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Old Order Mennonites in New York: Cultural and Agricultural Growth

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Abstract

New York is experiencing dramatic population growth among horse-and-buggy driving populations. Farming is recognized as essential to the maintenance of these cultures. Nationally, these groups, particularly in larger settlements, struggle to stay active in farming. However, Old Order Mennonites run contrary to trends within the plain sects as well as agriculture at large. With over 570 households, a central New York settlement of Groffdale Conference Mennonites grew by 2,700% over the last three decades. They have one of the highest percentages of their population in agriculture, operating 99% of the dairy farms in the area, yet with a herd size of less than 50% of the state average. A Mennonite run produce auction grew by \$185,000 annually for the last 12 years; and church members operate nearly 50 agricultural support businesses in the settlement. Youth activities, mission work, business growth, and internal social support systems (for both Mennonite and other Old Orders) are outward signs of the inner strength of the settlement. Potential constraints to growth include geography, commodity prices, and doctrinal issues.

Keywords

Groffdale Mennonite Conference; Wenger Mennonites; Team Mennonites; Yates County, NY; Finger Lakes Mennonite settlement; Agriculture; Produce auction; Occupational shift

Introduction

In the mid-1970s, Groffdale Conference Mennonites from Lancaster County Pennsylvania migrated to Yates County, New York, triggering a major shift in the agricultural and cultural landscape of this upstate New York region. The settlement's rapid growth, density, and regional agricultural dominance merit a settlement profile. This study employs a variety of sources—population statistics, personal interviews with members, published references, literature reviews, internal communications, surveys, and agricultural statistics—to create this profile.

Historical Background

The Old Order Mennonites trace their origins to 1500s Anabaptism, the religious movement that grew out of a rejection of the Protestant Reformation. Mennonites migrated from Europe to Pennsylvania beginning in the 1700s (Shirk 2012). In 1717, Hans Graff founded the Groffdale community—from which the Groffdale Mennonite Conference derives its name—in West Earl Township, presently east of Lancaster City. In 1893, modern worship ideas spurred a division among the Lancaster County Mennonites. The Groffdale group (“Old Orders” led by Jonas Martin) broke off the Lancaster Mennonite Conference, distancing themselves from modernistic encroachment on their faith.

In 1927, a second division within the Lancaster County Old Order Mennonites occurred. Bishop Moses Horning was in favor of the use of black automobiles, whereas Minister Joseph Wenger rejected automobile ownership. These factions became the Weaverland Mennonite (Horning) and Groffdale Mennonite (Wenger) Conferences, respectively (Hoover 1982). The Wengers retained Pennsylvania Dutch in services and as their first language. They use horse drawn transportation and forbid the use of rubber tires on self-propelled machines (Shirk 2012), in addition to other church regulations, including plain dress. The church today has settlements in nine states (Shirk 2012) with an estimated population of 22,397 in 2013, doubling every 19 years (Kraybill and Hurd 2006).

Wengers are defined by a “conviction of unity” (Shirk 2012, 7). This is realized in their conference structure, whereby ministers from all settlements gather to reach a consensus on church positions (with input from the laity). To gather so many people under one *Ordnung*—or set of church regulations—is unique among Old Orders, especially compared to the Amish, among whom church regulation is more localized.

The Groffdale Mennonites established new settlements outside of Lancaster County—but still within Pennsylvania—beginning in the 1940s. The rapid growth of the Conference and a continued dependence on agriculture led to additional settlements in Kentucky, Missouri, New York, Ohio, and Wisconsin (Shirk 2012). By the 1980s, farmland in Lancaster County was valued near \$10,000 per acre. Farms were split until they became too small to split again (Igou

1999). It was in response to this land pressure that in 1974 Wenger Mennonites purchased the first farms in Yates County, New York (Shirk 2012). The primary occupation of the early settlers was dairy farming. Due to the depressed conditions of New York's agricultural economy in the 1970s and 1980s, many non-Mennonite farmers were happy to find Mennonites willing to take over their farms (Lee 2000). The Pennsylvania migrants bought these abandoned and non-viable farms and converted them into profitable dairies.

