important issue for communities and policy makers. For example, the Children's Aid Society of New York City estimated that there were 30,000 homeless children in that city in the 1850s.⁵

Who are America's children in the nineteenth century? What are the expectations of the child in United States during this time? What did those living in mid-century understand to be the role of children? Can we attempt any understanding about children of the nineteenth century when we put them in the context of what the greater American culture believed about children and their growth and development?

This paper will consider the world of children in mid-nineteenth century America: approximately 1820 to 1880. In his book, "The Shaker Experience in America", Stein labels this era for the Shakers the "Middle Period of Shaker History." These dates mark the first permanent closing of a major Western Shaker community, Busro, Indiana in 1827 and the shutting down of the first of the Eastern villages in 1879: Tyringham, Massachusetts.⁶

⁵ The Orphan Trains, The Children's Aid Society, <http://www.childrensaidsociety.org/about/history>

⁶ Stein, 132.

It will separate children's lives into three sections: family, work, play and learning. It is vital that the reader understand that the paper is, indeed, using several generalized statements. It is noted by Stein that scholars are always at risk of posting a rigid conformity upon the villages of the Society.⁷ Just as for the Shakers, we also cannot assign uniformity to all families living in the United States during this time frame.

It is for ease of consideration in comparing the world's children and the children living in Shaker community that these generalizations must needs be used. The intent of this paper is to consider for further research and thought the possibility that the beliefs about children, no matter who or where they lived, influenced what we believe today about how those lives might have been lived.

The Shakers

Established in 1774, Shakers are the longest-lived religious communal society in the United States. Currently two people live in Shaker life at Sabbathday Lake Maine.⁸ Today, as throughout their history, Shakers beliefs and practices include community living, celibacy, confession of sin, and pacifism.

Ann Lee, an illiterate factory worker from Manchester England, came with a small group of followers to the New World seeking religious freedom. They settled on land near what is the present day Albany airport.

At the height of the Shaker movement, there were twenty-five short and long lasting communities (essentially farming villages) in ten states with a population estimated to be as many as 8000 people (often many more lived in the communities but

⁷ Stein, 149.

⁸ Principles and Beliefs, <http://maineshakers.com/beliefs/>

were passing through as they decided to choose the life, or were itinerant farm workers, etc.)⁹

In the eighteenth century, converts were often entire families and their children who came with them. In the nineteenth century, adult converts were often adults, such as widows with children. As their numbers began to decline due to industrialization and the Civil War, the communities took in foster children, adopted children, and apprentices, partly in hopes of converting the children, partly because caring for those in need is their value system. There were always legal documents to support the children's presence. These children were living as Shakers, but could not sign the Covenant until they were 21.¹⁰

The increase of children in this era is important: In 1800, there were 39 children in 11 communities. In 1860 25 - 39% of the population were children. For complicated reasons, some of which I believe can be attributed to what we now know about child growth and development -- only 1 out of 10 children became members.¹¹

Childhood in America

The physical life of both children of the world and children living with Shakers likely differed very little in the eighteenth and the first decades of the nineteenth century. Once a child is weaned, and able to do certain self-maintenance tasks, they were small adults. They were not considered "innocent" and no particular safeguarding was in place. The tasks of life and how to do them are learned in daily living from participation in shared family responsibilities. Toys, if any, were hand made. Books were rare, formal

⁹ Priscilla J. Brewer, "The Demographic Features of the Shaker Decline, 1787-1900". *The Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 15, 1, Summer 1984, pp. 31-52.

¹⁰ Stein, 155.

¹¹ Brewer, 42.

schooling was sporadic, if at all present, and childhood could be very short. Children were assigned and performed certain chores at a young age.¹²

Children were a necessary part of the economic success of families. Although the idea would gain ground in the next eighty years or so, the idea that children had rights that should be protected seemed quite ridiculous at the turn of the 19th century.¹³

Children were a vital part of the labor force for both the Shakers and the world's families even as society changed. Concerns for their growth and development came only in relationship to what skills and labor they brought to their family.

