

An Amish Paradox

*Diversity and Change in
the World's Largest Amish Community*

Charles E. Hurst *and*
David L. McConnell





YOUNG CENTER BOOKS IN ANABAPTIST & PIETIST STUDIES

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Preface

Studying the Amish is like undertaking a great detective adventure. There are detours, hidden treasures, unexpected discoveries, and clues to Amish culture and lifestyle lying all around. But as soon as you think you have a firm grasp on an issue, it slips away. You find exceptions and differences, and you begin to realize how misleading it is to jump to conclusions. You learn that it is dangerous to enter the study with a know-it-all attitude or a fixed theoretical framework. The research humbles but excites you because you become increasingly aware of the richness and depth of this living culture.

One of the many joys experienced in our exploration of the Amish in the Holmes County Settlement has been the twists and turns encountered on our journey. Because of the complexity and changing face of this settlement, the adventure has never been boring. Popular treatments of the Amish too frequently generalize inappropriately, focus on sensationalist incidents, or merely slide along the surface without ever penetrating the reality of Amish society. And while there are numerous excellent scholarly books on the Amish, they have tended to focus on other settlements, such as those in Pennsylvania and Indiana, even though the Holmes County Settlement in Ohio is the largest and perhaps the most complex in the world. It is on the latter community that our study focuses. (For convenience and because the settlement is centered around Holmes County, we use the term *Holmes County Settlement* throughout the book. In other works, the same settlement is sometimes referred to as the “Wayne-Holmes Settlement” or the “Wayne-Holmes-Tuscarawas Settlement.”

In fact, it includes small parts of Wayne, Stark, Tuscarawas, Coshocton, Knox, and Ashland counties.)

To be Amish means to keep oneself separate from the wider society while at the same time being able to negotiate with it. This is an interminable struggle, one that contributes mightily to the dynamism of the Holmes County Settlement. This struggle has numerous faces and manifests itself in many forms. Among these are the ongoing negotiations between the individual and the community, between freedom and regulation, and between tradition and modernity. It is within the crucible of these cross-cutting and conflicting forces that Amish behavior and culture are generated. Like the polarities of a magnet, the elements within these pairs often repel each other but also often reach accommodation and create fascinating mixtures.

During the early months of our fieldwork and on numerous other occasions, we experienced these unlikely mixtures and the sense of paradox that accompanied them. Sitting quietly next to an Amish friend on our way to the Heritage Historical Library in Aylmer, Canada, we were startled when the sound of his cell phone broke the silence in the car. Eagerly awaiting the arrival of parents who were bringing a hot lunch to schoolchildren, we were surprised when a pizza delivery truck pulled into the schoolyard, followed minutes later by a horse and buggy loaded with soft drinks and salad. In another instance, an Amish teacher, hearing of our interest in a particular lesson plan, opened a cupboard and proceeded to run off a color copy of it on his battery-powered copy machine. In this community that so often emphasizes cooperation and mutual dependence, we also watched Amish boys and girls go head to head in front of the class in a timed competition to solve math problems. And when students arrived for a school campout, we noticed that they sported the latest Nike and Adidas travel bags, footwear, and camping gear (but only in dark colors).

Such surprises, of course, said as much about our own expectations of the Amish as they did about the realities of Amish life. Mixtures like these are not anomalies; they are interwoven throughout the fabric of Amish culture and characterize our substantive discussions of religion, family, education, economy, and health care. The central focus of our book is the diversity created by these seemingly unlikely combinations and the border work that they require between Amish affiliations and between Amish and English (non-Amish) societies. Challenging a singular view of

Amish culture and identity, we show how the interplay of internal tensions and external pressures affects integration and separation in different contexts.

The Holmes County Settlement is rife with diversity, internal disagreements, and varying adaptations to the conflicting forces that members must face. We find self-made Amish millionaires alongside struggling dairy and produce farmers; successful female entrepreneurs next door to stay-at-home wives; fervent adherents of public schooling and of homeschooling as well as supporters of parochial education within the same church district; and Amish youth who “run wild” even as their peers reject the period known as *rumspringa* altogether. Much of this diversity is caused by the coexistence of Swartzentruber, Andy Weaver, Old Order, New Order, and even New New Order affiliations within the Holmes County setting.

