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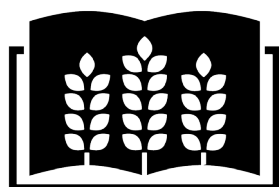
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In 1967: An Ethnography of the Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Old Order Mennonites

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Abstract: This study is an overview of the culture of the Pennsylvania Old Order Mennonites of the Groffdale Conference. It is based on the six months of anthropological field work I carried out in Lancaster County in the spring and summer of 1967. Oriented by ethnographic emphasis on the world view, conceptual system, key concepts, and basic practices that characterized the community during that period, it explores Old Order Mennonite religion, farming, family, community, and relations with outsiders. Based on conversations and interviews with a variety of Old Order Mennonite farmers, particularly intensive interviews with one key participant and his family, it also draws on participant observation, as I spent time around this family and neighboring families while we worked together on their farms and shared meals. Using a person-centered ethnographic approach, this study additionally considers the particular cultural orientations that my key participant and I brought to our encounters as we moved from an initial crisis to a friendship that helped transcend the cultural boundaries between us. [Abstract by author.]

Keywords: Groffdale Mennonite Conference; Team Mennonites; Childhood; Adolescence; Family; Religiosity; Funerals; Red Scare



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INTRODUCTION

As a young anthropologist, I spent six months in 1967 studying an Old Order Mennonite community in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. This research was based on standard methods of anthropological ethnography. These consist of establishing close working relationships with key participants, intensive interviewing and participant observation, and methodical analysis and interpretation of interview records and observation notes. The present study was oriented by anthropological culture theory that focuses on the insiders' concepts and perspectives. I sought to understand and describe the basic cultural practices of this group, their religion, farming, family, community, and relations with outsiders. I was also interested in how members understood and felt about these practices and how these were woven together in the general Old Order Mennonite world view. Drawing on an approach that was developing at that time, I paid particular attention to key concepts, including ideas about "serving as a witness," "separation from the 'world'" (or dominant American culture), and living a "plain" rather than "fancy" life. I also describe the evolving relationship I developed with my key participant and his family.¹

In 1967, most the Old Order Mennonites lived in the same area of Lancaster County, PA, that their ancestors had settled in during the eighteenth century after fleeing persecution and economic distress in Europe. Over the years, there had been several divisions among the Mennonites over whether to accept changes in the rules of the church. In 1927, the Old Order group split over the use of the car.² The Weaverland Conference (or Horning Mennonites) accepted the use of the car. The Groffdale Conference (or Wenger Mennonites), the subject of this essay, chose to keep using the horse and buggy. In 1967 only a few families lived more than six miles from one of their eight meetinghouses and most lived in an area ap-

proximately bounded by the Welsh Mountains and Route 23 in the South, Route 222 in the West, and the Pennsylvania Turnpike in the North.³ Amish, liberal Mennonites, and other Americans lived in the same area which was dotted with towns and villages. Most of the Old Order Mennonites lived on farms. In 1966, the Groffdale Conference had about 1,600 baptized members. Given their families were large and that young people did not join the Church until they were 16 or 17 years of age, the total population was about 3,500.

During my field work with the Old Order Mennonites, I heard two Old Order ministers speak about their religion, talked with several other members of the community, visited their farms, and sometimes helped with their work. However, most of my understanding came from participation in the daily life of one family and conversations with its members, particularly my "key informant," as we spoke of them then, the husband and father whom I call JW. He was a reflective farmer in his late thirties who not only lived the Old Order Mennonite way, but he also had a serious interest in the history and culture of his own community. In the course of our interviews, conversations, and farm work, he helped me understand Old Order Mennonite culture, which he contrasted with the ways of "The World," or dominant American Culture, with the ways of liberal Mennonites, and also with the Old Order Amish, whose plain culture he saw as similar but also significantly different from that of his own community.

JW and I formed a close relationship. First, we developed our own version of the anthropologist and participant relationship. JW's interest in his own community was reflected by the many books he had about its history. He kept most of these in the attic of his house since he knew that other mem-

¹ For a discussion of the kind of anthropological theory I drew on at the time, see Spradley (1972); for an analysis of the relationship between ethnographer and participant, see Caughey (2006). When I did this 1967 field work I was an advanced graduate student in the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. This article is a condensed and rewritten version of the unpublished manuscript I wrote in 1967.

² For an account of this schism, see Hurst (1960, pp.1-4)

³ While most Old Order Mennonites lived in Lancaster County in 1967, there were two small daughter settlements, one in Union County and one in Franklin County. At the time, moving beyond Lancaster County was controversial since it involved leaving the ancestral homeland and close neighborly connection with relatives and friends who still lived there. However, even in 1967, the rising price of available farmland in Lancaster County was a pressing issue, and community members were "keeping an eye" on the feasibility of daughter settlements. Nowadays, there are daughter settlements in nine or more different states, and the largest portion of Old Order Mennonites live outside Lancaster County.

bers of the community might disapprove of this “frivolous” interest. My anthropological concern with the contemporary community also interested him. He had not read much of the sociology of the plain people but his commitment to this way of life was based on serious reflection about this culture in comparison with other ways of living. He enjoyed considering my questions. However, his commitment to farm work meant that he was most comfortable talking when he was also working. Many of our best conversations occurred around a small Franklin stove in the tobacco shed while he was tying up tobacco and I was asking questions and taking notes. We spent time together when he was working in the fields and I was trying to help, as in haying, planting tobacco, and feeding the cattle. I also took many meals with the family, and played with the children. Occasionally, JW and I went out to run errands.

Our friendship was also shaped by what I brought to our relationship. As an anthropologist, I was committed to seeking understanding of the world view and values or “conceptual system” of the culture. We spent considerable time, for example, exploring “plainness” as a key concept and value in Old Order Mennonite culture, including how JW saw its application in his own community as different from that of the Amish. As a young anthropologist in 1967, I was also involved in critically questioning the values and practices of contemporary American culture and interested in looking to other cultures for potential help in understanding how to live. The Old Order resistance to the dominant American culture, their religious convictions, their small-scale farming, their strong sense of family and community, and their closeness to nature were of great interest to me. JW understood that my interest in the Old Order Mennonites was not just academic. He saw that I was seriously interested not only in learning about their culture but in leaning *from* it. This gradually deepened our connection. Our relationship was also affected by an early incident that nearly derailed this study.

