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# Performing Amish Agrarianism: Negotiating Tradition in the Maintenance of Pennsylvania Dairy Farms

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**Abstract:** Amish people have a reputation for being ecologically and environmentally conscientious. As numerous scholars in Amish and Plain Anabaptist studies have demonstrated, Amish views of the environment are diverse and ultimately anchored in the understanding that God made nature for human use. In these cases, Amish views of the environment could be described as much more anchored in traditional philosophical notions of “agrarianism” than “environmentalism.” In this article, I explore how some Amish approach agrarianism with a turn from more traditional farm life toward necessary economic engagement with multi-faceted operations and diversification. Based on intensive ethnographic research and participant observation, I emphasize the unique place of the dairy farm in sustaining agrarian values that maintain the Amish church *Ordnung*. I present four case studies that illustrate the negotiation, expression, and maintenance of agrarianism of Amish dairy farmers. Each ethnographic case demonstrates how contemporary challenges are met by creating boundaries between Amish and worldly life. Ultimately, I argue that dairy farming operations are held at a different standard when compared to other occupations, given farming’s historical tie to achieving an ideal agrarian livelihood. In some instances, Amish dairy farmers had to over perform *Ordnung* standards to stabilize agrarian values. These cases complicate both the traditional definitions of Amish agrarianism and the breadth of participants (Amish/non-Amish) maintaining it. [Abstract by author.]

**Keywords:** agribusiness; dairy farming; technological adoption; tradition; Pennsylvania

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**Note:** This article pulls from ethnographic data that served the basis for the article “Restoring Eden in the Amish Anthropocene,” published in *Environmental Humanities* in 2019. The methodology section in this article echoes this published work, and there are very brief one-sentence mentions of the case studies that I expand upon in the following article.

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## INTRODUCTION

Since its inception as a religious movement, Amish life has centered on the farm. Scholars who study the Amish have long described and debated the importance of agriculture in the maintenance of the Amish church, citing the group's agrarian foundations and its potential upheaval in the turn away from full-time farming. However, these earlier assumptions have had to be readdressed with late-twentieth century changes in the geographic and economic conditions which contextualized Amish life.

Remarking, in part, on Hostetler's (1993, 88) belief that the Amish would cease to exist if they moved away from farming, McConnell and Loveless (2018) asked the following question:

Given that the percentage of full-time farmers has fallen to under 20 percent in all the large Amish settlements, does it make sense to continue to hold up the Amish as purveyors of agrarian wisdom? (6)

This provocation launched McConnell and Loveless into an exploration of a false binary in non-Amish understandings (i.e., English understandings) of Amish life and nature. Given praises about the Amish by writers such as Wendell Berry and heavy-handed critiques voiced by organizations such as the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the authors explored if "the Amish are ecological saints or environmental sinners" (McConnell and Loveless 2018, 7). McConnell and Loveless illustrated the nuances and complexities in the ways that Amish people think about themselves as part of nature, including the paradoxes maintained as fewer Amish take on full-time farming operations in a world that sees them as *inherently* agrarian.

Non-Amish onlookers are not the only ones who align Amish life with agrarian values, even in the wake of this change. From *within*, Amish farmers express feeling pressures that were different from those of their non-farming Amish siblings, friends, and neighbors. Some of these pressures were related to disagreements about technological adoption and use on the farm. Other pressures stemmed directly from the unique economic uncertainties that come with full-time farming occupations. These tensions, large and small, illustrated the sustained importance of farming for

the Amish on both an individual and societal level. With fewer committed to this occupation and way of life, I argue that Amish farmers of the 2010s have felt a unique burden to uphold an agrarianism that defines Amish life.

In Pennsylvania, more specifically, I found that the burdens of agrarianism fell particularly on full-time Amish dairying operations. Amish dairies are diverse, and their approaches, technological adoptions, and attitudes toward dairy cattle vary based on individual, affiliation, church district, and geographic region (Brock and Reschly 2016; Cross 2021). In the case of Pennsylvania dairy farmers, with many Old Order Lancaster members who rely on a Grade A fluid milk market, the intricacies surrounding technological adoption and agricultural advice and education can take on different dimensions when compared with similar challenges met by New York, Ohio, or Wisconsin-based Amish. As such, Amish wrestle with external expressions and internal reflections of agrarian values in dairying, which come to the surface in interactions with people who are helping to maintain their businesses, including agribusinesses.

## METHOD

The basis of my argument comes from a series of case studies I collected during ethnographic research conducted in 2013 and follow-up interactions and interviews between 2014 and 2019. As I have mentioned in a publication focused on Amish attitudes about the environment and intervening technologies (Welk-Joerger 2019), these observations were unique because I worked through an agribusiness liaison to gain access to primarily Old Order Amish dairy farming families. This agribusiness, a feed company based in central Pennsylvania, granted permission for me to ride with three salesmen, observe their farm visits, interview them among other employees, and attend larger team and customer meetings related to the dairy feed business between May and August 2013.<sup>1</sup> This arrangement allowed for unique participant observation opportunities that are sometimes overlooked using other sociological methods, such as paper surveys. Many of the interactions witnessed and documented were spontaneous, which allowed for the observation of a wide range of expressions and reactions that illustrated the day-to-day maintenance of Amish

