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# Working Together: Women and Men on the Amish Family Farm in 1930s Lancaster County, Pennsylvania

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**Abstract:** Old Order Amish men did not own gasoline tractors or other large power farm implements to amplify their manhood, and Amish women did not own mechanical household appliances to symbolize their feminine role as housekeepers. Rejecting the notion of mechanized, capital-intensive agriculture in favor of traditional, labor-intensive family farming, the Old Order Amish of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, practiced a system of labor that necessarily required the crossing of strict gender-role boundaries. Although men primarily identified as farmers and women as homemakers, agricultural success among the Amish necessitated a significant degree of cooperation and mutual labor. In the words of one Old Order Amish wife of the 1930s, “On our farm I did whatever needed to be done.” Employing data from the federal government’s Study of Consumer Purchases, the authors investigate how the traditional gender arrangements of the county’s Amish population enabled them to survive the Great Depression more successfully than other agrarian communities. [Abstract by author.]

**Keywords:** Great Depression; gender; agriculture; Study of Consumer Purchases; New Deal

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## INTRODUCTION

At the end of the Great Depression, the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE) in the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) issued a report designating the Old Order Amish of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, as the most economically and culturally stable agricultural community in the nation. The article that follows examines the role that Amish women played in their community's successful survival of the depression. On the surface, the Old Order Amish seemed to conform closely to a separate spheres model of family labor in which men ran the family business by raising cash crops and livestock, while the women cared for the household and children. The Amish, however, did not view themselves as farm-based entrepreneurs but as preservers of a superior agrarian and religious way of life that was to be handed on intact to their children. This necessitated that Amish women's actual role extend beyond homemaker and reproducer of the farm family. Women's work in the field and barn, in the vegetable garden, and in the poultry house helped their families to survive depression conditions and retain their way of life for future generations.

The quantitative framework for this article is based on the massive federal "Study of Consumer Purchases" (SCP) conducted in 1935-1936 by the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics and the USDA's Bureau of Home Economics. The study's organizers selected families in large and small cities, villages, and farming communities throughout the country for an exhaustive analysis using five detailed questionnaires. Lancaster County was among the 66 farm counties included in the study. Survey workers collected questionnaires from over 1,200 farm families in the county, including 103 Old Order Amish families. Survey investigators approached the women in participating families to gain information about their households' spending habits as well as data about farm crops and income, farm and household equipment, family size, home production, recreational practices, and dietary habits. The SCP provides invaluable evidence about the production and consumption activities of Old Order Amish women and their families as well as comparative data about the practices of their Lancaster County neighbors. The data particularly highlight the extent to which Amish women's farm labor outpaced that of their

non-Amish counterparts and contributed to their families' relative economic security during the depression years.

## FOLLOWING IN THEIR ANCESTORS' FOOTSTEPS

The Old Order Amish of the 1930s believed that both male and female labor was vital to sustaining their lives on the land and thus closely followed the rules for agrarian success that their ancestors had known in West Central Europe. For instance, in his widely read 1682 agricultural advice book, titled in English *Careful Husbandry Improved*, Wolf Helmhardt von Hohberg set forth the ideal working relationship for wives and husbands who headed rural households in German-speaking Early Modern Europe. "A household without a woman," Hohberg wrote, "is like a day without sunlight, a garden without flowers, a lake without fish. Without her assistance an economy can never be undertaken and carried on in proper order. . . . [T]he household will malfunction if the marriage partners do not help one another harmoniously."<sup>1</sup>

Forty-five years after Hohberg wrote these words, the Amish began transplanting this system of complementary male and female labor to southeastern Pennsylvania. After enduring generations of persecution and exile for their opposition to infant baptism and other aspects of mainstream Protestant belief, the Amish and other Anabaptists left their homes in Switzerland, Germany, and the Netherlands for a new life in colonial America. In their new location, they continued the agricultural practices of West Central Europe, establishing family farms where men and boys labored in the fields with horses and oxen, while women and girls worked in the house, the garden, the poultry yard, and the dairy. When the agricultural cycle demanded it, however, female members of the household worked alongside men and boys during planting, harvest, and haying seasons. The other