THE COMMUNIST

I first connected to JW through a linguist who had been recommended to me by the Amish scholar, John Hostetler. Early on, before we knew each other well, JW asked me to drive him to an

auction. While Old Order Mennonites did not own cars, they were allowed by the rules of the church to accept rides. On the way, already helping me learn about his culture, JW explained that he and other plain farmers liked to attend auctions and farm sales in order to pick up needed farm tools or equipment cheaply but that this was also as a break from farm work and a chance to visit with neighbors and friends. “It’s like a diversion we allow ourselves,” he said, “like television for (you) outsiders.”

The auction was well attended, and there were well over a hundred people there, most of them Old Order Mennonite and Amish men in plain dress. There were also a few outsiders. Shortly after our arrival, one of the outsiders came up to us as we were talking with several other plain people. I can still see him in my memory. He was wearing an outsiders’ tan jacket and a narrow brimmed hat. He shocked us all when he said to JW and his companions, “I know him,” - meaning me - “and he is a COMMUNIST.” This created a sensation at the auction. A large group of men gathered around, pushing to get close and talking loudly and shouting mostly in Pennsylvania German. Meanwhile, my accuser slipped away. I claimed I was not a communist, but this had little effect on the excitement. At the time, there was news about the nefarious behavior of communists and rumors that they might be seeking to subvert the Old Order way of life. JW stood his ground trying to reassure the others that I was not a threat and gradually things settled down. Driving back through the darkness, JW and I sat silently in the car. I was shaken and I worried that my relationship with JW, and perhaps my project with the Old Order Mennonites, was already over. Finally JW spoke up. “You can be my friend,” he said, “even if you are a communist.” This was one of the kindest things anyone ever said to me - and our relationship deepened and developed further.⁴

⁴I remain puzzled by the motives of my accuser. Perhaps he was a member of the then flourishing John Birch Society, which suspected that communists were everywhere. Certainly, to use the historical phrasing, I was not and never had been a member of the communist party. However, years later it occurred to me that my accuser might have had some basis for his accusation. A distant relative of mine with almost the same name had been a scholar at a university in California, and during the McCarthy “red scare,” he refused to take the loyalty oath the university demanded of its professors.

RELIGION

Like other plain groups, religion was central to all aspects of Old Order Mennonite life. They looked to the New Testament and the 1632 Dordrecht Confession of Faith for their Christian religious orientation. They emphasized several basic principles including brotherhood and sisterhood among members of the church, non-conformity to the world, separation from the world, avoiding the unequal yoke with the world, serving as a witness to the world, and living plainly. Living plainly received special consideration. As a member of the ministry put it, "Here in these last times materialism seems to be taking over, with its god, Satan, and there is a special danger of drifting into the world. Therefore, it is more important to hold to the doctrine than spread the gospel." "We believe," he said, "that Christ wants our life to be a witness." That is, to show others how to live through the example one sets in one's speech and behavior. He put special emphasis on living plainly. "As Christ said, 'Learn of me for I am meek and lowly.'"

Being "plain," that is, simple, straightforward, honest, and direct, as opposed to being "fancy," that is, showy, artificial, and proud, ran through all aspects of Old Order Mennonite life. It affected ways of being, how one talked and comported oneself, how one's house and farm should look, the ways weddings and funerals were conducted, and how one dressed. Plain clothing was required by everyone, but even minor details of dress were of concern. A young man was expected to wear one type of hat before his courting or "running around time," another during this period, and yet other types as he married and reached the more respected and mature period after age 35 or so. A young man who wore a hat with a shape or brim appropriate to an older age might be suspected of being "fancy," which is trying to stand out as especially "plain."

I appreciated the plain look of Old Order farms and homes and the straightforward ways Old Order Mennonites spoke and acted, but one dimension of plainness initially affected my relationship with JW, his family, and their neighbors. After spending all day on their farms, working

together, doing interviews and sharing meals, I felt compelled by my own enculturation to offer thanks and goodbyes. While JW understood this worldly behavior, he and his family were uncomfortable with this "fancy" way of taking leave. They preferred me to say something plainer, like, "Well, I'd better be going," or just to get up and leave. Similarly, they wanted me to stop knocking on the door and to simply open the door and walk into the house when I arrived. At first, it was difficult for me to do this, since in my world, it would have been rude. But when I learned to arrive and leave plainly, JW and his family grew more comfortable with me. Sometime later, I drove one of their kids to the village to run an errand. When I got back, JW and his wife both tried to thank me. "Wait a minute," I said, "if I am not going to thank you, you shouldn't thank me." We all laughed.

ORGANIZATION OF THE CHURCH

While religion guided all aspects of Old Order Mennonite everyday life, the center of community worship was the meetinghouse. Here, they differed from the Old Order Amish who continued to worship in houses. The meetinghouse was decidedly plain and austere in comparison to most American churches. A simple white rectangular structure, it lacked "modern frills" such as bells, steeples, electricity, and stained glass windows. Meetinghouses were built on high ground out in the country with long open sheds where horses were tied during the Sunday service. To the side or back of the meetinghouse was the grave yard with simple grave stones. Each family attended the meetinghouse nearest their farm and that area was referred to as the meetinghouse district. In 1967, there were eight meetinghouses and meetinghouse districts in Lancaster County.

The interior of the building contained a small preachers' room, a women's room, and one large main room. During the service, the ministers sat in the front along with the song leaders. The rest of the men and the boys sat on the north side of the room, women and girls on the south side, with the older respected elders towards the front and younger people toward the back. Age, marital status, and church membership also affected one's placement. The seating of ministers and older married people toward the front reflected their relative importance in dealing with matters that affected

Could my accuser possibly have known about this through the John Birch Society or some similar organization?

the church. Services lasted about three hours and were held every other Sunday at a given meeting-house so ministers and deacons could serve two different meetinghouses on alternate Sundays. The five meetinghouses built before the 1927 division served the Horning Mennonites on one Sunday and the Groffdale conference on the next. One Sunday, black bumper automobiles were lined up outside the meetinghouse, on the next, horses and carriages.

