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Oral history interview with Amy Bess Miller, 1985 July 10

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Amy Bess Williams Miller on July 10, 1985. The interview took place in Hancock, Massachusetts, by Robert Brown, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, father than written, prose.

Interview

ROBERT BROWN: This is Lawrence Miller at Hancock Shaker Village, in Hancock, Massachusetts, Bob Brown the interviewer. And this is July 10, 1985.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: —said that you were born and raised in Massachusetts, I believe Worcester wasn't it?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: I was raised in Worcester, I was born in Texas.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh you were?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: And came to Worcester when I was five years old, so I feel that I've been brought up in Massachusetts. Although I love Texas, I don't go there very much, and I don't have any family left there.

ROBERT BROWN: Was your family one that, at least in Worcester, developed interests in history or in culture, were they involved in things?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Oh yes, very much so. And my father, who was a physician and a surgeon, served with the British forces during the first three years, I think it was, of the—or two years anyway, of the First War [World War I], and realized how much the British used herbal materials in medicine. [Phone rings.] He bought medicinal herbs from a pharmacy in Worcester, who bought them from the Harvard and Shirley Shakers, and those two communities had very, very large and extensive herb businesses. So that I knew about long before I moved to Pittsfield.

ROBERT BROWN: So your awareness of the Shakers was as a retailer—

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —of rare and excellent items.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes. And then my father, they would give or he would buy, boxes from them, and many of them were boxes which held herbal materials. He didn't use those in his practice, because the herbs all went to the Brewer Company, who were pharmacists, and they processed them. [00:02:04] And then I knew the Shakers in Canterbury, New Hampshire.

ROBERT BROWN: How did you get to know them? You mentioned, in your account of this restoration, knowing that very early.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes. Well, we had a—were looking, my family was looking for a summer place in New Hampshire, to get out of the heat of Worcester, and my aunt and mother had friends living in Boscawen, quite near the Shakers, and we'd go over there, and they were very kind to children, they loved children. And then, when I moved here, my father in-law was a friend of the Shakers. They would write letters to the Shakers and they were always interested in having the editor publish them, so he knew them quite well and it followed that I got more and more interested in them.

ROBERT BROWN: But they did like children, they were very—were they outgoing?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes, they loved children. Of course, many of them had come in with their own children and then, the children could stay and be brought up by the Shakers. They could not become Shakers until they were 21, which really is a—was a very fair way to look at it. They weren't then, indentured, and they weren't forced to stay here, when they were 21 they could make the choice. So there were a lot of children here.

ROBERT BROWN: Were most of them, like you said, when you first met them in Canterbury, were most of them adults, or were there any children there still?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: There were children, and my brother and I, we—it was so amusing. My mother would have us dressed up in white, that's what children wore in those days, and we'd go, and the minute we got there, they'd say, "Oh come on now, wouldn't you like to go and see the barn and gather eggs in the haylofts," you know? And we'd come back absolutely covered, black, with even our faces with this terrible dust from the hay. [00:04:05] And this, of course, then we had to be washed up. The Shakers thought it was very funny. But they would wash us up, you know we'd be taken off by someone, and then given wonderful candies that they made. At Canterbury, there still is what they call the syrup or the sugar house. They made—they boil their maple syrup there, made their little maple sugar patties, and then other kind of awfully good candy, and of course they did the same thing here at—Hancock. And in everything they did, it seems to me they were artistic. Their shapes were so good and they were perfectionists, they wanted everything to be just right and perfect.

ROBERT BROWN: Did that come out in their temperament? Even as a child, were they quite kind of cranky people or fussy?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Some of them were, I think. I don't remember as a child, feeling that they were, but as I got to know them later on and know them better, I realized that they were very painstaking. They had very high standards and they expected to live up to them and everyone else should too. And I think it shows in their architecture, their beautiful furniture. It had to be perfect. I think one of the saddest stories that I've heard, and I've also read it in a diary, this young man here at Hancock had been put into the fields to work as part of his program here, the work duty—whatever they called it—but he dearly wanted to make boxes, and you know they had to be perfect. So they said, "Well, you can try and see how well you do with it," and so he made one box and they destroyed it, they said it wasn't good enough. He made another box of another type and they said no, and even the third one, and they said, "No, you must go back to the fields." [00:06:07] So they insisted upon the best in everything.

ROBERT BROWN: I expect you—this was a fairly vivid memory of a young child, I mean probably not consciously, and then you've mentioned that when you were a young girl, you were in boarding school out here in fact.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes, at Ms. Hall's in Pittsfield.

ROBERT BROWN: So I gather, you had impressions as you would drive by here, or was driven to another school, say in Albany. What do you think impressed you then, as an adolescent?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Well, I think one of the first things of course was just passing it and seeing the village dimly lit, seeing this beautiful circular barn. It was so mysterious. And then, going on and looking back at that magnificent five-story barn at Lebanon, you see, and seeing that, and that was more yellow, it was a concrete on the outside and it was a pale yellow, and as we passed it in the early evening, you know, it was something. It had the charm and the mystery and the elegance, really, that all of their architecture does have. I think knowing that these people, who were not worldly people, because they didn't associate with the world, or at least that's what we were told, and that was more or less true, so you see there was a mystique about it all.

