

The Decline of the Shakers: Evidence from the United States Census

WILLIAM SIMS BAINBRIDGE

THE SHAKERS HAVE BEEN variously described as an "American socialism," a "communistic society," a "utopian community," and a "utopian sect."¹ Yet, it might just as well be argued that they were merely a religious refuge, sociologically little different from Catholic monasteries and nunneries that operate children's schools as part of their holy work, distinguished merely by the lack of an appropriate denominational affiliation.² Nineteenth-century Shaker publications stress millenarian and communal doctrines, and simple communism arose spontaneously as the original communities coalesced.³ However, possession of a radical ideology does not disqualify Shaker colonies from acting primarily as retreats or refuges for even the majority of members.

Studying the Shakers, we can draw on a vast library of theology and other material they published themselves, and on a nearly equally large corpus of modern historical studies. But quantitative data have, until recently, been very scarce. The most common estimates of

William Sims Bainbridge is Associate Professor of Sociology at Harvard University.

1. John Humphrey Noyes, *History of American Socialisms* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1870); Charles Nordhoff, *The Communistic Societies of the United States* (London: John Murray, 1875); Rosabeth Moss Kanter, *Commitment and Community* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972); John McKelvie Whitworth, *God's Blueprints* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975).

2. Mary Marshall (Dyer), *The Rise and Progress of the Serpent from the Garden of Eden to the Present Day* (Concord, New Hampshire: Marshall, 1847), p. 19.

3. Calvin Green and Seth Y. Wells, *A Summary View of the Millennial Church, or United Society of Believers* (Albany, New York: Packard and van Benthuyzen, 1823); Benjamin S. Youngs and Calvin Green, *Testimony of Christ's Second Appearing* (Albany, New York: van Benthuyzen, 1856); Anonymous, *A Defense of the Order, Government and Economy of the United Society Called Shakers Against Sundry Charges and Legislative Proceedings* (New York: Egbert, Hovey, and King, 1846; reprint of 1828 edition), pp. 29-37; Frederick W. Evans, *Shaker Communism; or Tests of Divine Inspiration* (London: James Burns, 1871).

Shaker membership in 1860 are wrong by a factor of nearly two, and little sociological analysis has been applied to what reliable statistics have been published.

While good quantitative data cannot answer all our questions, they can contribute significantly to our understanding of several issues. How numerous were the Shakers? How did their age and sex distribution change over the years? What sorts of people were most likely to join the sect for a substantial stay? Which categories of members were most apt to defect and thus contribute to the Shakers' gradual decline? Answers to such questions would increase the knowledge we use to frame general theories about communal recruitment and defection, as well as improving our picture of the Shakers themselves.

In a sense, the Shakers may always have been declining in numbers, if one counts only ordinary recruitment and defection. Their early rapid gains came when Shaker leaders were able to exploit the passion and denominational disruptions of two exceptional religious revivals that raged in the surrounding society, in parts of New York and New England around 1779⁴ and in Kentucky and Ohio around 1801.⁵ Many people became Shakers in following years after their religious sensibilities were aroused and their conventional affiliations were disrupted by revivalism, but the last large contingent of such exceptional recruits came from the Millerite "Great Disappointment" of the 1840's.⁶

Although statistics from the period 1790-1849 are hard to come by, ordinary recruitments may never have exceeded losses by death and defection, and the harvests of neophytes during the great religious awakenings were undoubtedly essential to the early success of the sect. After the 1840's, the trend was constantly downward to the handful who today continue the Shaker traditions in Maine and New Hampshire. Most sects seem to decline steadily in membership from a peak soon after formation, and it may be that information about the

4. Charles Edson Robinson, *A Concise History of the United Society of Believers Called Shakers* (Westport, Connecticut: Hyperion, 1975; reprint of 1893 edition), p. 19; Henry C. Blinn, *The Life and Gospel Experience of Mother Ann Lee* (East Canterbury, New Hampshire: Shakers, 1901), pp. 24-28.

5. John Patterson MacLean, *Shakers of Ohio* (Philadelphia: Porcupine, 1975; reprint of 1907 edition), pp. 19-58; Julia Neal, *By Their Fruits: The Story of Shakerism in South Union, Kentucky* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1947), pp. 11-19.