Over the past few decades, the tensions created by all these pressures have intensified as Amish settlements across America have undergone a remarkable economic transformation. To the surprise of many, as Amish enterprises and other forms of nonfarming employment have prospered, the retention rates of Amish youth have grown to an all-time high. To date, however, there has been no comprehensive analysis of the cultural negotiations, tensions, and contradictions unleashed by these changes in Ohio’s Holmes County Settlement. Based on more than ten years of experience with the local Amish community and seven years of systematic field research, including extensive interviewing and survey data, our book analyzes cultural continuities and changes in the world’s largest and most diverse Amish community. For those who are interested, we describe our methods of data collection more fully in appendix A.

In addition to our primary focus on the diversity and tensions within the Holmes County Settlement, a second emphasis in our analysis is on the far-reaching cultural implications of greater Amish involvement in the marketplace for changes in Amish religious convictions, family practices, educational choices, occupational shifts, and health care options. As a large and fundamental part of Amish lives, economics in all its particularities has impressed itself on even the most personal aspects of their lifestyles.

To our Amish readers, we are keenly aware that our book will not reflect the same spiritual tone that an Amish writer would strike. Ours is

a social-scientific study; following the standards of our respective disciplines, we have tried to put our personal beliefs aside and to avoid judgments that are not supported by the data we collected. At the same time, we have tried to write with respect, and we hope that our admiration for the many positive qualities in Amish life comes through. Walking the tightrope between being outside analysts and participant observers, as outsiders inside, we have tried to view Amish culture through Amish eyes while trying to maintain somewhat of an objective stance. Neither of us speaks Pennsylvania Dutch, and so the differences in language required us to be especially sensitive to the insider's point of view so as to get a more accurate picture of the Amish lifeworld. Along the way, we made use of Amish insiders, outsiders who had been insiders (ex-Amish), and total outsiders (English) as informants. To ensure anonymity, we have not used any individual names except where names have been published in the news media or for those individuals whose names are associated with Amish affiliations.

Researchers who work with the Amish usually end up with a great deal of respect for what Amish communities are trying to accomplish. As Marc Olshan notes, one side effect of this process is that many accounts have treated the Amish with "kid gloves" and have examined their lifestyle through "rose-colored glasses."¹ We too greatly admire certain aspects of Amish society. But we have tried to look at Amish society with a critical eye and have not hesitated to point out contradictions and conflicts. As a living, prospering cultural community, the Amish wrestle with the same problems of finding adequate health care, staying true to their principles, teaching their children, and making a living as does everyone else. We hope we have portrayed the Holmes County Settlement as a complex, dynamic, contemporary, and creative community and have dispelled the image of Amish life as a vestige of a bygone era.



WE HAVE ORGANIZED THIS BOOK around six substantive chapters that, taken together, tell a multifaceted story about diversity and change in the Holmes County Settlement. Chapters 1 and 8 are the bookends to this story. In chapter 1 we take readers on a cultural tour of the Holmes County Settlement, provide background information on common cultural and historical threads that unify the Amish, and lay out the central puzzle and guid-

ing concepts for our study. In chapter 8 we attempt to tie together many of the specific patterns associated with religion, family, education, work, and health care to construct a coherent framework for understanding the Holmes County Settlement as a community.

Chapters 2 and 3 explore the origins and consequences of religious diversity among the Amish.² The Amish have not been immune to religious conflict, and chapter 2 delves in some detail into the various factors—doctrinal disagreements, technology use, personality clashes—that have given rise to the four main church affiliations in the settlement. In chapter 3 we ask, How far-reaching are these religious divisions in shaping patterns of interaction in the Holmes County Settlement? Specifically, we focus on three key barometers of religious life—mission and outreach efforts, rum-springa, and excommunication and shunning.