Child Development

Child development theories focus on explaining how children change and grow over the course of childhood. They focus on aspects of growth such as social, emotional, or cognitive growth, or some combination of aspects. Growth is the progressive increase in the size or parts of a child. Development is the progressive acquisition of various skills (abilities) such as head support, speaking, learning, expression of feelings and relating with other people.¹⁴ During the nineteenth century, the idea that the growth and development of children is important began to emerge from the early thinking about the natural world.

“Let us then suppose the mind to be, as we say, white paper void of all characters, without any ideas. How comes it to be furnished? Whence comes it by that vast store which the busy and boundless face of man has painted on it with an almost endless

¹² Philippe Aries, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. (Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1962).

¹³ Mara Guber, <http://www.representingchildhood.pitt.edu/victorian.htm>, University of Pittsburgh

¹⁴ Developmentally Appropriate Practice, <http://www.naeyc.org/DAP>

variety? Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, one word, from Experience.” John Locke 1689¹⁵

John Locke’s theory held sway as the century opened. He posited that children could be formed into the kinds of adults society needed. A child is born a blank slate (tabula rasa) and its nature and personality would develop in childhood. A child can be taught virtue and morality as well as letters and numbers, and those lessons would result in the type of adults needed by society at large.¹⁶

Children and families were still living the colonial life in terms of what was believed about how a child became an adult. The concept of nature versus nurture and its role in the development of children gained ground in this era. Until this century, the general opinion was that nature and sin defined the newborn child. They were born in sin and it had to be tempered and driven out of them, and that this inborn trait, once conquered left them blank slates to form into adults.

Throughout the nation’s families, the amount of physical discipline may have differed, but the idea that a child had just the first few years of life to learn the tasks of adulthood was the foundation of bringing up children:

As innocent as children seem to be to us... [they] are young vipers, and are infinitely more hateful than vipers, and are in a most miserable condition...” Jonathan Edwards¹⁷

"If God give you children, love them with wisdom, correct them with affection: never strike in passion, and suit the correction to their age as well as fault. Convince them...punish them more by understandings than the rod." -William Penn¹⁸

¹⁵John Locke, ed. Jack Lynch, “Essay concerning Humane Understanding,”
<https://andromeda.rutgers.edu/~jlynch/Texts/locke21.html>

¹⁶ John Locke. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Prometheus Books, 1995.

¹⁷ Discipline, <http://www3.gettysburg.edu/~tshannon/341/sites/Childhood/Discipline.htm>

Darwin's work, in 1859, "On the Origin of Species" presented biological facts about human development:

"That is, do we believe what we believe, or behave as we behave, because of our social environment or is it because of our biology?" Darwin

Biologists, social scientists, philosophers, and other began to use Darwin's ideas to speculate about how children grow.¹⁹

Thus begins a discussion that is still underway: is the growth and development of children about nature or nurture or some combination? Rousseau, in his very influential book of 1762, "Emilie: or On Education" declares that a child is endowed with an innate moral sense.²⁰ He is a kind of noble savage with intuitive knowledge of what is right and wrong, but is thwarted and needs guidance by society. Education was to observe the natural world, support physical strength and health, and teach manual skills suitable to a boy's inclination and socio-economic class. Running a home and family was for the girls. Emotions, religious and abstract ideas could not be understood until 15 or 16 years of age.²¹

In 1869, Frances Galton, an English progressive, is credited with coining the "nature versus nurture" phrase:

"[Nature and nurture are] a convenient jingle of words, for it separates under two distinct heads the innumerable elements of which personality is composed. Nature is all

¹⁸ William Penn's Advice to his Children,
<http://www.qhpress.org/quakerpages/qwhp/advice2.htm>

¹⁹ Charles Darwin. *On the Origin of Species: by Means of Natural Selection*. (Dover Publications, 2006).