TABLE 1: ONE WEEK OF VISITS, MAY 27 – MAY 31, 2013

Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1. Amish (13)	12. Amish	18. Mennonite	26. Amish (7)	35. Amish
2. Amish	13. Amish (1)	19. Mennonite	27. Mennonite	36. Amish
3. Amish	14. Amish	20. Amish	28. Amish	37. Amish
4. Amish	15. Amish	21. Amish	29. Amish ( <i>t</i> )	38. Amish
5. Amish	16. Amish (17)	22. Amish	30. Amish	39. Amish (Md.)
6. Amish	17. Amish (16)	23. Amish	31. Amish	40. Amish (Md.)
7. Amish (26)		24. Amish	32. NAA	41. NAA (Md.)
8. Amish		25. Amish *	33. Amish	42. NAA (Md.)
9. Amish			34. Amish	43. NAA (Md.)
10. Amish				44. NAA (Md.)
11. Amish				

This week represents 6-11 visits each day, 44 unique farms over one week with one salesman. The details included in this chart aim to illustrate the places visited (all Pennsylvania except ones marked “Md.” for Maryland), affiliation of person who operated the farm, and relevant connections between church and family members.

NAA – No Anabaptist Affiliation

(#) – Sibling to head-of-household represented in parentheses

\* – Church leader

(*t*) – Currently or formerly on trustee system

to non-Amish business partnerships. These qualitative data aid in understanding how ideologies manifest in everyday work and decisions and how they become concretized in times of tension or conflict.

Cultural anthropologists embrace methodological messiness in their attention to positionality, reflexivity, and storytelling in their discipline (Ruby 1982; Brettell 1996; McGranahan 2020). Participant observation allows researchers prolonged opportunities to witness patterns of behavior and distinctive interactions which illustrate ways of knowing and being in the world. In anthropological contributions to the environmental humanities, case studies help ground theoretical frameworks with everyday human interactions. In Amish and Plain Anabaptist studies, similar approaches to data and commitments to storytelling bring nuance to the more generalizable conclusions about these people.

The aim of my research project was to explore how farmers interacted with feed companies and made decisions about farming amidst regular exposure, services, and products from agribusinesses. The resulting ethnographic findings demonstrated that dairying came with unique challenges that expanded well beyond the purview of agribusiness services. With dairying also came te-

dious negotiations about the structure of agrarian life within Amish worldviews, worldviews that the company I worked with needed to be sensitive to and consciously aware of to maintain their partnerships with Amish customers. Responding to this customer base, the feed company used weekly farm visits to navigate these unique needs alongside their traditional nutritional services.

The feed company’s dairy-focused sales team had various responsibilities during farm visits. Each week, the salesmen would visit customer farms to pick up orders, facilitate herd checks, or provide nutritional advice related to supplemental animal feed. If a family member was available on the farm, much of the visit was spent having a conversation with this person about the animals, the crops, and their feed plans, as well as updates about their lives and community. These unstructured conversations formed the basis of the relationship between customer and feed company and lasted anywhere between five minutes to one hour. Most of the involved conversations were with the male heads of the household, which is consistent with the long-standing, overt (and to some in the past, “enviable”) patriarchal structure of the culture (Jellison 2001; Johnson-Weiner 2017). In two instances, on the most conservative farms on my roster, I was an unwelcome addition to the sales-

man-farmer management conversations, given attitudes about women's involvement in business matters. As a result, I did not collect data on those farms. However, in most cases, I interacted with the male heads *and* helped take feed samples from wives, spoke with daughters and sons as they helped milk, and watched young children play with the cats, dogs, and birds who roamed around the barns. These interactions supported the equitable distribution of labor in the familial nucleus that has long existed in Amish farm life (Jellison and Reschly 2020).

The company sold feed to farm families across Pennsylvania, Maryland, Delaware, and New Jersey, and although these families included Amish and non-Amish farmers of various backgrounds, the majority of the dairy farms buying feed from this company were Amish-owned and located in Pennsylvania. Over the course of my research, I visited 84 different Amish dairy farms; a stark comparison to the 12 non-Amish farms that made my visit roster. Each week I would visit between 21 and 44 farms with the breakdown contingent on the length of conversations during visits, the need for individual "herd checks," weather, Amish holidays, and harvest timelines (Table 1). The consolidation of dairy farming operations since the early 2000s explains some of the overall figures and distribution of farm owners found in my work. The structure of non-Amish farms compared to Amish-owned ones may also account for this differentiation. While non-Amish-owned farms often include larger multi-family (and outside farm worker) operations with hundreds of animals, most Amish-owned dairies remain single-family operations with 40 or 50 milking cows (Holly, et al. 2019).

The location of these farms is important to highlight because the "under 20 percent" figure cited by McConnell and Loveless (2018) does not account for regional variations in Amish full-time farming numbers. In 2013, the year of my significant ethnographic work, it was estimated that one-third to half of the Amish population in the United States actively maintained a farm as a primary source of income (Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt 2013, 282). However, the distribution of these active farms was uneven across settlements. While Amish in Holmes County, OH, were estimated to only have 8% of their households farming, around 40% of Lancaster County,

PA, Amish households owned full-time farming operations (Hurst and McConnell 2010). These numbers and percentages continued to fall, but my encounters in Pennsylvania may demonstrate a unique agrarian vision that is maintained by groups attempting to sustain the full-time farming occupations that have come to define (and sell, in some cases) Amish culture of the "Garden Spot" (Walbert 2002).