6. Anna White and Leila S. Taylor, *Shakerism, Its Meaning and Message* (Columbus, Ohio: Heer, 1904), pp. 169; Whitney R. Cross, *The Burned-over District* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1950), pp. 310-311.

Shaker decline will illuminate the typical experience of radical social experiments, even if it cannot explain those rare bursts of enthusiasm that bring them into being.⁷

This paper uses the excellent census data from 1850 through 1870 to chart the beginning of the Shaker decline, strengthening our knowledge of the demographic structure of the largest American communal sect, and adding to our understanding of the social processes responsible for its fate. Data found in the Shakers' own records are also important for such studies, and I shall draw upon Lawrence Foster's researches on the Second Family at the New Lebanon, New York, colony to supplement the census data. Shakerism was such a vast movement that we shall need several studies performed according to different research methodologies before we can fully comprehend its nature and the social factors that shaped it.

1. Methods of Research

Essentially complete microfilm copies of United States decennial censuses from 1790 through 1910 are maintained for use by ordinary citizens or scholarly researchers at twelve regional offices of the National Archives and Records Service. These records have a vast potential for historical and social-scientific research, and a number of interesting studies have already been published.⁸ Many Utopian experiments were visited by the census takers, and the microfilms contain the names of the members of such famous communes as Amana, Aurora, Bethel, Bishop Hill, Harmony, Icaria, St. Nazianz, and Zoar. Earlier, I reported the demographics of all Shaker colonies for the years 1840, 1860, 1880 and 1900, data extracted from the census archives.⁹ Over those sixty years, Shaker membership became progressively more female and elderly, as the sect's numbers shrank dramatically from about 3,600 to 855. The data suggested that the sect

7. Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, "American-Born Sects: Initial Findings," *journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 20, no. 2(1981): 130-149; Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, *The Future of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming 1985).

8. Glenna Matthews, "The Community Study: Ethnicity and Success in San Jose," *journal of Interdisciplinary History* 7 (1976): 305-318; Lucie Cheng Hirata/Tree, "Indentured, Enslaved: Chinese Prostitutes in Nineteenth-Century America," *Signs: journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5 (1979): 3-29; William Sims Bainbridge, "Religious Insanity in America: The Official Nineteenth-Century Theory," *Sociological Analysis* (1985), in press.

9. William Sims Bainbridge, "Shaker Demographics 1840-1900: An Example of the Use of U.S. Census Enumeration Schedules," *journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 21, no. 4 (1982): 352-365.

lost its power to hold young male members, as the years passed, although the processes of recruitment and defection responsible for the decline remained obscure, and more data were clearly needed about the turning point in Shaker history that occurred in the middle of the century.

Thus, a new research project was indicated, one that would emphasize recruitment and defection patterns and focus on the period just after 1850. Up through 1840, the census records report the names only of heads of households, but from 1850 onward, the full name of each Shaker is recorded, making it possible to track individuals through time, to see who died or defected and who was recruited over the interim between censuses. To begin the research, I located and photocopied the records of all Shaker colonies for the federal censuses of 1850 and 1860.

Following the standard set by the 1850 federal census, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts carried out careful censuses in 1855 and 1865, counting the Shakers at Hancock, Harvard, Pittsfield, Shirley, and Tyringham, along with all other residents of the state. In the archives of the Massachusetts State House in Boston, I was able to find and photocopy complete records, with fully legible names, for these five colonies at both years. Already having the records for 1850 and 1860, I needed only to copy the 1870 records at a federal archive, to have a complete set spanning two decades, enumerated every five years.

The fact that the census schedules legibly record the names of essentially all Shakers permits us to tract 3,842 members across the decade from 1850 to 1860, seeing who vanished and who appeared. I wrote identification numbers on clear photocopies of the records of all twenty-one colonies for 1850 and 1860. Working from the 1850 records, I copied each individual's name, age, birthplace, and identification number on a separate file card. Next I alphabetized the cards by last name and went carefully through the 1860 records, copying the 1860 ID number on a card and the 1850 ID number on the 1860 records, whenever I found a match.