ROBERT BROWN: This was a special turf, each of these Hancock and Lebanon had that—were kind of forbidden areas.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: I think all of them do. I've been to all of the Shaker villages now, including one in Indiana, that's almost—there are only two buildings left there, and I've been there for instance, in Kentucky, with a friend, and I said, "When will we get to the Shaker village?" [00:08:16] And she said, "You'll know the minute we come to Shaker land." And of course she was so right, because even though the land hadn't been well kept up, you still felt that there had been a structure that would never be destroyed. The fences were straight, although tumbling, the rock walls or fences. The inside interior roads of the village had been well laid out and although they weren't kept up well, you could see the structure there, and the buildings that did remain had that same mystery, the austereness. You know they had been well-built and well-kept in their prime.

ROBERT BROWN: So just the sheer outward, as in when you were driving by here—when you were in school, the sheer outward general appearance was mystifying.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: And yet lovely wasn't it?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Lovely, just lovely. I have a friend who used to drive over and he would—he thought it was so mysterious. He thought probably it was because there weren't electric lights, when he saw them, when it was candlelight or kerosene lamps, and of course that was true. On the other hand, they wanted to keep up with everything that was modern, and when Mrs. Westinghouse had electricity brought into her place in Lenox, they did too. So they had—they were electrified [laughs] as soon as Mrs. Westinghouse was, and they

had—their water came from this lovely mountain over here and gravity flow brought it right down into their pantry and their kitchen, so they had—and they had the telephone when it came out, they thought that was only practical. [00:10:17] And they of course, when we came into possession here, there were, I think at least two oil burners and one coal stove left, but the oil burners took care of the heat for that very large dwelling house and the trustee's office. So you could see that they wanted to keep up with everything. They wanted also, to preserve all the old ways that were good, they didn't completely discard them. They wanted the best in animals. When a new strain of sheep was introduced, they bought that kind of sheep. They didn't raise hogs very much, but sheep, horses, cows, cattle. They were very much up-to-date with the new strains in hay: alfalfa, clover, all the good seeds, and even shipping to England for them. And then of course their herb industry was—their herbs were grown to perfection. They marketed them in Europe, in India, and were well-known really, all over the world. Coming across letters and papers and account books, their postage, their—of course they would send them on the fastest boats. [00:12:00] I remember seeing one bill for some produce of herbal material that was going to England, and the bill was something around $500. Well, that was a lot of money in those days, so you could see how many big crates they were sending, how many hundreds of pounds they had sent.

ROBERT BROWN: So there have been careful study and transmittal to younger generations, of their knowledge.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned, in your account, that this particular community, it was rather touch and go for the first 20 years or so, and then suddenly, agricultural prosperity. Apparently, they studied carefully. Did they—

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: They studied carefully and they had very good managers, trustees they called them, business managers. And those business managers went to the very best—got the very best advice they could in the local banks. When the Shakers moved out of here in 1959, and we were dealing with them in order to purchase the property, we found out that they had accounts in seven banks in Pittsfield. And they moved over $2 million from here, which went into the Central Ministry. So you see, at $2 million in 1960 was a good bit more than it is today in purchasing power, but that goes into the Central Ministry, it did, and that takes care of the remaining Shakers there. There are now eight, nine sisters left, six at Sabbath Day Lake and three at Canterbury. And I'm sure that that isn't the only money they have. I think other monies have come in from the sale of other Shaker communities just like this one. [00:14:05]

ROBERT BROWN: Because Canterbury is now the central administration for the assets.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes, the Central Ministry is under the control of a group of lawyers and uh, the eldresses, the two eldresses at Canterbury. There are only two eldresses left: Eldress Gertrude Soule and Eldress Bertha—oh, what's her name? Well, Eldress Bertha.

ROBERT BROWN: Well you came back again, and when you really began to learn about them is when you came back here newly married, in the '30s. Again, you said that your father in-law is a newspaper publisher.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: This is a bit earlier, but I mean accepting and getting letters to the editor from them. Did they also come out here and look, or was he quite familiar with Hancock?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes, he was familiar with Hancock and Mount Lebanon, and he was one of five men who purchased the Mount Lebanon, North family for a school. It became first, the Mount Lebanon School for Boys, and then the name was changed to the Darrow School. And this group of five men bought it and it's still in operation, and they felt that as long as it could be run as a good boys' school, that it was preferable to having the buildings dismantled and losing the historic site.

ROBERT BROWN: They had real appreciation then, of the appearance of the architecture.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes. One of the men, one of those five or seven men was Frank Boyden, and of course he was the headmaster at Deerfield, and then there were several other local people; Wynn Crane, Merle Graves, my father in-law, and somebody from Connecticut, and then I think one or two people from the Lebanon Valley. [00:16:21] And so he knew a lot about it and he knew a lot about the history of the Shakers.

ROBERT BROWN: There was a good deal to learn. There was a good deal written already on them, was there?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes, well yes there was. The first person—of course they had written a lot about themselves.

ROBERT BROWN: To explain themselves, is that the point to that—

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes, to explain—

ROBERT BROWN: —to counter false rumors?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes. Evans, one of their elders, who was an Englishman, also a vegetarian, he wrote a lot about them, just so that other people could appreciate what their religion was and what they tried to do and wanted—did accomplish. [Phone rings.] And then two—

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: From your father in-law, he talked to you about these [cross talk.]