²⁰ Jean-Jacques Rousseau. *Emile: or, Treatise on Education*. (Basic Books, 1979).

²¹ Ibid.

that a man brings with himself into the world; nurture is every influence that affects him after his birth.” Frances Galton, 1874.²²

Robert Chambers in his 1844 book, “Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation” added to the ongoing discussion of child development by maintaining that one of the laws of life is the Law of Development.²³

Concurrently, through images in writing and art, the romantic idea that children were innocent creatures who needed protection and allowed to develop on their own was gaining ground.²⁴ By the end of the century, images of children become a commodity. Pears Soap, for example, used an image of a child to sell their soap. Prams and bassinets came into vogue in the newly minted middle class as a way to put one’s child on display.²⁵

It was a complicated debate, however, because as many who were on the side of children, there were as many who still saw children as manpower. Prince Albert was known to argue that a man’s children were part of his productive power – an important source of family income to use as he saw fit. The age of consent was not raised to upper adolescence in most western cultures until late in the nineteenth and early twentieth

²² Frances Galton. *English Men of Science: Their Nature and Nurture*. (Leopold Classic Library, 2016).

²³ Robert Chambers. *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation*. (CreateSpace independent Publishing Platform, 2015)

²⁴ Gubar, Representing Childhood

²⁵ Barbara E Moore. "American Childhood through the Years: Colonial Era, 18th through 19th Century, and Progressive Era."

<http://scholarworks.calstate.edu/bitstream/handle/2148/56/Moore.pdf?sequence=1>, Humboldt State University, May 2006.

century. Previously, this was set by individual states and was as low as seven, with most states setting it at about twelve for girls, and often lower for boys.²⁶

A list of those scientists who would deeply influence today's growth and development theories will demonstrate that these concepts truly are recent history: Freud (1856-1939), Erikson (1902-1994), Piaget (1896-1986), Vygotsky (1896-1934) and Gardner (1943-). These theorists' work brought us to today's understandings that children grow in discernible stages, are vulnerable in their first years to poor health and nutrition, need what is called "attachment" to a primary caregiver to develop trust in their world, need lots of undirected time we call "play," and require adults to provide care and assistance to them as they develop. We know that children's brains are still developing, as well as their outward physical being are still developing throughout childhood. What we know to be true about a child's growth and development is very recent.

Understanding the concept that children were not small adults came slowly, if at all, in the nineteenth century. This is vital to remember by those who research the children of the 19th century and earlier.

The state of the United States in brief

In 1826, the United States (US) had 26 states. The first national census of 1820 notes ten million Americans, with 1.5 of those being slaves. By 1870, there are 38 states in the union; the population grew to 39 million, with half living west of the Appalachian Mountains.²⁷ These mid-century decades saw an outpouring of American literature with the likes of Poe, Longfellow, Emerson and others. The US is becoming prosperous, the

²⁶ Ibid, Gubar.

²⁷ Census, United States. 2017. 2017.

<https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/1820_fast_facts.html>

middle class is growing due to industrialization and economic changes, and by 1850, the country had more millionaires than all of Europe. In the middle of this century, with industrialization, and its factories, the need for labor was at its height. The era brought, amongst other inventions, patents for the telegraph, rubber band, elevators, toilet paper, and even for the potato chip. Many other innovations entered society and its family's lives. Immigration is unrestricted. Refugees came from all parts of the world.

