

# Anna's World

by Wim Coleman and Pat Perrin

## AUTHORS' NOTES on UTOPIAS

A utopia is said to be an ideal place where everyone lives in harmony and contentment. The Elizabethan statesman and thinker Sir Thomas More first used the word utopia in 1551 as the title of his book about a perfect society. But utopian thought actually dates much earlier. For example, around 390 B.C., Plato wrote a philosophical dialogue, *The Republic*, which explored the possibility of an ideal government. Over the centuries, many writers have considered improving human society, or else discarding it and starting a new one, in order to achieve utopia. The Shakers were among a number of groups that tried to create a utopia in America.

The nineteenth century bred many utopian experiments in socialism and communism. These included George Ripley's community at Brook Farm in Massachusetts and Robert Owen's New Harmony Community in Indiana. Most of these experiments were dismal failures. The Shakers were a remarkable exception. They shared their belongings and the fruits of their labor cheerfully, without any apparent resentment or envy.

—Wim Coleman, *The Shakers*,  
Discovery Enterprises, Ltd., 1997

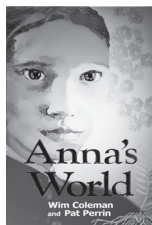
Brook Farm was an interesting example of a utopian experiment. It was founded by the former Unitarian minister George Ripley in 1841. Many of its members were prominent thinkers of the time—including Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Theodore Parker, and Margaret Fuller. Brook Farm's philosophy was that everybody would share alike in the community's fruits and labors. And so its members would have more time and leisure for creative and intellectual pursuits.

As it turned out, Emerson didn't think much of Brook Farm. And Hawthorne left when he found it impossible to write there. (It has also been suggested that he didn't like digging ditches!) The community was disbanded soon after its main building burned down.

Hawthorne, Emerson, and Henry David Thoreau were all fascinated by Shaker communities. After all, the Shakers kept right on going after most other utopian communities of the time had failed. Emerson said some rather snide things about Shaker rituals and beliefs but couldn't help admiring their ideals and accomplishments. Hawthorne wrote a couple of stories that portrayed the Shakers unattractively, but apparently even he considered joining the society at one time or other.

From as far away as Russia, the great writer Leo Tolstoy became fascinated with the Shakers and carried on a lively correspondence with Brother Frederick Evans, possibly the Shakers' most remarkable thinker. Tolstoy was a wholehearted admirer of the Shakers. He probably would have joined them if he had lived in America.

The Shakers are often credited with making the most successful experiment in communism in modern history. How did they succeed where others failed? Before joining the Shakers, Frederick Evans was a staunch secular socialist. He believed that a utopian community in which everyone shared everything must be based on materialistic principles. But the Shakers changed his mind. Evans came to believe that true communism must arise from a spiritual impulse.



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If a man loves his neighbour as himself, it will first ... be visible to “all men,” by their equal participation between them of all earthly goods and substances; yet this is but the fruit and evidence of their equal participation in spiritual treasures pertaining to salvation.

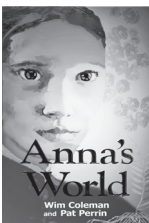
If communion of earthly goods be sought as an end, it is of man; but if it follow as a consequence of an inward principle—love—it is of God.

—F.W. Evans, *Shaker Communism; or, Tests of Divine Inspiration*,  
London: James Burns, 1871, New York: AMS Press, Inc, 1974

One great objection to communistic societies is that they destroy the work ethic and human initiative. Perhaps because of their spiritual perspective, the Shakers escaped that trap. To them work was a form of worship, not mere drudgery. Their accomplishments enrich our lives today.

Try to imagine today’s world without washing machines, metal pointed pens, flat brooms, or common clothespins. These are just a few of the inventions credited to the Shakers. They are also believed to have invented the screw propeller and the steam turbine. Perhaps the most visible contribution of the Shakers to today’s world comes by way of their architecture and furniture. Shaker designers and woodworkers were instructed to forego beauty and adhere to the sacred principles of “use” and “order.” The effect was paradoxical, for Shaker architects and carpenters produced works of spare, fresh beauty. Today, we are surrounded by furniture, homes, and buildings influenced by the Shakers.