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Oh yes, he had lots of stories about them and admired them very much, and he knew many of them personally. He always like to tell a story about the Shaker gentlemen and how the Shaker brothers, how—individuals they were. He told me that the only time the Shaker brothers were ever known to take off their hat in public was when they doffed it to Lafayette, when he came to Pittsfield and was received in the center of the town, at our park. The Shaker brethren came and bowed to him and took their hats off, and put them back on again, and just had a look at him and then went home [laughs]. [00:18:02] Mr. Miller liked that story.

ROBERT BROWN: But he gave you the feeling that they were approachable people and—

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: —and enjoyed to a degree, meeting with outsiders.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Oh yes, oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: I suppose we could confuse them with the Amish, in the sense that they are always working, with retail a few things, but otherwise, they're not to be disturbed. Were these, these—the Shakers too, had chores, I guess.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: They had their work.

ROBERT BROWN: They couldn't give you too much time.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: No. No, and they never wasted time, but they loved to talk. I don't call it gossip exactly, they like to visit. And Sadie Neal, I loved to come over and see her, and her own sister, she was very nice and she was an eldress, and I enjoyed the brothers. I enjoyed talking to—what was the one—Brother Ricardo here at Pittsfield. I didn't—I knew Frances Hall, I knew quite a few of the Shakers here at Pittsfield, but not as well as I did the Lebanon ones, because of Mr. Miller's friendship with them, although he came here too, he came to Hancock too, to see them.

ROBERT BROWN: The Lebanon ones, did they transfer here then, as that was sold and became a school?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes. When that was sold, it became a school, they came here, and I think that was in something like '39. Thirty-nine, I think the school was established then, and then most of them, well there were only I don't know, a dozen left perhaps, and they came over here, not all at once, but by the time the war started, they were all here. And they lived in the brick dwelling and they had their own suites of rooms, I mean they could have as many rooms as they wanted then [laughs]. [00:20:07]

ROBERT BROWN: By then.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Because it had been built for a hundred Shakers. And I used to come over and see them, and I would get—the Andrews, Mr. and Mrs. Edward Deming Andrews, have written about it, because they were very friendly with them, and of course it was the Andrews who first knew about their inspirational drawings. [00:20:33]

ROBERT BROWN: People really didn't know about them before.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: No, they didn't. And I liked Mr. and Mrs. Andrews very much indeed. I got to know them soon after I came here as a bride—came to Pittsfield that is. And we began collecting Shaker furniture, simply because of their interest in knowledge, which they were kind enough to pass on to me. And they tell the story, Ted Andrews tells it in his book, *Visions of the Heavenly Sphere*, that they were visiting with a Shaker one day and she showed them one of the drawings, and watched their reaction, and later she said to them, "If you had laughed at it or if you hadn't been able to appreciate it, I was going to burn all of them." So, there were 14 in that collection and that is the nucleus of our collection here at Hancock. We have 26 inspirational drawings and 14 came from the Andrews collection, and they're perfectly beautiful. Have you seen them?

ROBERT BROWN: I have seen them.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: These were things that had been put away long before, as no longer in use. [00:22:00] They had been, as I recall, something of a development in the mid-19th century, a moment of religious fervor?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes, there was an era of inspiration which started in 1837, something like that, and endured for about 10 years. These drawings probably came out of a religious fervor which the Shakers observed by going to a holy mount. Each one of the villages had a holy mount, and this was called Mount Sinai, and it's across the street, on the north side of the village, and from the top of it, where their feast ground was established, you can see the village, and the houses that were painted were all painted a yellow. And they wrote about seeing our beautiful village in a golden glow, and they would give one another imaginary presents, and they would eat imaginary food, and they would admire the imaginary and beautiful clothes that each had on. And I'm told, and I've read from people who have written about it, that from that, these drawings emerged. There would be a tree with stylized apples on it, that was the tree of life. Uh, there would be another tree, a heavenly bower of mulberries with a wonderful banquet table laid out underneath it you see, with wonderful food on it, and this was all imaginary, but it was then put on paper. [00:24:06] And also, as I understand it, from reading and having seen what people—contemporary accounts said, not just what's been written in the 20th century, but contemporary.

ROBERT BROWN: Because that would be guess wouldn't it?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes, that would be guess. No, these would be contemporary accounts—

ROBERT BROWN: Contemporary accounts.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: —that a sister who felt a message or felt under the spell of a message, would convey this to her superior and she would be given the very best paper, colored ink, crayons, paint, and she would be relieved of her duties so that she could write—record this spiritual message, which would be in the form of a painting. And then, with most wonderful words and wonderful little vignettes, a chariot of gold, well another chariot would be a farmer with his hay on the back of a wagon and a horse who seemed to be without one hoof even on the ground, you know, that was a chariot. And pearls and jewelry and doves, very fanciful birds, and these, these were made during that period, from 1837 to 1847, although one, which was done around 1850, and I think that's the one at Western Reserve, and I think it's the only one they thought was done by a brother, and that was late. [00:26:06] Then they did hands, they did hearts, they did leaves, with these messages, you see. And these were perfection, and they're still so good and the color is so brilliant, that you know they were well-preserved. They were rolled and they were passed to one another as very special religious messages, messages of endearment and therefore, not subjected to light or heat or dirt, soil of any kind, really treasured.

ROBERT BROWN: And these were not known really, until the '20s or '30s?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes, it would have been the late '20s. Now, I don't know, there are many beside what was in the Andrews collection, but there were never as many, I don't think, in one possession.