Of course, sometimes the census enumerator incorrectly hears or spells a name, so I next alphabetized the cards by first name and repeated the procedure. Previously, I had learned much about tracking by watching the huge 1880-1900 panel project carried out by The Center for Studies in Demography and Ecology at the University of Washington, and I had done a preliminary study following 1,003 Shakers from 1880 to 1900. As yet, we have no completely mechanical rules for linking records, but I think the reliability is quite good.

In the absence of other, confirmatory data, I would reject a possible link if there were more than five years discrepancy in the ages reported for 1850 and 1860. In a few cases, birthplace and placement among room mates in the records indicated a match despite a greater age discrepancy, undoubtedly marking a copying error by the enumerator or a wild estimate by his informant. There were hardly twenty questionable cases in which I suspected a link should be made but did not have enough justification to make it, and these seemed randomly distributed by age and sex. The ID numbers made it possible to consult the original handwriting if I suspected I might have misread a name, and several weeks were invested to make the linkage as good as possible.

There may be a few cases of false linkage, two different boys named John Jones, for example. But, if this were a common error, it should happen most often across colonies. The chance of finding a second John Jones in 1860 is much greater for the twenty colonies that did not have the target John Jones in 1850 than for the one that did, simply because their aggregate population is much greater. In fact, only eighty-one persons, 2.1 percent of the total 1850 population and 4.3 percent of those found again at decade's end, appear to have moved to a different colony for 1860.

Most of the eighty-one moved between geographically close colonies that might even share governance. Ten people switched between New Lebanon and Canaan, New York, and nine between Hancock and Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Eight went from New Lebanon to Hancock, just across the border, while five switched between Hancock and Canaan. Five moved between associated Maine colonies, Sabbathday Lake and Poland, and six switched between Watervliet and White-water in the same part of Ohio. The numbers of migrants are surprisingly small, especially when one notes that some of these pairs were counted by the Shakers as branches of a single community, with one of the pair a satellite or a noviate order that might feed members to the other (Canaan, Pittsfield, Poland). Not a single person apparently moved between the six western colonies in Ohio and Kentucky and the fifteen colonies in eastern New York and New England.

These facts convince me that very few errors were made in record linkage, and that this method of research can give us highly reliable results. Just as the work on the federal census was completed, it became possible to analyze the Massachusetts data via computer-assisted record linkage, using an Apple lie microcomputer, achieving greater efficiency and possibly slightly greater accuracy.¹⁰

10. I found Apple's *Quick File U* program to be ideal for this work, because it permits one to enter the data and make linkages simultaneously. Not only can it quickly alphabetize a file by last name, then do it again almost instantly by first name, but it can hunt through

1. *Enumeration of the Shakers in Decline*

The Shaker data for the 1850 and 1860 censuses are highly legible, while in contrast those for 1870 and 1880 are often difficult to read. The only exception was an overexposed 1860 microfilm roll that enumerated the Pittsfield and Tyringham, Massachusetts, colonies. In my original study of Shaker demographics, I missed a Tyringham family of twenty-one persons because its section of the film was completely blank, but examination of a handwritten copy of the original records supplied the missing information. Our count of Shakers is more precise now also because the process of tracking members from one year to another permitted me to find a few cases in which an individual was counted twice. Thus, the earlier estimate of 3,489 members for 1860 must be amended to 3,502, an increase of 0.4 percent.

Books about the Shakers often claim there were as many as 6,000 members in 1850 or 1860. This is simply an error.¹¹ In addition to counting heads, the census takers of the mid-nineteenth century were supposed to gather information on the number of seats in the nation's churches. The 1860 census report said there were accommodations for 5,200 persons at an incomplete list of Shaker colonies, and conceivably the full list of Shaker meeting rooms could have held 6,000 people. But the actual total of members, unknown until now, was little more than half that.