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Marion W. Gray, *Productive Men, Reproductive Women: The Agrarian Household and the Emergence of Separate Spheres during the German Enlightenment* (New York, NY: Berghahn Books, 2000), pp. 71, 73. Like the Amish, Hohberg was a Protestant whose beliefs conflicted with the religious orthodoxy of the state, and he ultimately fled Catholic Austria to find refuge in the Upper Palatinate region of northeast Bavaria.

major task for adult women was to reproduce the household labor force through frequent childbirth. With their history of persecution in Europe and a theology that taught them to separate themselves from worldly influences, the Amish and other Anabaptists remained wary of outsiders. Amish families might hire one another's youngsters to perform farm work on a temporary basis, but they resisted engaging any long-term non-Amish help.<sup>2</sup>

By the time of the Great Depression, the Old Order Amish had been living this way of life in Lancaster County for two centuries. Among the various Anabaptist groups resident in the county, the Old Order Amish were the most traditional, remaining committed to many aspects of the culture they had brought with them to Pennsylvania in the Early Modern period. They continued to speak a German dialect, referred to as "Pennsylvania Dutch," and refused to adopt modern communication, transportation, housekeeping, and contraceptive technologies, forgoing ownership of telephones, radios, automobiles, electrical appliances, and birth control devices. At a time when a high school education was becoming a nearly 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. Members also dressed in a decidedly "plain" and unfashionable manner, with the men sporting beards and flat black hats and the women wearing modest head coverings and aprons.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Gray, pp. 34, 59. Evidence suggests that 1727 is the earliest possible date for Amish arrival in Pennsylvania. See James T. Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country: A Geographical Study of Early Southeastern Pennsylvania* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), p. 237, n. 54, and Steven D. Reschly, *The Amish on the Iowa Prairie, 1840 to 1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), p. 25.

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of Amish history and culture, including the reasons behind Old Order Amish retention of numerous Early Modern practices and customs, see material throughout Paton Yoder, *Tradition and Transition: Amish Mennonites and Old Order Amish, 1800-1900* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1991); John A. Hostetler, *Amish Society*, fourth edition (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Donald Kraybill, *The Riddle of Amish Culture*, revised edition (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2001); Donald Kraybill, Karen Johnson-Weiner, Steven Nolt, *The Amish* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013); Steven Nolt, *A History of the Amish*, third edition (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2016); and Chapter 22 of Sally McMurry, *Pennsylvania Farming: A*

Most significantly, in an increasingly urban, industrial America, the Old Order Amish remained committed to an agrarian 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 production of a few major cash crops, the Old Order Amish continued their tradition of general, diversified farming to provide for the agricultural market and at the same time feed their own 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, "[T]he Lord told Adam to replenish the earth and to rule over the animals and the land—you can't do that in cities."<sup>4</sup>

#### FINDINGS OF THE "STUDY OF CONSUMER PURCHASES"

As the SCP data indicate, Amish adherence to the farming practices of the Early Modern era yielded positive results. In the mid-1930s, when the average Lancaster County family netted \$878 a year (\$16,300 in 2020 currency) from cash crops and livestock on a 60.5-acre farm, Old Order Amish families realized \$1,000 in net farm profit (\$18,565 in 2020 dollars) on 61.4 acres. One key to the success of these families was the flexibility of their labor roles. In an amendment of gender roles practiced in Early Modern Europe and colonial Pennsylvania, women no longer predominated in dairy work. As the scale of Amish dairying had

*History in Landscapes* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2017). For a critique of the standard paradigm in Amish studies of contrasting an abstract "modern" with "Amish," see Cory Anderson, Joseph Donnermeyer, Jeffrey Longhofer, and Steven D. Reschly, "A Critical Appraisal of Amish Studies' De Facto Paradigm, Negotiating with Modernity," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 58, (2019): 725-42.

<sup>4</sup> Jane C. Getz, "The Economic Organization and Practices of the Old Order Amish of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 20 (January 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, DC: Government Printing Office, 1942).

grown and become more market oriented in the twentieth century, it engaged both sexes roughly equally. Women and girls nevertheless remained the predominant labor force in the home, garden, and poultry house, while men and older boys continued to be in charge of large livestock and cash crops. But at harvest time—with the exception of the very youngest boys and girls—male and female family members all labored in the farm fields. In other words, in a pattern consistent with that of other traditional farming communities, female family members regularly crossed gender-role boundaries to perform cash-oriented men's work. Much less frequently, men reciprocated and performed women's prescribed tasks.<sup>5</sup>

