

Research Note:
**Amish Women and the Household Economy During
the Great Depression**

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In the mid-1920s, C. B. Smith, chief of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Office of Cooperative Extension Work, described the ideal American farm family as one that closely followed the contours of the urban middle-class family. Men were to be providers and women full-time housewives. In order to achieve this way of life, farm families would necessarily have to reside in homes that more closely resembled those of the urban bourgeoisie. In Smith's words,

When the farmer returns weary from the field at night to a modest, attractive home, it makes him feel that the day's work has not been in vain. . . . But, to have such a home, to sit down to the evening meal with joy on every face demands that mother . . . must have every labor-saving convenience.

Smith's dream of better farm family living through domestic technology was impractical for most farm families in the 1920s, and it became even less obtainable as the farm economy worsened and the nation as a whole plunged into the Great Depression of the 1930s. Farm family stability and contentment in the cash-strapped 1930s would not be achieved through investment in modern cooking ranges, electric lighting, and mechanical refrigerators or in the pursuit of full-time homemaking by women. Although Smith and other Department of Agriculture officials had long advocated household modernization as the key to farm family happiness and success, their prescriptions were ill suited to depression conditions. Only a decade after Smith's pronouncement that farm family stability depended on women's access to modern equipment, government investigators were finding that the nation's most successful farm families—the Old Order Amish of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania—were precisely those whose religion dictated that “mother” must *not* “have every labor-saving convenience.”¹

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1. Smith is quoted in Florence E. Ward, *Home Demonstration Work under the Smith-Lever Act, 1914-1924* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1929), 34.

Among the various Anabaptist groups residing in Lancaster County at the time of the Great Depression, the Old Order Amish were the most traditional, remaining committed to many aspects of the culture they had brought with them from Europe to Pennsylvania in the colonial period. They refused to adopt modern communication, transportation, housekeeping, and contraceptive technologies, forgoing ownership of telephones, radios, automobiles, and electrical appliances. At a time when a high school education was becoming a universal experience throughout the rest of the northern United States, the Old Order Amish refused to send their children to school beyond the eighth grade. Most significantly, in urban, industrial America, the Old Order Amish remained committed to an agricultural way of life. They farmed in Lancaster County and other areas of Amish settlement without the benefit of tractors, relying instead on the power of horses and mules. And at a time when other farmers were increasingly specializing in the production of a few major cash crops, the Old Order Amish continued their tradition of general, diversified farming to provide for the agricultural market while also feeding their families. Old Order Amish men and women believed that the Bible sanctioned their devotion to an agrarian way of life, just as it did their other distinctive practices. As a Lancaster County Amish man told cultural geographer Walter M. Kollmorgen in 1940, "the Lord told Adam to replenish the earth and to rule over the animals and the land—you can't do that in cities."²

Given the modernization efforts of many New Deal programs that focused on rural America, such as the Rural Electrification Administration, government researchers like Kollmorgen, who conducted his research as an employee of the federal Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE), might have been expected to view Amish women and men as quaint, outmoded—even subversive—defenders of the obsolete traditions of another era. But for Kollmorgen and his colleagues the uniqueness of the Old Order Amish made them a desirable population for study. The Amish community's successful reliance on an older way of agrarian life, at a time when many "modern" farms were failing, intrigued these investigators. They suspected that perhaps traditional Amish family farming, in which both male and female members continued to play an active role in farm production, represented a viable alternative to mechanized, business-oriented agriculture.

2. Jane C. Getz, "The Economic Organization and Practices of the Old Order Amish of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania," *The Mennonite Quarterly Review* 20 (Jan. 1946), 59. Getz quotes here from Walter M. Kollmorgen's field notes for his study *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community: The Old Order Amish of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania*, Rural Life Studies, vol. 4 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1942).

In 1935-1936, the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Home Economics and the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics organized a massive Study of Consumer Purchases (SCP), which sent Works Progress Administration employees around the country to interview women in rural and urban households about their consumption and production practices. In total, some 300,000 women participated anonymously in the study, including 1,200 Lancaster County farm women. Among them were 105 Old Order Amish women, who reported extending their already significant role in farm and household production to cope with depression conditions and keep their families on the farm. The results of the Consumer Purchases survey indicated that Amish women's rejection of the modern housewife role, and the domestic appliances that came with it, allowed their families a level of economic stability that few other farm households achieved in the 1930s.³