In chapter 4 we explore an area that would seem to be the most resistant to change: family life. To be sure, the structure of the family has not been completely altered by the move to nonfarming occupations. But even this most stable of Amish institutions is showing signs of new stresses and challenges. We discuss the various meanings surrounding family and home, continuities and changes in relations between parents and children and between husbands and wives, and the re-shaping of leisure time and consumption.

Chapter 5, on Amish education, looks at the new set of choices and challenges facing Amish parents, teachers, and school board members as they try to ensure that children are both socialized into the Amish worldview and trained in the skills they will need to make a living. The Holmes County Settlement is distinctive for the diversity of educational choices made by Amish parents. This chapter examines the educational options available to Amish parents—parochial schools, public schools, and homeschooling—and asks why some Amish parents choose public schools even though they are well aware of the excessive competition, individualism, and other cultural baggage found within the public school terrain. We also explore recent trends in vocational training and education for special-needs children.

Chapter 6 takes up the variety of occupational niches available to the Holmes County Amish and asks what kinds of social and cultural consequences stem from particular occupational choices. Unlike other large Amish settlements, where the shift away from farming has resulted in

more widespread adoption of micro-enterprises and factory labor, the Holmes County Settlement can be described as a “mixed economy.” The challenges raised by the tourist industry continue to be an issue, as does growing concern about social class inequalities among the Amish themselves. This chapter also examines emerging occupations such as dog and deer raising and organic farming and businesses such as greenhouses and produce auctions.

The Holmes County Settlement offers a useful window on diverse responses to health care among the Amish, which we examine in chapter 7. With major hospitals in nearby cities and with world-class health care services available at the Cleveland Clinic and at Akron Children’s Hospital, the Amish have access to the finest doctors and the latest surgical techniques. However, one does not have to travel far to find midwives, reflexologists, chiropractors, natural foods proponents, and other nontraditional forms of health care. In this chapter we explore the role of church guidelines, cost, access, and knowledge in health care decisions across the life cycle, including where to give birth, how to address physical health problems, how to deal with mental illness, and how to die with dignity.

Ultimately, we argue that the notion of the Amish as “separate from the world” overlooks the fact that, to varying degrees, the Amish have come to see and to forge connections between themselves and outsiders. But the Amish have resisted complete assimilation into the English world. In the wake of the Amish economic transformation, which cultural meanings and practices have remained conventional and taken for granted, which have been discarded, and which have become troublesome or contested?³ It is our hope that, through a fine-grained analysis of religion, family, education, work, and health care, we will be able to shed some light on these important questions.

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We have many people to thank. First and foremost, we could have accomplished little without the cooperation and insights of many local Amish contributors, including members and ordained leaders from many church affiliations, as well as farmers, businessmen and businesswomen, committee chairs, teachers, factory employees, and homemakers. Several of these individuals read drafts of chapters and submitted comments to us that added to the reality and richness of our presentations or corrected errors. The directors of the Heritage Historical Library in Canada and the Ohio Amish Library graciously made all their resources available to us. Many Amish spent hours with us and welcomed us into their homes. We are truly appreciative of their tolerance and openness to us as strangers and outsiders.

Many other, mostly non-Amish (English), residents consented to interviews, sometimes repeatedly. They occupy a variety of pivotal positions within the local area, and among them were the executive directors of the Holmes County Chamber of Commerce and the Holmes County Education Foundation, the community development director of the Ohio State University Extension, principals at public elementary schools, and local historians who are Mennonite or Amish. English people who were business partners with Amish individuals or who worked often with Amish businesses also participated. Many ex-Amish from different affiliations also offered their ideas. For the health care chapter, we consulted with a wide variety of counselors and medical professionals, licensed and unlicensed. We are grateful for all the time these individuals gave to our project.