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. When historian Sarah Elbert visited a farm household in the late twentieth century and asked the farm wife to estimate the number of hours she devoted to work for the farm versus work for the home, the frustrated woman flung open the lid of her automatic washing machine to reveal a load of laundry including grimy farm coveralls, children's play clothes, and furniture slipcovers. The jumble of work clothing and household laundry in the woman's washing machine graphically revealed the difficulty in dividing labor for the marketplace and labor for the family when workplace and home place—as well as workforce and family—are one and the same.<sup>6</sup>

The situation on Old Order Amish farms was no different in the 1930s. For example, when SCP

Agent J. Byler asked one Amish family to determine whether their horses were primarily a family expense for buggy driving or a farm expense for powering field equipment, they were entirely stymied, leaving her to report, "No Extra cost for Driving horses. Uses farm horses only. Cannot give any amount for Family." Like horse labor, human labor was often difficult to categorize as primarily serving the family or the farm. SCP Agent Rigdon recorded a typical catchall response when she reported the farm and household labor arrangements of a middle-aged Amish couple with four teenage children: "All work done within family both in house and farm."<sup>7</sup>

As in other farming communities around the country, men's and women's access to particular types of equipment and power sources theoretically differentiated their labor. According to the dominant patriarchal model, the male farm operator and his older sons were the ones who chiefly operated expensive farm equipment. Elsewhere in the northern United States, this increasingly meant that older males claimed primary or exclusive use of the gasoline-powered tractor. In Amish country, however, men's chief claim remained use of farm horses and the plows, wagons, and other equipment they powered. In contrast, wives, younger sons, and daughters primarily performed their work by hand. When they did employ implements in their farm labor, these were likely to be less expensive tools that all family members used regardless of age or sex. In some instances, this equipment might even be difficult to categorize as either principally a farm or household tool.<sup>8</sup>

A common 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. SCP 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

<sup>5</sup> Profit and acreage statistics from 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): 150. (Currency conversions throughout the article are determined using the American Institute for Economic Research cost-of-living calculator at [www.aier.org/cost-living-calculator](http://www.aier.org/cost-living-calculator)). Numerous histories of U.S. farm families prior to the mechanization of agriculture document that women crossed gender-role boundaries more frequently than men. Perhaps the best known and most influential of these studies is John Mack Faragher's *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1979).

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Elbert, "Women and Farming: Changing Structures, Changing Roles," in Wava G. Haney and Jane B. Knowles, eds., *Women and Farming: Changing Roles, Changing Structures* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1988), p. 261.

<sup>7</sup> SCP Surveys 1930 and 1017, Study of Consumer Purchases (SCP), Record Group 176, National Archives II, College Park, MD.

<sup>8</sup> For discussion of mainstream farm families' use of mechanized equipment during this period, see Chapters 3 and 4 of Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1993).

female boarder. The farm family raised their own broomcorn 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 hosting 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. Their difficulty in defining a broom as a household or farm investment, as house or barn equipment, or as a female or male tool demonstrated the interwoven nature of Amish family life and farm work and the mutuality of female and male labor.<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, in a rhetorical practice common on family farms throughout the United States, Amish families downplayed the extent to which male and female members shared labor and equipment. Instead, they insisted that, in the words of one Lancaster County Amish woman, “The women keep the house and the men work the farms.”<sup>10</sup> When they did acknowledge the work women performed in the barn and field, the Amish did not characterize this labor as farm work but as “helping” male family members with the men’s

work. Although the Amish employed a rhetorical strategy that reflected the patriarchal structure of their households, privileged male labor, and seemingly rendered women’s farm work “invisible,” SCP data demonstrate a different reality. Evidence indicates that regardless of their rhetoric, the Old Order Amish acknowledged and valued women’s work wherever it took place.