In addition to farm visits, I helped the feed company execute company-hosted events and workshops. This included an educational day, where the company invited experts to lecture about dairy calf health, and a business expo, which included speakers and booths focused on farm policy, finances, and rumen gut health. I also attended Family Days on the Farm in 2013 and 2014, an Amish-organized fair held in Pennsylvania that hosts lectures and workshops focused on organic farming. The Amish-hosted fairs both paralleled and diverged from the company-sponsored workshops, and both aimed to extend agricultural knowledge and maintain agricultural businesses among the Amish. After my research in 2013 and 2014, I continued to attend the feed company expo in 2015, 2017, and 2018, and in 2021, I conducted a short series of follow-up interviews with the feed salesmen I rode with during my earlier studies.

## BACKGROUND AND TERMINOLOGY

### Defining Amish Agrarianism

Agrarian attitudes operate differently among the Amish. Although the Amish share a general history of agrarianism with mainstream agriculturalists in the United States, reinterpretations of the *Ordnung* over time went on to reflect and frame agrarian ideology as it operates in Amish life today. In many cases, these historical shifts went on to inspire non-Amish agrarians and the development of multiple, culturally-contingent "agrarianisms."

The ideology of agrarianism has been described as the long-standing celebration and vision of agricultural life as an inherently positive force in society (Danbom 1991, 1; Sexsmith 2019, 708). Scholars of American life and history have argued that agrarian ideals anchored the prospect and vision of early European settlement in what

we now call the United States (Hagenstein, et al. 2011; Evans 2019). Promises of land ownership in reaction to rigid European hierarchies and urbanization inspired colonization and leached into Early American politics as the acquisition of this land was predicated on dislocating the major indigenous nations that already occupied North America at this time. Eighteenth-century agrarianism assumed that Old World crops and agricultural practices were morally and scientifically superior to other ways of engaging with nature, which went on to influence the work of U.S. politicians and, by extension, ideas of citizenship (Hellenbrand 1985; Christensen 2021). The Jeffersonian agrarian ideal, for instance, imagined the small-scale, white-owned family farm as the model for society, with familial ties to the land forming the basis of citizen ties to the nation (Thompson and Hilde 2000; Grey 2014; Sexsmith 2019). Historically, the Amish did not actively contribute to these debates, neither through wartime participation nor votes, but they certainly benefitted from the economic developments anchored in agrarian values and enmeshed with colonial pursuits, especially regarding westward expansion (Rhodes 1991; Kroeker 1997).

The moral orientation of agrarianism has long been an important characteristic of the larger ideology, especially as it has evolved over time as a term and concept in the United States. American agrarianism has roots in Protestantism, which would go on to inform factions in agrarian capitalism, agrarian populism, and social-agricultural reform (Mommmsen 2005; Lowe 2015; Smångs and Redding 2018; Fischer-Tiné, Huebner, and Tyrrell 2021). Just as reactions to denigrated European urbanization and unjust social orders framed eighteenth-century U.S. agrarianism, responses to exploitative industrial farming informed twentieth and twenty-first-century “new” agrarianisms in the country (Freyfogle 2001). New agrarians emphasize the intentionality of agricultural practices to promote food justice, ecological regeneration, and biodiversity in the wake of heavily consolidated and industrialized farming operations. Scholars within and outside these progressive agrarian pursuits have criticized their play to nostalgia, seen as both a hindrance and an advantage by activists who have tried to reach wider audiences through emotive responses (Smith 2000). Through their lifestyle, situated within their religious beliefs, the

Amish came to personify such agrarian nostalgia for non-Amish onlookers.

Before twentieth-century developments of land scarcity, Amish life “required” a focus on farming occupations which aligned agrarianism with Christian values (Hostetler 1993, 88). Farming allowed the Amish to be protected from urban influences that would otherwise challenge the good works and fellowship pursued by the church and guided by Biblical Scripture. Scholars of Amish life have long cited how connections to God inform Amish connections to nature, with the Anabaptist responsibility to be “stewards of the land” steering decisions about agricultural practices (Redekop 2003). Although nature may be understood and celebrated through Christian doctrine, farm life and the practical choices that come with it are ultimately about sustaining family and the wider Amish culture. These attitudes would go on to inform Amish decision-making about industrial agricultural technologies in the twentieth century.

Decisions to embrace or eschew industrial agricultural technologies impacted the Amish with great force with the advent of the tractor, resulting in variable and regional *Ordnung* distinctions across the wider religious sect. This is arguably when non-Amish agrarians began to take closer notice of Amish life and looked to Amish farmers for inspiration in navigating their own concerns about the same agricultural developments. As early as 1935, ecologist Paul Sears identified the Amish as agrarian exemplars, with Jerome Rodale constantly referencing Amish farming in his organic-focused publications throughout the 1950s and 1960s (Case 2014). Amish writers who would focus on harmony with nature, such as David Kline, went on to inspire non-Amish agrarian writers such as Barbara Kingsolver and Wendell Berry, pleading for environmental reform through religious example (McConnell and Loveless 2018). Sociologists of sustainability continue to grapple with the relationship between religious affiliation and sustainability decision-making, and this has led to researcher focus on Amish and other Plain Anabaptist traditions as models for future intervention and outreach (Stinner, Paoletti, and Stinner 1989; Hockman-Wert 1998; Brock and Barham 2015; Schewe and Brock 2018). Inspired by Amish life, non-Amish agrarian values have expanded beyond topics of

food production and infiltrated concerns about quality education (Howley et.al. 2008). In these examples, the Amish convey a monolithic reputation as “purveyors of agrarian wisdom” for non-Amish communities, which often ignores the existing diversity of agrarian expression between regions, settlements, churches, and families (Nolt and Meyers 2007).