We also received support and comments from inside the academy. We owe a huge debt of gratitude to Donald Kraybill for his wise counsel and useful suggestions at every stage of the process. Richard Stevick, Karen Johnson-Weiner, Larry Greksa, David Luthy, and David Weaver-Zercher, all important analysts of the Amish, made very helpful suggestions for different parts of our study. An anonymous reviewer provided thought-provoking and constructive comments. We are also indebted to Richard Moore, Elizabeth Cooksey, and Myra Katz for sharing their work on the Holmes County Amish with us. Our colleague Jennifer Graber clarified many of the nuances of religion among the Amish and how their views contrast with those of evangelical and other Protestant churches. Anne Nurse provided methodological assistance, and Heather Fitz Gibbon and Christa Craven critiqued our comments on gender. Catherine Grandgeorge and Mary Schantz gave invaluable assistance in constructing figures and maps. The following Amish individuals read drafts of all or parts of our book and/or provided helpful and detailed comments: Ed Kline, Marvin Wengerd, David Kline, Wayne Wengerd, Rob Schlabach, Ernie Hershberger, Monroe Beachy, and Jacob Beachy. Others providing assistance were Bruce Glick, David Wiesenberg, Owen and Pat McConnell, and Paul Hostetler. Any errors of fact or interpretation remain our own.

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Finally, it goes without saying (but we'll say it anyway) that we have been fortunate to have the full support and love of our spouses, Mary Ellen and Cathy. Their continued encouragement and patience have made our work much easier.

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Discovering the Holmes County Amish

You can drive down any north-south road in the settlement and in a span of just a few miles you might pass Amish families from five or six different affiliations.

—An Old Order Amish man

Ohio's Amish Country

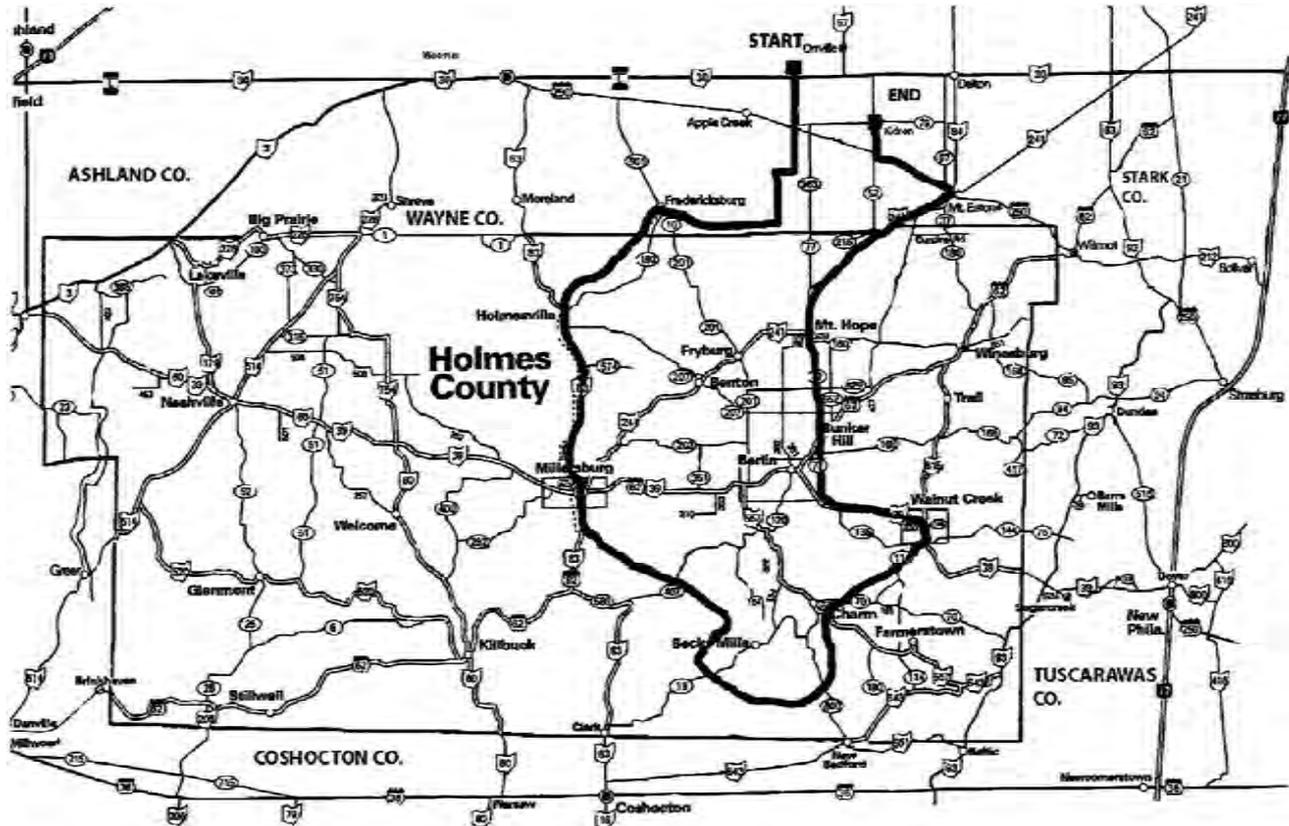
Just sixty miles south of Cleveland and seventy miles northeast of Columbus, in the center of the triangle formed by interstates 70, 71, and 77, lies the largest contiguous Amish community in the world. Over the past five years, we have driven thousands of miles crisscrossing this settlement as we gathered information for our study. Many times we had the good fortune to be accompanied by Amish friends and acquaintances who generously shared their intimate knowledge of the region's social and physical terrain. We invite you to join us, in this chapter, for a journey through the Holmes County Settlement; we'll explore a few of the places that have special meaning to the thirty thousand Amish who call it home.