—Wim Coleman, *The Shakers*,  
Discovery Enterprises, Ltd., 1997



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## AUTHORS' NOTES on the MEXICAN WAR

In 1846, two young American nations went to war against one another. In some ways, these nations were remarkably alike. For example, both had won independence from great European powers. The United States had declared its independence from Great Britain in 1776; by 1781, it had defeated Britain in the Revolutionary War. Similarly, Mexico had won its independence from Spain in 1821.

—Wim Coleman, *The Mexican War*,  
Discovery Enterprises, Ltd., 1998

Of course, the United States and Mexico were quite different in many ways. The U.S. had established the republican form of government that we have today. Mexico was less stable, with an ongoing power struggle between opposing political groups.

A huge area that includes California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, New Mexico, most of Colorado, and parts of Kansas, Oklahoma, and Wyoming then belonged to Mexico. Although Texas had declared independence from Mexico in 1826, Mexico did not recognize its independence. When the U.S. annexed Texas in 1845, Mexico felt that all of its northern territories were threatened.

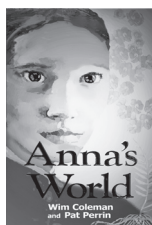
In 1844 James Knox Polk (1795–1849) was elected President of the United States.

Polk's expansionist policies were popular, if controversial. He insisted that the United States should extend from ocean to ocean—and this definitely meant the acquisition of New Mexico and California. Polk hoped to gain these territories by peaceful means; but if war proved necessary, he was prepared to wage it.

Why did Polk and many others in the United States yearn for all this western territory? One reason was a new, romantic notion known as "Manifest Destiny." Many believed that it was literally the God-given destiny of the United States to extend across the North American continent—"from sea to shining sea," as a patriotic song later expressed it. California, especially, was seen as a rich and promising region. Could struggling, chaotic Mexico realize California's potential? Surely, it was thought, California and its neighbor New Mexico would fare better under U.S. rule.

Less attractive motives lurked behind the glamorous surface of Manifest Destiny. Southern slave states longed for more territory, which would give them more representation in Congress. The annexation of Texas as a slave state was welcome to slave holders. Continued expansion could add more slave territory. For this reason, U. S. abolitionists were vehemently opposed to Manifest Destiny and Polk's expansionist policies.

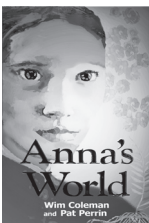
—Wim Coleman, *The Mexican War*,  
Discovery Enterprises, Ltd., 1998



Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862) was an American poet and essayist. When the Mexican War started, Thoreau spent a night in jail rather than pay a poll tax. Part of the money, Thoreau explained in his essay “Civil Disobedience,” would go to support an immoral war in Mexico. Therefore, he considered it a moral obligation *not* to pay the tax.

It is not a man’s duty, as a matter of course, to devote himself to the eradication of any, even the most enormous wrong; he may still properly have other concerns to engage him; but it is his duty, at least, to wash his hands of it, and, if he gives it no thought longer, not to give it practically his support. If I devote myself to other pursuits and contemplations, I must first see, at least, that I do not pursue them sitting upon another man’s shoulders.... I have heard some of my townsmen say, “I should like to have them order me out to help put down an insurrection of the slaves, or to march to Mexico, see if I would go;” and yet these very men have each, directly by their allegiance, and so indirectly, at least, by their money, furnished a substitute....