ROBERT BROWN: What was your impression when you first saw them? Did you see them in the '30s then?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: I saw them in the—yes, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Andrews might have had them in their collection by then, I guess.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Oh yes, they did. I was trying to think. I first saw them in 1937, because the Andrews had them then, and they had—some of them had been framed, not all of them but just a few. And then there's one that's absolutely charming, because it has faces, it's their idea of what George Washington looked like, Mother Ann, Jesus Christ, Christopher Columbus, all the important people that they wanted to record at St. John, and—because they were a religious people, the Shakers. [00:28:14]

ROBERT BROWN: That must have been stunning for you, having to that point, seen these beautiful but utilitarian and functional things, to something like, look at these with no mundane purpose.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes. No, I still feel awed when I look at them, you see, and the details are so great, and the design is so modern.

ROBERT BROWN: At that point, when you'd seen them, say at the Andrews, were they treating things just as collectors, were they simply—because of course they were studying something, but were they primarily simply furnishing their home—

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes, they had two houses. They had a farm, so-called, in Richmond, which was an old house, and they had only two framed then, because the rest of them were framed when we had—when there was an exhibition at Smith College, and we raised some money to have them all framed, and then they came here to us in the frames. That was the year before we opened here. I think that was in the—not the whole year, that was in the winter of '61, and we opened here in July of '61.

ROBERT BROWN: Well you said, written in your account of the restoration that beginning in the late '30s, you were totally absorbed in collecting. And of course, you have a young and growing family as well, I'm sure that took up a good deal of time, but you would make little expeditions, and you were reading up as much as you could, and you were becoming very—

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes. Yes and of course the Andrews published the first book on Shaker furniture, which was certainly my guide and bible, in finding furniture and being sure that what I was buying was Shaker. [00:30:17] And in those days, it was very—it was easy to buy something and not pay too much for it. A wonderful flight of shelves that I bought for, let's say $100, not because it was considered a great piece of Shaker, but as the antique dealer said, "Just look how much wood you're getting." [They laugh.] And I don't know, it was appraised for a great deal of money. I have given most of my things here. I don't know how many hundred pieces, it was a great deal more than I even thought, but I did it because it was too good to be used daily, in a large family. I had other things too and anyway, it looked better out here.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you meet in the '30s, for example painter and photographer Charles Sheeler, when he was here?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: No. I knew so much about him and reading in your journal here, *Archives of American Art Journal*, and seeing his pictures, I've seen his picture before, but I was so glad to see him again, because we own some of his Shaker furniture. After he died, that came to us through the good auspices of the lady who ran the downtown gallery in New York.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, Edith Halpert.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Edith Halpert. She had collected Shaker furniture and she called up one day after he had died and said that Mrs. Sheeler did want to dispose of the furniture, and we bought these beautiful pieces. [00:32:11] And they're—we wanted to keep them all together because it showed what an eye he had for buying outstanding furniture of the Shakers, made by them. Then, Mrs. Halpert sold us some of her furniture, because you see, this was absolutely devoid of anything, all these buildings.

ROBERT BROWN: They'd been taken to other communities?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: The Shakers themselves had sold them, that was their idea.

ROBERT BROWN: So they didn't need to sell those.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Sell them, as their group diminished and when there were only three or four left here, there weren't very many pieces of furniture. Likewise, in Canterbury, Eldress Emma, as she closed up one building after another, she called up one day and wanted to know if we were interested in buying some furniture, we said yes, and we sent a truck up and we bought everything in one of the sister's shops. Beautiful pieces of furniture, great, big marvelous counters, as they were called, and it was one of the largest of Sacco's trucks, but you see, she thought she was winding everything down and putting it in good order, as she was the oldest eldress. And she—they had made plans, as I understand it, to turn their property over to the state for something like an orphanage, or a retire—well, it wouldn't have been a retirement home in those days, but you see that was 1963. And that was 20-something years ago. [00:34:03]

ROBERT BROWN: But now that's no longer?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: No and fortunately, the buildings are being saved and they have what's called Canterbury Shaker Village Inc., and they have a board of directors, on which some Shakers serve, but it's set up with a very interested board, so that it will be ongoing. Their buildings are lovely. They lost their great big, marvelous barn, that I used to go to and collect eggs [they laugh] and jump in the hay. That was too bad, it burned, a tremendous fire.

ROBERT BROWN: You mentioned that in the '30s, there was a first plan to try to establish a place for display, Shaker artifacts, with the Andrews collection forming the core. Do you recall, did that get very much off the ground or not, that effort, back in the '30s?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes, even before that. And in, I think '29, there was a wonderful exhibition of their things at the Whitney, when the Whitney was way downtown, I think it was Seventh Street, and of course Juliana

Force was a great admirer of Shaker and was a Shaker furniture collector herself. So that was the first one, that was the Whitney, and it's interesting that next year, we're going to have a Shaker exhibit at the new Whitney on Madison Avenue, and that's opening in April of '86 and it will run until July or the end of June of '86, and then it's going to the Corcoran, and most of the furniture is coming from here. The Whitney did do a show back a few years, of inspirational drawings, and some of ours were in that. [00:36:04] Now, I don't know whether we're sending the drawings, I don't think so, but we're sending a lot of furniture, and there's a book coming out that's written by our present director, Jerry Grant, and we hope that that will also be available, and it's on Shaker furniture, at the same time.

ROBERT BROWN: So their interest practically spans their whole life.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes it does.