Like other “Anabaptists” (“rebaptizers”), the Old Order Mennonites believed that joining the church should be an adult decision based on conviction and choice. In 1967 young people usually “joined church” at 16 or 17 years of age. A seriously ill young person would be allowed to join at 14 or 15, but before that, they were not yet considered capable of the necessary “understanding.” Prior to baptism, there was an instruction period of about two months. The class of applicants would meet with the minister every other Sunday and three articles of faith from the Dordrecht Confession of Faith were reviewed. Baptism took place at the Saturday service and the Biblical texts used were from John and Matthew. After sermons on the texts, the applicants were questioned as to their faith, sorrow for past sins, and their willingness with God’s grace and help to follow the teachings of Christ unto death. Then the kneeling applicants were baptized with water and rose to a “new beginning” as a brother or sister of the church. For the parents and relatives of the new members, this was a day of rejoicing.

In 1967 the Old Order Mennonite church had a combined ministry of fifteen men, one bishop, nine ministers, and five deacons, as well as several collectors. The bishop alone had full power to lead the ceremonies at baptism, communion, weddings, and funerals. He also had the leading responsibility for maintaining the church, as pressures from within and without regularly threatened its well-being. As a servant of the community, when issues arose, he had to seek harmony, tolerance, compromise, and peace within the church while also preserving the church’s basic religious principles. While the opinions of other ministers and the elder people of the church were nearly as influential, he was considered the key figure. Like the ministers, the bishop was expected to be a plain, humble person who, in a peaceful manner, could find solutions to problems acceptable to

other members of the church and in keeping with their basic religious principles. Ministers, like the bishop, had the duty of preaching and maintaining religious principles, attending to the sick, conversing with people experiencing religious problems, and warning sinners. If a member of the church sinned, as by violating a rule of the church, a minister would visit to discuss the problem and give a warning. If the person persisted, he or she might be excommunicated from the Church. Unlike the Amish, who shunned those who were excommunicated, the Old Order Mennonites took what they considered a more “peaceful way” and sought to persuade the sinner to repent and return to the Church.

The duties of the deacon at a service included reading the Biblical text for a minister; he might testify to the sermon afterwards. He also sought to settle disputes among members of the church and “to replace discontent with peace.” If a dispute was about money, like the sale of a horse, he might offer to pay the difference out of his own pocket. This usually would cause people to “feel offended” and drop the dispute. Like other ministers, the deacon had to warn people who violated the rules of the church. “Collectors” were men of the community who served for only one year. Their role was to visit people’s homes and solicit donations when the church needed financial contributions, as in building a new meetinghouse or helping a community member who was ill or who had suffered some serious mishap. Collectors and members of the ministry were farmers like almost everyone else and received no salary for their work. However, a young minister might be helped by others if his duties were interfering with his farming. Since they served as an example to others, members of the ministry lived in a particularly plain manner, and they would not use items like electricity that were disapproved but not forbidden by the rules of the church. Younger men were often nominated for the ministry since it was felt that they had a stronger influence on young people in the church. Those nominated for the ministry, mostly by elders in the church, were selected by lot.

In order to preserve their religious way of life separate from the world, the Old Order Mennonites maintained and regularly articulated the “Rules of the Church” (*Ordnung*). These rules represented the application of religious principles

to the conduct of life. They consisted of a body of statements spoken by the bishop at the service prior to spring and fall communion. The rules consisted of restatements of basic religious principles like being plain, non-resistant, and peaceful, and statements about items and activities which were forbidden or disapproved. Cars, televisions, radios, cameras, rubber tire tractors, musical instruments, insurance policies, and holding political office were forbidden. Fancy home furnishings, like elaborate wall calendars or closets for display, electricity, telephones, voting, serving as a juror, or conducting a business were disapproved but not forbidden. Members of the church were also advised to stay on farms “if at all possible” and to have weddings that were simple and not too large. Young people were advised to conduct themselves in a quiet and Christian way at weddings and sings. The rules were not only prerequisites for membership in the church; they were guidelines for living a truly Christian way of life by taking on the sacrifices, restrictions, and self-denials needed to follow this way in a world of wickedness and sin. The Old Order Mennonites were well aware of the difficulties which sometimes arose in applying their principles of faith to the conduct of life, that is “knowing where to draw the line.” But they were convinced that lines had to be drawn in order to avoid slipping into worldliness. They knew that other more liberal Mennonite churches had larger memberships but they would say, “Where would our forefathers see the true church today?”

Given their situation within what they saw as a wicked and perverse society that seemed to uncritically embrace technological and economic change for its own sake, the Old Order Mennonites regularly had to consider what to do about some new item or activity coming at them from the outside world. When an issue arose, such as the acceptability of television or electricity, the first step was discussion within the community. Conversations began during the family visiting that regularly took place on Sundays and principles and Scriptures that seemed to argue for or against it would be considered. People would also think about and discuss how it might affect the well-being of the community. Men and women who felt strongly about the issue would visit the bishop and ministers. A council meeting was always held after the Sunday church service one or two weeks before the spring and fall communion. Here elder

members of the church, those above 40 or so, entered the preachers’ room of the meetinghouse. At an ordinary council meeting, they simply stated that they were “in agreement with everything the church maintained.” However, when there was a controversy, they informed the ministry of their views on the issue. Since these perspectives came only from the elders, they were generally more conservative than if young people were participating. The Thursday after council meeting, the entire ministry of the church met together and decided the issue. There would be a preparatory service on Saturday and communion on Sunday. The bishop had to be present for communion, so it was held every Sunday until all meetinghouses had been covered. There was fasting prior to the preparatory service and women wore black. When the service was over, the bishop indicated how the issue had been decided. If the item was forbidden this would be said as he spoke the rules of the church. Once this was stated, a person in disagreement with the decision had to decide whether to remain in the church. During Sunday communion, stress was laid on self-examination, repentance, forgiveness, peace, and brotherly love among members of the church. Taking communion signaled one’s willingness to abide by the new rule. This crucial process allowed the Old Order Mennonites to effectively handle controversial issues and to continue their separation from the world.

