Shaker music
It's not as simple as you think

'Tis the gift to be free,
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.

By Feoshia Henderson

The concise, poetic words of "Simple Gifts" combine with its elegant melody to form the most famous hymn of the United Society of Believers in Christ's Second Appearing. For many people, the song comprises their entire knowledge of the Society, whose members danced as they sang and worshipped — thus becoming known in their time and evermore as the Shakers.

For Dr. Carol Medlicott, Northern Kentucky University associate professor of history and geography, studying the religion and its surrounding culture is a vocation. She is well-versed in all things Shaker, and noted regionally as an expert through several articles, essays and books. Most recently she co-authored "Richard McNemar and the Music of the Shaker West: Branches of one living tree." It's set to be published in 2012 through Kent State University Press.

So imagine her delight when a series of happenstance events led her to being part of discovering and preserving a Shaker hymnal full of songs and music that the world had never seen. The nearly 100-page book belongs to the descendants of Charles Amery, a Shaker Elder who lived in White Water Shaker Village, the Cincinnati-area communal village which is one of the 24 founded in the United States from the late 1700s through 1824. The book contains 200 to 250 songs, hymns and dance tunes.

"It's a major connection to the Shaker world," Medlicott explained.

A Shaker hymnal with historical songs has been preserved and digitized through the efforts of Dr. Carol Medlicott, left, the cooperation of the hymnal's owner, Kathryn Amery Hagemier, center, and the assistance of NKU graduate Cori Munro.


“There have been a few scholars who have devoted themselves to Shaker music. One of them, Daniel Patterson, emeritus music professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in early 2000 incorporated his study every known Shaker music manuscript (about 800). (The discovered hymnal) represents a completely unknown music manuscript. It really is a very rare find,” she said.

This songbook is currently being preserved in digital form with the aid of an $8,000 grant from The Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation, a New York-based nonprofit that supports research and scholarship that transmits worldwide cultural heritage.

Its journey from deteriorating family heirloom to uncovered treasure was accidental. It started several years ago when a board member of the preservation organization, Friends of White Water Shaker Village, discovered the names of Amery’s descendants during a shot-in-the-dark, online genealogical search of White Water Shakers known to have left the community. The names of all Shakers at White Water were part of the records the Friends organization preserves.

The board member tracked down the Amery descendants in Texas and asked if they knew about their rare family history (Shakers practiced celibacy so family lines are unusual.) Not only did the Amery descendants know of their religious past but had several materials related to it.

“They had a section of a diary, and what they believed was a hymnal. It appeared to be a songbook of some sort,” Medlicott said.

By then, Medlicott, also a member of the Friends organization, had become involved with getting access to the materials.

“We asked the family if we could at least look at the materials to examine them. Once we saw what they were, and that one was a hymnal, we started a dialogue with the family to impress upon them that this was an unknown Shaker music manuscript that should be studied and analyzed,” she said.

The Amery descendants are permitting the Friends of White Water to retain the hymnal for research purposes. Since securing the grant funding, Medlicott has pursued a project to digitally preserve the book and transcribe the music into standard notation.

“We produced digital images of the entire book, and are having some replica copies bound,” she said, adding, “The Shakers developed their own music notation, so we’re expending some effort to translate it.”

Supported by funds from the Delmas Foundation grant, an NKU graduate student has been meticulously handling and scanning each page of the hymnal, making the high-resolution digital copy that eventually will be part of the NKU digital library catalog for others to peruse and study.

“The Shakers were tremendously creative and productive in their music. That’s one of the major parts of Shaker culture. Second to their distinctive theology was the music that underpinned their worship,” Medlicott said.

There are well-known Shaker settlements in both Ohio and Kentucky. The Shakers were a small, tightly knit religious group that came to the United States from 18th century England. Regarded as one of the first “Charismatic” Christian groups, they lived in communues, were celibate and grew the sect by conversion. Men and women lived as brothers and sisters and the sexes were generally separated, even in worship services where they sat on different sides of the room. The Shakers were first known as “Shaking Quakers” because they were known to sing, dance and move enthusiastically during the worship services.

“The dance separated them from other denominations, and the Shakers wrote each and every one of their own hymns. The output of Shaker music is tremendous, with 10,000 or more songs,” Medlicott said.

That catalog just became a little richer.