The market value of the labor family members contributed to their own households and farms may be determined by the wages they earned when they took that labor to their neighbors’ homes and fields. In a practice familiar to their ancestors in Early Modern Europe, an Amish family with enough children to spare might send a son or daughter to labor at a neighboring farm where the children were either too young to work or were old enough to begin marrying and leaving home. Working at a neighbor’s place was an important coming-of-age experience for many Amish youngsters, providing them with a sense of personal responsibility and a chance to practice the work skills they had learned at home and would soon be taking into adulthood. Work on a neighboring farm also provided young people with a wage to take back to their families or to invest in establishing their own farm households one day.<sup>11</sup>

Prevailing wage rates designated male hired labor—which centered on cash crop production in the spring, summer, and fall—as worth more than household-centered female labor that might occur year-around. Over the course of a year, however, girls’ lighter but more frequent work resulted in wages that were roughly equitable to those of their brothers. During the 1935-1936 survey year, for instance, one 16-year-old Amish girl earned \$156 (\$2,893 in 2020 currency) for performing “Household work on farm” for a neighboring family at the rate of \$3 a week for 52 weeks, while her 18-year-old brother received \$160 (\$2,967 in 2020 dollars) for doing “Unskilled labor on farm” at \$20 a month for eight months. As such evidence indicates, both male and female labor had significant economic value for Lancaster County farm households, and Old Order Amish families, who maintained a higher birth rate than the county’s

<sup>9</sup> SCP Surveys 1583, 1903, 1937.

<sup>10</sup> Amish woman’s comments are from “One Day in the Life of an Amish Woman,” *The Independent*, June 11, 1903, p. 1397. For discussion of use of this rhetorical strategy in non-Amish farming communities in other regions of the country, see Carolyn E. Sachs, *The Invisible Farmers: Women in Agricultural Production* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Allanheld, 1983), and Deborah Fink, *Open Country, Iowa: Rural Women, Tradition and Change* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1986).

<sup>11</sup> Cordelia Beattie, “Economy,” in Sandra Cavallo and Silvia Evangelisti, eds., *A Cultural History of Childhood and Family in the Early Modern Age* (London, UK: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 54-56.

other residents, benefited from this system whether their children exerted all their efforts at home or earned cash resources by sometimes taking their labor elsewhere.<sup>12</sup>

Amish theology as well as the need for family labor encouraged the community's high birth rate. Taking seriously the Biblical injunction to "be fruitful and multiply," Amish women did not view childbirth as potentially threatening but as status enhancing, and they and their husbands considered babies gifts from God rather than extensions of their parents' identities. Birth announcements in the Amish newspaper *The Budget* emphasized a child's status as a future worker and designated whether or not a new baby would eventually perform indoor female labor or outdoor male labor. In autumn 1934, for example, Katie Lapp reported from the Lancaster County community of Gordonville that a "little dish washer" named Sarah had "arrived at the home of Samuel Blanke," while Mary Ann Byler spread the news from Crawford County, PA, that folks at the Jake A. Byler household were "all smiles since the little woodchopper came to stay with them. He answers to the name of Andrew." In addition to reifying gendered labor roles, such announcements also clearly reinforced the patriarchal structure of Amish family life. A woman gained greater personal status with the birth of each child, but that did not mean her name would make it into the newspaper. The household she lived in and whose workforce she enlarged continued to be known strictly by her husband's name.<sup>13</sup>

Although the Amish themselves, as well as federal investigators, categorized girls' and women's work as primarily household labor, female family members necessarily performed periodic outdoor labor—particularly during busy harvest seasons. In most instances, this was unpaid labor on their own family farms. Occasionally, however, Amish girls performed outdoor work on neighboring farms, and the wages they earned in these instances indicate the market value of their

labor. For example, during the autumn of 1935, a 17-year-old Amish girl earned a dollar a day picking apples in a neighbor's orchard. The five dollars she earned in total for her Monday-Friday toil (\$93 in 2020 currency) matched the wages of the 18-year-old male laborer previously discussed when his \$20 monthly earnings are broken down by the week. In other words, as gauged by local wage rates, Amish families valued male and female farm labor equally—at least during peak seasons when a crop had to be harvested or else lost.<sup>14</sup>

The experiences of a 19-year-old "Hired Girl" and the household she labored in offer both insight into the value of female labor and the imprecision of the term "Household work on farm." In 1935-36, this young woman worked on a 55-acre general farm rented by a 30-year-old wife and 29-year-old husband who had a five-year-old son and three-year-old daughter. The farm wife reported to SCP Agent Viola J. Hambright that the main activities of her son and daughter were playing and sleeping. With children too young to labor on the farm, the Amish couple hired both farm (male) and household (female) labor. Due to Amish skepticism of outsiders—including the belief that they lacked the training, strength, and perseverance to work successfully on Amish farms—the youngsters the couple hired were likely Amish. The couple reported paying just \$25 for farm labor, which suggests that they only hired male help during the busiest weeks in the farm calendar, such as during the wheat harvest and at haying time. In contrast, the young woman Hambright classified as the couple's "Hired Girl" apparently worked throughout the spring, summer, and fall, earning the going rate of \$3 a week. She received \$105 (\$1,947 in 2020 dollars) as well as her room and board for the 35 weeks she worked on the farm.<sup>15</sup>

