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The White Water, Ohio, Shaker Community: A Newly Discovered 1877 Visitor's Account Introduced by Thomas Sakmyster

Although the value of visitor accounts to Shaker villages has long been recognized by scholars, the focus has usually been on the eastern Shaker societies. Because Shaker villages in New York and New England were relatively close to major urban centers, they attracted frequent visitors, sometimes including tourists and dignitaries from foreign countries. Such visits were made easier by the rapid expansion of the railroad network that began in the mid-nineteenth century. By contrast, fewer visitors were able to make their way to the more remote western Shaker societies. Those who did were for the most part journalists or writers for regional newspapers or agricultural journals. Many of these visitor accounts appeared in newspapers in Cincinnati, which for most of the nineteenth century was the largest mid-western city and was located at the geographic hub of the Shaker West.

Also noteworthy is the fact that Cincinnati had perhaps the largest community of German-Americans in the country. Probably for this reason the city was a magnet that drew German travelers who passed through for excursions to other sites of interest, including Shaker villages. One of the earliest accounts of a visit to Pleasant Hill in Kentucky was written by one such traveler, Clara von Gerstner. The report of another German traveler, Moritz Busch, about his visit to Watervliet in 1851 is the fullest and most interesting of the few such accounts relating to that small Ohio Shaker society. Reprinted here for the first time is a newly discovered account from a German perspective of a visit to another Ohio Shaker village, White Water. Entitled “Die Shaker: Ein Tag unter den Kommunisten des Whitewater Thales” (The Shakers: A Day Among the Communalists of the Whitewater Valley), this front-page article appeared in one of Cincinnati’s German-language newspapers, *Westliche Blätter* (*Western Pages*) on May 20, 1877.

White Water Village, located about twenty-five miles northwest of Cincinnati, was one of the smaller Shaker societies and was often overlooked by those seeking to learn more about the communal movement that practiced celibacy and held religious services that featured elaborate dance movements. Curious writers and travelers in southwestern Ohio

most often chose to make their way instead to Union Village, which was for a time the second largest Shaker society in the country and was more easily accessible from Cincinnati than White Water. For example, Charles Nordhoff, the author of an influential study of American communal societies, did field work at Union Village and other mid-western Shaker societies, but chose not to visit White Water.

Only three substantial accounts of visits to White Water are known to historians. The earliest, which appeared in 1855, was composed by Benn Pitman, a recent immigrant from England who was residing at the time in Cincinnati. The other two were published in Cincinnati newspapers in 1871 and 1881. The article reprinted here, “The Shakers,” appeared in the *Westliche Blätter*, a newspaper that catered to Cincinnati’s large community of German-Americans. The *Westliche Blätter* was the Sunday addition of a popular daily, the *Volksblatt*, and was designed to be a version of what was known in Europe at the time as a feulliton, a section of a newspaper or a separate edition that focused on broad political, social, and cultural topics.

The identity of the author of “The Shakers,” which is signed simply “Kim,” could not be traced. “Kim’s” curiosity about the Shakers was aroused by the tragic events in April 1877 involving Sallie and Ida Dill, who had recently left White Water after spending most of their lives there as Shakers. Unable to cope with the pressures of life in the world, the mother and daughter committed a joint suicide in a Cincinnati hotel. For weeks the press covered the story in sensational fashion, not just in Cincinnati but throughout the country. Newspapers published interviews with White Water leaders and the text of letters that Sallie Dill and her daughter had exchanged with Believers at their former Shaker home. The eloquence and poignancy of these letters intrigued “Kim,” who decided to visit White Water in order to learn more about this unusual communal society.

“Kim’s” article, “The Shakers” was clearly designed to resonate with the paper’s more informed readers, most of whom had been born and educated in Germany. The language employed was refined, though to modern readers occasionally archaic, and there are many literary and cultural references, including quotations from German poets (Heine, Goethe, Schiller), folk songs, and popular literature. The author endeavored to describe the Shaker settlement in terms that would be familiar and appeal to immigrants from the Old World. White Water was likened to “a great feudal estate that for centuries has been managed by

expert agronomists.” The houses were kept spotlessly clean by women who resembled a rural German “Hausfrau” constantly at work with her “dust cloth.” George Bear, the lead elder, was described as “the prototype of a German farmer.” The author pointed out that there were four German-born Shakers at White Water and offered a warm and sympathetic sketch of one of them, “Lorenz,” a herdsman.

Because “Kim’s” visit to White Water was a relatively short one, the article has curious omissions. For example, the author chose not to go to the North Family, and thus failed to see the earliest buildings constructed at White Water, including the splendid brick meeting house. As a result, the article does not offer a first-hand account of a Sunday public meeting at White Water, which, as “Kim” accurately noted, was often attended by several hundred people of the world. On the other hand, having expressed an interest in the dancing that took place at such meetings, the author was given the privilege, rarely if ever offered to outsiders, of a private demonstration of the dance exercises. Along the same lines, “Kim” was permitted to observe another Shaker activity that was not generally attended by non-Shakers, the twice-weekly union meetings at which brothers and sisters were paired off for social interaction.