Key Factors for Success in Agriculture

Agriculture is an essential aspect of Wenger culture, and rural New York has provided an outstanding opportunity for Wenger Mennonites to maintain an agrarian lifestyle. By 2007, Old Order Mennonites operated 99% of the 262 dairy farms in Yates County (USDA—NASS 2007 Census of Agriculture; author estimate). The average herd size of 45 cows is less than half of the statewide average of 109 milking animals (Dahl 2013). A wholesale produce auction established by Wengers in 2000 now conducts in excess of \$3.5 million in sales of fresh fruits and vegetables (H. Lied, personal communication, 2013). This agricultural vitality occurs against a backdrop of a national decline in farms (USDA—NASS 2013).

Farm Labor

Labor is widely recognized as a leading constraint on mainstream agriculture (Zahniser, et al. 2012), accounting for up to 40% of variable production costs for non-plain sect farms. The Wengers are noted for their large family size (Kraybill and Hurd 2006) of 8.3 children per married woman. These children are important labor sources in family farming operations, as with produce, where weeding, harvesting, and packaging use child- and adolescent-level skills. Indeed, the produce auction likely would not exist without family labor. The plain communities are increasingly involved in labor-intensive horticulture as they have a labor pool without a payroll. The adoption of additional agricultural enterprises, such as greenhouses, is often a response to family growth.

Agricultural Technology Adaptations

Among horse-and-buggy Anabaptists, the Wenger Mennonites are perhaps the most accepting of technology. Whereas other groups are restricted in their use of tractors, silo unloaders, and gutter cleaners, relatively few restrictions exist on agricultural technology in the Wenger church. The most significant, and particularly emblematic, adaptive use of technology is the tractor wheel. Any self-propelled machine owned by a church member cannot use inflated rubber tires. Thus, the Wengers have accepted steel wheels—in myriad forms—for modern farm tractors, including grain combines. This has allowed them to farm on a scale different from those Old Order Anabaptists rejecting tractors for field use as well as those accepting all farm equipment. Further, the Wengers employ tractors (on steel wheels) not only in farming but also in delivery of produce to the auction house. The selective use of tractor technology enables them to bring larger loads at a decreased cost compared to other plain farmers.

In this way the selective adoption and modification of the tractor allows the Wengers to excel in the Finger Lakes region farming niche. This adaptive technology also serves as a cultural support mechanism. Steel wheels on tractors are repeatedly noted for their reinforcement of horse and buggy transportation (Reid 2004; Kraybill and Hurd 2006).

Settlement Density

Settlement density has led to community-wide success in agriculture and business. This density is the direct product of conference's requirement that members do not own automobiles, retaining horse and buggies instead. When choosing a homestead, young Wenger Mennonites prioritize proximity to family, that is, a reasonable horse-driving distance. A comparison between Finger Lakes' two Old Order Mennonite groups supports the argument that non-ownership of automobiles leads to increased density. In 2015, the Weaverland Mennonite Conference (car driving) counted 335 households in the settlement spread over 137 miles, north-to-south. The Groffdale Mennonite Conference, on the other hand, included 578 households over just 40 miles (Johnson and Yost 2015; Sensenig 2015).

Among Old Order Anabaptists, mutual exchanges of agricultural labor are common (Zook 1994; Meyers & Nolt 2005). Density facilitates these labor exchanges, such as a barn raising and restructuring. Geographically constrained by carriages and bicycles, Old Order Mennonites have help that is always nearby. Shirk (2012) notes that with so many available hands, a dairy barn—including siding—is often erected in a single day. A dairy barn in Milo Township, Yates County, for example, was completely destroyed by a fire on Christmas Day 2008, yet was rebuilt and shipping milk again by January 2nd.

