Shakers proved celibacy has disadvantages

By Peter Bronson
pbronson@enquirer.com

There's a little picket-fenced cemetery on Oxford Road just north of Newhaven, northwest of Cincinnati.

The spongy ground is littered with rotting hickory nuts. Some of the lichen-crusted markers are so worn even the headstones can't remember their names. They crowd into a shy huddle in a far corner, as far from the road as possible.

I guess they were expecting more company. But this cemetery was for one of Ohio's early settlements of Shakers - a genealogical dead-end road.

A marker in the middle of the graveyard explains it in a way that makes you read it twice: "An order of celibate Christian communists," it declares. "1827-1916."

Celibate Christian communists? In Crosby Township?

The Shakers are the longest continuous communal society in America, with one community of nine Shakers living in New Gloucester, Maine, said Jim Innis, a retired Procter & Gamble chemist who has made a hobby of Shaker history.

They were America's broom-makers. They grew barley for Cincinnati breweries.

They farmed thousands of acres, sold turkey eggs and honey, and were the first to package seeds, with 67 varieties of vegetables peddled out of wagons all over the Midwest.

At its peak before 1850, White Water Shaker Village had 200 people living and working in a little settlement up the road from the cemetery. They took in religious pilgrims, widows and orphans.

It was no Holiday Inn. The Shakers slept on narrow cots in austere dorms, crowded four or six to a room no bigger than a tool shed - "sisters" to the north, "brothers" to the south.

They ate, worked and prayed together - and even shared a beer.

"You'd have to assume they were so straitlaced they would not engage in any spirituous liquors," Innis said. But you would be wrong. They had a brewery right across the road.

And they loved to dance - which is how they got the Shaker name.

When Innis unlocked the door, the 1827 Meeting House had the clinging chill of a lonesome house. The wide-plank floors are barn-wood gray. The walls are lime-washed plaster, with gaps that expose skeletal timbers almost 200 years old.

Fireplaces at each end are soot-black, showing hard use. The floors must have made a kettle-drumming heard for miles when the Shakers were shaking on a spring night.

Innis described the scene: "They had circular dances, sometimes concentric circles" - separating men and women who arrived and left through separate doors. "They would throw their hands in the air or might at some point throw themselves on the floor and begin to thrash around as if having a seizure. They were shaking off the devil."
Not everyone liked them. Some of their first buildings were burned by arsonists. During the Civil War, they were among the first conscientious objectors.

The old meeting house has been painted, remodeled, wallpapered and even desecrated with a hot tub. But Innis and the Friends of White Water Shaker Village Inc. are working to restore the village for Hamilton County Parks. They got $10,000 from the Greater Cincinnati Foundation, but they need donations and help (http://whitewatershakervillage.org).

There's history behind those walls. Glass from 1827 is wavy and pitted like a blurry window on the past. Flagstones are almost swallowed in the grass. Huge timbers in the barn show the bite marks of horses and hand tools. In a little room in the women's dorm, a gate-leg writing table faces a second-story window looking out on the woodshed and stables. I wondered what they thought as they sat there to read, pray, write or just dream.

It's also easy to imagine that not all Shakers were dancing for celibacy. There must have been ... problems. A secret glance. A rendezvous at the milk house. A lingering touch passing the biscuits. Stealthy steps on creaking stairs on a winter night. Rebellion against a religion that smothered God's gift of love.

Innis said the Shakers should be remembered for pioneering women's equality, for being good neighbors and for taking in widows and orphans.

But remembering the Shakers will be up to us. That's the problem with celibacy. By 1912, there were only a few stragglers and the ghost village was sold.

That's why there's still so much space available at that cemetery - and nobody around to visit the graves.

Send your suggestions for columns on local history to Peter Bronson at pbronson@enquirer.com or call 513-768-8301. Peter Bronson is on vacation. His Sunday column will return March 29.