



# COMMUNITY SERVICE

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### amish economics



by Gene Logsdon

*The Amish have become a great embarrassment to American agriculture. Many "English" farmers, as the Amish call the rest of us, are in desperate financial straits these days and relatively few are making money. So it is fashionable among writers, the clergy, politicians, farm machinery dealers and banks to depict the family farmer as a dying breed... All of them seem to forget those small, conservatively-financed family farms that are doing quite well, thank you, of which the premier example is the Amish.*

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Amish farmers are still making money in these hard times despite (or rather because of) their supposedly outmoded, horse-farming ways. If they do get into financial jeopardy, it is most often from listening to the promises of modern agribusiness instead of traditional wisdom. The Amish continue to farm profitably not only with an innocent disregard for get-big-or-get-out modern technology, but without participating in direct government subsidies other than those built into market prices, which they can't avoid.

I first learned about the startlingly effective economy of Amish life when I was invited to a barn raising near Wooster, Ohio. A tornado had leveled four barns and acres of prime Amish timber. In just three weeks, the

downed trees were sawed into girders, posts and beams and the four barns rebuilt and filled with livestock donated by neighbors to replace those killed by the storm. Three weeks. Nor were the barns the usual modern, one-story metal boxes hung on poles. They were huge buildings, three and four stories high, post-and-beam framed, and held together with hand-hewn mortises and tenons. I watched the raising of the last barn in open-mouthed awe. Some 400 Amish men and boys, acting and reacting like a hive of bees in absolute harmony of cooperation, started at sunrise with only a foundation and floor and by noon had the huge edifice far enough along that you could put hay in it.

A contractor who was watching said it would have taken him and a beefed-up crew all summer to build the barn if, indeed, he could find anyone skilled enough at mortising to do it. He estimated the cost at \$100,000. I asked the Amish farmer how much cash he would have in the barn. "About \$30,000," he said. And some of that paid out by the Amish church's own insurance arrangements. "We give each other our labor," he explained. "We look forward to raisings. There are so many helping, no one has to work too hard. We get in a good visit." Not the biggest piece of the Rock imaginable carries that kind of insurance.

Not long afterwards, I gave a speech to an organization of farmers concerned with alternative methods of agriculture in which I commiserated at length with the financially depressed farmers. When my talk was over, two Amish men approached me, offering mild criticism. "We have finished one of our most financially successful years," one of them said. "It is only those farmers who have ignored common sense and tradition who are in trouble." What made his remarks more significant is that he went on to explain that he belonged to a group of Amish that had, as an experiment, temporarily allowed its members to use tractors in the field. He also was making payments on land that he had recently purchased. In other words, he was staring at the same economic gun that's pointed at English farmers and he was coming out ahead. "But," he said, "I'm going back to horses. They're more profitable."

From then on, I resolved to start cultivating the Amish as assiduously as they cultivated their fields. I had always taken our sorghum to Joe Bontragger's press in the Kenton, Ohio area not far from our farm. We bought bulk foods and angel food cake at the Peterscheims, sought advice about operating a woodworking shop at Troyers, but now I expanded my horizons to include eastern Ohio, center of the largest Amish community in the world. When I helped a neighbor haul hay to that area, I received another lesson in Amish economics. If they need to buy extra feed for their livestock, they almost always choose to buy hay and raise the grain rather than vice versa. The price of the hay is partially regained as manure after passing through the livestock, allowing them to cut down on the amount of fertilizer they need to buy. The greater mass of hay generates a greater mass of manure, adding organic matter to the soil. That is valuable beyond computer calculation. Grain farmers in my area who sold their straw and hay to the Amish were trading their soil fertility for cash of flitting value.

Whenever I got to know an Amish farmer well enough, I asked about farm profits. Always the answer was the same, spoken with careful modesty. Not as good as in the 70's, but okay. I heard that in 1983, '84 and even in '85, when finally the agribusiness magazines admitted that agriculture faced a fullblown crisis.