ROBERT BROWN: Their whole lives. The Berkshire Museum, I gather rather nearly opened in the early '30s, in '32, had an exhibition here in Pittsfield.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes it did and that was splendid, that was an awfully good one. That was before I was living in Pittsfield, but I came to it—and you see even then, people realized how beautiful the furniture was. One of our trustees, who is now unfortunately no longer living, but if she were she'd be about 90, and she saw that in 1932. She happened to be—she lived in the South but she happened to be up here in the summer, and she said that what—when I asked her to be on the board here, what intrigued her about coming on the board was that she'd seen all their furniture but didn't know how or where they lived. So, she was so interested in coming on the board and then, as we got furniture back and we put it in the rooms just the way it had been and the way it should be, she was engrossed with that and was one of our best supporters.

ROBERT BROWN: That show was then, there was one in Worcester in the late '30s.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: But the effort, apparently, to organize, the museum didn't get really going until the '50s. [00:38:00] Did the Berkshire Museum ever contemplate starting a Shaker wing or getting involved with that?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: No. Ms. Bragg was the director then and Stuart Henry, who was the director following her for so many years, and he was a graduate of Harvard and the Fogg, they were interested but not to the extent of furnishing a wing or anything like that. So we weren't treading on anybody else's ideas. We were—I don't think of any other, until just lately, the American Wing at the Metropolitan has a room, one Shaker room. Oh, oh no, in the '50s, Mr. and Mr. and Mrs. Zieget gave their collection to the Philadelphia Museum and there are four rooms there, beautifully furnished, that's lovely furniture.

ROBERT BROWN: Now were they veteran collectors?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: Did you know them?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Oh yes, very well, and they gave us things here. Their four rooms—Mr. Zieget was the treasurer of the Philadelphia Museum and they had a summer house in New Hampshire, so they got to know both of the New Hampshire communities, and collected. And the same thing happened there, you see. A building would be closed down, the furniture would be offered for sale, and they bought it, and then after they made those rooms in Philadelphia, Mr. Zieget died and Mrs. Zieget moved out to one of the suburbs, I used to go out and see her, and she gave us a lot of things. Plus, almost more important, she talked to us about the Shakers and how she loved them, what they said and what remarkable people they were. She would give us small artifacts and books, and her memoirs were as priceless as furniture, you know. [00:40:04] She died about 10 years ago, but all through those years.

ROBERT BROWN: She had known the Shakers for a long time.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes. And then of course, there were people Tyringham, and a lot of people around here who knew them. In Tyringham, Ms. Eloise Myers, whose father had a rake factory. Now you see how far back that goes, when every farmer had to have a lot of rakes and a lot of different kinds of rakes, and Mr. Myers was an extremely capable businessman. She got to know the Shakers over in Tyringham, which was in the same bishopric as Hancock, and she bought lots of things from them, and when we got established here with nothing in the buildings, we were so happy to have things from her and from Mrs. Zieget, as well as the Andrews collection, and others. And then what was valuable about Mrs. Myers was personal accounts of the Tyringham Shakers, how she knew them.

ROBERT BROWN: Have many of these accounts been written down, or someone took notes from Mrs. Myers, as for Mrs. Zieget?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes, yes.

ROBERT BROWN: That's invaluable information.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes. We've got those notes, some of it, and then of course we do have accounts such as this one that you're taking, verbal, what do you call them?

ROBERT BROWN: Oral history.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Oral history. Wonderful accounts from a Mr. Retallack, who was the principal, the head farmer here, and overseer of the whole place. He grew up here and he went to the Shaker school. And then when he went to high school, the Shakers gave him a horse and a cart, and then in the winter they gave him a sleigh, and that wonderful story he told about coming home from high school one night during the winter, in his sleigh, and the elder, the principal elder here at Hancock was just ahead of him. [00:42:23] So, Mr. Retallack, Fred Retallack, caught up with him and for a while, they went along together and then Fred decided he'd race him, and he did race him and he got back here, and the elder said, "Frederick, I would like to see you in my office," and Frederick went in and he said, "Frederick, thee knows we do not race," but he said, "Frederick, I'm glad you won." [They laugh.] So you see, they were so human.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes. They had rules but—

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Rules, but still. They had marvelous horses. They had—we've restored a horse barn, which was just from their probably five best horses, and then there was another one or two other barns that of course burned. They had a lot of hay in them and I think at one time—we have 22 buildings restored. I think there were 30. There was an infirmary, there was also, the medicine house, another herb, large herb house, and in back of the meetinghouse, there was a wonderful horse shed for visitors, and also to keep their very good horses in too. There was the schoolhouse, which we've returned, but you see it was a very much larger community, a hundred people in this center village. [00:44:05]

ROBERT BROWN: This village.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: This, yeah, the church village they call it.

ROBERT BROWN: With your renewed effort, involvement with the Shakers occurred in the later '50s then did it, the Andrews collection was briefly at Yale and then was removed from Yale. Furthermore, I gather you all knew that the Shakers were beginning to sell off and people thought they might even sell out.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: That's right, they did, it was put on the market.

ROBERT BROWN: There were very few left, and then you learned that it was on the market, that was in what, in '58 or '59.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes. And they did—

ROBERT BROWN: Your interest continued throughout. Would you say you were the sparkplug of that?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Well—oh, that was a very, very good, interested group, I wasn't the only one. The Andrews, Dorothy Miller Cahill, Mrs. Holger Cahill.