These changes create a society where children become superfluous to the family's economic success. There are limited jobs available and adults are hired first. When work is available, it is because the child is being used for the size in relationship to the task, such as mill machinery and mines, or piecemeal work at home with their families. Children are in the streets, abandoned and deserted with nowhere to go. The resultant increase in unwanted children and industrialization, have policy makers becoming concerned about those children, although real change, in the form of enforced laws and regulations, will not occur until the late part of the century into the twentieth.²⁸

Family

World's People

What defines a family? At its simplest, a fundamental social group in society composed of related people. At its most complex, even today, and often romanticized, there is often disagreement as to who to count as family members. Family, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, like the centuries before it, is the place to create more human beings and the place you learn the skills of life and work to sustain a family. These families included multi-generations, apprentices, indentured servants, slaves, farm

²⁸ Aries, *Centuries of Childhood*

workers as well as the biological parents. In early America, children remained at home or, if home chores were few and extra children available, they were apprenticed out as early as five to learn a skill. This was particularly true of male children. These skills would either translate back to supporting the family of origin or launch the child as an adult into the working world. Apprentices or indentured children became part of a different family.

Families are not only those members related by biology. In addition to the average family having eight biological children, adults remarried frequently due to the life expectancy (which was 45 years of age in 1860), death in childbirth, illness and abandonment.²⁹ One specific example was the Gold Rushes of 1829 and 1848, and the Civil War, which created many families without an adult member, as one or several family members went west to try their fortunes or to war to try their fortunes.

As the Industrial Revolution progressed, families moved to urban areas, transforming the family into smaller and smaller units. Instead of the family unit working on the farm to sustain itself, children went to work outside the home, fathers are out of the house for longer periods of each day working in mills, mines or factories, mothers take in work and other children, or work piece meal in their home. Families are still often composed of whoever added to the family's survival, whether related by blood or not.

Children's lives might have included formal schooling, but more commonly life was days of work, either on the farm or in factories contributing to the family's welfare. Only three in five children went to school; many did not go for more than a few sessions,

²⁹ Aries, *Centuries of Childhood*

and school is, in most cases, only eight to thirteen weeks long. Children are small adults. They are a necessary part of the family's economic wellbeing when the average urban income is \$738 a year.³⁰

“I have no recollection of ever having been kissed by any one – have never been kissed by my mamma. I have never been taken on my mamma's lap and caressed or petted. I never dared to speak to anybody, because if I did I would get whipped. I have never had, to my recollection, any more clothing than I have at present.” Mary Ellen Wilson, 8 years old, 1874³¹

They did not have clothes made especially for them. They wore a smaller version of adult clothing. When they are capable of any chore, it is deemed suitable. Toys and play existed, but not as we know them, and certainly not as they would evolve by the end of the nineteenth century. Playtime is for the idol and leads to mischievous behavior so it is best to keep children busy.³²

Those children without families able to care for them soon ended up in the streets of urban areas. Informal adoptions were the norm, with family members or closest friends taking in children when the need arose. The first orphanage in the US is usually attributed to the Ursuline nuns in 1727 in Natchez, Mississippi after a massacre of the local First Nations people. Although no solid numbers are available, nationwide, St Louis, Missouri can provide a possible look at the state of orphanages during this time. The city did a survey of its children in institutions and discovered: 27% of the children were full orphans, 69% had one deceased parent (split equally between mother and

³⁰ Aries, *Centuries of Childhood*

³¹ Kathleen Thompson and Hilary MacAustin. *American's Children: Picturing Children from Early American to the Present*. (London: Norton and Company, 2003).

³² Geraldine Youcha. *Minding the Children: Child Care in America from the Colonial Times to the Present*. New York, NY: Scribner, 1995.

father), and 4% had both parents. As many as 32% of these children were placed out as indentured servants in order be less of a burden on the city.³³

In most states children residing in such institutions could be sold into indenture or apprenticeship without their parents permission. The need for the care of abandoned children would only increase as the 19th century progressed. It wasn't until 1851 that Massachusetts became the first state to be legally concerned about informal adoptions and indentures. A law was passed requiring that judges determine if the adoptive parents had consent from the adoptee's parents or guardians to take in a child.³⁴

In the second half of the century, as many as a quarter of a million children traveled by "orphan trains." The Children's Aid Society of NY tried to care for these children by sending them to the West to work on farms into the early 20th century. In 1849, NYC documented more than 3000 street children (1% of the entire city).³⁵ Children in poor and working class families lived the life of adults. In the 1830s, the United States had 23 orphanages; just twenty years later New York State alone had 27. They were not all quality or doing more than providing a roof and some porridge. One source states that Philadelphia had one orphanage with 100 boys in four rooms.³⁶

Those children, who managed to live to fifteen, would have already experienced the death of at least one parent, not to mention one or more siblings. They slept together, and worked together, were ill together, and made it through life as best they could.