While non-Amish outsiders have embraced a sense of agrarianism from a limited view of Amish life, agrarian values and views of agrarian integrity play various, vibrant roles within Old Order Amish churches today. Through Amish agrarianism, church districts invest in full-time farming members to navigate uncertain futures by carrying on long-standing *Ordnung* traditions other members may have abandoned in their economic pursuits. The two important characteristics of agrarianism that sit at the forefront for Amish include: (1) the sense of economic and social independence through living off the land, an independence historically tied to worldly separation; and (2) the ability to restrain from technological adoption to adhere to a traditional, labor-intensive model of care for nature. These are ideal components of Amish agrarianism, not necessarily the reality as they work on the ground. However, I argue that they inform some of the tensions I noticed for Pennsylvania-based Old Order Amish farmers I encountered in the 2010s.

### The Dairying Agrarian

Dairying occupies a unique space for exploring such agrarian tensions, as, for many years, dairy farming had allowed Amish farmers to fulfill a sense of economic and social independence given its year-long milk market. Traditionally, dairying was just one aspect of larger self-sustaining farming operations, with cattle supplying needed proteins in the winter months. Dairying grew out as a specialized, intensified business in the United States, starting in the early twentieth century, and the year-long labors surrounding the business remained appealing to Amish farmers. Dairying has become more difficult to sustain over the years, especially on the smaller operations that dominate the Amish model. This is due, in part, to internal debates regarding technology-use, which are entangled with possibilities for expansion and questions of ownership and labor regarding the

*Ordnung*. Such complications in dairying started in the mid-twentieth century for Amish churches when Grade A fluid milk regulations required new technological adoptions to ensure proper health measures, including the adoption of bulk refrigerated milk tanks and milking machines (Wetmore 2007). Amish farmers met a crossroads and had to decide either to adopt these state-mandated measures to continue to participate in the fluid milk market or find processors—usually cheese plants—who would accept Grade B milk (Blake, et.al. 1997). Conservative denominations, such as the Swartzentruber Amish, founded partnerships with non-Amish cheese factories or became their own processors, which allowed them to hand-milk and avoid bulk refrigeration for decades after the establishment of the formal USDA grade system. But it was mid-century acceptance of these government-mandated technologies in other settlements and church districts that led to an increase in the number of full time Amish dairy operations (Shupp Espenshade 2016).

The diversity of Amish dairying operations since the mid-twentieth century cannot be understated. Producers who rely on milk cans persist alongside bulk tank farmers, with variations in herd size and agricultural mechanization not only dependent on affiliation but also individual cases (Brock and Reschly 2016; Cross 2016). What is striking about dairying in these communities is that even as can milking becomes less feasible, over half of Wisconsin’s dairy farms are owned and operated by a range of Amish and Old Order Mennonite members. In Pennsylvania, Amish farmers make up approximately 25% of dairy farms, and land prices continue to affect the movement of farmers out of state into areas like Kentucky and Tennessee (Cross 2007; Holly, et.al. 2019, 335). Diversity in technological adoption can almost be designated geographically in Pennsylvania with the Route 30 line, as districts north of the line demonstrate more relaxed *Ordnung* parameters than those found in the southern part of the state, who tend to be more conservative. While some Old Order Amish may use technological implements linked to the electrical grid on *rented* farms in Lancaster County, others, regardless of renting or owning, refrain from using battery-operated tools (such as in York County).

Amidst this diversity and change, dairying occupies a special traditional place in what could

be called an occupational hierarchy in Amish life in Pennsylvania. It is pursued at times with great fervor by its members despite its many challenges. Speaking with a non-Amish banker for instance, whose clientele in 2013 comprised mostly Amish businessmen, Amish farmers pursued dairying for reasons related to community and family building:

Almost all of them will tell you they want to dairy because it's close to home; dad can be with the family and, as the children get older, it gives them something to do. They have work; they're not just idle at home. (Recorded interview, August 11, 2013)

The banker thought it crucial to point out during our conversation that “It's important to remember that they're working for a way of life.” During the interview, he set dairying apart from other occupations we discussed which included greenhouses, construction, and produce stands. When listing these other businesses, the banker was careful to note that in many cases, these operations helped finance dairying businesses. He said, “I sometimes ask myself, ‘Why are they still milking cows?’” The integrity of the dairying occupation was wrapped up in these familial values that defined Amish life, and it was something that needed to be sustained, even supplementally, to maintain this agrarian vision.

These observations testify to how the Amish see agriculture as a “religious tenet and Christian duty” and “the seedbed for family life” (Kraybill and Nolt 2004, 21). These attitudes are related, in part, to those Biblical interpretations of land stewardship but are ultimately about maintaining the Amish family unit. These original tenets became prey to reinterpretation and bargaining given more recent external pressures that have included land scarcity, land prices, urbanization, and tourism. I argue that the farms that survived were held to a different *Ordnung* standard when compared to other Amish businesses.