In some instances, people left the church. This was considered highly unfortunate but the issue had been decided and the Old Order went on. Leaving the church, or “falling away,” occasionally occurred as an individual matter as well. Joining the church too young was considered one problem and was “often preached against.” Another issue was that lack of success in farming could threaten church membership.

FARMING

In 1967, most Old Order Mennonites were farmers, and farming and religion were closely intertwined. JW estimated that about three quarters of the community were engaged in “cattle and tobacco farming.” A few men worked in farm-related activities like carpentry or blacksmithing but even they and their families usually lived on small farms.

The usual farm was about 55 acres and the four or more fields were planted in a regular staggered rotation such that all four main crops would be harvested every year. In one field, corn would be planted and harvested in the first year. In the spring of the second year, the field would be spread with cattle manure and plowed, and in June, tobacco plants would be transferred from beds to the field. In the fall, the tobacco would be harvested and the field sown with grain, usually wheat. In February of the third year, after the wheat had begun growing well, hay seed would be sown into the field amongst the grain. In July, the wheat was harvested. In June of the fourth year, the hay would be cut and baled and hauled to the barn. In the fall of the fourth year, the field would be plowed in preparation for corn planting the next spring. Three of the four main crops—corn, hay, and wheat—were grown as feed for the cattle and stored in the upper story of the bank barn. Cattle, horses, and often a few pigs were kept in the lower story which was open to the warmer south facing barnyard, enclosed by a stone wall. Young cattle were usually purchased in the fall, often at the New Holland Sales Barn, fattened through the winter on grain, corn, and hay, and – as “thousand pounders” – sold in May, usually at New Holland. To be profitable, the cattle had to sell at a few cents a pound more than when they were bought.

In 1967, tobacco was still the cash crop. Tobacco seeds—kept from the previous year or purchased at local feed stores—were stored in Mason jars in the house. Either in the previous fall or that spring, tobacco beds near the house were prepared and steamed to destroy weeds. Next, the beds—about three feet wide and nine feet long—were carefully raked and the seed scattered over them. As the tobacco began to sprout, a protective white muslin sheet was spread over the beds. In June, the young tobacco plants were transferred to the field. A two wheeled tobacco planter, drawn across the field by horses or a tractor, simultaneously dug a furrow and released a shot of water while those riding behind placed the young plants in each hole. This involved a fair degree of quickness and skill as I discovered in trying to help. Throughout the summer, the plants were weeded, and in September, the tobacco was cut with shears, speared on to lathes, and hung to dry in the tobacco shed until winter when the leaves were carefully tied and baled for selling in the late winter

or spring. Practiced in this way, tobacco farming required a great deal of labor. Although the return per hour of work was low, tobacco still produced a relatively dependable source of income in 1967.

In addition to the fields, family farms also included a large, approximately one acre garden where vegetables such as sweet corn, peas, tomatoes, beans, lettuce, pumpkins, and beets were grown. The gardens were cared for by the mother and her daughters while the field work was primarily done by the father, his sons, and sometimes hired help. However, women helped in the fields during busy times or if the family did not have older sons.

For most Old Order Mennonite farmers, it was not enough to “just make a living.” This was because they wanted to set up each of their sons on a farm. When a farmer had difficulty doing this, even with community help, the family might be tempted to leave the church in search of better economic opportunities.

When I asked *why* the Old Order Mennonites were so focused on farming, JW offered several reasons beginning with the way farming was connected to religion. First of all, most other ways of making a living were disapproved or forbidden by the rules of the church. Secondly, farming as the Old Order Mennonites practiced it, without fancy modern equipment, was understood to be a fundamentally “plain” activity which also connected them to the basic sacredness of the natural world. Moreover, unlike most other occupations, family farming meant that the father and mother were at home most of the time and could teach their children the Christian way of life and train them in the family farm work they would practice when they grew up. Farming, he said, was also strongly connected to their wider religious community. It was not only the most valued and commonly practiced occupation; it was also a major community concern. If a farmer was sick, or the family barn burned down (insurance was disapproved for religious reasons), other farmers would step in to help with the farm work or gather together to build a new barn – often in a single day. Farming was so basic that members of the Old Order community found it awkward to converse with others, even other Old Order Mennonites, if the other person was not farming.

In talking about farming, JW sometimes contrasted Old Order Mennonite cattle and tobacco

farming with Old Order Amish dairy farming, noting that dairy farming was currently proving more profitable. While acknowledging this, he said that he and other members of his community felt that the Amish sometimes took too much “pride” in their fine farms. He added that the somewhat “run down” look of Old Order Mennonite farms did not mean they were not successful. Maintaining such an outlook was often the result of their deliberate focus on plainness.⁵

JW also said that farming as they practiced it was difficult. Families often worked 14 or 15 hours a day and the labor was hard. I found this to be true when I tried to help. I was 26 years old at the time and relatively strong, but I found it difficult to keep up with their pace of work. For me, walking across a field in the summer heat throwing heavy bales of hay up onto the wagon was a task I could not sustain for long. Meanwhile, JW’s young son kept going long after I was exhausted. JW said this level of hard work often led farmers to begin breaking down physically at a relatively young age. Approaching 40 years of age, he could already feel his own body beginning to suffer. The religious basis for their farming also made it more challenging since they were not permitted or inclined to use more fancy and efficient equipment. Farming with horses and mules was more difficult than using tractors and using less efficient tractors with steel tires was more difficult than using better tractors. Using tractors with rubber tires was not permitted. One April day, JW and I were over at a neighbor’s farm trying to help him get started spreading manure prior to plowing the field. Both men were concerned about falling behind their spring schedule and they asked me several times about what I had seen of the plowing others were already doing when I drove past neighboring farms that morning. The tractor, however, kept stalling again. They remarked on the problems of the “cheap tractors we use” as they expertly removed and cleaned parts of the engine. Despite the challenge, JW and his friend maintained their sense of humor and patient, stoic equilibrium.