Kline (1999) observes, “This moneyless exchange often involves more than labor. It can be a sharing of machinery and knowledge [...] A lot of this exchange is tied to the biblical injunction to ‘love thy neighbor as thyself.’” By living in close proximity, Wenger Mennonites are prepared to meet this injunction more rapidly than their car driving counterparts. Critical labors, such as ensiling corn at a precise moisture content or baling hay while crude protein levels are high, require rapid deployment of equipment and operators. In a uniquely New York manifestation of Wenger communal labor, families and neighbors assist with wintertime vineyard work such as pruning and trellising. Non-Wenger grape farmer neighbors must rely on migrant farm workers for these tasks.

The produce auction's success is another illustration of the benefit of settlement density. The Finger Lakes Produce Auction, founded and managed by Wenger Mennonites in 2000, has grown at an average rate of \$185,612 per year, while two Amish-based auctions in New York grew by only \$27,042 and \$33,333 (Reid and Fenton 2012). The large number of Mennonite farmers within delivery distance of the auction has created a continually growing cycle of supply, attracting produce buyers from farther and farther away.

Population density has also created ample opportunities for local businesses. In New

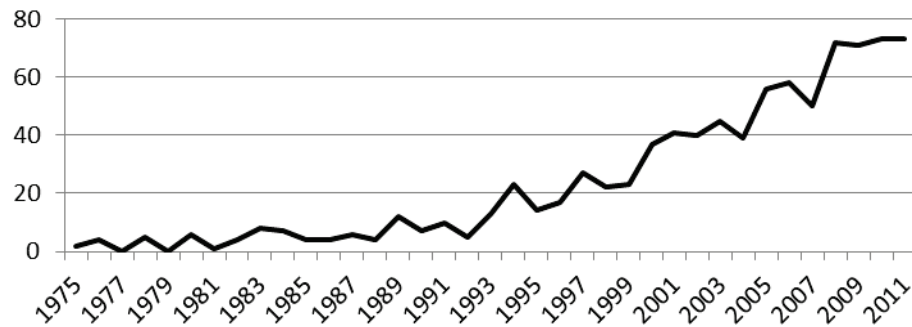
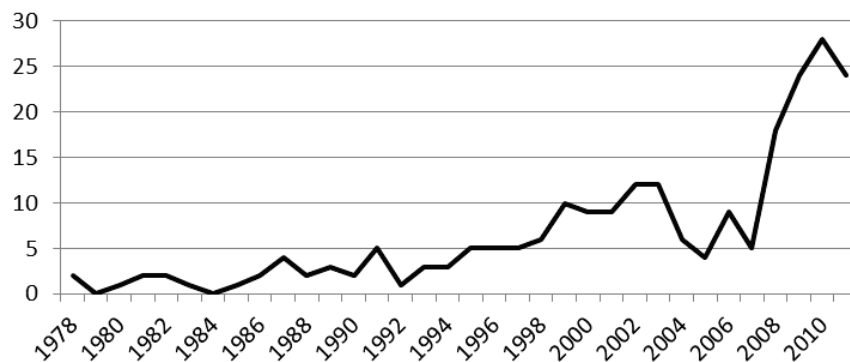
York, Wengers operate at least 50 agricultural support businesses (H. Hoover, personal communication, 2013). These include feed mills, tractor repair shops, produce growing supplies, and seed distributors. Collectively, these businesses represent millions of dollars of additional revenue for the local economy, not to mention job opportunities for non-farming Wengers.

Signs of Community Health and Vibrancy

The stability brought by occupational and agricultural success is evident in many community processes. Notably, the church benefits from a 90% retention rate (Kraybill and Hurd, 2006), pointing to family stability and successful child socialization. In 2015, there were approximately 578 Wenger Mennonite households primarily in Yates County but also in neighboring counties—Ontario, Schuyler, and Steuben (Sensenig 2015). Household growth from 1976 to 2013 is at 2,720%, and the Finger Lakes settlement is on track to eclipse the Lancaster County Wenger settlement in the near future. Growth comes from both continued migration from Pennsylvania and young Mennonites—born in New York over the last three decades—beginning their own families. As a relative comparison, the next largest horse-and-buggy settlement in New York—the Conewango Valley Amish—was founded nearly 30 years prior to the Wengers, yet count less than 400 households (Johnson-Weiner 2010).