Technology use best illustrates this elevated standard and expectation for Amish agriculturalists to “perform” agrarian within their communities. As mentioned earlier, some state-mandated adoption has been necessary for Amish participation in the fluid milk market - but these technologies are linked directly to the harvest and storage of milk from cows. Rearing and caring for cattle are arguably the most important elements of dairying

but they are often outside the purview of the state. Most of my ethnographic encounters with Amish dairy farmers have been set in this space of care, and as a result, I witnessed a diverse range of technological mediations regarding animal husbandry. It was in these instances that I noticed there were different expectations for farmers in what it meant to “look” or “perform” agrarian.

Many Amish today resist technological implements when encouraged to use them by the agribusinesses and extension agencies that advise them. To adequately sustain a business where lenders can be paid and cattle adequately maintained, non-Amish advisors often encourage further commercialization, which is thought to lead to better monetary returns. Yet, as the “seedbed of family life,” Amish dairymen and their church districts evaluate these farms with a traditional vision in mind, addressing any changes with financial hope and communal caution. It was in this liminal, uncertain space where farmers negotiated internal tensions informed by Amish agrarianism.

## FOUR ETHNOGRAPHIC CASE STUDIES

### 1. “Public” Agricultural Technologies

Over the month of May in 2013, “Pete” updated the dairy team on one of his customer’s technological challenges with the church. “Eli B.” was a younger Amish man with a growing herd of cattle in southern Pennsylvania. To assist him in mixing his feed without using a total mixed ration (TMR) mixer, Eli installed a hydraulically-powered forage wagon outside of his silo. The feed would be poured into the forage wagon, which was installed with a small elevator that would mix the feed and lift it up and into Eli’s feed cart. This clever system mixed Eli’s rations in a way that encouraged his animals to consume their needed starches, fibers, and proteins within the most favorable smelling feeds. Amish farmers who are not able to have TMR mixers usually pour their supplemental rations on top of one another instead of mixing them into their silage or hay. The disadvantage of this method is the animal can avoid these supplements if she does not find them as favorable as the fermented feed, which is usually piled underneath. In the worst cases, if a cow continually avoids

her supplemental ration, the method could cause health problems and drops in milk production.

To the average person, Eli's system was a clever technological loophole to obtain the results of a TMR mixer without the need to buy or install an electrical mixer. Each part of his forage wagon was a church-approved technology, and he had placed them together in a way that it ensured a properly mixed ration while saving him time from hand shoveling. But within his church, Eli began to upset other farmers. In the first week of the month, Pete announced that Eli "might lose his wagon." Pete had passed by the farm the day before and saw the wagon in the field, not in the vicinity of his silo. At the time I was observing visits with "Gene," who had explained to me that he sometimes would be asked for advice from farmers about technological advances and loopholes. Gene had given Eli the advice a few weeks earlier to keep his forage wagon after the bishop had approached him to say that some members of the church found his system "unfavorable." To hear the wagon had been moved to the field shocked Gene, since Eli seemed very keen on it. Forces stronger than his ambition must have sparked the move, and this concerned the entire office as a delicate situation balancing church rules with the betterment of the cattle at Eli's dairying operation.

The next week, Pete updated us once again on Eli's status. The forage wagon would be left up to a vote. It was a minister who brought the forage wagon "problem" to the district's bishop, but the bishop was so torn by the subject that he decided it best that the church vote on if Eli could keep his wagon. By the following week, the voting had been completed, and the church decided that Eli's wagon was acceptable. The only member to vote against Eli was the farmer-minister who initially brought the subject to the bishop. The salesman made it a point to explain to me that this farmer was not doing as well as Eli financially, and they speculated that it could very well have been jealousy that caused him to bring the entire situation up to the district in the first place.

To appease this displeased farmer who lost the vote, Eli built a shed over his forage wagon, so it was no longer in the line of sight of passersby. Pete later explained to me that this was not a problem for Eli, who made his wagon more efficient from within the shed. But this decision speaks to what Walbert (2002, 112) has described as the impor-

tance of "looking" like a traditional farmer within the Amish church, even if the reality is much more complicated. Despite possible jealousy, the major issue with Eli's forage wagon was it could be seen publicly by Amish family, neighbors, and even non-Amish passersby. While the church recognized it as an important tool for cattle rearing, it was frivolous within the confines of Amish agrarian ideals. The wagon did not adhere to the more traditional way of feeding that had been long practiced by other farming members of the church, which involved pulling feed from the silo by hand and transporting it in a cart with the supplementals to distribute to each animal.

The course of these events frustrated Eli and other farmers with respect to the public-facing technologies other kinds of businesses were able to use and adopt within their districts. After one salesman, "Lee," told the story of Eli's troubles to an Amish customer, the farmer lamented over the fact that lumber companies could use big rigs and computerized cutting machines with little controversy. Such adoptions in agribusiness-adjacent Amish businesses were likely made years earlier by the church district based on a combination of state pressures, product inspections, and the suspension of some technology-use rules based on if the person owned or rented the building, equipment, or business outright. However, these measures fall on farmers differently than non-farming neighbors, in part because of these agrarian ideals that prioritize the integrity of traditional farming over occupations that were embraced as a result of twentieth-century land squeezes.

## 2. "Private" Agricultural Technologies

The case of the public forage wagon, a debate that played out because of its visibility from the road, contrasts sharply with the notion of "looking" or even "performing" agrarian ideals in private (Goffman 1959). But the prevalence and potential for conflict regarding private farm work and technology-use anchored several interactions I had with another farmer during my visits.