On the other hand, JW said that he and most of his Old Order friends and family liked farming, preferred it to other permitted occupations, and enjoyed doing it in their plain way. They enjoyed being outside, walking behind a plow, connected to nature and the rhythms of the seasons. “We feel sorry,” he said “for city people cooped up inside like chickens.” Young men doing obligatory conscientious objector service in the city often found themselves “belly aching to farm.” Often, I could readily understand this preference. One nice day later in the spring, JW and I were leisurely riding along a back country road to the nearby village in a horse drawn cart. Perhaps we were going two or three miles an hour sitting in the open cart smelling the fresh spring air, enjoying the sun, and gazing at the pretty, newly planted fields. Quite unexpectedly, we came up to a bridge over a four-lane superhighway. Down below, in closed up automobiles, worldly people were rushing past at 60 miles an hour - in opposite directions. How good it felt to be enjoying the Old Order Mennonite way.

FAMILY

Family life centered on farmhouses that maintained double front doors and many other features of Pennsylvania German houses of a century earlier. Two and a half stories tall, the second story had a hall and four bedrooms, while the first floor consisted of a sitting room used for extended family visiting on Sunday, a parlor where a daughter of courting age received her date on Saturday night, one bedroom, and the kitchen. The most important room was the kitchen, which was used for everyday informal visiting as well as eating and cooking. The large wood and coal burning Franklin Stove was for heating as well as cooking; sometimes it supplied the only heat in the house. Not only did newly built houses follow this basic layout, if an Old Order family purchased a “modern house of worldly people,” they would have its central heating and bathrooms torn out, its electric stove removed, and interior walls knocked down and rearranged so that the finished product conformed to the needs and plainness of the basic Old Order Mennonite design.

The furnishings of Old Order Mennonite houses were simple and plain compared to typical homes in the wider society. There were no fancy carpets, no curtains, and usually no closets.

⁵ In his article on the “Team Mennonites,” Shoemaker (1957) suggested that in comparison to the Amish, Old Order Mennonite farms were badly run down. This would be an oversimplification if the emphasis on plainness was not taken into account

Hanging pictures on the walls were disapproved, but calendars with simple pictures were often substituted. There were no televisions, radios, record players, or pianos. In other details, there was variation from one house to another. Some families had telephones, which were disapproved but not forbidden, and others did not. Perhaps the greatest difference was whether or not the family had electricity, which again was disapproved but not forbidden. Some families used electricity for some equipment, such as refrigerators, but not for others such as electric lights. For families as well as the church, there were issues about “where to draw the line.”⁶

The nuclear family, consisting of husband, wife, and children, was the most important social unit. The relatively large families had an average of five children. All members of the family, except small children, were engaged in the work of running the family farm. With the exception of children attending school, everyone spent most of their time from Monday through Saturday afternoon working together on the farm. During the week, contact with others was limited and work followed regular patterns. The family was usually out of bed by 6 a.m. Men and boys worked outside in the fields, the barn, and the tobacco shed. Women sometimes helped men in the fields but their main work was maintaining the family garden, cooking, cleaning, washing, sewing and caring for infants and younger children. The family all gathered at the kitchen table for the large “noon meal” which was held about 11:30 a.m. and preceded by a silent prayer. While men’s work was seasonal, women’s work followed a consistent weekly pattern: Monday was wash day, Tuesday ironing, Friday baking, and Saturday cleaning. This pattern was so ingrained that washing might be hung out on Monday even in a light rain. Some people believed that if the basic work pattern was not followed, a mishap might occur, such as children or cattle getting sick.

Families were able to stay more separate from the world when farming. It allowed parents to be home with their children to train them in the Old Order Christian way of life and teach them the values, knowledge, and skills they needed to help

run the family farm in a plain way. They would also need this knowledge in the future when they married and began to run their own farms. Before they were six years old, children were treated quite permissively and received affectionate attention from their parents and older brothers and sisters. They were allowed to play – as with store bought toy wagons, tractors, and dolls - and to get in the way of whatever work was going on.⁷ However, “balking” and stubborn behavior was met with a smack. Letting children get away with such behavior was thought to cause more harm than the light punishment.

EDUCATION

The Old Order Mennonite view of education was complex. Their first concern was to teach their children how to live a true Christian life and to save them from being “led astray by the world.” Religious training was expected to occur in the home. As one minister put it,

We feel it is the Christian parents’ own duty to teach the child. Some might feel that the parents are not qualified. But they *are* qualified. They are qualified to lead a Christian life which is the best teacher.

Their second concern was that their children learn the knowledge and skills necessary to help run the family farm. These would also be crucial when they married and set up their own family farm. They believed these skills were best acquired not at schools but at home on the farm where the father could train the sons in men’s work and the mother could train her daughters in women’s work. The strength necessary for their work could, they said, not be acquired sitting in a classroom. Parents wanted their children to have some schooling primarily to learn reading, writing, and math so children were sent to school through the eighth grade. After that, all children stopped attending school and began working full time on the farm. There was a general belief that education beyond the eighth grade was unnecessary and even dangerous for their way of life. As one minister said,

⁶ For a study that addresses Old Order Mennonite concerns about drawing the line with telephones, see Zimmerman Umble (1998).

⁷ On Order Mennonite children’s games, see Gray (1967:1-4).

The more education a person has, the more he is apt to be swallowed up by the world, and those who are more educated are more apt to doubt the Bible or portions of it like the creation story.