ROBERT BROWN: And Holger himself had been interested.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: And Holger himself, and we talked about it incessantly, that's all we talked about when we met.

ROBERT BROWN: How to save this?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: How to save it and if it were going to be sold and to whom and when and how, and the Shakers going about everything methodically, let it be known that it was to be sold, and that they would begin hearing individuals and entities interested in the purchase of it. And so they interviewed us all. We came in January, we were among the first. There was a school for unfortunate children that was interested, the local airport commission was interested, because this was a flatter, longer piece of land than the airport now, presently, where it's located now. [00:46:04] The racetrack people over here were interested in it, a real estate man from Springfield was interested, and he wanted to bring sort of an amusement park in too.

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AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: And we couldn't meet that, so one of the group interested was the president of the largest commercial bank, the Agricultural Bank, and he said, "You can offer 125, and we'll give you a note at four percent," but he said, "We can't go any higher than that at four percent, if we went up we'd have to charge you more." And it was a demand note, and my name was the only one on it [laughs], but it was all right you know, except that they put so many reserves on it. I mean these Shakers, they said, "You cannot do this, you cannot do that, you cannot"—a lot of things that we might have been able to do to pay that note off. It wasn't until 1972, when we proved how much we could do, how good our intentions were, and of course we paid the note off in three years.

ROBERT BROWN: In '72, did the Shakers remove their reserves?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes, yes. The year we built this, this building we're sitting in now, which is our reception center, visitors center.

ROBERT BROWN: And that was all right with the Shakers?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes, didn't mind at all. And so finally I said you know, "It's perfectly ridiculous. It isn't that we're going to do anything you aren't going to approve of, but it's not very nice. We've proved that we're steady-going people and everything and why don't you lift these restrictions?" I can't remember what the restrictions were but it was just that they had the right to censor what we were doing and so forth, and so they did, they lifted it. [00:02:05] There was a group that would offer more than $250[,000], they were the real estate people that also wanted to have an amusement park here, and then the racetrack people were connected with them, so of course the Shakers couldn't tolerate any thought of that.

ROBERT BROWN: So it was perhaps just as well, if they had those restrictions, although they became onerous, I suppose any temptations there might have been couldn't exist could they? [Laughs.]

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: No, they couldn't exist.

ROBERT BROWN: In the end, you didn't want them looking over your shoulder.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Well, one of the restrictions was that it could not be used for a penal institution. Well, we weren't going to establish a jail here. You couldn't sell liquor and you couldn't have horseracing. Well, we weren't going to do and never have done any of those things, but it was just the feeling that if we didn't succeed, you see, it would revert to them. These reverted clauses were just in case we didn't succeed and wanted to sell to someone else, and that fortunately didn't happen.

ROBERT BROWN: You were able to buy it in June of '59.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Sixty.

ROBERT BROWN: June 29th, or something like that?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yeah. We bought it and then before we had paid for it, we paid, actually paid for it October 14, 1960, but they had given us permission, from March or April of 1960, to come in here with experts and study exactly how much had to be done and where to start on the restoration.

ROBERT BROWN: You make that point that it was important, and you were able to secure the services of a veteran preservation builder to do that study for you.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: And if we hadn't started that, you know because a dollar was a dollar, just think the round stone barn, in 1967 or '68, we started in '67, was completed in about six months, seven months, at a cost of $518,000. Well you couldn't—I don't know, it would cost a million and a half now you see, and the other thing is just recently, we had a grant from the Massachusetts Council of the Arts, to restore a little washhouse which is nine feet square, and they wanted an endowment with it, so the cost of that comes to $19,000.

ROBERT BROWN: For a very small building.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: For a very small building. When we did our wonderful icehouse, which took 200 tons of ice, and had all kinds of chambers and everything, and it was brick and falling down, and that only cost us $11,000, you see, in 1964.

ROBERT BROWN: So a major part of your planning has got to be how to keep ahead of inflation, and it affects greatly, what you choose to restore.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Well, we've restored everything and our library—

ROBERT BROWN: It's all done?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: It's all done. The little washhouse is the last. Oh, I think we are going to build it a little ash house, but we'll do that ourselves, it's just six—five feet squared and it's brick, it's just where they put in their embers, so they wouldn't burn anything down. No, the big thing is to remove our library from the second floor of the poultry house, and that is going to be a nice building but not too terribly big, and that will cost $400,000. [00:06:00] So you see, we're lucky that we started when we did.

ROBERT BROWN: And you hope to develop this further, as a research facility.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes. It will be called the Center for Shaker Studies and the Studies of Communal Societies.

ROBERT BROWN: Is Hancock sort of the leader, would you say, among the Shaker village restorations, and soon to be the leader in studies of communal organizations—or communal societies?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: I think so.

ROBERT BROWN: You've become a leader.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: I think we have. There's a very excellent society for the study of communal societies, you know, and it's in Indiana.