The contribution of young people to this rapid growth is evident in several ways. First, rates of young adult baptisms have been increasing. The most recent years reported in Shirk (2012) show an average annual increase in church membership of around 72.5 (Figure 1). This figure translates to close to 10% growth per annum. Baptism represents formal church membership and a milestone in a youth's path toward marriage. Second, wedding rates have also increased, suggesting stability in this primary social institution (Figure 2). Third, new community facilities, like meetinghouses and schoolhouses, continue to be built. As of 2015, the Groffdale community had seven meetinghouses and 32 schoolhouses; three meetinghouses were built in the last decade alone. Fourth, many social opportunities exist for new and aspiring members. Saturday night youth gatherings exceed 400 people. During warmer months, two singing schools are held. Many young people play in one of over 15 hockey and baseball teams, which compete in leagues.

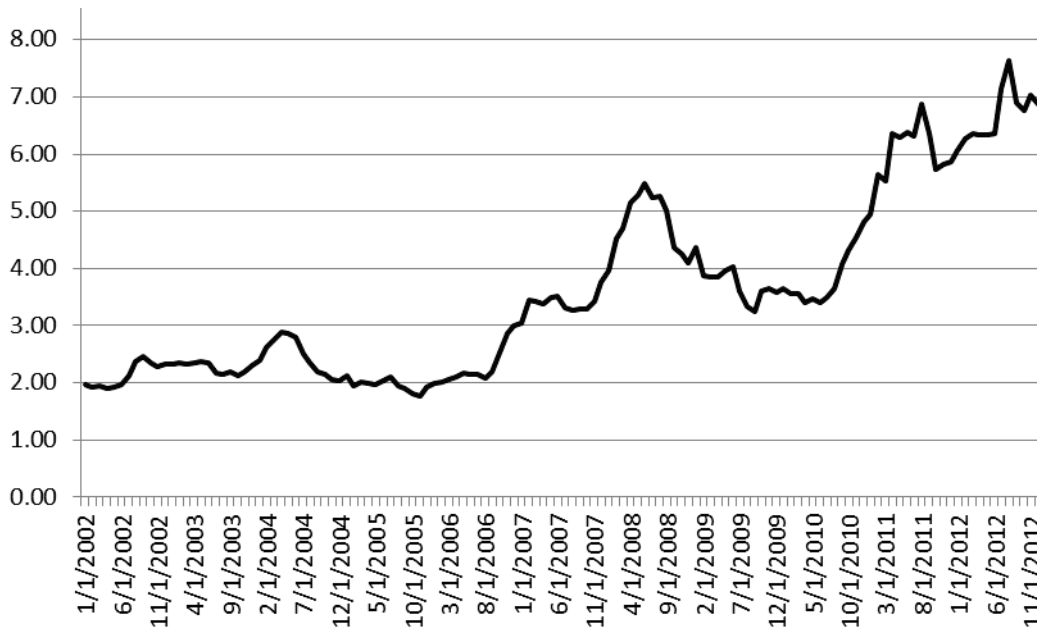
Mission and charity work are further examples of community health. The New York Haiti Benefit Auction raises close to \$300,000 annually (E. Horning, personal communication, 2013). The annual Mexico Mennonite Auction raises funds for Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico. Each April, the Mennonite Central Committee operates a canning operation in Penn Yan, NY, to can meat for shipment to global poor (Christensen 2013); in 2012, 100,000 cans of turkey meat were shipped from Penn Yan, NY. The New York Wenger Mennonites are also very active in Mennonite Disaster Services and were among the rebuilding crews for hurricanes Sandy, Katrina, and others. Further, Wengers provide support for socially and emotionally challenged Amish and Mennonites across the country by operating a church-based mental health clinic, Ray of Hope.