³³ Downs, S. "The Orphan Asylum in the 19th Century." *Social Service Review* (1983).

³⁴ Ibid, Moore, *American Childhood*.

³⁵ Ibid, *The Orphan Trains*

³⁶ Ibid, Downs, *The Orphan Asylum*

Shakers

In Shaker communities, family was the gathering of members to live together to follow the religious beliefs of the system in community and following the principles of union and order. “By the mid-1820s, the United Society of Believers was composed of a highly complex network of social and economic units tied together by religious commitments and a growing body of legal arrangements. The primary group to which every Believer belonged was the family, a unit varying in size from a handful of persons to more than one hundred members.”³⁷ Depending upon the specific village, there were two or more family units, and children resided either with the adults in the main dwelling or in a separate Children’s Order (most notably New Lebanon).³⁸ There were four or more “families” in each community. They were often a few miles apart. The Church family was the center and designated for those who had signed the covenant. Adults in each family may or may not be biologically or legally bound by marriage. Men and women lived and worked along gender divisions.

It is generally accepted by scholars that the year 1840 was the peak of Shaker membership with as many as 6000 members in eighteen long lasting communities. In the 1850 census, there are 3842 members in 21 communities.³⁹

Children were a vital part of all the communities. Initially, they were the biological offspring of the first generation of converts. Even when they were taken in as orphans and apprentices, the Shakers believed as many adults in the late 18th and early

³⁷ Ibid, Stein, *The Shaker Experience*, 133.

³⁸ Graham, Judith. "The New Lebanon Shaker Children's Order." *Retrospective Theses and Dissertations*, 1996. Paper 11372, 12.

³⁹William Sims Bainbridge. "Shaker Demographics 1840-1900: An Example of the Use of the U.S. Enumeration Schedules." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 4.21 (1982): 352-365

19th did: “Little children are nearer to the kingdom of heaven than those who have grown to riper age.”⁴⁰

The issue of the numbers of children in the Society was considered important enough that in 1795 the covenant included the statement that youth and children were not members except with both parents consent.⁴¹ Children were not allowed to sign the Covenant until they were of the age considered adult. Children were consecrated to the Society, as were all possessions and property, and the same restrictions for their removal applied as it did to all other donated goods.

In common with childhood everywhere, the degree of well being, of course, was subject to the kind of parenthood, or supervision, that prevailed in a given case.⁴² Schneider in her article concludes that Shakers contributed to the 19th century understanding of the value of a child’s and their opinion about their own well-being. In court cases involving custody, children as young as seven, were asked where they wished to reside as part of these legal disputes. The end result of these cases may have been to establish the Shakers being seen as stable custodians in future legal battles.⁴³

Work

World’s People

“They’d start you watching young ones and getting water from the spring. That’s on the day you stood up! By four, you’d be doing feeding and a little field work, and you’d always be minding somebody. By six, you’d be doing small pieces in a tub every washday and you’d bring all the clear water for the rinsing clothes. By eight you’d be able to mind children, do cooking and wash. If you wasn’t trained full by ten-you was

⁴⁰ Testimonies, Shaker. *Testimonies of Mother Ann Lee and the Elders*. 1997. January 2017. <www.passtheword.org/Shakers-Manuscripts/Testimonies/tstmnyx4.htm>

⁴¹ Edward Deming Andrews and Faith Andrews. *The Shaker Children's Order, Offprint* 8. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1973) 203.