It's a sunny day in early June 2007, and we begin our trip on the outskirts of Orrville, Ohio, heading south down Kansas Road. Just a stone's throw to the west is the Wayne County Speedway, where Amish youth sometimes gather at night to sneak a glimpse of the local auto racing scene. Almost immediately we come to the new U.S. 30 bypass, running from Wooster to Canton, and on this day the big story is road construction.

Kansas Road is temporarily closed because the Ohio Department of Transportation is building a bridge with a special buggy bypass over the highway to allow Amish families to travel safely to Orrville and other points north for health care and shopping. Partly because the area is home to the most conservative sect of Amish, the Swartzentrubers, who depend on buggy transport far more than do the other affiliations, the bridge was approved after extensive consultations between state and local officials and Amish residents.

Having navigated the detour, we proceed south past Riceland Golf Course and several dozen non-Amish homes, their identity betrayed by the electrical wires from the grid and the vehicles in the driveways. Within minutes, however, we are in an area that is filled with historical significance for the Amish. It includes the site of the oldest continuously operating school in Ohio and the original location of a major schism in the settlement that created another conservative branch, the Andy Weaver affiliation. By the time we pass the intersection with Lautenschlager Road, gently rolling farmland stretches east and west and the telltale signs of Amish homes emerge: windmills that power the pumps for the water wells, white purple martin houses that look like tiny apartment complexes on a pole, dark-colored clothes drying on clotheslines, and mailboxes with names such as Miller, Raber, and Hershberger. Some houses are crowded up against the road on small lots, whereas others are set back, accessible only by a long lane. More than a few can accurately be called “self-contained estates,” since they include numerous outbuildings—a shop, a barn, an attached house for the elderly grandparents. Amish farms in this area generally range from 80 to 140 acres, with the land and buildings valued between three hundred thousand and a half million dollars.¹

Soon, however, we realize that farms are not the only businesses in the area. Dotted the roadside are small shops with names like Kidron Woodcraft, Y and M Chair, and Yoder Hardwood. Misty Ridge Woodcraft makes entertainment centers and computer furniture, items never used by the Amish. The number of shops specializing in wood products is especially noticeable, but on closer inspection, a surprising variety of occupational niches appear, such as the Kansas Road Tarp Shop, Hostetler Welding, and Chupp’s Powder Coating. We pass several Swartzentruber homesteads, identified by their dark red barns (white is considered too worldly) and dirt lanes, that sell products out of the house, advertised by



Holmes County tour. The solid black line on this map shows the route of our cultural tour through the heart of the settlement, which spans six counties but is centered in Holmes County. Courtesy of Mary Schantz.