In the mid-1930s, when the average Lancaster County family netted \$878 a year from cash crops and livestock, Old Order Amish families realized \$1,000 in net farm profit. The contribution of women seems to have been a crucial factor in this difference. Old Order Amish women frequently worked with large livestock, and during the busy seasons most women took a regular turn in work related to grain, tobacco, potato, or hay production. One Old Order Amish woman remembered, "I threw bales until I was 50." Girls from predominantly female families worked in the farm fields alongside their fathers every day, risking the same debilitating accidents as their male counterparts. When Israel Zook's daughter Susie "had the misfortune of hurting her foot . . . while working in the fields" in the spring of 1935, her injury even merited mention in the popular Amish newspaper *The Budget*. Acknowledging the accident's negative impact on the Zook family economy, correspondent Katie F. Lapp lamented that the injured foot had rendered Susie Zook "[un]able to do much work" for several weeks.⁴

3. Study of Consumer Purchases records are held in National Archives Record Group 176. For a thorough discussion of these materials as they pertain to Lancaster County, see Steven D. Reschly and Katherine Jellison, "Production Patterns, Consumption Strategies, and Gender Relations in Amish and Non-Amish Farm Households in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, 1935-1936," *Agricultural History* 67 (Spring 1993), 134-162.

4. Lydia Stolfus, interview with Louise Stolfus, Lancaster County, Pa., April 14, 1995; Katie F. Lapp, "Gordonville, PA," *The Budget*, June 13, 1935. For discussion of the mutuality of men's and women's work on farms in other regions of the country, see Nancy Grey Osterud, *Bonds of Community: The Lives of Farm Women in Nineteenth-Century New York* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1991); Nancy Grey Osterud, *Putting the Barn before the House: Women and Family Farming in Early-Twentieth-Century New York* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2012); and Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

In addition to their productive labor, women's reproductive efforts benefited the Amish farm. Old Order Amish women contributed to the farm family labor force at a higher rate than did their neighbors, making their farms less reliant on paid field laborers. While the average county farm woman who responded to the Study of Consumer Purchases had 2.53 children living at home in 1935-1936, the typical Old Order Amish respondent had 3.34 children in her household.⁵

The lines between women's and men's work, household and farm labor, and house and farm equipment are difficult to draw on any family farm. This was especially true for Old Order Amish farms in the 1930s. While collecting data for the Study of Consumer Purchases project, Agent Rigdon recorded a typical Amish response when she reported the farm and household labor arrangements of a middle-aged couple with four teenage children: "All work done within family both in house and farm." A ubiquitous symbol of the mutuality of men's and women's work in Amish farm families was the decidedly low-tech floor broom, a tool that received heavy use in households lacking power vacuum cleaners. Agent Margaret F. Fratantono recorded three dozen new brooms in an Amish household that contained a middle-aged couple, their 20-year-old daughter, three teenage children, a 21-year-old hired man, and an elderly female boarder. The farm family raised their own broom corn and then paid a broom maker 25 cents apiece to make enough brooms for the eight-person household. At a total cost of nine dollars, the investment in three dozen new brooms was a wise one, even in cash-scarce times. The women of the family would immediately press some of the new brooms into daily service, sweeping the large farmhouse and its porches and yard. They would put the implements to more rigorous use when they thoroughly cleaned the house for hosting Sunday worship services, visiting guests, or perhaps holding a wedding or funeral. But the investment in new brooms to tidy the house also benefited work on the farm. As Agent Rigdon described the scenario on multiple Amish survey schedules, "Brooms purchased for household, used first in house then taken to barn." With the arrival of clean new brooms, veteran implements lived out the remainder of their service in the barn. While women and girls were the primary users of new brooms, men and boys more frequently handled used models for sweeping barn and outbuilding floors. Female family members—particularly younger girls—might also take a turn sweeping farm buildings with a retired household broom. The difficulty in defining a broom as a household or farm investment, house or barn equipment, or a female or male tool

5. Reschly and Jellison, "Production Patterns," 148.

demonstrated the interwoven nature of Amish family life and farm work and the mutuality of female and male labor.⁶

Agent Viola J. Hambright's mid-September visit to an Old Order Amish family in 1936 yielded additional evidence of the mutuality of men's and women's work, the labor intensity of their efforts, and the economic benefits of their exertions. A 47-year-old husband and 51-year-old wife headed the household, which included 19-, 12-, and 10-year-old sons and 16-, 15-, and 13-year-old daughters. The three youngest children were still in school, but since Old Order Amish cultural and religious practice prohibited education beyond the eighth grade, the three older children were full-time participants in the farm family economy. During the week of Hambright's investigation, the Sabbath day was the only one on which the farm wife could rely on household assistance from all three of her resident daughters. From Thursday, September 17, through Saturday, September 19, and again from Monday, September 21, through Wednesday, September 23, the two older daughters spent eight hours a day picking tomatoes. If their father or older brother worked alongside the two girls in the tomato fields, Hambright simply subsumed this male labor under the general heading "Farming." With her older sisters in the field, this left the family's 13-year-old daughter as her mother's only household help on a Saturday that apparently included the presence of a weekend "houseguest." The visitor—most likely the family's 21-year-old daughter listed elsewhere in the survey as the eldest child—arrived from her week of teaching in a one-room school or working as the "hired girl" on a neighboring farm to reap the benefits of the tomato pickers' diligent labor. A typical day's menu during the time of the houseguest's visit included fried tomatoes at noon and fresh sliced tomatoes for supper.⁷