During my first interaction with him, Gene and I found "Jonas" working in the back barn, sitting in the seat of his tow motor adorned with a bucket and cage fork. He was pushing the manure piled on the ground into the bucket to lift it up and into the manure spreader found outside the entrance of

the back barn area. When Jonas saw us, he leaped nervously out of the tow motor and cautiously walked toward Gene, who had a menacing grin on his face. Jonas forced out a small laugh, and as he approached the fence that separated the back barn from the milking area, he shook his head. “I’m not sure if you came at the best time,” Jonas announced, referring to his unconventional way of collecting manure. Gene laughed, “It’s okay, Jonas. I see your fork laying up next to the post, there,” signaling that he understood the unspoken rule that required Jonas to fork manure by hand. Later, Gene would regret not being quick enough to joke around with Jonas further. He thought it would have been amusing to see the reaction if he had told Jonas his bishop was riding down the lane to visit him in that same moment.

The joke of the performance of farm work with limited technology entered the conversation in subsequent visits to Jonas’s farm. During the following week’s consultation with him, for example, Gene and I met Jonas as he was in the middle of scooping out his feed rations by hand, pushing his four chambered feed cart with his three-year-old son riding in the empty side-bed of the wooden bin. Jonas grinned in remembrance of our last meeting, “Well, you came at the right time this time,” were his first words to us. His self-acknowledgement of the technological downgrade produced just a little more tension than joking in his voice, as if he was reminding himself to be on guard for that possibility of a church leader, or anyone else, witnessing him at work. The truth of that ever-looming concern was what made the banter between Gene and Jonas funny, but it also revealed the stress of “performing” agrarian, even in a private hidden setting.

The agrarian ideal that informed these cases of complicated technology-use emphasizes the very physical work of traditional farming. Scholars have noted that part of the allure of agriculture for Amish, in the past, has included bodily labor and the aches and pains it may produce, to allow for further spiritual meditation on the material world (Hostetler 1993, 88). Using technologies such as grain elevators or tow motors circumvents some of this effort, which was of concern to older church leaders I spoke with in the field. One older bishop voiced to a salesman how Amish farmers have become “lazy” with their adaptations. He explained that farm labor was supposed to “remind”

Amish men of the labors he is indebted to give to the Lord. For this bishop, the physicality of farming reproduced Amish doctrine, and he went on to voice his concerns for his “young farmers” and the members of his church who were “forgetting” core values. I was later told that this bishop was radical in his thinking, but he informed the salesmen’s hopes that as younger church leaders replaced older ones, these views would change to respond to farmer needs rather than needs of the consistency of old values.

Illustrating the diversity of cases within settlements, overall technological adoption and use took on various dimensions in the day-to-day Amish operations I visited across Pennsylvania and Maryland. Both Eli and Jonas’s examples point to the importance of the physical nature of farming for some Amish agrarian imaginations, which is only further highlighted when compared to some seemingly less problematic agricultural adoptions that are arguably more “modern” or “technical” than a grain elevator or tow motor. Amish farmers grew Roundup Ready® corn, used artificial insemination to breed their cattle, and, before being phased out through pressures by dairy processors by 2015, used synthetic bovine growth hormone to extend lactation cycles. While arguably some of the most problematic technologies for non-Amish agrarians, these adoptions were less controversial and rarely pointed out during the non-Amish to Amish feed consultation sessions.

Certainly, some Amish have resisted Roundup products for environmental reasons, as expressed eloquently by writers like David Kline. But others I met demonstrated the sheer diversity of Amish farming as they poked fun at neighbors and family members who were hesitant to adopt these tools. During a visit to “John’s” farm with Pete, Pete dramatically pointed out the bags of Roundup Ready® corn in John’s shed. “Is that a problem?” John answered in a singsongy voice, with laughter between the two men following. They proceeded to take their time during the visit to exchange the “crazy stories” they had heard about GMO-corn. John mentioned how some farmers he knew thought it would make human skin glow, while Pete recalled a myth that the corn kept deer away from conventional fields. “Those must be some pretty smart deer!” John exclaimed, sarcastically. “Well, it didn’t quite work,” Pete assured him, “I think the guy who farmed his field with the

stuff got a wake-up call when he saw the deer eat through his rows of GMO just to eat more rows of his conventional.” John, among others, found the seed an important agricultural development that did not take away from the labors of the field. In fact, in many ways, Roundup Ready® made these labors worth it through its opportunity to increase yields at a time of limited available crop lands.

There were also cases of Amish farmers adopting highly technical systems that even non-Amish farmers might have found superfluous. When Pete and I visited “Levi’s” farm, within a few miles of Jonas’s operation, I was surprised to see a computerized mister system integrated into the tie-stall barn. The misters were set to spray the cattle with cool water every half-hour to keep the animals comfortable in the peak-heat of July. I rarely saw these adopted in non-Amish dairy barns, so I had not anticipated an Amish dairyman to have one. Pete speculated that Levi’s bishop knew about the system but ignored it given the extra work Levi put into his operation. He was known to wash his cows regularly, brush out their tails, and keep their pens meticulously clean. Rather than circumventing other physically labor-intensive tasks, the misters ultimately benefitted the cattle, which had modest capital returns back to Levi’s operation, since cool clean cattle are known to produce more milk than heat-stressed ones. This cost-benefit calculation pushes Amish agricultural labors into a different perspective, as the rationale for technology-use must balance with the physical work of the individual farmer, with the needs of the confined dairying animals taking precedent in Levi’s situation so they could make adequate returns to keep his operation in business.