Figure 1: Baptisms in the Finger Lakes Wenger Settlement, 1975 to 2011**Figure 2: Weddings in the Finger Lakes Wenger Settlement, 1978 to 2011**

Old Order Mennonites in New York: Looking Forward

Significant population growth in central New York has resulted in intensification of agricultural enterprises and occupational shifts, as well as migration to new communities. Wenger farmers have expanded to marginal farmland in New York State, both around the original settlement and into a northern “daughter” settlement. In Malone, NY, Wenger Mennonites began buying farms in 2009. In 2015, around 20 families were there—primarily occupied in dairy farming—with two schoolhouses built and property purchased for a new meetinghouse. One pioneer described the motivation to move there: “Prices are \$1,200 to \$1,500 an acre vs. \$3,000 to \$4,000 in Yates County. We’ve got young people who want to farm, and they’re serious. We need farmland they can afford” (H. Martin, personal communication, 2013).

Like Mennonites everywhere, Malone Mennonites face constraints from record high commodity prices. Returns on corn and other grains have risen (Figure 3), so that instead of selling, landowners often rent to large farmers (University of Illinois 2013). High crop prices create increased demand for farmland prices. This price pressure is coupled with a burgeoning Wenger population in need of new homesteads.

Figure 1: Grain Corn Prices per Bushel, 2002 to 2012

With these challenges, more young people have been pursuing non-agricultural careers such as carpentry and construction. Wengers are liable to perceive this as a threat:

As the ratio of farmers goes down, the ratio of people that are influenced by non-Mennonites (employers, drivers, etc.) goes up. They become more comfortable out there than in their own culture. They spend six days out of the culture. That is probably the biggest threat, how comfortable they become with electronic devices. (H. Hoover, personal communication, 2013)

Another Wenger man considers how members are exposed to prohibited items while working with non-Mennonites:

For car drivers, the cell phones made sense, but then that brought internet connection. That is a culture changer. Eventually you'll develop a new theology to accept the technology. This is a step towards Protestant theology that believing is more important than doing. The Anabaptists have historically been a doing church. (I. Martin, personal communication, 2013)

Despite some occupational changes, these Mennonites are “opportunistic farmers,” as one interviewee put it, and agriculture is not about to be phased out. Mennonites continue to look into farming opportunities, such as dairying on less productive farm land and planting higher value crops—fruit, vegetables, and greenhouse-based crops—on smaller acreage. Settlement expansion is likely, especially to the south and west, into Schuyler and Steuben Counties. However, as commodity prices increase, Wengers find themselves in sharper competition for land and feed

stuffs. These expensive inputs erode the profit margin of livestock production.

While agricultural, occupational, and migratory changes could lead to fragmentation and specialization, the church's conference structure has a moderating effect, supporting cultural continuity across geographies and occupations. The church maintains a conviction of unity, and that unity stretches across multiple settlements and occupations:

Our group tends not to fracture as easy as some groups do. We are more flexible and less dogmatic. The general conference fears chaos in allowing individual districts to have their own rules. There is a moderating effect. That can be good and bad. (I. Martin, personal communication, 2013)

A potential drawback of the conference structure is indifference to local needs across settlements. A member commented,

There is a greater danger that a whole outlying district could breakaway. For example in Iowa larger farms may want rubber tires. The farther away they are, different geographies, different state laws; these may face different pressures than the main body. This is more likely a potential for splits. (I. Martin, personal communication, 2013)

Conclusion

The Old Order Mennonite settlement of the Finger Lakes, NY, region represents a new page of history for the Groffdale Mennonite Conference. The availability of affordable farm land, an ethic of shared labor, dense settlement patterns, and the willingness to adapt farm technology to church rules have all resulted in a high level of involvement in agriculture. In turn, the Wenger's high youth retention, formal social support activities and entities, and outward looking charity efforts signal a vibrant cultural organization. Agricultural intensification, the establishment of new settlements, and increased adoption of non-agricultural occupations are all outcomes of rapid settlement growth.

As a cultural group, the Wengers could be further studied to better characterize what attitudes and practices have led to their success in agriculture when compared to other Mennonites, Amish, and non-plain farmers. Further studies could examine Wenger attitudes toward farm technology in comparison with other plain groups.

Endnote

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