Earlier research indicated there were 3,608 Shakers in 1840, exclusive of a few black members whose exact numbers could not be ascertained. The 1850 census found 3,842 Shakers, 1,626 of them male, and 2,216, female. While some scholars believe the sect peaked at about 6,000 in 1843,¹² and rapid growth and decline during the religiously stormy decade of the 1840's is possible, the membership in 1850 was the largest of any year for which we have definite statistics.

a list for names containing a particular set of letters. *Quick File* easily sorts persons by age, sex, or other characteristics, thus greatly facilitating analysis as well as tracking. Working directly from the photocopies of the original records, I could try several interpretations of troublesome names. Whenever I wanted, the program would print out its data in whatever form would be most convenient. Rupert Lissner, *Quick File 11* (Cupertino, Calif.: Apple Computer, 1982).

11. Henri Desroche, *The American Shakers* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1971), pp. 128-129.

12. Edward F. Dow, *A Portrait of the Millennial Church of Shakers* (Orono, Maine: University of Maine, 1931), p. 42; Green and Wells, *A Summary view*, pp. 68-76; cf. Whitworth, *God's Blueprints*, p. 76. These works offer estimates of the populations of colonies in the early 1820's, implying a total membership between 4,000 and 4,300. However, the numbers are usually expressed to the nearest 100, so the margin for error is quite great. Experience working with the 1840 census suggests that the 1820 and 1830 censuses should be quite adequate for a more accurate enumeration of Shakers during that period.

It may be that the number of Shakers approached its maximum in the 1820's, then fluctuated for more than a generation in a rough plateau. Although the Shakers entered their period of decline around 1850, their membership was relatively stable, compared to the end of the century. Their annual rate of growth (compounded annually) from 1840 to 1850 was 0.6 percent. From 1850 to 1860, the rate of decline was 0.9 percent, compared with 3.1 percent from 1860 to 1880 and 3.8 percent from 1880 to 1900.

Four censuses of religious organizations permit us to follow the decline into the twentieth century.¹³ The annual decline was 3.4 percent from 1906 to 1916, 6.3 percent from 1916 to 1926, and 7.1 percent from 1926 to 1936 when there were only ninety-two members left. These rates are based on the church's estimates of membership, not on federal head counting, so they do not precisely continue the nineteenth-century sequence. But it is clear the rate of loss increased as the decades passed, and the mild decline from 1850 to 1860 may not have seemed like the beginning of the end to the Shakers themselves or their contemporaries.

3. *Defection and Death from 1850 to 1860*

Table i shows the age distributions by sex for 1850. The celibacy of Shakers is shown in the small number of children under age ten, 9.9 percent of the total, compared with 9.1 for 1840 and 7.8 for 1860 (revised from the estimate given in my earlier article). The most numerous group is aged ten to nineteen, 23.6 percent, compared with 21.8 percent in 1840 and 28.3 percent in 1860. The numbers drop for members in the twenties and thirties, then rise again in the forties and fifties, before dropping again. Other census years show similar patterns, the result of complex processes of recruitment, defection, and death.

Table i also shows the results of tracking individuals from 1850 to 1860. Altogether, 1,208 females and 658 males were found again after ten years, representing retention rates respectively of 54.5 percent and 40.5 percent. Males were more likely to die or defect from every age group, the greatest difference being among those aged ten through nineteen in 1850. For both sexes, the retention rate is lower

13. Bureau of the Census, *Religious Bodies: 1906* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1910); *Religious Bodies: 1916* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1919); *Religious Bodies: 1926* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1930); *Religious Bodies: 1936* (Washington: United States Government Printing Office, 1941).

TABLE i Retention of Shakers at all twenty-one Communities, 1850-1860

Age	Number of Females in 1850	Percent Kept 1850-1860	Number of Males in 1850	Percent Kept 1850-1860
0-9	199	45	182	36
10-19	470	39	436	19
20-29	289	47	203	39
30-39	260	64	155	51
40-49	314	81	175	66
50-59	243	79	185	69
60-69	177	56	129	52
70-79	189	42	118	31
80+	75	16	43	7

for this age group than for any other except those eighty or over (the youngest of whom would be ninety if still alive in 1860). While the chief factor for elderly Shakers is mortality, most who disappear before their forties undoubtedly defected, and defection seems to have been the rule for younger members.