ROBERT BROWN: But as a restoration, you're the most complete would you say?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes. And even so, that organization is interested in the study and in seminars and things like that. They don't have a central library, they don't have a place. They are in the University of Indiana and it's very well-managed and we've learned a lot from them, but it wouldn't duplicate anything that's being done. We have so much to study, so much in the Shaker idiom to study, beside all the other communal societies. The other communal societies were interested in the Shakers. The Shakers were interested in them. For instance, the Mormons were interested in the Shakers, which is so funny, being so diametrically organized, the Mormons, and yet papers have been written by the Mormons, on the Shakers. The Oneida Society, so completely the opposite, was very much interested in the Shakers, they visited them. They wanted to know why they thought that a group such as the Shakers, who were celibate, could live and prosper. [00:08:08] Well, Oneida of course, went out of existence as an ongoing society, I think before the—well, I think perhaps there were a few people living there in 1910, but not very many and it wasn't much longer than that.

ROBERT BROWN: They would have been far different from the Shakers.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yeah.

ROBERT BROWN: So there was a good deal of curiosity among all of them.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes.

ROBERT BROWN: On your trustees of the restoration, you've had, and perhaps still have, a Shaker representation do you?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes. Eldress Gertrude Soule, who is now at Canterbury, she was the eldress at Sabbath Day Lake, and then she moved to Canterbury when Eldress Emma was there but was in failing health, and then she took over as the senior eldress, and she is an honorary member. And then we have representatives from other restorations. Well, Mr. Williams is from Old Chatham Museum, but there are others that are interested in some of the other restoration.

ROBERT BROWN: And you've mentioned Mr. Williams decided he would do what he has down there, which is assemble material, particularly machinery and all, in especially built buildings, rather than place them in Shakers.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes. We asked him if he was interested in this and he said, "No, I have my museum and library and I want to just stay right here in New York state." New York state itself, owns one of the very, very finest Shaker collections of furniture, which was built up there by Mr. Adams, who was the head of the Historical Society, New York State Historical Society, and one of Ted Andrews' finest books is on the community industries of the Shakers. [00:10:13] He takes it, in this book, which he wrote in 1932, industry by industry; the box making, the shoe making, their herb industry, their farming activities. And that—nothing else has been written as well as that, or is in as great depth.

ROBERT BROWN: But do you foresee future studies, being more comparative with other societies?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes, and you see, his information came from documents just here at Lebanon. Very little from Hancock. So that—

ROBERT BROWN: Things that he found throughout publications.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: —in publications. And he was working with Mr. Adams, who was the head of the state historical, and so Mr. Adams was collecting for the state, and Ted, I think was collecting for himself too, but I think there's still a great book to be written on the community industries of the Shakers in other areas. Now, what was done in the two Kentucky communities was quite different. Their crops were different, their climate was different. Their housing—

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: —a great variety of these communities.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: A great variety, but the fascinating thing about those two communities was that they were there at the time of the Civil War, and those wonderful diaries of Eldress Nancy, telling about the Northern army going down and taking everything they had and requisitioning all they needed, and then the South driving them back and coming back up through, and what they endured during the Civil War, what they grew, how they managed. [00:12:09] They were poorer than the northern communities. But that's fascinating and really, Julia Neal has written a very good book about it and she's trans—edited the diaries of Eldress— [phone rings]

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT BROWN: —so as a research institution, there's a great deal of potential.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: A great deal of potential, and the trustees feel that we've restored it, we've saved the property, restored it. We've established the farm, the herb gardens.

ROBERT BROWN: You have a farm now, and gardens that will show pretty well, the scale of the—

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes. And also, we have classes and we have workshops, and we have the industries, the community industries, where we make the Shaker furniture. So we've done everything and that will always be ongoing. The one thing that we haven't had a chance to do, we have one librarian and seven chairs, that's all. Of course, we have a magnificent collection to be studied, and we have the microfilm, microfiche of every other large collection— Library of Congress, Cleveland, you know.

ROBERT BROWN: So this is—these are policies that have gone back a ways, in general at least, I mean you have a film.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Oh, we've been collecting for 25 years. We have a wonderful collection, the library itself. We have, I think is considered one of the best photographic collections. And that was built up by one of our trustees who lives in Chicago, Elmer Pierce, but for years he's been collecting negatives of the Shakers and how they lived and what they did and how they ran their farms, and then bringing it all up-to-date. [00:14:20] So —and we've put out one book and we could certainly put out another book. And when we do do a book, we get it underwritten and then with the understanding that profits go back into a fund, and then we get going again.

ROBERT BROWN: And you have presumably, a good library of Shaker publ—their own publications.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Oh yes, absolutely.

ROBERT BROWN: Sure.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: I think our earliest is 1812 or '13. It's the first printed book.

ROBERT BROWN: But presumably, you'll seek in the future, to fill in gaps and so forth.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes. And we never will have as much as Western Reserve in some areas, or the Library of Congress naturally, but with that all on microfilm, microfiche, it's just as good.

ROBERT BROWN: I presume the library is collecting very early, the Library of Congress was, comprehensively, as it does. How did Western Reserve get involved, so interested so early?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Well, they didn't get interested until 1904, and their librarian at the time—and

incidentally, that was the first bibliography ever printed, until Mary Richmond did the one for us. He went to—he heard about the Shakers and he went to Lebanon and he met eldress—the two eldresses, Catherine White, and the other one, and I can't remember her name offhand now, but Catherine White was the one who said, "You ought to take all of this and save it, because we're not here forever, our brethren have mostly died, we don't know what should be done with it," and he did. [00:16:15] So they have—oh, I've studied there weeks at a time, you know, and it's just absolutely fabulous, what they own. So that's all now, on microfilm and we have it right here, and we have—you see it's so expensive to go to Cleveland, Washington, New York.