Eventually, or perhaps inevitably, I took my softball team to Holmes County for a cow pasture doubleheader. It was a grand day. The Amish bishop watched from his buggy behind home plate, sorely tempted, I was told, to join the game but afraid it might seem a bit demeaning to some of his congregation.

The games themselves taught two lessons in economy. First, our uniforms of blue and gold cost me more money than I care to talk about. The Amish players, with their traditional denims, broadcloth shirts and straw hats, are always in uniform. Second, some of our player/farmers could not take time off from their high-tech machines to play in the game. The Amish, with their slow, centuries-old methods, had plenty of time.

Housing is another good example of Amish economy. First of all, the Amish home doubles as an Amish church. How many millions of dollars this saves the Amish would be hard to calculate. Amish belief wisely provides for the appointment of ministers by lot. A minister works his farm like everyone else. Secondly, the Amish home doubles as the Amish retirement village and nursing home, thereby saving incalculably more millions of dollars, not to mention the self-respect of the elderly. The Amish do not pay Social Security, nor do they accept it. They know and practice a much better security that requires neither pension nor lifelong savings.

There is an old Amish quiltmaker who lives near Pffeifer's Station, a crossroads store and village I often frequent. Her immediate family is long gone and she lives now with somewhat distant relatives who, being nearest of kin, are pledged to care for her. Her quarters are a wee bit of a house connected to the main house by a covered walkway. I make up excuses to visit, pretending to be interested in quilts. I have no idea how old she is, other than ancient.

Around her I feel the kind of other-worldly peace I used to feel around nuns before they decided to dress up and hustle about like the rest of us. Her bedroom is just big enough for a bed and quilting frame; her kitchen is equally tiny. The boys of the family keep the walkway stacked with firewood for her stove. She has her own little garden. Children play on her doorstep.

She has her privacy but is surrounded by living love, not the dutiful professionalism of the old folks' home. And she still earns her way. Quilt buyers come, adding to her waiting list more quilts than her fingers, now slowed by arthritis, can ever catch up with. I love that scene. She still lives in the real world. If she were not Amish, she would have languished in some nursing home and no doubt be dead by now--from sheer boredom if nothing else.

Between the ballgames, sorghum pressing and barnraisings, I have had the chance to observe several Amish households enough to know that there are few generalities. The Herschbergers of the Schwartzentruber Amish, the Bontragers and all who live near Kenton, Ohio, and the Holmes County neighborhood where we played softball, all represent different economic levels. I do not wish to say that one is financially better off than another, because I do not know. But compared to a middle-class English household, the Herschbergers have the fewest amenities--not even a soft chair, although there is a beautiful, century-old pendulum clock on the wall. The nearby Kenton community is more "advanced" compared to the Herschbergers'.



The Holmes County houses are quite like our own except for the lack of electricity. These latter houses sport gas appliances, modern bathrooms, Maytag wringer washers with Honda gasoline motors (the Amish housewives say Hondas start easier than Briggs & Stratton). Although I saw none in the homes I visited, some Old Order Amish are allowed to use battery-operated electric typewriters! Although there is something of a lack of interior decoration as we would call it (unless you go in for the country-look craze), any middle-class American could move into one of these Holmes County homes and not feel materially deprived until habit called for television, radio, or record player.

There are no telephones in the homes, but the Amish use the telephone booths that dot the roadsides. An Amishman views a telephone wire in the home, like an electric line, as an umbilical cord tying them to dangerous worldly influences. You will not talk so long or often at a pay booth down the road.

Whatever one's views of such fence-straddling religious convictions, they obviously reveal tremendous economizing. In a 1972 study of Illinois Old Order Amish similar to the Holmes County Amish, conducted by the Center for the Biology of Natural Systems at Washington University in St. Louis, Amish housewives said they spent \$10 to \$15 a week on food and non-food groceries. They reported household living expenses from \$1379 for a small young family up to \$4700 for a large, better-financed one. My own Amish informants thought that today, that figure might top out at \$8000 for a large family, including transportation by buggy and occasionally renting a car or riding a bus. A horse and new buggy cost about \$2000 and last a good bit longer than a \$12,000 car. Throughout Amish country in eastern Ohio, a vigorous small business has grown up taxiing Amish around in vans, successfully competing with older private bus lines that perform the same service at a higher price. Clothing is a low budget item for the Amish as they use long-wearing fabrics and often sew the clothes themselves. Styles do not change.