—Henry David Thoreau, “Civil Disobedience”



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## AUTHORS' NOTES on the SHAKERS

They were called “Shakers” from the very beginning—and the name was not meant as a compliment. In their early days, they were notorious for explosive meetings during which they shook, jerked, trembled, convulsed, spoke in tongues, and generally behaved in a disruptive and undignified manner. Their sect was formally known as the United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing, the Millennial Church, or the Alethians. But they shrewdly embraced the name “Shakers,” thereby making it useless as an insult.

—Wim Coleman, *The Shakers*,  
Discovery Enterprises, Ltd., 1997

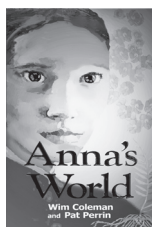
The sect called Shakers was founded during the mid-18th century in England, by James and Jane Wardley. Beginning in 1758, their dominant leader was Mother Ann Lee. In 1774, Mother Ann settled in New England with a small group of disciples. She founded the first American Shaker community in Watervliet, New York.

Mother Ann and the American Shakers strongly advocated both communal living and celibacy. They shared all their goods and property, and believed that good works and deeds could create a paradise on earth. After Mother Ann’s death in 1784, the sect expanded under new leaders.

By the late 1820s, there were approximately twenty Shaker communities spread out between Maine in the east and Ohio, Kentucky, and Indiana in the west. These communities were very successful, profitable, and innovative. Today, the highly industrious Shakers are credited with important inventions in architecture, furniture design, and even technology. Their communities are also widely regarded as the most successful experiment in communal living ever attempted in the modern world.

The sect thrived and grew in an atmosphere of religious revivalism in early nineteenth century America—and also a climate of experimentation in worldly utopias like George Ripley’s community at Brook Farm in Massachusetts. After the Civil War (1861–65), these trends waned, and so did the Shakers. The sect then fell into a decline from which it has never recovered. But its influence upon American life remains.

—Wim Coleman, *The Shakers*,  
Discovery Enterprises, Ltd., 1997



In 1884, American author and editor William Dean Howells visited several Shaker communities. The following is excerpted from Howells' essay describing the village in Shirley Massachusetts.

It was our fortune to spend six weeks of the summer of 1875 in the neighborhood of a community of the people called Shakers, who are chiefly known to the world-outside by their apple-sauce, by their garden seeds so punctual in coming up when planted, by their brooms so well made that they sweep clean long after the ordinary new broom....

As I recall their plain, quaint village at Shirley, a sense of its exceeding peace fills me; I see its long, straight street, with the severely simple edifices on either hand; the gardens up-hill on one side and down-hill on the other; its fragrant orchards and its levels of clovery meadow-land stretching away to buckwheat fields, at the borders of whose milky bloom the bee paused, puzzled which sweet to choose; and it seems to me that one whom the world could flatter no more, one broken in hope or health, or fortune, could not do better than come hither and meekly ask to be taken into that quiet fold, and kept forever from his sorrows and himself....

It was a hot afternoon at the end of July, and when we drove out of the woods, we were glad of the ash and maple trees that shade the village street in nearly its whole length.... The village is built on each side of the road, under the flank of a long ridge, and the land still falls, from the buildings on the eastern side, into a broad, beautiful valley (where between its sycamores the Nashua runs unseen), with gardens, orchards, patches of corn and potatoes, green meadows, and soft clumps of pine woods; beyond rise the fertile hills....

I should be sorry to give the notion of a gloomy asceticism in the Shaker life. I saw nothing of this, though I saw self-restraint, discipline, quiet, and heard sober, considered, conscientious speech. They had their jesting, also; and those brothers and sisters who were of a humorous mind seemed all the better liked for their gift of laughing and making laugh.... [S]uch an entertainment as a lecture by our right-hearted humorist, Mark Twain, had been attended by one of the brethren not only without self-reproach, but with great enjoyment. They had also some of them read Mr. Bret Harte's books without apparent fear of consequences.

—from *Three Villages* by William Dean Howells,  
Boston: James D. Osgood and Co., 1884  
<http://users.rcn.com/shs1.ma.ultranet/howells/howells.htm>