Some people also thought that some forms of higher education were so impractical and nonsensical that they might interfere with good farming practice.⁸

In the past Old Order Mennonite children attended one room public schools in the area. However, when the change to consolidated public schools occurred the Old Order Mennonites decided to switch to private schools. They either bought the old one room schoolhouses or built their own on this model. The teachers were older teenage girls of the community who themselves had only an eighth grade education but were well versed in Old Order Mennonite ways. By 1967, the pattern had changed. JW estimated that more than half the children attended some public school. There was a feeling that it was good for children to have some contact with outsiders since they would need to deal with them as adults. Many and perhaps most children attended private school in the last couple of years to avoid extracurricular activities that required immodest clothes or involved seeing plays and movies.

CHILDREN

From what I saw, children were mostly well behaved, hardworking, quite happy, and usually respectful. At play, however, they could quickly turn into the strong, rough farm kids they also were. Once, while we were hauling a wagonful of wheat seed, several older children and I got into a game of throwing wheat seed at each other. One of the boys snuck up behind his sister, lifted up her dress, threw some seed up under the skirt, and turned innocently away. The girl spun around, and seeing me looking at her, threw the seed hard at my face. I ducked and pointed at the real culprit. He ran and she tore off after him.

Since the help of children and teenagers was so important to running the farm, a family without children would often pay for a “hired boy” or “hired girl.” Children were expected to help at a

relatively young age depending in part on their own inclination and family need. Older children started working earlier. At six or seven years of age, a boy might begin feeding and currying the horses, and by ten, a child would be seriously helping in adult work before and after school. Children played standard American games such as pick up baseball and soccer during recess at school and sometimes during free time at home. Although children might be given a little change for candy or trinkets, they worked for the family without pay. Until they were 21 years old, money they might earn from outside work usually went to helping with the family farm. In return, children and young people were completely taken care of by their parents. and when they were adults the family would help them economically and try to set their sons up on farms of their own. Teenage sons and daughters also received special help when they reached courting age.

The teenage years were considered particularly important in forming children with good, plain, Christian character. Parents tried to have a close relationship with their sons and daughters during this period. Hereditary factors were also seen as an influence, and children were often thought to take after a relative of the father or mother in personality as well as appearance. People also believed that an outsider’s child, even if adopted by an Old Order Mennonite family soon after birth, might not prove to be a good farmer and “staunch member of the church.”

“RUNNING AROUND,” COURTSHIP, AND MARRIAGE

At 16 or 17 years of age, about the same age they joined church, Old Order Mennonite teenagers also began going to young people’s gatherings and dating, or as they would say, “running around.” When a boy reached this age, his father was expected to provide him with a good horse and a “courting buggy.” This differed from the family carriage, a black box-like carriage large enough to hold most of the family. The courting buggy was designed for only two people, had a convertible top that could be lowered in back, and was often decorated with pinstripe designs. Ordinarily, a young man only used the buggy on Saturday night and Sunday. On Saturday evening, he might use the buggy for a date or to attend a “sing.” On

⁸ For more recent studies of Old Order Mennonite schooling in Lancaster County, see Johnson-Weiner (2007:167-205) and Zimmerman (2015).

Sunday, he would use it for family visiting, to attend a “crowd,” or for a date, that is, visiting a girl in the parlor of her home. Sings were held on Saturday night by the parents of young people of courting age. The young people sang songs from the English hymnal, *Revival Glory*, for the first two hours or so and afterwards played “games.” While worldly dancing was forbidden, the games like Wagon Wheel, Four in the Boat, and Bluebird were similar to folk or square dances. Groups of couples followed the steps of a game to the accompaniment of songs and sometimes a harmonica, the only musical instrument used by the Old Order Mennonites. “Crowds” were held in the summer on Sunday afternoons. A regular crowd was open to all young people of the church, while a “pick” crowd” was by invitation only. Crowds were for the purpose of “visiting, talking, joking around, and loafing.” After a meal was served, the young people might play games such as quoits or baseball. During the instruction period before communion, there was usually a crowd after the instruction class.

On Sunday afternoons when there was no crowd, young people along with the rest of their family went around visiting at the homes of relatives and friends. Young people of courting age usually gathered in the parlor. Parents were expected to fix up the parlor for a daughter of courting age. The room would be freshly painted and provided with good wooden furniture, a rocking chair, several straight chairs, a couch, and a wooden cupboard for displaying small trinkets like fancy dishes. The parlor was used for gatherings of young people on Sunday afternoon but its primary use was for the daughter to receive her date on Sunday and sometimes Saturday night. Dates were usually arranged at Saturday night sings and scheduled for the next Sunday. For the first date, a boy usually asked a friend to ask the girl for him. If the girl accepted a boy for the first date, the couple usually dated three times since a girl “refusing” before then would be considered “rude and out of line.” From then on, both the boy and the girl were free to stop. When a couple stopped dating, other boys could ask the girl since she was now “blank.”

Secrecy was an important theme in dating. A girl would not talk about the boy she was seeing and tried to keep his identity from her sisters and parents who would be watching and trying to figure out who he was. The second front door

allowed the boy to enter the girl’s parlor without coming through the house, and parents and siblings were “not allowed in the parlor” when she had a boy there. The amusing, game-like aspect of this secrecy was also illustrated by the fact that a boy was expected to tell one of his parents where he was going Saturday night but that parent “was not allowed” to tell anyone else. A girl or boy who succeeded in getting lots of dates gained prestige. Character, attractiveness, pleasant ways, and a reputation as a good worker were valued. During the “running around” time, some young people, especially boys, got rather “wild,” and their conduct might be “preached against” by the ministry. They would be advised to be less rough and more Christian. During these years young people often “took a peek into the world” by attending worldly places of amusement such as movies. Older people regarded movies as sinful, as taking one’s mind off religion, a waste of time, and a waste of money that could better be used to help other people. Young people were often curious, however, and if they attended only once or twice, it wasn’t considered too serious. The Old Order Mennonites of the time thought the Amish young people who were said to get into drinking, owning cars, and fighting were much rougher than their own. As JW put it, “The Amish do things our children wouldn’t half think of doing.” When a young man settled on a girl he wanted to marry, his behavior improved, and if he had not already done so, he joined the church and tried harder to work diligently, be polite, and follow the rules of the church.