⁴² *Ibid*, 210

⁴³ *Ibid*, Schneider, *Prayers and Prosperity*.

thought to be slow. Still, even if you was slow, you had to do! Pernella Ross
(Thompson and Mac Austin)⁴⁴

Work has played a complex role in the lives of children, and it is hard to discuss it without risking either romanticizing or demonizing it. American children were part of the economic health of the family, as well as worked as slaves and servants for the betterment of someone else's economic situation.

England saw the need to deal with its children as early as the late 1600s, establishing workhouses where children are sent out to work, fed minimal meals and given a roof. Carried over to the young America, almshouses and poor farms are established early in the Colonial era to help families. In the 1800s, concern for the poor continued with states establishing rules that towns create poor houses and other methods to take care of the poor.

At the beginning of the 1800s, because of rapid industrialization, and the need for cheap labor, as much as one-third of the workforce in factories were children under the age of fourteen. 1813 marked the opening of the first textile mill in Lowell, Massachusetts, where a special system called the 'Lowell System' was set up specifically to employ women and girls, many of the girls as young as seven years of age.⁴⁵ During this period, some states began to pass laws concerning children workers; but enforcement and the realities of the families kept the impact away for quite some time. In 1842, Massachusetts passed a law limiting the workday for children less than 10 years of age to 10 hours. It was not until 1938 that federal laws began to make a difference in the existence of child labor.

⁴⁴ Ibid, Thomson and MacAustin, *America's Children*.

⁴⁵ Ibid, Moore, *American Childhood*.

Families began to have fewer children by the end of the nineteenth century; but the increased cost of child rearing, housing, food, and clothing still required those children contribute to the family's cost of living. Land became scarcer, some families headed west as the US expanded drastically during the mid-century.

Forms of child labor have been around for millennia, ranging from indentures to slavery to participating in family chores. Child labor provided necessary labor on farms, in small businesses such as stores and bakeries, and in homes providing families with their necessities. Farm work could be hard, yet also came with space, fresh air and usually healthy food.

During these decades of the 1800s, industry developed on a huge scale resulting in children being used, and forced by economic necessity, to work in horrifying conditions in factories, mills, and mines. Children were up to 20% of the work force in factories.⁴⁶ They worked up to twelve hours a day, six days a week, with less than a hour break each day, earning an average wage of one dollar a week (the equivalent today of almost \$28.00). As late as 1900, the census notes that one in six children between five and ten were "gainfully employed" outside the home.⁴⁷

Shakers

Chores still called for attention regardless of what one believed. Work to sustain the family remained the focus of everyday life. Daybooks and journals document the children's physical life in the Society, although little attention is noted to their emotional

⁴⁶ Historama, American. n.d. January 2017. <<http://www.american-historama.org/1866-1881-reconstruction-era/child-labor-america.htm>>

⁴⁷ Census, United States. 2017. 2017. <https://www.census.gov/history/www/through_the_decades/fast_facts/1820_fast_facts.html>

struggles and growth. In his work on “Children and Industry in a Shaker Town”, Backofen establishes the solid suggestion that children were not taken in by the Shakers after the first decade of the 1800s just to do right by them, but in fact, as a valuable part of the “communal workforce” necessary for existence. It is his contention through the examination of town records that “in most general and benign terms, they were recruited to become an extension of an otherwise limited adult workforce.”⁴⁸

As mentioned previously, children were seen as small adults. If they could complete the task, it was assigned to them. They harvested, raked, cooked, baked, fetched water, feed animals, sewed and ironed. Name a chore on the farm and a child may very well have been involved in completing the task at hand. Food was plentiful and well prepared; children had excellent opportunities to learn one or more trades and several daily living skills, whether they lived there as a biological descendent of a member or were apprenticed or adopted by the Shaker society.