It is hard to pinpoint the most likely age of defection, because my ten-year span of measurement blurs the age distribution at which people actually left. For girls, the retention rates for five-year age spans from birth to nineteen are 44.2 percent, 44.9, 33.3, and 43.9, essentially the same except for the third group, aged ten to fourteen in 1850. A girl in the middle of this group would live through her entire teens during the decade and would be seventeen in the middle of it; so I suspect that fifteen to eighteen may have been the most likely years.

For boys, the retention rates for five-year age spans are 38.5 percent, 35.7, 19.9, and 18.9, indicating that boys found a wider escape window than girls. The retention is much lower for those aged twenty to twenty-four in 1850 than those twenty-five to twenty-nine, 40.1 percent compared with 54.2 for females and 32.5 percent compared with 47.2 for males. Especially for young people, we should keep in mind that many found again in 1860 will defect thereafter. If Shakers were able to find confidence in their relatively stable total numbers over the decade, the exodus of youth must have been readily apparent and alarming.

Three complementary explanations can be offered for the heavy losses of young people. First, the Shakers prohibited sexual relations, a sacrifice which may have been felt most keenly by those whose desires have just been aroused by the hormonal changes of adolescence. Older members may have joined after bruising experiences

which made them happy to abandon sexuality, might be selected for lower inherent sex drive, and might experience a diminished drive compared with their younger years.

Much has been made of the idea that the Shakers' ecstatic religious exercises may have satisfied erotic urges, but this sublimation may have been sufficiently weak that it would not satisfy strong urges. In the 1840's and 1850's, young women were sometimes seized by the "whirling gift," and behavior that would strike many observers as the undirected outpouring of insufficiently sublimated sexual urges was common.¹⁴

Second, children typically achieve considerable autonomy and form their adult identities during the years of greatest defection.¹⁵ If they stay Shakers through these years of individual decision, they may remain for the rest of their lives. For each separate teenager, this is the time when the greatest proportion of his or her peers defect, and the social maturation of the cohort as well as the psychological maturation of the individual will encourage many to seek wider scope for decision and action outside the community.

The Shakers imposed considerable ideological and social conformity in their schools, frequent religious meetings, residential dormitories, and work activities. The fact that all this concentrated socialization effort availed them nothing with most of the young people should remind us of the strength of individual human needs, and it casts doubt on any sociological theories that postulate that religious ritual and formal socialization practices have overwhelming power.¹⁶

Third, many young people were taken away by relatives, rather than departing on their own, and relatives might have been more likely to do this when the children were old enough for their labor to be a valuable economic asset. If roughly 60 percent of members under age five in 1850 vanished by 1860, surely they did not all walk off on the eves of their fifteenth birthdays. Most, undoubtedly, returned to families who had left them on a trial basis or during a time of difficulty that later passed. Lawrence Foster¹⁷ tabulated the reasons for departure of 200 persons of all ages who left the Shakers, using detailed

14. Louis J. Kern, *An Ordered Love* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 1981).

15. Erik H. Erikson, *Identity, Youth, and Crisis* (New York: Norton, 1968).

16. Such as the widely-accepted theory of the power of ritual proposed by Emile Durkheim in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (New York: Free Press, 1965).

17. Lawrence Foster, *Religion and Sexuality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 57.

records of the Second Family at New Lebanon, and found that thirty-four (17 percent) were taken by relatives, a fate unlikely to befall the many adults in his sample.

Utopian experiments probably benefit from geographic isolation, not only because it protects them from contamination by an antagonistic culture but also simply because isolation increases the practical difficulties faced by would-be defectors. By the 1850's, the Shaker colonies were surrounded by ordinary farms and businesses, and young people willing to work might have found easy routes out of the colonies. One of the colonies was eventually swallowed by the city of Cleveland, while two others were near Cincinnati, then one of the largest cities in the nation, and several others were near well-travelled transportation routes.

Shaker education gave children reading, writing, arithmetic, and the habit of regular work. Thus, any power of socialization to hold them in the faith may have been offset by the opportunities the training gave them to find good jobs outside.