Weddings were the biggest celebrations of the Old Order Mennonites, and for young people who usually came with a date, they might last 15 hours. Guests began arriving about eight in the morning, and young people of courting age usually brought the couple small gifts, which were displayed on one of the beds. At about 8:15 a.m., seating began and wine and cake were served. The ceremonial and symbolic center was the space between the parlor and the sitting room where the bride and groom would be seated later in the ceremony. The parents of the bride and groom sat in front facing the center. Behind the bride and groom were their attendants, one couple for the groom and one for the bride, usually a brother, sister, or cousin with a date. Other young relatives of the bride and groom were arranged behind them by age in the sitting room. The older people sat in the parlor. During

the seating, the bishop, the bride, the groom, and couple's parents met upstairs. The bishop asked if the parents were fully agreed on the match and gave the couple advice on living a Christian marriage. The ceremony itself was much like a Sunday service; a wedding song was sung, and at the beginning of the second verse, the couple came down the stairs and walked to their places. After a second song, the minister delivered his sermon and offered a prayer; the deacon read a text; the bishop preached on it; a final song was sung; and the ceremonial part of the wedding was over.

After the ceremony long tables were set up, a large meal was served, and several seatings were needed for everyone to be fed. During the meal, practical joking began, and the young men would tease the girls who were serving. After the meal, there was more singing, and cake and wine were served again. At about three in the afternoon, older people began to leave, the oldest first. When the ministers and married couples had gone, the young people "get wilder." Young people threw confetti at the bride and groom, and the groom – who might really resist – was thrown over a fence. The bride might be pushed over a broomstick, and if the bride had an unmarried older sister, the unmarried young people might try to stand her on her head. If the groom had an unmarried older brother, he might be forcibly seated on a hot stove. Special party games were played that involved holding hands and kissing. At least in the fall when the weather was still warm, this might go on until midnight. That night, the bride and groom slept together in the home of the bride.

After their wedding, the couple stopped attending young people's gatherings and was expected to become more serious and responsible. Both the bride and groom usually continued to live separately at the homes of their parents. During the week, they did not see each other at all, but on Saturday evening, the groom came to the bride's house and spent Saturday night, Sunday, and Sunday night with her. Meanwhile, the young man would be looking for a farm to rent or buy. In early April, traditional moving time, the couple would move to the farm they had found, usually with the help of the groom's father. Now, they began their marriage, and working together, they started the traditional farming practices they had been training for most of their lives. Soon they would likely

begin having their own children and training them for the Old Order way of life.

While the usual farming family consisted of husband, wife, and their children, the youngest son, who usually inherited his family farm, often built a grandparent's apartment attached to the side of the farmhouse where his aging parents could live. While divorce was not permitted, if one spouse died, especially while still relatively young, the other might remarry. Given the separate and complementary roles of men and women that their farming required, households based on blood ties rather than marriage sometimes occurred. A bachelor brother and unmarried sister or a widowed father and an old maid daughter might set up a household together.

EXTENDED FAMILY

In 1967, the area of Lancaster County, where most Old Order Mennonites lived, had a deep familiarity very different from that of more uprooted and mobile Americans. Members of the church spent most of their days from birth to death within or around their own meetinghouse district, and areas only 15 or 20 miles away seemed strange and foreign. Most of their ancestors had lived in the same area for six generations, and nearby were most if not all of their Old Order Mennonite relatives. Relatives were referred to in Pennsylvania German as one's *Freundshaft* and the term had three different meanings. In its first sense, it referred to one's most important kin, that is, one's father, mother, siblings, uncles, aunts, grandparents, and first cousins. This group assembled at one's wedding, provided reliable emotional support, helped if a person was sick or in need, and visited regularly back and forth. Families drove around in their carriages and buggies Sunday afternoon to enjoy visiting these family members. Often there would be several families at the house. The women and small children usually gathered in the kitchen, the men in the sitting room, and the young people over 12 in the parlor. Since families were large, often with five or more children, one could easily have 40 first cousins. The effect of such a large set of primary relatives meant that it was difficult to invite all of them—with their spouses or dates—to a wedding since weddings were supposed to include no more than 120 people. Because there were so many relatives in one's

primary kin, this also meant that the *Freundschaft*, in its second meaning (great aunts and uncles and second cousins) was not so important though some visiting took place. *Freundshaft* in its third sense referred to all those who shared the same paternally inherited last name, such as all the Zimmermans or all the Martins. Virtually all the Old Order Mennonites were the descendants of the relatively few Mennonite settlers who came to the area in the 1700s, so there were many descendants with the same last name. In 1967, there were said to be about 100 Martin households in the community. A child's last name was that of the father and middle name the maiden name of the mother. A girl took her husband's last name at marriage, but in referring to her, others might mention her original last and now middle name. Since people of the same last name could marry if they were not second cousins, you often heard reference to names like "Mrs. Alma (Zimmerman) Zimmerman." In a broad sense, the entire Old Order Mennonite community was regarded as a kind of extended family, and a feeling of brotherhood and sisterhood was expected to – and usually did – prevail among all members of the community.

FUNERALS

Funerals were the largest family and community gatherings. After a person's death, his or her closest family decided where and when the person should be buried and which minister to ask to do the funeral preaching. Typically, the funeral occurred three days after death and began in the morning at the person's home. Along with a few close neighbors and friends, all of the person's primary *Freundshaft*, many of the secondary *Freundschaft*, and most of the closer members of the widow or widower's *Freundshaft* would attend. In the relatively short ceremony in the house, the simple coffin was placed next to the sitting room window. Closer relatives sat near the coffin, and the seating was otherwise similar to that of a wedding. After the ceremony, the coffin was taken to the meetinghouse in a wagon with a long line of carriages following behind. Outside the meetinghouse, the viewing of the deceased began, on the sheltered side in the winter or under shady trees in the summer. There was some preaching at the grave and a few verses of a song were sung. After burial, there was a service in the meetinghouse.