The communal life style at White Water was depicted in “The Shakers” in very flattering, at times almost fulsome, terms. The author found the buildings, landscape, and overall setting to be “charming” and “wonderfully delightful.” Like many other visitors to Shaker villages in the second half of the nineteenth century, “Kim” had high praise for the Shaker dedication to “the most painstaking cleanliness,” hard work, and self-discipline. Contradicting those who were inclined to believe that a Shaker village was dreary, uncomfortable, and completely isolated from the world, the author declared that “the life of a Shaker is vastly more comfortable and pleasant than that of a typical farmer or artisan.” They ate well, were well-clothed, and had comfortable dwelling places. As a result, their lifestyle was conducive to good health and longevity. Furthermore, the Shakers were by no means culturally deprived. They read books of all kinds, including novels, and were eager to expand their knowledge of the world, for example by taking German lessons from Elder George Amery. All in all, they were a community to be admired and respected, and certainly not scorned by “enlightened” non-Shakers who tended to regard them as inferior, coarse and “boorish.”

In describing the women of White Water, the author sought to discredit the views of those visitors to Shaker villages, like Charlotte Cushman, who found Shaker sisters to be unhealthily pale and “cold and passionless.” The Shaker women whom “Kim” encountered had a “natural appearance” and were “trim and nice” in their clothing. In “intelligence and knowledge” they were well above the level to be found among their counterparts in the world. Most of the sisters were musically inclined and were interested in and conversant with world literature. Both boys and girls received an excellent education in the Shaker school and, as the letters of Sallie and Ida Dill demonstrated, could write with remarkable eloquence.

In this flattering portrait of the White Water Shakers, the author of “The Shakers” made only a few minor comments that could be considered negative. For example, Shaker songs were described as too “cloying and uninflected,” and as a result sounded like little more than “baleful chants.” “Kim” also noted that children raised at White Water almost never chose to remain Shakers when they reached the age of consent. Yet the author apparently did not consider this fact, which was contributing to the steady decline of membership at White Water, to be a disturbing portent. Indeed, in noting that the Shaker movement had lasted for a hundred years and outlived many other communal societies, the author implied that the Shakers could look forward to continued success in the future. “Kim” claimed to detect “not even the smallest signs of decay at White Water,” and thus concluded that “the communal system of the Shakers has been very intelligently conceived and wisely implemented.”

Like Charles Nordhoff and other visitors to Ohio Shaker villages in the 1870s, the author of “The Shakers” failed to notice what, in retrospect, were obvious signs of decline, such as the ongoing steep drop in membership. “Kim” had praise for White Water’s broom-making industry and agricultural production, but failed to note signs of economic trouble, such as the decision, in the mid-1870s, to discontinue the previously very profitable sale of seed packets because of White Water’s inability to compete with newly formed national seed companies. “Kim” also failed to detect subtle indications of discontent among the Believers of White Water. For example, the author singled out and provided brief sketches of several members who were deemed to be exemplary examples of highly committed, long-term Shakers. Yet three of them, elder George Amery, eldress Amelia Dobson, and eldress Lucy Woodward, were to apostatize within two years of the publication of “Kim’s” article. Readers of “The

Shakers” doubtless gained the impression that White Water village, as a prime example of the successful Shaker movement, would surely last at least for a century more. In fact, White Water closed in 1916. Ironically, the *Westliche Blätter* was then also nearing its end; it ceased publication in 1919.

Note: The only known surviving copy of the May 20, 1877, edition of the *Westliche Blätter* is held by the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County. This copy is in fragile condition, with darkening at the edges and one hole created by the flaking off a small section of the brittle paper. This renders a few sentences near the end indecipherable, as noted in the translation. The copies of the *Westliche Blätter* preserved at the Cincinnati Public Library were used for the microfilmed version available at <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/lccn/sn83045582/1877-05-20/ed-1/seq-1/>

Notes

1. For visitor accounts relating to the eastern Shaker societies, the indispensable source is Glendyne Wergland, *Visiting the Shakers, 1778-1849* (Clinton, N.Y.: Richard W. Couper Press, 2007), and the companion volume for 1850-1899 (2010). Bixby, "Seeking Shakers: Two Centuries of Visitors to Shaker Villages" (Ph.D. diss., University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2010) available at https://scholarworks.umass.edu/open_access_dissertations/157/
2. "Document: Visitor's Account of the Shaker Community at Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, by Clara von Gerstner," *American Communal Societies Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (January 2019): 58-62.
3. Moritz Busch, *Travels between the Hudson & the Mississippi, 1851-1852* ([Lexington]: University Press of Kentucky, 1971), 58-77.
4. Nordhoff described White Water as small and "subordinate to ... Union Village." Charles Nordhoff, *Communitic Societies of the United States* (New York: Harper, 1875), 206.
5. David D. Newell, "Benn Pitman's 'Visit to the Shaker Settlement – Whitewater Village, O.,'" *American Communal Societies Quarterly* 4, no. 1 (January 2010): 20-36.
6. "Among the Shakers. A Visit to Whitewater," *Cincinnati Commercial*, July 21, 1871, reprinted in Marjorie Burnside Burress, *Whitewater, Ohio. Village of Shakers, 1824-1916*, 24-31; and "Interesting Visit to the Shakers at the Whitewater Village in Hamilton County," *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, August 27, 1881, reprinted in Thomas Sakmyster, "A Visit to the Shaker Village of White Water in 1881," *Communal Societies* 32, no. 1 (2012): 57-81.
7. For the details of this tragic story, see *The Shakers of White Water, Ohio, 1823-1916*, edited by James R. Innis Jr. and Thomas Sakmyster (Clinton, N.Y.: Richard W. Couper Press, 2014), 59-61.
8. On the mistaken impressions gained by Nordhoff and other writers who visited Ohio Shaker villages, see Thomas Sakmyster, *The Last Shaker Apostate. Augustus Wager and Union Village, Ohio* (Clinton, N.Y.: Richard W. Couper Press, 2018), 52-54.