In total, during the week that Hambright visited the family, they consumed 17 and a half pounds of tomatoes. If indeed their young visitor was the family's oldest daughter, she may even have arrived specifically to help with tomato canning. During Hambright's visit, a report published in the Amish newspaper *The Budget* noted that women in the Lancaster County community of Leola, Pennsylvania, were "busy . . . canning . . . tomatoes, and making catsup to use up the tomatoes which [were] very plentiful [that] summer." The family also likely canned corn during the week of Hambright's visit, accounting for their

6. SCP Surveys 1017, p. 4; 1583, p. 21; 1903, p. 23; 1937, p. 19. Rigdon's first name is unknown; she did not record it on any of the survey forms.

7. Survey 1903, pp. 3, 25-26. Although Agent Rigdon completed the majority of the survey for this family, Agent R. Groome completed a small portion of the survey's clothing section and Hambright was responsible for the sample menu and daily activities sections.

consumption of 70 pounds of fresh corn in that seven-day mid-September period. The family, in fact, produced a significant majority of the canned vegetables and fruits they consumed that year, indicating the wisdom of their "ownership of [a] pressure cooker." In total, the family canned 180 quarts of fruits and vegetables during the survey year, which extended from April 1, 1935, to March 31, 1936. They also apparently dried some of their fruits and vegetables, including the three pounds of onions they used during the week of Hambright's visit. Perhaps they combined fresh tomatoes, a portion of the dried onions, and the three pounds of home-grown cabbage and store-bought vinegar they consumed that week to make chow-chow, a local relish dish that women typically pickled in mid-September. During the survey year, the family also produced 40 quarts of sauerkraut, 25 quarts of pickles, and 15 quarts of jams and jellies for home consumption.⁸

Potatoes were another mainstay of the family's diet, and, according to Amish *Budget* correspondents, they were in large supply during Agent Hambright's visit. Fannie Beiler reported from Lancaster city that farmers had their hands full that week both "cutting corn and picking up late potatoes." *The Budget's* Leola scribe characterized local "men folks" as "very busy" picking tomatoes and "taking out potatoes" at a time when they were also cutting corn, filling silos, and making hay. Mrs. John K. Lapp of New Holland, Pennsylvania, explained to *Budget* readers that the current abundance of both tomatoes and potatoes in Lancaster County was the result of "dry September weather, which was in favor of potato and tomato picking." The family Hambright visited certainly took advantage of the bumper potato crop, listing fried potatoes on their sample day's breakfast and supper menus and boiled potatoes at the noon meal. But even if they ate potatoes at every meal for seven days, the family could not have consumed the 84 pounds of potatoes they reported having on hand during the survey week. Rather than eating the majority of this produce themselves, family members obviously sold potatoes as one of their cash crops. In fact, another survey agent visiting earlier in the year had ranked potatoes second only to wheat as an income-producing crop for this Amish family. While the family made \$120 selling their 150-bushel wheat crop at 80 cents a bushel, they earned two-thirds that amount (\$80) by selling 200 bushels of potatoes at 40 cents a bushel. Had she visited earlier in the now-waning potato harvest season, Hambright might have recorded "taking out potatoes" among the daily activities of the family's daughters. At another time of year, she might have described them "shocking wheat." Depending on the

8. Survey 1903, pp. 5, 27-28; "Leola, Pennsylvania," *The Budget*, Sept. 24, 1936; Mrs. M.P. Stoltzfus, "Ronks, Pa.," *The Budget*, Sept. 19, 1935.

urgency of the harvest, the girls' mother might even have participated in these activities. On a farm that did not hire labor and instead relied entirely on its "own help," even the chief household manager sometimes necessarily took a turn in the fields.⁹

Fruits, vegetables, and grains were important to the family's economic welfare, but the Study of Consumer Purchases agents classified their farm as primarily a livestock, dairy, and poultry operation. If this family practiced the typical division of labor, the farm husband and sons were primarily in charge of the large livestock, dairying engaged both sexes in roughly equitable labor, and poultry was a predominantly female enterprise. During the survey year, the family sold 27 steers at \$65 a head, two calves at \$10 apiece, and one horse for \$50, earning \$1,825 in gross profits for their livestock operation. They apparently raised livestock strictly for the market because the survey recorded no butchering activities or consumption of home-produced meat. Hambright instead noted that the household patronized a local butcher shop to procure the cured ham, beef bologna, and dried beef they consumed during the third week of September 1936. The family's dairy and poultry enterprises were another matter. Without the benefit of electric-powered milking machines or incubators, the family nevertheless produced a variety of dairy and poultry products for both the market and home consumption. Although they only ran a dairy operation for one half of the 1935-1936 survey year, the family nevertheless grossed \$780 in annual milk sales. And while they averaged \$15 in milk sales per week, they also averaged \$1.40—or 28 quarts—in milk consumption. Their sample meal menus listed milk as a beverage at every meal, and they ate home-produced butter on their homemade bread three times a day.¹⁰