Here, the largest number of people would be present; all those that were present at the earlier service and many more from the person's friends and wider extended family. After the ceremony, closer family returned to the home for a meal. While family and friends mourned their loss, death did not seem as disruptive to Old Order Mennonites as it does to so many other communities. Neighbors and especially the large extended family prepared the house for the funeral, took over the chores of the household and farm, and offered emotional support. Their strong, shared religious convictions meant that the bereaved had the hope that since the person who died had lived a true Christian life, he or she would be accepted into heaven and "be received by Christ into eternal life where they will receive that joy which eye hath not seen or ear heard."

RELATIONS WITH OUTSIDERS

The Old Order Mennonites of 1967 wished to live a life separate and apart from the world – and to a very significant degree, they were successful. There were, however, a variety of contacts and connections with outsiders. While farming helped people keep separate, farms were less self-sufficient than they had been in earlier times. As JW remarked, "We sell our cattle and milk and buy meat and dairy products from the store." The increasing price of farmland meant that young men were more likely to work for a few years in local factories to earn the money necessary to help rent or buy a farm. Loans from local banks were also becoming more common. In earlier times, people were more likely to use home remedies or seek out local "*Brauche* doctors" or faith healers. In 1967, most people consulted local doctors or went to hospitals when they were ill. Doctors were almost always present at birth, but it usually took place in the home.

The Old Order view of outsiders was ambivalent and complex. From their basic religious perspective, the outside American society was seen as sinful and evil, plagued by violence, war, political conflict, rapid change, murder, adultery, divorce, materialism, and indulgence in wicked pleasures such as cars, television, music, drugs, movies, gambling, and other "things of the devil." Old Order Mennonites also believed that they might be persecuted by outsiders for trying to follow

Christ's way in a sinful world. In the centuries prior to migration to America, Anabaptists had been severely and systematically persecuted in Europe. This persecution was kept vividly alive in *The Martyrs' Mirror*, which extensively describes the imprisonment, torture, and execution of many of their ancestors. The book was kept in many homes and was also often the subject of Sunday sermons. While systematic persecution has not occurred in the United States, there had been enough trouble to keep Old Order Mennonites wary. When the larger society engaged in war, as was the case in 1967 with the Vietnam War, the community might be pressured for their refusal to bear arms. Because they were different and often misunderstood and because they would not retaliate, harassment continued off and on even in times of peace. Although grateful to the government for the concessions that have been made, such as conscientious objector service, Old Order Mennonites remembered instances in which the government had tried to force them to participate in programs contrary to their beliefs such as social security or education beyond the age of 15. Fears about encroachment by the world also involved concerns about economic pressures on their way of life and the temptations of the world. There was also anxiety about agents whom they feared might be deliberately seeking to destroy their way of life. The devil was considered one major threat, and in conversations and sermons, he was pictured as a dangerous threat lurking nearby. There were rumors that even members of the church might be tempted to give in to the devil and sell their souls. To do this, it was said, one would go to a crossroads at midnight, recite the Lord's Prayer backwards, and wait for the Devil to appear. In the Old Order Mennonite community, the Catholic Church and communists were also rumored to be actively plotting against the church. My experience at the auction demonstrated the force of this belief.

However, concerns about the outside world were tempered by other factors. There was a tendency to see some outsiders as queer and humorous. While tourists came to Lancaster County to see the "quaint Amish" (all plain people), the Old Order Mennonites viewed tourists as strange creatures, for example, "women wearing men's clothing." Even in 1967, young people referred to outlandishly dressed tourists as "creepy." The tiny gardens of outsiders and their ignorance

about basic farming practices were also a source of amusement. At the same time, members of the church were also curious about the ways of outsiders and interested to learn more about them. An Old Order Mennonite woman was surprised to find that outsiders did not follow their weekly work cycle. Another farmer was taken aback to see that some children from the city "looked pretty healthy." Young people especially were often interested in "taking a peek or two into the world." Another complication was that because of their relative unfamiliarity with outside life, Old Order Mennonites sometimes felt awkward with outsiders, so hesitated to attend permitted outside events. They might say, "We don't know how to behave." Because they generally enjoyed their way of life and considered it to be the right and true way to live, they believed they were leading a better way of life than outsiders and sometimes felt sorry for them.⁹ While knowledge of the world varied from individual to individual, at that time, men tended to have more experience than women. Still another dimension involved the generous way, without publicity, that Old Order Mennonites not only assisted members of their own community but regularly contributed to distressed outsiders. Finally, outsiders whose presence seemed legitimate were treated with kindness. And this was my personal experience.

CONCLUSION

Despite initial concern that I was a communist, the Old Order Mennonites I met in 1967—including JW, his neighbors, and his family—treated me with kindness and generosity. They were very patient as I asked about and sought to understand the basic practices of their culture. These I have summarized and described here as Old Order Mennonite religion, farming, family, community, and relations with outsiders. As I tried to help with farm work, I was sometimes a nuisance, but they never made me feel that way as they attempted to

⁹ This is not to say that the Old Order Mennonites of the time did not have problems. They spoke about economic concerns, especially the rising price of farmland, and they acknowledged the existence of other issues like occasional marital discord, mental illness, and forms of abuse. For an insightful recent article that considers the balance between idealizing and criticizing plain ways of life see, Graybill (2022).

teach me how to do it. I shared numerous meals with JW and his family in their big kitchen, and our relationship deepened as I learned to follow some of their plain ways. I owe a real debt of gratitude to all those who helped me, especially JW. I am very grateful for all the time he spent answering my questions, and this overview of Old Order Mennonite culture in 1967 would not exist without the reflective thinking, understanding, and insight he contributed.¹⁰ He not only taught me a great deal about the Old Order Mennonite way through our conversations and interviews, he also taught me through his example and way of being. As my first key ethnography participant, he helped me become a better ethnographer, and his influence affected the studies I have done since in the U.S., the Pacific Islands, and South Asia. More than this, he became a kind of older brother and mentor to me. He was a true “witness” to the Old Order way. By his example and insights, he helped show me that the Old Order Mennonites, like other Plain Anabaptists, have important lessons to offer the wider American society.

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¹⁰ Any factual errors in this article are due to my own misunderstandings.