### 3. Maintaining Amish Agrarian Businesses

Regular interactions between the feed company and their Amish dairy farming clientele demonstrated not only these minute tensions regarding agrarian integrity and work; they also illustrated the difficult juggle of farming as lifestyle, livelihood, and business. Opportunities to practice (as well as witness and police) traditional farming would not be possible without first the success of the business, which has posed challenges for dairying in an ever-fluctuating milk market amidst high real estate prices and limited agricultural education opportunities for young farm managers.

Despite these circumstances, Amish have demonstrated investments in the success of full-time dairying operations. In the decades that a banker had worked with dairy farmers, he emphasized that he never charged off an Amish loan. Members always found a way to pay off lenders, and in dairying, they always found a solution to even the direst of financial situations.

Part of the fail-safe of these and other businesses comes from the unique position of the Amish trustee system. When an Amish business shows signs that it is struggling, especially related to overall management and paying off bills, the church may decide to appoint three trustees to help oversee the business. Usually, the church appoints one member as a trustee, the struggling business owner chooses another, and those two appointees choose a third person to aid with surveillance and decision-making (Jeong 2020, 133). The goal of such a system is financial stability: ensuring that either the business returns to a profitable status or deciding that it ultimately should be sold for the sake of the family and church.

During the interviews and farm visits, the feed company salesmen would flag to me when one of their customers was “on trustees.” The salesmen described the system in various ways to me: from a dire situation where a farmer needed to “hand over his checkbook” to a church-appointed team, to a useful group of advisees that helped younger farmers navigate the challenges of the dairying business. The number of farmers with a trustee group fluctuated over time, with one of the salesmen updating me in 2021 that six of their customers were taking part in the system (at the time of my ride-alongs in 2013, only three customers across the whole company had trustees).

The feed company occupied an interesting place in Amish trustee situations, which were very much case-by-case. Although much of their nutritional advising still went directly to customers on trustees, at times, the salesmen would have to relay feed company information to one of the advisors. Most of the church-appointed trustee groups would include at least one successful full-time farmer, but it was rare to see all three advisors come from full-time farming backgrounds. Advisors often owned agribusiness adjacent companies, including seed, welding, and lumber businesses. Given this unique structure, at times, trustee cases strangely gave the feed company

more business. In cases when a farmer-advisor would be paired with a farmer-in-trouble who fed their cattle with a different company, the farmer-in-trouble would be forced to use the same feed company as the farmer-advisor. Knowing the fragility of these situations, the feed company I worked with took care to take extra time with new customers who came to them through the trustee system.

As the feed salesmen understood it, the biggest threat to Amish dairy businesses was a lack of adequate agricultural training. Younger farmers, often just married, took on farms without the experience of managing a full operation. Some families—husband and wife included—may have worked on dairy farms that they grew up on or near in their church districts. They may have even decided to take on a dairy after continued exposure and work with cattle in their community. But often, these young workers were never taught *why* they had to complete certain tasks, and the importance of certain habits or practices they completed on the farm was never broken down or verbalized by the generation before them. In instances where there was this clear disconnect, either in experience or explanation of experiences, the feed salesmen encouraged their clientele to participate in their church trustee system from an advisory standpoint. To the feed company, the trustee system acted as a more formalized Amish educational network. The feed salesmen recognized that the program worked well to connect younger farmers with more experienced members, and this recognition came from an understanding that the church actively invested financially and socially in the success of their full-time farming members. In these cases, the salesmen used their understanding of Amish agrarianism to redistribute their advisory loads and encourage their customers to seek help from the resources already available locally.

#### 4. Ensuring Amish Agrarian Longevity

The trustee system is just one of several Amish practices that aim to keep agricultural work alive and at the center of life. Family Days on the Farm is another, an event that aims to educate and excite agriculturally-distanced Amish generations about gardening, food processing, and organic methods (McConnell and Loveless 2018, 73). Efforts to internally educate, encourage, and sustain agrarian

occupations have their limitations, especially as the agricultural markets Amish farmers contribute to change in response to new knowledge, environmental circumstances, and political developments. In these instances, extension services and agribusinesses have participated in the agrarian mission to keep Amish farms in business, as customers, partners, and neighbors.

This increased reliance on agribusinesses for products and the agricultural practices attached to them invigorates quotidian negotiations between Amish individuals and non-Amish actors from the community at large. On the one hand, agribusinesses expose Amish farmers to technologies and practices that can prove disruptive to religious values and cause conflict between members struggling to adapt to the agricultural market. On the other hand, with the scarcity of full-time farmers and generational agricultural knowledge, agribusinesses can help keep farmers in business—with each successful farming operation comprising an ideal that continues to help define what it means to be Amish.