Learning and Play

World’s People

For much of history, childhood was just a time that a person was smaller and could do less work, but still worked. It was not a time set aside for engaging in play and learning. Children and adults engaged in many of the same kinds of recreational pastimes: leap frog, swimming on a hot day, drinking a beer or cider after work, singing or dancing at holidays and festivals, sharing stories in the evening or reading the Bible. Only in the mid to late 19th century and into the early 20th century with the growing

⁴⁸ Walter A. Backofen, "Children and Industry in a Shaker Town: Enfield, New Hampshire, 1805-1868." *Enfield Shaker Forum*. Paper, 2002,

middle urban class did toys begin to be mass produced, and new ideas about play and its importance in a child's development come into its own.⁴⁹

The goal of school reform was to prepare children to meet the responsibilities of democratic living and Christian morality. A more thorough look at the history of education in the nineteenth century would reveal the opening of the first schools for girls, first reform schools for boys, first school for blind children, laws that every town should have a district school (Massachusetts) and more. It was, indeed, a busy century in terms of considering the educational needs of children. However, it really was not until the early 20th century that a substantial education for all children in the US became a reality.

Early in nineteenth century, the need for education of children brought about some reforms. Laws allowed selectman to choose the books used in the district schools. Previously a child brought any book, if they owned one, and that was what the teacher used. The main purpose of schooling was still, however, to teach children how to read so that they could read the Bible. The value of education was in the attendant moral training of the child. Being part of the collective whole was the role of the child.

Shakers

Shaker schools were as good or better than those in surrounding districts, and attendance was likely better enforced.

“Children taken into the Society of Believers, should be considered as young plants taken from the wilderness of nature and planted in the garden of God; and that they are to be cultivated, raised up and prepared for the Kingdom of Heaven. (Seth Y. Wells, 1846)⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Ibid. Moore, *American Childhood*.

⁵⁰ Seth Y. Wells. "A Circular Address to the Society at Watervliet Concerning the Education of Children." (Watervliet, NY), 1832

The Shakers were aware quite early of the need for some kind of schooling for the children in their care. Enfield, CT secured a share of public tax money for education in 1792.⁵¹

Instruction in various villages was uneven leading to the appointment of Seth Youngs Wells as Superintendent of all Shaker schools.⁵² Seth Youngs Wells, a former schoolmaster, who joined the Shakers in 1797, was a former public school teacher in Albany New York. He was appointed by Mother Lucy (the female head of the entire Shaker community after Ann Lee's death) and set off to visit the Eastern societies "to encourage their programs of education and to establish schools." He brought the current curriculum known as the Lancastrian System to Shaker schools.

Lancaster asserted that "Let every child at every moment have something to do and a motive for doing it".⁵³ In 1839, New Lebanon is the first schoolhouse built for the children of the village in the Shaker world.

"They [teachers] should, at all times, bear in mind that the character of the future man or woman is to be formed in childhood, and the formation greatly depends upon the teacher." Seth Y Wells, 1846⁵⁴

According to Taylor, Wells trained his teachers to be flexible and loving using confession and not harsh discipline for correcting behavior. Other communities quickly followed with organizing spaces and rules for children and their education.⁵⁵ The Shaker

⁵¹ Stein, *The Shaker Experience*

⁵² George Lorenz. "Shaker Education: A Job Well Done." *The Shaker Quarterly*, Fall 1992, 113.

⁵³ Joyce Taylor. "Joseph Lancaster and the Origins of the Lancastrian System of Education." *The Shaker Quarterly* Fall 1991: 72.

⁵⁴ Seth Y. Wells. *A Plain statement of custom and manner or receiving, managing, teaching, governing and disciplining children, in the Society of people called Shakers.* New Lebanon, n.d. WRHSVII B 62, 2.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, Lorenz, George. Shaker Education.