Medical costs are the only expenses the Amish cannot control by their sub-economy. Religion forbids education beyond the early teens, so they cannot generate their own doctors and medical facilities, and must pay the same ridiculous rates as the rest of us.

Another surprising element in the Amish economy is the busy social life they lead within a day's ride by buggy or bicycle. We could scarcely schedule a softball game because there was always a wedding, a raising, a sale, a quilting, or church and school doings to attend! I can assure the world that the Amish have just as much fun as anyone, at far less than the cost of weekends made for Michelob.

It is in agriculture that the Amish raise economy to a high art. After the ballgames, when talk got around to the hard times in



farming today, the Amish said a good farmer could still make a good living with a herd of 20 to 25 cows. One of the players countered with mock seriousness: "Don't you know that you need at least 70 cows to make a living these days? Ohio State says so." "Oh my," an Amish dairyman replied, not entirely in jest, "If I could milk 70 cows, I'd be a millionaire." The Amish farmers all agreed that with 20 cows, a farmer could gross \$50,000 in a good-weather year, of which "about half" would be net after paying farm expenses including taxes and interest on land debt, if any. Deducting \$8000 for family living expenses still leaves a nice nest egg for emergencies, bad years, and savings to help offspring get started in farming. Beginning farmers with higher interest payments than normal often work as carpenters or at other jobs on the side. These income estimates agree closely with those in the Washington University study mentioned above and those Wendell Berry reports in *The Gift of Good Land*, a book that demonstrates the sound fiscal foundation of small-scale, traditional farming, even--or especially--in a modern world.



The most amazing part of the Amish economy to me is that, contrary to notions cherished by old farm magazine editors who escaped grim childhoods on 1930's farms for softer lives behind desks, the Amish do not work as hard, physically, as I did when my father and I were milking 100 cows with all the modern conveniences in the 1960's.

English farmers like to make fun of the Amish for their hair-splitting ways with technology --allowing tractors or engines for stationary power tools but not in the fields. But in addition to keeping the Amish way of life intact, such compromises bring tremendous economy to their farming while lightening the workload. A motor-powered baler or corn harvester, pulled by horses ahead of a forecart, may seem ridiculous to a modern agribusinessman, but it saves thousands of dollars over

buying tractors for this work. The reasons tractors aren't allowed in the fields is that they would then tempt an Amishman to expand acreage, going into steep debt to do so, and in the process drive other Amish off the land --which is exactly why and how American agriculture got into the trouble engulfing it today.

To satisfy religious restrictions, the Amish have developed many other ingenious ideas to use modern technology in economizing ways. Other farmers should be studying, not belittling, them. When Grade A milk regulations forced electric cooling tanks on dairymen, the Amish adopted diesel motors to generate their own electricity for the milk room, cooler and milk machines. They say it's cheaper than buying electricity and keeps them secure from power outages. Similarly, they operate commercial woodworking and other shops with diesel-powered hydraulic pumps rather than individual electric motors for each tool. Their small woodworking shops, like their printing and publishing houses and a lot of other enterprises, make money where others so often fail.

Where Amish are active, countryside and town are full of bustling shops and small businesses, neat homes, solid schools and churches, and scores of roadside stands and cheese factories. East central Ohio even has a small woolen mill, one of the few remaining in the country. Compare this region with the decaying towns and empty farmsteads of the land dominated by large-scale agribusiness. The Amish economy spills out to affect the whole local economy. Some farmers, like Lencie Cleppinger near Mount Vernon, have the great good sense to farm like the Amish even though they don't live like them. They enjoy profits too. When discussing the problems agribusiness farmers have brought on themselves, Cleppinger just shook his head and repeated, "What in the world are they thinking?"

The Amish sum it up in a sentence. "Don't spend more than you make and life will be good to you." Uncle Deficit should be so wise.

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