The real mainstay of the farm economy, however, was the family's poultry operation. During the survey year, they sold 7,200 dozen eggs—at 30 cents a dozen—to gross \$2,160 in egg income, and they grossed another \$300 in chicken sales. In addition, the family themselves consumed two chickens per month and five dozen eggs a week. Hambright, in fact, listed fried eggs as the main course on the family's sample supper menu.¹¹

9. Fannie Beiler, "Lancaster, Pa.," *The Budget*, Sept. 24, 1936; "Leola, Pennsylvania," *The Budget*, Sept. 24, 1936; Mrs. John K. Lapp, "New Holland, Pa.," *The Budget*, Oct. 8, 1936; Survey 1903, pp. 1, 25-26, 28.

10. Survey 1903, pp. 1-2, 26-28.

11. *Ibid.*

In her list of their daily activities, Agent Hambright recorded some variation in every family member's schedule save one. For the wife and mother of the family, the week was simply one long, ceaseless exercise in "Housework." Household maintenance was indeed a component of her work. With varying levels of assistance from her already busy daughters, she cleaned the house without benefit of a vacuum cleaner or indoor running water; cooked, baked, and did the laundry with old-fashioned coal, wood, or gasoline-powered equipment; mended the distinctive Old Order Amish garments she had constructed on her pedal-powered sewing machine; and tended to any minor illnesses or injuries. In reality, however, the farm woman's work extended far beyond keeping house. The corn and tomatoes she canned, the cows she milked, and the hen house she supervised allowed her husband and children to live and prosper on their 78-acre, family-owned farm—even in the middle of an economic depression.¹²

Farm communities in many regions witnessed a substantial increase in women's gardening, dairying, poultry-raising, and field activities in the 1930s as compared with the 1920s. By the 1930s, however, most of these women's families were in a period of transition between the general family farming practices of the nineteenth century and the greater crop specialization, mechanization, and reliance on consumer goods that farm journals, agricultural college farm and home extension services, and most Department of Agriculture agencies had urged upon them. For the Old Order Amish, in contrast, these productive activities represented a continuation and expansion of their usual chores rather than a resumption or selective extension of earlier practices. As Walter M. Kollmorgen noted in the conclusions to his study of their community, the Old Order Amish belief that the Lord had commanded them to lead a labor-intensive life on the land lay behind their strong and sustained commitment to productive activities that involved all members of the farm family. Hard work distracted family members from worldly influences outside the Amish community, and home production ensured that members of the Old Order Amish—with their history of religious persecution—could remain relatively self-reliant and independent of potentially dangerous outsiders.

For Old Order Amish women and girls, a central role in home and farm production thus represented a permanent way of life rather than a temporary survival strategy or the final stage of reliance on the practices of an earlier era before continuing down the road toward modern, mechanized farming when the economy revived. Old Order Amish women's long-established and wide-ranging production efforts, and

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 1, 3, 7, 25-26.

their limited involvement in consumer activities, served their households well during the crisis years of the Great Depression, helping them to weather these difficult conditions more successfully than most other farm families.¹³

New Deal researchers noted that Old Order Amish women's wide-ranging work—on both sides of the farmhouse threshold—contributed to their families' relative economic stability during the Depression years, enabling their farms to thrive into the second half of the twentieth century. Armed with the simplest and most cost-effective tools—from the humble broom to the stove-top pressure cooker and the treadle sewing machine—Amish women maintained the home and fed, clothed, and earned money for their families with person-power while saving cash resources for investment in the farming operation rather than for the purchase of modern household appliances. Together with other family members, Lancaster County's Amish women and girls maintained what, according to the Bureau of Agricultural Economics, was the most successful farming community in Depression-era America. Opting out of the trend toward capital-intensive mechanized farming and housekeeping for cultural and religious reasons, the Lancaster County Amish successfully maintained their small-scale, labor-intensive, general farms beyond the economic crisis of the 1930s.

13. For information on farm women's activities in other areas of the North during the Great Depression, see chapters 5 and 7 of Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); chapter 6 of Catherine McNicol Stock, *Main Street in Crisis: The Great Depression and the Old Middle Class on the Northern Plains* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); chapters 3 and 4 of Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), and material throughout Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm*. For extensive examination of the greater long-term success enjoyed by farming communities that practice farming as a way of life rather than as a business enterprise, see Sonya Salamon, *Prairie Patrimony: Family, Farming, and Community in the Midwest* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).