Although Hambright listed the 19-year-old's daily labor as "Housework," the fact that her employers did not require the young woman's services during the winter months indicates the extent to which her work was tied to the household's farming tasks. While the household's wife and mother worked in the garden, poultry house, dairy barn, and farm field, the hired girl washed dishes, dust-

<sup>12</sup> SCP Survey 1933.

<sup>13</sup> Katie Lapp, "Gordonville, Pa.," *The Budget*, October 11, 1934, and Mary Ann Byler, "Atlantic, Pa.," *The Budget*, November 8, 1934. For discussion of Old Order Amish attitudes toward childbirth, see John A. Hostetler and Gertrude Enders Huntington, *Amish Children: Education in the Family, School, and Community*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1992), p. 21.

<sup>14</sup> SCP Survey 1357.

<sup>15</sup> SCP Survey 1930. For discussion of the preference of Amish households for Amish laborers, see Kollmorgen, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community*, pp. 52-53.

ed, swept, and kept an eye on the children. When her female employer processed fruits, meats, and vegetables for market sale or home consumption, the hired girl assisted her. In the winter months, however, when the woman's gardening, canning, and fieldwork were done, her small household did not require the services of a hired female laborer.<sup>16</sup>

The SCP data that Hambright compiled demonstrate the impressive results of the work that the hired girl and her female employer performed. During Hambright's late November 1936 visit, the household consumed an extensive list of vegetables and fruits that the farm woman had raised and canned with the hired girl's assistance, including fresh cabbage and apples and green beans, tomatoes, carrots, beets, pickles, and applesauce. The fact that the hired girl was still residing with her employers during the last full week of November indicates that she continued to provide assistance while the wife and husband did the late autumn hog butchering and processing that provided the household with hams, sausages, and pudding pork (head and organ meat to be ground and made into a pudding-like food product). And while the hired girl did the housework and minded the children, the farm wife devoted time to the family's poultry and dairy operations, which provided food for both the household and the market and earned the household a gross income of \$195 in chicken, chicken egg, and duck sales (\$3,616 in 2020 dollars) and \$1,325 in milk sales (\$24,574 in 2020 currency).<sup>17</sup>

The hired girl and farm wife also played an important role in field crop production. As a petite young woman—five feet, three inches tall and 120 pounds—her employers would not have allowed her to work with farm horses or the equipment they powered in the grain and hay fields. The meals that she and the wife prepared for male field hands, however, were vital to their success during harvest and haying seasons. And while the hired girl worked indoors, the young farm wife undoubtedly worked alongside her husband and hired male laborers doing the handwork of shocking grains, gathering hay, and harvesting a potato crop that grossed \$100 (\$1,855 in 2020 currency).<sup>18</sup>

If she was emblematic of other Amish women in the county, the wife and mother also labored in the farm's tobacco fields, helping her household earn \$170 in gross tobacco income (\$3,153 in 2020 dollars). Tobacco profits accounted for nearly 10 percent of her family's total income, which was a typical situation on Lancaster County farms. Tobacco was the county's major cash crop—although dairy, poultry, and livestock produced more of the total farm income—and Lancaster County produced more than 90% of Pennsylvania's total tobacco crop.<sup>19</sup>

Amish farm families contributed significantly to the county's high rate of tobacco production. While in 1935-36 the average Lancaster County farm raised a tobacco crop worth \$398 (\$7,375 in 2020 dollars), the typical Old Order Amish household raised a crop valued at \$460 (\$8,524 in 2020). Tobacco was the quintessential Amish crop. The Columbian exchange of crops between the Americas and Europe meant that their ancestors were cultivating this "New World" crop in West Central Europe long before the Amish left that region for their new life in Pennsylvania, and they were particularly attracted to tobacco farming because it was not dependent upon the purchase and use of gasoline-powered farm equipment. Stripping, sorting, and baling the crop took place during winter months devoid of major field tasks, so the Amish especially prized tobacco as a crop that kept "boys from being idle in the winter." But tobacco also kept Amish mothers and daughters busy weeding with hoes in summer and harvesting the crop with hand shears in late August and September. Women, in fact, were so associated with this type of agricultural work that when the weekly news and opinion magazine *The Independent* published one of the first serious discussions of Amish women's labor in June 1903, the article featured a photo of two Amish women working in a Lancaster County tobacco field.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> SCP Survey 1930.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.; Kollmorgen, p. 46.