ROBERT BROWN: Of course, of course.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: But a student can come here and live across the street in a nice little motel, very reasonably, and work with us and it's within reason. And I hope that's what's going to happen—well, we have them now, but as I say, we've got seven folding chairs [laughs]. We need desks and we need carrels, is that what you call them, carrels?

ROBERT BROWN: Paddocks or corrals for horses?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: No. Carrels.

ROBERT BROWN: Oh, carrels. Sure, that's right.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Carrels, carrels, carrels. And all kinds of equipment, so that students—they're used to it at colleges, you know they have to have the same.

ROBERT BROWN: Well you said that at the time of the acquisition of the property, that you are or I think maybe it was written, that it was destined to become a museum, but it isn't just that is it?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: No. A museum and an educational center, and it isn't a museum in the strictest sense, except that we have such a great collection, that it has to be considered—we have a collections committee. We have to take care of these things with the same authority and interest and knowledge as a great museum. So, from that point of view, we don't have climate control in every room but those rooms are so well built, that the furniture is perfectly safe and we have good, adequate fire protection. [00:18:16] And we follow the pattern that good museums do and on our board, we've always had at least two museum directors. We have Jock [John] Howet, who is the director of the American Wing, the Metropolitan, and we have Lane Faison from the Williams College Museum, and we've had, whenever we needed, we have committees that meet and study a certain situation, and we always can attract that caliber of advice.

ROBERT BROWN: Are you quite—you're quite pleased about the way things have turned out.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Oh yes.

ROBERT BROWN: It's deliberate and things have come along as you anticipated.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes. We've always had a board with very high standards and we've had a board that never let us get into debt by trying to do more than we could take care of. And I hope that will always happen.

ROBERT BROWN: The—in your accounts, you mention these various industry and company sponsored events and festivals and the like. Were they partly devised, as I suppose, to make the public more aware, but also did they help with the income?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Greatly, because in both those cases you mentioned. For instance, General Foods, the Campbell Soup Company, the Ball Jar Company.

ROBERT BROWN: There was Borden's, I think.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Borden's was one.

ROBERT BROWN: Durgin-Park Restaurant.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Durgin-Park. [00:20:00]

ROBERT BROWN: Ralston.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: And they did, it was—they were publicity things but they were in keeping with the general attitude toward advertising that we've always kept—like to keep a low profile and when we advertise and have a Kitchen Festival and it's sponsored by General Foods, it can be done right. And we're going to—the

call that just came in has to do with our next—our festival, Kitchen Festival that's opening the first week in August, and it's being directed by a young woman who is on our staff here and she's written a cookbook, and it's all this wonderful food. People like simple food if it's well done and sophisticated. And the Shakers food was greatly superior to a lot of farm cooking and it was sophisticated, and it was perfect. And they had so little you see, I mean they didn't have TV or radio until later. They do now.

ROBERT BROWN: Now they do [laughs].

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: It was food and good sort of home entertainment that took their minds off of their hard work during the day, and we like to bring—have these festivals and tell about the food.

ROBERT BROWN: Are you as fascinated, do you reckon, by the Shakers, as you were back in the '30s or so, when you first—well, earlier, when you first, as a child, with your brother [they laughs], got dirty in the Canterbury barn?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Oh I think so, I think so. I correspond with Eldress Gertrude, you know. I'm supposed to be this week, up there in Sabbath Day Lake, but I couldn't. My husband has a bad back so I couldn't go up there. But oh, I think even more so. The more you read, the more you study. It's too bad that I don't know personally, more of them, but I feel that by reading about them and by them, things they've said, that I'm really as much engrossed.

ROBERT BROWN: Yes. [00:22:13]

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: You know? And now I have a little more time to read the manuscripts, the old letters. And I'm just looking forward so much, to this library, because then I feel that we will be able to go out in that library and work, and other people will too, and it all brings everything out. We have a man who is a consultant for us, Walter Broom, and he's into every sort of thing that computers can do for you, and he's been studying Sodus Bay, which was not a long lived community in New York.

ROBERT BROWN: New York. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes. And what he's learned there you know, is all new to me.

ROBERT BROWN: You mean some of the activities, et cetera?

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Activities, their thoughts, the way they controlled their farming, their business management, their attitudes towards one another, the sorrows and pleasures of a large family, people who wanted out and there was controversy, should they be let out, should they take—what should they take with them? The rules, the digressions from the rules in certain cases. It will be a long time before anybody knows everything [laughs] about the Shakers.

ROBERT BROWN: And even when they're all—the last one's gone, it will still be possible, do you feel, to give a great deal of their spirit here.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Yes, and there are private collection and whereas we won't—we may not receive any of the things from these private collections, if it's a question of manuscripts or books, it's possible that we could have duplicates, and that we could learn from them, and it's possible that some of these private collections will eventually come to us. [00:24:16] In fact, I know of—I know of three collections of furniture, and possibly a fourth, that are coming to us. The owners are elderly.

ROBERT BROWN: So conceivably, in time you'll have to have an exhibition too.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: [They laugh.] Well, we've got an awful lot of space still. Really. But no, I'm just as enthralled as I ever have been and then it's interesting, to have people like you and your organization want to make record of it.

ROBERT BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. We wanted to know your opinion, your involvement, your account.

AMY BESS WILLIAMS MILLER: Well, we appreciate the opportunity to talk to you about it.

ROBERT BROWN: Thank you.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]