4. Losses from the Massachusetts Colonies

Table n reports the number of Massachusetts Shakers, by age and sex for the five censuses, with rates of retention over the four five-year spans. The chief limitation in this set of data is that we cannot know which departures or arrivals represented a move from a colony outside the state. Analysis of the federal census records for 1850 and 1860 reveals that five Shakers moved from Massachusetts to colonies outside, while thirteen came in from colonies in other states. Because there were fully 605 members of the five colonies in 1850, the small numbers that apparently switched will not greatly inflate our estimates of recruitment and loss.

Retention rates appear higher in Table II than in Table i, but we must remember we are dealing here with only five-year periods, rather than ten as before. If a cohort has a retention rate of 70 percent over each of two five-year spans, figured simply it will have a retention rate of only 49 percent over the full ten years. For both males and females, the twenty to forty-nine age group had a retention rate of 60 percent from 1850 to 1855. If this rate were held steady, for a cohort in their early twenties, figured simply only 13 percent would still be Shakers in 1870. But this means only 36 percent would have been found in the 1860 census, while the actual percentage for this defection-prone age group was 43.

This apparent discrepancy reminds us of a reasonable sociological principle: the longer an individual stays at a commune, the greater that

TABLE ii Retention of Members of Five Massachusetts Shaker Communities, 1850-1870

Sex, Age	Percent		Percent		Percent		Percent		Number in 1870
	Number in 1850- 1855	Kept 1855- 1855	Number in 1855- 1860	Kept 1855- 1860	Number in 1860- 1865	Kept 1860- 1865	Number in 1865- 1870	Kept 1865- 1870	
Females									
0-19	91	47	104	50	88	48	80	40	57
20-49	136	60	91	76	84	64	64	66	53
50+	133	65	125	75	123	74	116	69	102
Males									
0-19	87	32	79	28	65	18	50	14	35
20-49	85	60	71	48	50	50	30	73	34
50+	73	71	74	68	67	57	56	63	56

person's commitment is likely to be, and the more apt that person is to remain a member. Thus, long-term retention rates will be higher than linear extrapolation from short-term rates would predict. However reasonable it appears, this principle has been contradicted by Benjamin Zablocki's research on sixty contemporary urban communes. In his study, veteran members were as likely as neophytes to defect.¹⁸

To test these competing predictions, we need to control for two other variables known to influence defection probabilities: age and sex. I systematically drew pairs of Shakers from the 1855 Massachusetts records, matched by year of birth and gender, one veteran and one neophyte. Shakers were counted as veterans if they had been listed in the 1850 records, and neophytes if not. The number of pairs was limited to ninety-seven (194 persons) by the fact that there are few veterans in high-defection age and sex groups, and few neophytes in low-defection groups. These matched samples had a mean age of 29.6 years, and included forty-one male pairs and fifty-six female pairs.

After five years, according to the 1860 records, 55 percent of the 194 individuals were still Shakers. But among the veterans, the retention rate was 72 percent, compared with 37 percent for those who had been neophytes in 1855. This difference is statistically significant well beyond the .001 level (by *chi square*) and represents strong disconfirmation of the random model of defection suggested by Zablocki. One might doubt that many of his urban communes ever were real communities capable of generating commitment in their members, while the Shakers seem much more likely to have had this power.

18. Benjamin Zablocki, *Alienation and Charisma: A Study of Contemporary American Communes* (New York: Free Press, 1980), p. 135.

The clearest trend in Table n is the declining retention rate for males under age twenty. For 1850-1855, this group already has a lower retention rate than any other group in any period, just 32 percent. This drops to 28 percent five years later, then to 18 percent, and finally to 14 percent for 1865-1870. Foster's¹⁹ data on the Second Family at New Lebanon also indicate that the Shakers' power to hold males declined, although he does not distinguish age groups. Their mean stay was 16.9 years for 1820-1849, 4.9 years for 1850-1859, and 2.1 years for 1860-1869. He notes a parallel shift for females, although the retention rates for girls shown in Table H seem to hold about steady, with only a hint of a decline at the very end.

5. *Gains through Recruitment*

The process of tracking Shakers across the decade 1850-1860 identified those who must have been recruited, as well as those who died or defected. A total of 1,636 persons who were not residents of the twenty-one communities in 1850 appear in the 1860 census and are described in Table HI.