<sup>19</sup> SCP Survey 1930. For discussion of Lancaster County potato and tobacco farming practices, see Chapters 8 and 11 of Gideon L. Fisher, *Farm Life and It's [sic] Changes* (Gordonville, PA: Pequea Publishers, 1978).

<sup>20</sup> Reschly and Jellison, p.151; B.H. Slicher Van Bath, *The Agrarian History of Western Europe, A.D. 500-1850*, trans. Olive Ordish (London, UK: Edward Arnold Publishers, 1963), p. 276; Kollmorgen, p. 34; "One Day in the Life of an Amish Woman," p. 1394. For further discussion of the Columbian exchange, see Alfred W. Crosby, Jr., *The Colum-*



All told, with her labor in the farm's tobacco and potato fields and its poultry and dairy operations, the 30-year-old wife contributed to cash earnings of \$1,790 (\$33,168 in 2020)—or 63 percent of the household's gross farm sales income for the year. The joint efforts of this Amish woman and the hired girl she supervised were impressive and made a significant economic impact on their household. This reality becomes more apparent when comparing this household to the non-Old Order Amish household it most closely resembles in the SCP's Lancaster County survey records.<sup>21</sup>

Like the Amish household described above, with its teenage hired girl and two young children, the comparable non-Old Order Amish household included three youngsters—12 and 8-year-old sons and a 5-year-old daughter—and the couple who headed the family were relatively young: The husband was 37 and the wife 36. Being a few years older than their Amish counterparts, this couple had moved up the agricultural hierarchy to own rather than rent their farm, which at 60 acres was five acres larger than the one the Amish couple rented. Like the Amish farm, nearly 10 percent of this farm's income came from tobacco, but a smaller percentage of its income derived from its poultry operation (defined as women's work) and a much smaller percentage from its dairy enterprise (which engaged both men's and women's labor). In contrast, a larger proportion of this farm's income derived from wheat farming (predominantly men's work) and a much larger proportion from its large livestock operation (defined as men's work).<sup>22</sup>

Since the non-Old Order Amish farm relied on cattle, hog, and wheat farming for 71% of its income, it depended more significantly on hired male labor than did the Amish household. During her mid-August 1936 visit to the household, SCP

Agent Viola J. Hambright characterized the family's 12-year-old son as engaged in "Odd jobs" or "Farm chores," but he was still too young to drive the farm truck the family listed in its equipment inventory. And at five feet, five inches tall and 106 pounds, the boy was not yet large enough to do the physical labor of a full-grown man. The family thus employed a hired man to assist the husband and father with grain and livestock farming. During the survey year, the hired man earned two dollars a day and three meals a day for the 260 days he worked on the farm, but he did not reside with the family.<sup>23</sup>

In contrast, the family reported employing a household worker for only fifteen days during the survey year. The household helper earned a dollar a day and, like the farm laborer, ate three meals a day with her employers but did not stay overnight with them. The short duration of her employment suggests that the house worker assisted the family's wife and mother, whose reported activities were "Housekeeping" and "Gardening," only during busy harvest seasons. Although her garden produced food for home consumption, and she provided a total of 780 meals to the farm's field hand over the course of a year, the woman's direct role in production for the market was more limited than that of her Amish counterpart. The family's poultry operation and small dairy enterprise undoubtedly took up a portion of her time, and she likely did some work in the tobacco fields. Although the family did not grow potatoes as a cash crop, they did grow asparagus and rhubarb for the market, and the wife and mother likely provided labor in producing these vegetables. In contrast to the wife and mother in the Amish family, however, the market-oriented labor of the woman was minimal. Efforts in the tobacco and market vegetable fields, the dairy barn, and poultry house accounted for only 28% of the family's farm income. With less involvement in outdoor activities, this woman could devote more time to household chores and simply did not require the services of a live-in hired girl.<sup>24</sup>

In its general outlines, the differences between this household and its Amish counterpart illustrate larger trends throughout Lancaster County. As SCP data indicate, the ages of Old Order Amish

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*bian Exchange: Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*, 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary ed. (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> SCP Survey 1930.

