

"Lest We Forget - The Quaker Seedsmen of Long Ago" Article, April 21, 1909

LEST WE FORGET

The Quaker Seedsmen of Long Ago.

LEVI SHAW AND DOCTOR JONES

The Waning Shaker Community-How It Is Gradually Dying Out- Necessary Young Blood not in Evidence.

With the blue birds and robins, the the crocuses and tulips, the March breezes and April showers of yearly recurrence, old Honesdalers will remember the long gray coats and broad-brimmed hats of Levi Shaw and his brother, as harbingers of spring. As regularly as the season came and went, these smoothfaced, mild-eyed, gentle-mannered representatives of the New Lebanon Shaker Community, appeared on our streets, called from door to door on our merchants of from thirty to forty years ago, counted the garden seeds left over from the year's commission sale, took their pay for such packages as had been disposed of, and left fresh boxes for the ensuing season's trade. Unlike the free seeds sent from Washington by Congressmen and Senators as a reward to their constituents for support at the polls, and generally distributed locally by the county newspapers as special favors to their subscribers, the Shaker seeds were always to be depended on, and, with due respect to individual beliefs as to planting in the proper phase of the moon, if put in the ground in the proper "seed time," were sure to reward the husbandman with satisfactory "harvests," in due season.

Levi Shaw, the chief traveling representative of the Shaker Community, was wisely selected by his platonic brethren and sisters, to make friends in the world at large. Suave, handsome, companionable, he was always welcome in business houses, even at a time when "drummers" were as a rule regarded as nuisances. Just how he became the warm personal friend of Dr. Joseph Jones and his first wife, the latter a daughter of the late John A. Gustin, the Honesdale postmaster when the writer was a lad, we don't know, but this at least is sure, that he made their house his home on his annual visits here.

Dr. Jones was the pioneer among the homosopathists of Wayne county. He was a firm believer in and an able exponent of the "infinitesimal dose" theory, a doctrine which was of course vigorously combated by the physicians of the old school. Once in a while these upholders of the different systems indulged in personal controversy, and the writer well remembers an occasion when Dr. Jones dropped in at the drugstore of the late Dr. William H. Reed, more familiarly

known as "Doctor Billy." When these two met, friendly as they were personally, the professional battle was on, and when the allopathist laughed to scorn the pretension that there could be any efficacy in the pin-head pills prescribed by the new school, Dr. Jones produced a bottle of strychnine pellets, one of which was a dose, and declared that to swallow half a dozen of them would mean death. Dr. Billy took a good look at the hundreds of miniature pills in the phial, and simply saying, "Well, call the coroner," poured them all down his throat. Whether the overdose proved its own antidote, or whether the doctor was immune against poison may never be known, but certain it is that Dr. Billy showed no ill results from his heroic overdose, and that he lived for many, many years afterward.

Notwithstanding such apparently discrediting incidents, Dr. Jones acquired a fine practice, and with it material prosperity. With the accumulation of the necessary funds he invested quite largely, for a professional man, in real estate, and eventually became the owner of various farms and other landed property in the vicinity of Honesdale. On the 6th of November, 1860, he bought of Edward Fowler and Benjamin Gates, trustees of the United Society of Shakers, town of New Lebanon, Columbia Co., N. Y., 433 acres and 131 perches of land, lying along the Wangum in Cherry Ridge, Paupack and Salem townships, with the privilege accorded in former deeds of building dams on the streams. This tract was sold by Edward W. Weston, agent for the warrantee owners, to the late Judge James R. Dickson and Win. II. Cushman of Honesdale in 1855. In February, 1804, Mr. Dickson assigned his share to Mr. Cushman, and the same day, (15th) Mr. Cushman sold the property to the Shakers.

When, March 21st, 1870, Dr. Jones contracted the lot to former Sheriff J. T. Barnes, the consideration was \$8,890, reservation being made of the hemlock bark, which had been sold to L. A. Robertson, owner of the tannery at Middle Valley, and the bass wood which had been bought by Beers, Reed & Co., of Honesdale. Sheriff Barnes commenced lumbering on the lot, which was one of the most heavily timbered in this section, and continued in that business until he met his death by accident in his own sawmill.

In October, 1870, Dr. Jones sold to Levi Shaw, of the Shaker community, his remaining interest in the Barnes contract, receiving \$5,800 for it, and a few years later removed to Stockbridge, Mass., where his wife died, and where two or three weeks ago he was remarried at the age of seventy. Last summer he paid Honesdale a visit and so impressed his old friends with his youthfulness and vigor, notwithstanding his honorable tale of years as shown by the family Bible, that no one was surprised to hear of his second venture on the matrimonial sea.

With the settlement of business affairs between the Barnes estate and Mr. Shaw, and the final crowding out of the latter as a commercial traveller by the encroachments of Peter Henderson and other seedsmen, it is many years since the quaint and distinguishing garb of the Shakers has been seen on our thoroughfares. It may be remarked here that the nickname "Shaking Quakers," was altogether a misnomer. The sect originated in England in 1747, under the leadership of Mother Ann Lee. The members differ from the Quakers both in doctrine and practice. They style themselves the "United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearance." They do not marry, and their communal name originates from their movements in dancing,

which form part of worship. The sect is now confined to the United States, and is steadily weakening here.

To what an extent the Shaker settlement at New Lebanon to which the Shaws belonged has been reduced is disclosed by a recent alleged scandal, in which one of the elders or head of a family has been sent forth into the world without the benediction of his superiors. Back of this casting out lies the fact of poverty of numbers of the Shakers, else he had not come among them. He is a Swiss and his advent at Mount Lebanon fifteen years ago was the result of a European proselytizing in order to recruit the depleted ranks of the brethren and sisters. Others of foreign birth came over to join the community, and it was hoped that the infusion of fresh blood would revive the waning prestige of a community doomed to death by dry rot. It is worthy of note, however, that the Shakers are rich, and it is therefore rather strange that cupidity has failed to attract, where arid righteousness had palled.

The present families of Shakers are composed of old or elderly people and there does not seem to be any reasonable hope that young folks will ever be induced to ally themselves with a people holding out so few allurements from a worldly point of view.

We pause to remark on this condition of our old friends, the Shakers, because it marks the decline of almost the last of that once very popular form of communistic experimentation which bore fruit in the Oneida Community of John Humphrey Noyes, the Hopedale Community- of Hosea Ballou, the Brook Farm hazard of Charles A. Dana, Horace Greeley, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Margaret Fuller and others, the New Harmony settlement in the west, and others which have made a lesser stir in the world. Of later years there have been other ventures of the sort, but they have lasted even for a shorter than those enumerated. In all of them the basic idea has been community of property and purpose, an altruistic and generally impracticable theory of brotherly love, and also, in most instances, some fantastic religious schism, as for instance, the complex marriage of the Oneida Community. In all of them, however, be it noted, money has been made and the central idea was beautiful, as a theory.

The conclusion inevitably to be deduced from these numerous failures is that the time is not ripe for the communistic ideal to be realized. To become thus ripe presupposes a vast amount of unselfishness, industry and disinterestedness, such as mankind has not yet had instilled into it, and Bellamy was well warranted in placing the date of his famous romance as far in the near future as he did.

In fact the trend of opinion is distinctly from, instead of towards, such experiments. Fewer and fewer are now established, and the old ones, have all passed away (as strictly "communities" in the old sense) with the exception of these worthy old Shakers, who are all over the escapade which exposes their diminishing numerical strength rather than demonstrates any yielding to carnal impulses (sic) on their part.