The most striking fact is that over two-thirds of the newcomers were younger than twenty at the time of the 1860 census. Because most of them undoubtedly joined some time before the census, a few even in the last days of 1850, the overwhelming majority entered as children. Another 54 recruits (3.3 percent) were between twenty and twenty-four years old in 1860, and some of these must have been younger than the mid-teens when they joined.

Females outnumbered males among these recruits, 861 to 775, and the imbalance is greatest in the earliest years. However, it would

TABLE III Shakers of 1860 who had been Recruited Since 1850

Age in 1860	Number	Percent	Percent Female	Percent Sharing Last Names with Others Joining the Colony	
				Males	Females
0-19	1,112	68.0	53.1	63.0	65.6
20-49	377	23.0	55.4	35.1	52.6
50+	147	9.0	42.2	23.5	24.2
TOTAL	1,636	100	52.6	52.6	59.5

19. Foster, *Religion and Sexuality*, p. 56.

be a misinterpretation of the statistics to conclude that more females than males joined the Shakers in this period. Many people joined the Shakers after 1850 but defected before 1860. Perhaps equal numbers of males and females joined, but males were more likely to defect, thus producing an excess of females among those who appear for the first time at the 1860 census.

Foster²⁰ has calculated the duration of stay of 270 members of the Second Family of the New Lebanon community who joined prior to 1870. Before 1850, only 49 percent of recruits were female. In the 1850's this dropped to 43 percent, and in the 1860's exactly equal numbers of females and males entered. The mean duration of stay was 6.5 years for the thirty-two females who joined in the 1850's, but only 4.9 years for the forty-three males.

For sake of a simple comparison, let us imagine that recruits of each sex came to the Second Family at regular intervals, and each stayed the mean time for his or her sex. Then we can estimate that (coincidentally) exactly equal numbers of male and female newcomers, twenty-one of each, would have been counted by the 1860 census. A similar estimate, based on Foster's statistics for the 1860's, indicates that the newcomers to the Second Family counted by the 1870 census would have been 65 percent female, while the real proportion of females among those who entered in the prior decade was 50 percent.

A similar effect cannot be responsible for the excess of children among recruits, however, because Table i showed rates of loss to be especially high among young people, rather than low. Therefore, the proportion of children among those who joined the Shakers during the decade must be even higher than indicated by that subset of them still members at the time of the 1860 census. The concluding columns of Table HI suggest the social circumstances under which young people entered.

Foster examined the names of 284 individuals who entered the Second Family at New Lebanon, and found that 171 (60 percent) shared surname with at least one other newcomer. This is a good, if imperfect measure of kinship. Some persons share the same last name by accident, while many close relatives have different names. Foster mentions two Jones families in the Second Family, but the 405 members of the New Lebanon colony in 1860 included only five with this name—about one percent. Women who married before joining would not share surnames with their parents and siblings, and errors in reading names are most likely to prevent making correct matches.

20. Ibid.

Nearly two-thirds of the 1,112 children who entered in the 1850's came with at least one probable family member. With fair confidence, we can identify parents within these family groups as those adult individuals or couples with at least a twelve-year age gap separating them from the next-oldest family members. By this standard, 480 (67 percent) of the 716 children apparently joining with family members entered with siblings only, without parents.

Only thirty-nine (5 percent) of the 716 apparently joined with both of their parents. Another thirty-four (5 percent) came with fathers only, while 163 (23 percent) came with mothers. Indeed, if we remove single parents from consideration, the proportion female aged twenty to forty-nine among those added since 1850 drops from 55.4 percent to 48.3 percent. Undoubtedly, a few marriages broke up after one partner joined the Shakers, leaving the other outside, and mothers may have been more likely than fathers to bring children in with them. But reports of marital breakup associated with joining seem limited to the earliest days of the sect, when religious revivals and awakenings disrupted some households.²¹ Furthermore, much evidence indicates that under normal conditions recruitment to sects spreads through existing social bonds, and thus would have difficulty sundering strong marital relationships.²²