The feed company I worked with demonstrated a support for their Amish customers in three major ways: personable advising, incentive programs, and educational events. As scholars of sustainability have suggested, increased attention and sensitivity to the religious diversity of farmers may help in future efforts to create open discourse about the future of agriculture as an environmentally conscientious trade (Schewe and Brock 2018). In these facets of their business, the feed company provided a few good examples of what this kind of attention and sensitivity can look like on the ground when working with Amish farmers. As mentioned earlier, feed company salesmen have used their knowledge of Amish agrarian attitudes to work with their customers, building trust that contributes to the longevity of their feeding partnerships. Recognition of these cultural nuances has helped the feed company navigate the unique expectations that can come with working with Amish clients, an important task since the company relies economically on its Amish clientele, who comprise more than 25% of the dairy farms in Pennsylvania and over 50% of farming operations in the counties served by the feed company (Cross 2007; Cross 2015).

As mentioned above, advising sessions took the form of weekly farm check-ins, where con-

cerns were voiced but cattle were also carefully observed. The feed company worked closely with milk testing companies in the region to encourage and obtain herd reports, which served as blueprints for understanding the production status of a given dairying operation. In my August 2013 ride-alongs with Lee, the salesman explained that these efforts responded to Amish needs for “management in a bag.” The vice president of a larger feed company later described to me that farm management advice “came with the package,” and it made their business model unique to other non-Amish agribusinesses working with the Amish (Recorded Interview, August 8, 2013). The feed company’s advising transcended well beyond the supplemental feed advice they offered doing weekly check-ins and monthly herd checks. Pete, for instance, gained the nickname “Doppler Radar” in the office because of the volume of calls he received from his Amish customers asking for the hour-to-hour weather report. Pete would often answer his phone announcing “Doppler Radar, here!” in jest, which was always followed by the morning news weather report and advice about planting or harvesting crops and hay.

To encourage farmers on their supplemental feeding programs, the feed company incentivized high production numbers on Amish farms through special programs. One way they did this was through pizza parties hosted by the feed company for farmers whose cows reached a daily 80-pound milk average according to milk testing reports. During their interviews, the salesmen described these parties as “public relations” opportunities, where they supplied a meal and talked to families informally to further personalize their business partnerships. I attended one pizza party in June 2013, and the lunch included the farmer, his wife and five children, as well as his parents. The salesmen in attendance joked with the children, praised the strawberry dessert the wife made for the party, and exchanged stories with the farmer and his father about their weddings and definitions of a happy marriage. The feed company understood the importance of family and fellowship in the maintenance of Amish agrarian values and the success of Amish farm operations. These parties were opportunities for the feed company to participate in fellowship, celebrate a successful farm management plan, and thank their customers for their business.

In addition to personable advising and incentive programs, the feed company also hosted educational events for their customers in the form of field days and community business expos. The company invited their customers to these events through flyers handed out during the weekly farm visits, with each event held at the community fairgrounds. The educational events of the year in 2013 focused on calf health and featured a series of speakers, including some of the salesmen, providing basic information about aiding in calf birth and feeding newborn calves. One of the speakers invited to this event included a veterinarian who completed a calf dissection to illustrate the basic anatomy of young bovines. The feed company invited this veterinarian for various reasons but especially with their Amish clientele in mind. The veterinarian seamlessly integrated the scientific information with religious doctrine, making comments about how calves were born in a way that “God did not intend” and how certain organs “proved the existence of God,” with the multi-chambered bovine kidney illustrating Godly intentions for cattle to be reared by humans prone to error” (Welk-Joerger 2019, 96). The Amish in the audience were receptive to the advice, taking notes and nodding enthusiastically during the lecture. The narrative framing executed by the veterinarian validated Amish worldviews and took them seriously in the context of agrarian education.

## CONCLUSION

As Amish represent proportionately fewer full-time farming operations, church districts will need to continue to recalibrate and balance the pressures placed on their farmers, deciding when to push for the integrity of the traditional Amish agrarian vision and when to sacrifice worldly separation and restrained technological use for the sake of the survival of Amish farmers. In the examples above, I have demonstrated how some of these lines have been negotiated for church districts within the Old Order Amish settlements of Pennsylvania. While public and private technology use comes under scrutiny when bodily labor is sacrificed for “convenience,” Amish of the same districts have also come to rely on non-Amish agribusinesses for education and guidance to maintain their operations. These stories illustrate a strange time for looking, performing, and sustaining Amish agrarianism

into the twenty-first century. Yes, it is true that the Amish have continued to flourish in the wake of fewer full-time farming operations, but those that have survived hold a special place in the technological negotiations, economic investment, and social hierarchy of the Amish today. I would argue that just as agrarian ideals have proved polarizing in mainstream U.S. agriculture, the Amish also grapple with specific ideals of agrarian integrity, both romantic and pragmatic, that will continue to be negotiated and expressed by their fellow farming members.

Further, in studying how outside businesses come to observe and understand the intricacies of these ideological constraints, there is more to be explored in the role non-Amish play in the maintenance of Amish ideology. While non-Amish theorists may embrace over-generalized or incomplete ideas of agrarianism based on blanket observations of Amish life, non-Amish businesses that rely on Amish customers also illustrate the capacity to create sincere and specific relationships, knowing they are built on church-defined agrarian values. This is not to say businesses understand Amish life better than humanities writers or scholars, but in their regular interaction with Amish customers, their own economic stability depends on the trust built with their clientele. This trust may go on to inform how Amish farmers negotiate the terms of the agrarian expectations placed on them by their church, which may lead to the longevity or loss of future full-time farming operations.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> All names included in this study are pseudonyms to protect the identity of my informants. The feed company's name has also been omitted. This is a standard protocol aligned with an IRB that I submitted with Brandeis University in 2013, protocol #13090.

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