Millennial Laws of 1845 set out who was to attend school, for how long, and until what age. Seth Wells and Brother Franklin Barner penned important documents on the care of children and their duties and education.⁵⁶

According to Stein, during the nineteenth century, Shakers placed a heavy accent on inculcating proper, respectful, and virtuous behavior. It was the Shakers hope that years of exposure to their values would convince the young people to remain in the Society when they reached maturity.⁵⁷ Although important content was taught such as the three “Rs,” it was noted that no useless knowledge was offered that would only “clog the mind and sense and shut the gifts of God out of the soul.”⁵⁸

Children, raised with the Shakers, with rare exception, did not stay into adulthood with the Shaker life.⁵⁹ It is an interesting idea to ponder whether appointing Wells as Superintendent who made great strides in bringing the current world of educational theory and thought into the Shaker classrooms, added to children leaving Shaker life as adults. Many of the Shaker schools were also the local district public school, enrolling local children as well. For many years, the teachers were Shakers.

Summary

As the nineteenth century unfolded, most children’s primary influence was their family. This family consisted of all those who lived and worked at the daily chores of

⁵⁶ Testimonies, Shaker. *Testimonies of Mother Ann Lee and the Elders*. 1997. January 2017. <www.passtheword.org/Shakers-Manuscripts/Testimonies/tstmnyx4.htm>

⁵⁷ Ibid, Stein, *The Shaker Experience*.

⁵⁸ Seth Y. Wells. *A Plain statement of custom and manner or receiving, managing, teaching, governing and disciplining children, in the Society of people called Shakers*. New Lebanon, n.d. WRHSVII B 62, p. 2

⁵⁹ Stephen Paterwic, e-mail message to author, 26 February 2017.

sustaining this family, be it farm hands, an extra relative or two, an apprentice or even a stranger taken in from the cold. They lived in rural areas, tending to the farmland and its needs, worked in small shops, and were aware of their contributions to the family and its well-being. While the adults may have believed in Locke's blank slate or didn't give much thought to how the children were developing, adult members were passing along the emotional, social and psychological habits and standards of the family system via close relationships with the children. As changes of the century were wrought, and the emergence of an urban family came about, more and more children were raised in crowded conditions, worked in factories, with a scarcity of food and overwhelming illnesses and other stresses.

This may be what most strongly delineates Shaker children's lives from the world's children during the volatile era of the 19th century. Shaker families, throughout both the 19th and 20th centuries conformed, in terms of function, to those of 17th and 18th century rural families in New England.⁶⁰

The majority of children raised in Shaker life did not stay in the communities, but chances are they left with rich experiences, knowledge of temporal and spiritual matters, and a strong base upon which to lead a successful life. A few scholars pursue the question of why children left over the years. Cosgal and Andrew conclude "interpersonal relationships played a significant role in membership decisions."⁶¹ Graham suggests that the way the children were separated and raised interrupted these

⁶⁰ Graham, Judith. "The New Lebanon Shaker Children's Order." *Retrospective Theses and Dissertations*, 1996. Paper 11372. Gubar, Marah. *The Victorian Child, c. 1837-1901*. n.d. January 2017, 133.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

interpersonal relationships from forming as they would between a child and its caregiver in the world.⁶²

What we know now about child growth and development is that children are not small adults. Emotional and social attachments are vital in the early years of growth and development. We might draw some conclusions that, although the Shakers did not understand this concept as certainly and surely as the rest of society did not, living in community played an important part in a child's future success; even when that future meant living amongst the world.

The author believes it is possible to speculate that Shaker children's lives were even better than a good many of the world's children. Can we also speculate that these children, raised by the Shakers in union and order, carried with them into living with the world's people some lasting gifts of skills of living in community, courtesy, thrift, industry and simplicity? The children who lived as Shakers began, on the whole, as children of the world's people, but did they leave the Shaker way of life behind when they once again became of the world's people?

Just as today, children of the nineteenth century lived in great joy and in times of great stress and sorrow, but they were children, and not adults. Country School scholars and researchers need to remember not to romanticize or demonize the lives of the children who attended those nineteenth century country schools. Their stories need to be told with the added reflection and thought about what we now know understand about child growth and development.

⁶² Cosgel and Andrew, *The Shakers*.