These statistics make the Shakers appear more like a refuge for broken families than like a Utopian community demonstrating a new plan for the ideal society. Even before we take account of the high rates of loss that must reduce the apparent proportion of children among recruits, family problems are implicated in the overwhelming majority of membership gains. If we add the fifty-four newcomers in their earlier twenties, guessing they were children at admission, and the seventy-nine probable single parents under age fifty, we reach a total of 1,245 or 76.1 percent of the total recruited. While something about Shaker life may have been attractive to each recruit, and some of these 1,245 may not in fact have been impelled to join by family dislocation or poverty, some of the 147 older recruits may have been elderly persons choosing the colony in preference to the poorhouse.

21. Marshall, *Rise and Progress*; Anonymous, *Report of the Examination of the Shakers of Canterbury and Enfield before the New-Hampshire Legislature at the November Session, 1848* (Concord, New Hampshire: Tripp, 1849).

22. Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, "Networks of Faith: Interpersonal Bonds and Recruitment to Cults and Sects," *American Journal of Sociology* 85 (1980): 1376-1395; *A Theory of Religion*, forthcoming; William Sims Bainbridge and Rodney Stark, "Friendship, Religion, and the Occult: A Network Study," *Review of Religious Research* 22 (1981): 313-327.

In Massachusetts, as in the other states, recruitment did not offset death and defection, and the colonies slowly shrank from 605 members in 1850 to 337 in 1870, averaging about 62 percent female with a slight increase in sex imbalance as the years passed. From 1850 to 1870, 260 males and 277 females entered the five Massachusetts colonies to be counted at one census, while absent from the one five years earlier.

Table iv analyzes these 537 recruits and shows again that most new Shakers were children and that most young people came without parents. Shakers who merely moved in from out of state, our 1850-1860 national analysis showed, would have been disproportionately adults, and thus do not inflate the proportion of children among Massachusetts recruits.

TABLE iv Recruits to the Massachusetts Shakers, 1850-1870

	Males	Females
Total Number	260	277
Age at First Appearance		
Percent 0-19	67	74
Percent 20-49	20	14
Percent 50+	13	12
Number Age 0-19 with Shared Last Names	176	205
Percent apparently entering alone	45	46
Percent with other children only	39	43
Percent entering with an adult	16	11

6. Conclusion

After the revivals of the 1840's, the Shaker movement declined because ordinary recruitment could not offset losses by death and defection. Rates of loss were especially high among young people and among males, and the sect became progressively less able to hold young males in the decades after 1850. Data from the federal and Massachusetts censuses confirm the suspicions of qualitative historians and give them precise quantitative form. These previously unseen statistics should be supplemented with counts from Shaker records, such as those offered by Foster, but in themselves give us a much sharper picture of the demographic processes that led to the decline of the Shakers.

Research that tracks members from one census to another not only provides statistics on rates of loss in various age and sex groups, but also permits analysis of recruitment. By the 1850's, Shaker colonies had already become places of refuge for members of broken families, and thus had more the quality of religious asylums than of Utopian experiments.²³

Shakerism began with millenarian hopes, but became a monastic refuge. Although surviving members even today anticipate the millennium, most persons who entered the Shakers after 1850 were apparently driven by family disruption and other social problems, rather than being drawn by a vision of perfection. Thus, one must select one's historical references with some care if one wants to present the sect as a Utopian movement that sought to establish an ideal form of worldly life. Considered as a religious communal society, however, Shakerism may tell us much about the attraction a noncompetitive, mutually-supportive community may have for population groups that suffer deprivations and special disadvantages in the larger society.

The rich results obtained from but a portion of Shaker census records imply that several more sociological research projects should examine similar official records for other communal societies, and they tell us to seek for other quantifiable data. The legendary longevity of Shakers, for example, could be investigated by combining Massachusetts census records with the complete and well-maintained series of death reports dating from the 1840's to the present, available to researchers in Boston. In combination with qualitative historical and ethnographic data, census statistics can help us understand the human meaning of communal societies.

23. Whitworth, *God's Blueprints*, offers a good sociological analysis of the transformation of Shakerism into a religious and economic refuge.