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The Story of Brother Ricardo's Song

By Darryl Charles Thompson

One summer evening, back in the mid-1980s, my father, Charles “Bud” Thompson, sang Brother Ricardo’s song for a roomful of people seated in the Meeting House at Canterbury Shaker Village. He sang it at the conclusion of the candlelight tour in a magical atmosphere of light and shadow with a full moon above casting its beams through the windows of the old Shaker house of worship, and the audience was powerfully moved by the experience. Rob and Sue Eifler, friends of ours from the local area, were on the tour that evening, and their party included Rob’s mother, Millicent Eifler. At the end of the tour, when we turned the electric lights back on in the Meeting House, Millicent, who had been deeply touched emotionally by the song, crossed the room and confronted me with a definite intensity of purpose.

“Darryl, this song in ‘tongues’ must be recorded, transcribed, and passed on to future generations.”

Recently I realized that a quarter of a century had passed since that night and I still had not gotten around to preserving the song. It existed nowhere outside of the memory of my eighty-eight-year-old father. The first step I needed to take would be to find out more biographical information about Brother Ricardo Belden. The second step would be to interview Dad to record his memories of the elderly Shaker brother and find out more about how their lives had first intersected.

There seems to be some mystery about Ricardo Belden’s earliest years and the circumstances that led to his being placed among the Shakers as a small boy. I have heard a few conflicting stories—all of them unverified—about who brought him to the Shaker community at Enfield, Connecticut. We can, however, safely say that we do know the date of his arrival there. Robert C. Opdahl and Viola E. Woodruff Opdahl record in the preface to their book, *A Shaker Musical Legacy*, that Brother Ricardo told Jerome Count in a 1952 interview: “I was brought to Enfield, Connecticut, on July 30, 1874, when I was four years old.”

Several writers have recorded details about Brother Ricardo's years at Enfield. Deborah E. Burns states in *Shaker Cities Of Peace, Love, and Union: A History of the Hancock Bishopric*: "Ricardo Belden became a general handyman in the Enfield community, able to fix anything that needed it; he eventually specialized in making and repairing clocks, particularly all-wood cuckoo clocks, refusing to guarantee his work on metal parts." Sylvia Minott Spencer recalled in her memoir of her childhood with the Enfield Church Family (beginning about 1902) that Brother Ricardo, still in his early thirties at the time of her arrival, was "a rather darkly handsome man." Brother Ricardo eventually left the Enfield community for life in the outside world, but he would ultimately returned to Shaker life and join the Believers at Hancock Shaker Village, near Pittsfield, Massachusetts.¹

Brother Ricardo's mechanical abilities would prove to be a great asset to the Hancock Shakers as the years passed. Stephen J. Stein mentions in *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* that during Brother Ricardo's years there he not only continued to repair clocks but also sewing machines, and he became the usual driver of the Hancock Shakers' first car, a Cadillac. Deborah Burns relates how the brick Shaker garage became one of his chief centers of activity:

This was the domain of Ricardo Belden, who among other things served as chauffeur and mechanic, insisted that the Sisters should ride in new cars, always of the best manufacture. He would keep a car for three years and then trade it in top condition. Each new automobile had to be dark in color, curtained, and spacious enough to seat three sisters comfortably in back.²

Brother Ricardo was destined to become the last male member of the Hancock Shaker community and of the Hancock Bishopric.

In his old age Brother Ricardo became a matchless source of inspiration and instruction for both staff and campers at Jerome (Jerry) and Sybil A. Count's Shaker Village Work Camp (later known as the Shaker Village Work Group) in New Lebanon, New York, a summer camp (located in the South Family of the old Mount Lebanon Shaker Village) in which youngsters learned Shaker music, dance, crafts, agricultural skills, history and culture. During his years of involvement with the camp, Brother Ricardo gave Jerry Count nine handwritten Shaker songbooks that, after his death, were given by Mr. Count's widow, Sybil, to friends and former camp staffers Robert C. Opdahl and Viola E. Woodruff Opdahl.

These manuscripts³ would ultimately become the basis for their book *A Shaker Musical Legacy* (Hanover, N.H. and London: University Press of New England, 2004). In a memorable passage of his foreword to the Opdahls' book, former camp staff member Stu Jamieson brilliantly evokes the spirit of Brother Ricardo as he recalls his memories of how Brother Ricardo would watch and advise him as Mr. Jamieson went about his work in the camp's woodworking shop and chair factory:

I can close my eyes and see him vividly—feet spread apart a bit, hands behind him with thumbs clasped to each other, right palm outward in front of the left, wearing plain, unpressed trousers and a clean unpressed shirt—watching silently until he saw a need to speak up, in his dry, thin old Yankee speech, or recite a warning, or suggestion, quietly into my ear. His skin was pale and his eyes bright blue, setting off his marvelously white hair and neatly trimmed, white, round-the-jaw beard. Though short of stature and slight of build, he dominated the room without effort or intent.⁴

My father also remembers what a distinguished-looking and vital man Brother Ricardo was in his later years, and how their common love of music proved to be a bond between them. Dad, who had been trained as an opera singer but had become instead a traveling singer of traditional folk music, had first become familiar with the Shakers largely through his research into the music of eighteenth and nineteenth century American communal societies. He had driven out to Hancock and had met the Shaker sisters there and told them of his interest in their traditional music, faith, and way of life. The sisters had encouraged him to go meet Brother Ricardo at the workshop where he spent so much of his time. After the introductions and some discussion about music and the woodworking projects that were currently in progress in the shop, Brother Ricardo offered to sing a few Shaker songs. After four or five songs, Brother Ricardo said that the Shakers also used to have “spirit songs” that members of the order received through sudden inspiration from the heavenly sphere, and that many of these were in “unknown tongues.” My father was fascinated and asked Brother Ricardo if he could give more details about this category of Shaker music. Brother Ricardo further related that the Believers often didn't know what these songs “in tongues” were about or what they meant, although on occasion the “gift of interpretation” had also been given to them so that they could know the meaning of a particular song. Brother

Ricardo then began to sing the song that lives on in Dad's memory to this day. My father recalls: "I was intrigued by it because I didn't know what it was and it sounded like it was in some foreign language."

