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## Review of: *The Amish Incident: Rural Conflict and Compromise* and *The Amish Incident: Wisconsin v. Yoder—Kelly Rundle and Tammy Rundle*

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Review of **Rundle, Kelly and Tammy Rundle. 2019. *The Amish Incident: Rural Conflict and Compromise*. Fourth Wall Films: Moline, IL. Running time: 26 minutes. DVD \$25.**

Review of: **Rundle, Kelly and Tammy Rundle. 2021. *The Amish Incident: Wisconsin v. Yoder*. Fourth Wall Films: Moline, IL. Running time: 27 minutes.**

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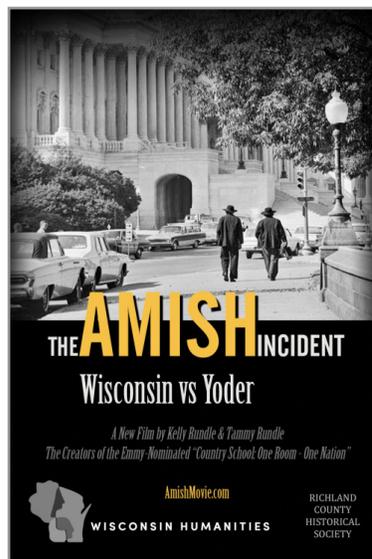
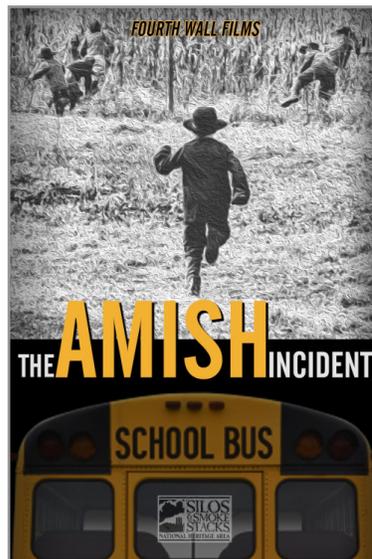
Award-winning documentary filmmakers Kelly and Tammy Rundle have created two short films focusing on historical conflicts over parochial Amish education in Wisconsin and Iowa. Their first film, *The Amish Incident: Rural Conflict and Compromise*, released in 2019, follows the rising controversy in rural Buchanan County, Iowa, from the bitterly contested 1961 vote to merge two school districts in neighboring towns Oelwein and Hazleton to the dramatic 1965 “incident” when education officials tried to forcibly transport Amish students to the local public school. The second film, *The Amish Incident: Wisconsin v. Yoder*, released in 2021, picks up the story of the Amish families who moved from Iowa to New Glarus, Wisconsin, in 1964, beginning with the tensions over increased tourism and disagreements with public school staff, and traces their choice to accept outside legal help in taking their court case to the Supreme Court in 1971.

Both films pivot on an “incident”—a point of conflict—that arose when Amish parents sought to run their parochial schools outside of existing legislative requirements for basic education. In Iowa, the contention in the courts was Amish parents’ choice to hire non-certified teachers; in Wisconsin, it was

Amish parents’ choice to only send their children to school through the eighth grade. Both films follow a simple narrative framework, opening with statements from experts on Amish educational history and local history, as well as people who were involved in the conflicts. They then pivot to a historical flashback, recalling Amish roots in the sixteenth-century Radical Reformation and summarizing both their beliefs and tradition. From there, the Rundles narrate the sequence of local events chronologically, using images from newspapers and voice-over from the experts introduced at the films’ outset. Their 2019 film focusing on the Iowa controversy uses footage mostly shot in present-day Buchanan County, Iowa, while the 2021 film on the Wisconsin fracas uses far more archival photographs, as well as archival audio from Supreme Court arguments.

The films have a distinct “outsider” narration, though the Rundles clearly chose to feature professionals sympathetic to Amish belief and tradition. Education historian Mark W. Dewalt speaks in both films, providing general background on Amish views on education. Both Dewalt and Brian Pottebaum, an elementary school principal in Jesup, Iowa, who also speaks in both films, argue that Amish communities support education, but they fear sending their children to alien educational contexts that conflict with their cultural expression of Christianity. The Rundles are at pains to demonstrate that this cultural expression includes an agrarian life apart from modern technology, providing extensive video and photographic evidence of plowing fields, harvesting hay, traveling in horse-drawn buggies, hanging laundry on clotheslines, and baking bread in wood-fired stoves. And while photos of Amish people are

included in both films, no Amish people speak at any point. While this is perhaps not surprising, considering Amish objections to appearing on camera, the filmmakers nevertheless are forced to



rely on the outside perspectives and memories of non-Amish people who experienced these conflicts or who have studied these events. Considering the brevity of the documentaries, there could have been space to add Amish perspectives, perhaps by having a narrator read from histories written by Amish people involved in the conflicts.

Still, the Rundles' strength as filmmakers is their ability to tell two cohesive and consecutive stories, portraying both the local politics of school conflicts and the Amish parents' religious freedom concerns. While they strive to present the Amish people as rooted in faith and concerned about their children's education, nevertheless, they present the state's interest in seeing that all children have equal access to education. In this way, the Rundles avoid the simplistic frame of public school officials persecuting helpless Amish families, as the national media coverage suggested was happening in both the Iowa and Wisconsin court cases.

Indeed, the Rundles quote historian Shawn Francis Peters as pointing out that the religious exception the Amish received in the *Wisconsin v. Yoder* case may not have been available to other religious groups; the Amish appeared "idiosyncratic" and non-threatening. To be sure, the court led by Chief Justice Warren Burger prioritized protecting religious freedom more than in later decades. Still, the *Yoder* decision was written extremely narrowly to allow the Amish freedom to control their children's education, a protection other religious groups have not been able to access. The legislative exception that the Amish received from the Iowa state legislature similarly betrays a unique sympathy to the image of the Amish as America's yeomen, preserving a microcosm of a virtuous Protestant past.

*Part I is available on DVD for \$25 (free shipping from <http://fourthwallfilms.com/films.html>). Parts I and II can be streamed through online services.*