

## ***Shaker Selfies, Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill***

*On view September-December*

### ***Picture This...***

Most of us walk around with a camera in our pocket. Mobile phones and social media have made photography an integral part of our lives. Since its invention, photography has been an important part of people's social lives. Even the **Pleasant Hill Shakers**. Looking at these black and white images, it can be hard for us to imagine how we are similar. Their stern expressions and old-fashioned clothing make them seem distant and different from us.

Learn more about the people behind the photos—about their feelings, choices and relationship with the camera. Photography technology has changed over time, and these advances influence how people look in photos in the past and today.

### ***The Power of Light***

The process of making a photo today is fundamentally the same as when it was first discovered. Light is required to make an image. It bounces off of the subject and is captured on sensitive material—this material could be film in a camera or the microchips inside your phone.

During the 19th century, taking a photograph was much harder than it is today. It took a lot of light and a lot of time for a photo to be made. People were not supposed to move while a photo was being taken. If they did move, the image would be blurry. Sitting still can be a challenge—especially if you try to hold a smile! This is why people look serious in old photos. They had to keep from moving for several minutes, and their faces remained relaxed and often expressionless. People in old photos weren't any less happy than we are today! The technology of photography at that time influenced the way that they look.

### ***Complicated, Dangerous and Costly***

As early as the 1820s, inventors in France and England were experimenting with photography technologies. Photography was complicated, expensive and sometimes even dangerous due to the equipment and materials used. Cameras were very large, and the process of preparing and developing an image took many hours. Photographers set up their own studios or traveled from town to town with their equipment. Photographs were typically reserved for commemorating special occasions, as they were very costly.

### ***Tintypes to Pixels***

Many different materials and technologies have been used to process photographs throughout history. In the 19th century, special light sensitive chemicals were commonly applied to glass, metals or paper to capture an image. Photography could only capture certain types of light, creating early black and white images. By the early 20th century, less expensive paper photographs overtook other methods in popularity, and advancements allowed colors to be captured.

New technologies were pioneered, making cameras smaller and photo-processing less expensive, which meant that everyday people could become photographers. Today, every phone has a camera—thanks to digital technologies developed in the 1980s. Microchips have replaced the light-sensitive materials that were once used, allowing an unlimited number of photographs with little cost.

### ***The Selfie***

#### ***A daily habit...***

Making photos has become an easy and natural part of our daily lives. Thanks to social media, sharing them with the public has become an important part of everyday activities. We are now able to record experiences that are important to us and share them with the world.

***What is a selfie?*** It is the act of taking one's own picture. This self-portrait says a lot about the person taking it. Posting a selfie on social media channels is a way of presenting oneself to the world, giving others an opportunity to acknowledge and respond.

Historic portraits were not that different, except a photographer was necessary to create the image. The Shakers had many photographs taken of themselves and their village, including individual portraits, group photographs documenting special occasions and images portraying everyday life. Photos had value to them—they documented and shared their lives with other Shakers and the world.

Today, historic Shaker photographs are important to the site's collection and archives. Through careful study of other primary sources, including journals and letters, we learn more about what Shaker lives were like and recognize how they were not so different from ours.

As technology made photography processing easier and more affordable, studios and traveling photographers began appearing throughout big cities and small towns across the United States. Shakers visited studios to have portraits made, and traveling photographers were commissioned to take pictures of their villages, including both buildings and people.

A surprising amount of photographs, in a variety of mediums—from daguerreotypes to carte de visites—exist from the 1850s onward.

Shaker society was very aware of appearance. Design was a fundamental part of Shaker culture, shown in the architecture of their buildings and style of their crafts. This value of appearance was captured and reinforced in photographs created of Shaker communities.

### ***Rule Breakers***

The Shakers had many rules in their communities that were governed by the ***Millennial Laws***. At one time, it was against these laws for the Shakers to have framed pictures or paintings in their dwelling houses—yet they still did.

Some of the rules the Shakers followed were straightforward and sensible. Other rules were more obscure and were hardly followed, especially as time passed and the society changed. It appears that this rule was one of them! What do you think this says about life in Shaker society?

Many journals and letters document Shakers having their photo taken. Shaker Village collection and archive staff investigate these images everyday. These experts research the individuals in the photographs and help us imagine what they were like as people.

**Sister Mary Settles** was the last Shaker to live at Pleasant Hill and has been referred to as “one of the most photographed women in Kentucky.” According to one newspaper interview, she greatly enjoyed having her photo taken. Can you imagine why? Later in life, she was visited by many people who were curious about her and her beliefs. Many people took a photo with her as a souvenir, considering her a celebrity.

### ***Camera Shy***

**Brother William Pennebaker**, a lifelong resident of Pleasant Hill, claimed to not like having his picture taken. However, there are many photos of William in the collection, from his early 20s to late 60s, including a photo of a young William with several Shaker sisters.

This type of photo—a carte-de-visite—was taken at a studio. It would have taken effort for William and the sisters to have this photograph made. They would have had to travel to the city, sit for a photographer and pay to have the image made. Carte-de-visites had a special meaning for the people who kept them. They were often created as tokens of affection for family or loved ones and were therefore printed on thicker cards to be kept in a pocket or

special place.

*What is today's version of a carte-de-visite? Do you think digital photos are as meaningful to us as these keepsakes once were?*

### ***Visual Literacy***

How well can you read a photo? We live in a world full of images. Learning to dig deeper into the details of a photo can tell you more about the person who created the image. This is important for historians, but it can be a useful tool in your everyday life too. Learning to look at photos thoughtfully is called visual literacy.

***Have you ever taken a selfie?*** Your image can tell more about who you are than you may intend to reveal. *What are you wearing? What is in the background?* While we may immediately be drawn to faces, there are many details located in photos that can tell us more about the subject and life at that time. People draw conclusions based on our physical appearance, but that may not necessarily tell the entire story. Selfies or snapshots can be controlled intentionally to influence the way people think about us, while a candid photograph may, in fact, capture more than we realize.