The "gift of tongues" manifested itself at various places and times in Shaker history, placing them among a variety of Christian groups over the centuries that have believed in the existence and legitimacy of this phenomenon, the proper name of which is "glossolalia." As with other Christian groups, the Shakers felt manifestations of glossolalia among them came in two forms, and their songs reflect this. Some Shaker songs in "unknown tongues" were claimed to be revealed in real human languages (such as Chinese or Native American languages) that had been never learned by the recipient of the song but miraculously received as a spiritual gift. (The alleged paranormal phenomenon in which a person is able to speak or write a human language that he or she never acquired by natural means is referred to by religious scholars and social scientists as "xenoglossy" or "xenoglossia.") The Shakers believed that other "tongues" songs were written in heavenly (perhaps angelic) languages of some kind. This latter category of glossolalia seems to be a more common claim among "tongues speakers" in various religious traditions.

Some modern observers from both inside and outside the Christian fold have also seen the "gift of tongues" in other ways: as a "language of the spirit" in which one expresses oneself to and communicates with God and others; as an expression of individual or group psychology, religious belief, or socio-cultural situation; as a cry of emotion from the human heart that seeks to return to a mode of expression that existed before the learning of speech or literacy; or as a complex, multi-faceted phenomenon that at various times might exemplify any of the various perspectives described above, or even a combination of several of them.

My father is a very honest man and when he relates the story of his learning the song from Brother Ricardo he is bluntly honest about one way in which he feels he has come up short in his transmission of the song: Dad is certain that he has accurately remembered and transmitted the tune that Brother Ricardo taught him, but he worries that he may not be totally accurate in his reproduction of Brother Ricardo's rendition of the syllables or words of the "tongue" that forms the song's lyrics. His concern about this is apparent in the transcript of my recorded interview with him about the song:

BT: I was so intrigued by it [the song] that I asked him [Brother

Ricardo], “Could you do it again so that I can get an idea of how it goes?” And I kind of hated to ask that because he was an old fellow and I didn’t want to [burden him with repeating it]. But I did ask because I wanted to learn it. Well, he did [repeat it]. Now, I will be very honest with you. I tried ... to remember after I left ... and, of course, it was some time before I got in my car and started home.... I tried to remember the sounds he gave as he sang, and I’m not sure how accurate I am. I think I have the tune pretty well, but the sounds themselves ... didn’t sound like a language I’d ever heard about. In fact, a lot of things in it didn’t sound like they were maybe even words but maybe sounds, syllables. So, anyways, I tried to record it when I got home on a tape recorder, the way I kind of remembered how it went.... I did the best I could, but I’m sure I’m probably far from being accurate because there are too many unknowns about my ability to recreate what I heard.

DT: But, in other words, you have the tune pretty much right but you’re wondering if you’ve got the syllables right.

BT: Yes, right. Because it sounded more like various vowels and sounds than words ...

DT: So you know the tune is accurate but your question is about the syllables.

BT: Yes, I’m very shaky about how clear that is.

DT: But at least we have an approximation of what you heard in terms of the syllables and you know that the song is right.

BT: Yes.

I have assured my father that the most important thing is that the tune is correct and that, through his memory, we at least have an approximation of what he heard in terms of the “tongue” that formed the text of the song.

Millicent Eifler passed away on November 15, 2002, but her words about the urgency of preserving Brother Ricardo’s song have continued to ring in my ears. I had made two recordings of Dad singing the song—a cassette tape of him performing it for a candlelight tour group at the village in the 1980s when he was in his sixties, and another tape made just last year of him giving a rendition at age eighty-seven. The problem was in getting the song transcribed from the recordings. I turned to my good

friend Christian Goodwillie, who undertook the task of transcribing the tune and checking the result with my father for approval. The transcribed song that my father learned from Brother Ricardo accompanies this article.

As for me, I have finally been able to record and preserve the song that a very determined lady several decades ago urged me to save for future generations. Thank you, Millicent, for your push and your persistence. And thank you, Dad, for remembering.

Brother Ricardo's Song

As taught to Bud Thompson.

Mee lo may nee oh Ah nee lee mo oh

Ah nee lee mo oh Ah nee lee mo oh Ah nee lee mo oh

Notes

1. Brother Ricardo Belden to Jerome Count in 1952 interview, quoted in Robert C. Opdahl and Viola E. Woodruff Opdahl, Preface, *A Shaker Musical Legacy* (Hanover, N.H. and London: University Press of New England, 2004), xviii; Deborah E. Burns, *Shaker Cities of Peace, Love, and Union: A History of the Hancock Bishopric* (Hanover, N.H. and London: University Press of New England, 1993), 168, 185; Sylvia Minott Spencer, quoted in Burns, 182.
2. Stephen J. Stein, *The Shaker Experience in America: A History of the United Society of Believers* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), 291, 361; Burns, 191.
3. Eight of these manuscripts are now at the Shaker Museum and Library, Old Chatham and New Lebanon, N.Y., and one is at the Shaker Museum at South Union, Ky.
4. Stu Jamieson, Foreword, in Opdahl and Opdahl, xiv.