<sup>22</sup> SCP Survey 1116. This household was located in West Lampeter Township and was "plain," with no recreation expenses and a bonnet expense on the wife's clothing survey, but the family also owned a 1929 Dodge automobile and had grid electricity. With no designation noted on the survey, the family was likely Conservative or Beachy Amish-Mennonite, Weaverland Mennonite Conference, or Conservative Mennonite.

<sup>23</sup> SCP Survey 1116.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

husbands and wives averaged a few years younger than those of couples who headed non-Amish households, and Amish farms were less dependent on hired farm labor. Most significantly, Amish women played a larger role in production for market and particularly outpaced other women in their poultry and egg production.<sup>25</sup>

While other farms in the county, even those operated by members of other Anabaptist groups, were in a period of transition between the diversified, labor-intensive agriculture of an earlier era and the specialized, mechanized farming that most agricultural experts of the 1930s advised, the Old Order Amish clung to the older model of family farming. The non-Amish household described above was a farm family in transition. With their gasoline-powered truck, high-line electricity, and a livestock operation that generated 64% of their income, this family was moving toward the type of capital-intensive, male-oriented farming that the experts prescribed. Although the wife and mother provided garden produce for home consumption, her market-oriented activities accounted for much less of the household's income than her husband's work in the livestock pens. As a result, although the household engaged in numerous other agricultural activities, the SCP characterized their farm as an "animal specialty" enterprise. In contrast, the SCP described the comparable Old Order Amish farm as primarily a poultry and dairy operation. In other words, it was a farm whose profits derived significantly from women's labor.<sup>26</sup>

One farm household made a substantial investment in mechanized equipment and the acquisition and care of hogs and cattle. Its reliance on hired male labor throughout most of the survey year illustrates the male-oriented character of this type of farming. The other farm household made no investment in costly farming equipment and focused expenditures primarily on its poultry and dairy operations. Its reliance on hired female labor throughout most of the survey year illustrates the extent to which women's labor contributed to this type of farming. During the depression years, when cattle and hog prices were low and cash to invest in mechanized equipment was scarce, "animal specialty" farming could be risky. Nevertheless, during the SCP survey year, the

non-Amish farm made a profit of \$1,163 (\$21,546 in 2020 currency). The Amish farm, however, which incorporated both male and female labor in its dairy operation and primarily women's work in its poultry venture turned a higher profit of \$1,428 (\$26,455 in 2020).<sup>27</sup>

## CONCLUSION

In 1995, looking back on the early years of her depression-era marriage, Lancaster County Amish woman Fannie Esch described her relationship with her husband as an ideal partnership. She and her husband made all decisions that affected the farm family together, and they shared work on both sides of the farmhouse threshold. He often looked after the children; she hoed weeds and shocked wheat. Her memories of milking cows together in the early morning moonlight were particularly fond ones. According to Esch, this spirit of cooperation began on the day the couple married in 1929 and continued until her husband's death sixty years later.<sup>28</sup>

Esch's depression-era participation in farm production was not unique. In the 1930s, out of economic necessity, millions of farmwomen throughout the United States stepped up their production activities and decreased their reliance on purchased goods. Farm communities in many regions witnessed a substantial increase in women's gardening and poultry-raising activities in the 1930s as compared to 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 an earlier era and the crop specialization, farm mechanization, and consumer culture participation that farm journals, equipment manufacturers, agricultural colleges, and many within the USDA prescribed. Once the economy recovered, most farmwomen and their families would continue on the path toward greater capital investment, mechanization, specialization, and

<sup>25</sup> Reschly and Jellison, pp. 148, 151.

<sup>26</sup> SCP Surveys 1116 and 1930.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Fannie Esch (pseudonym), interview with Louise Stoltzfus, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, April 29, 1995. Out of respect for Old Order Amish prohibitions against prideful behavior, the authors have agreed not to use this oral history narrator's real name. Interview notes are in the authors' possession.

consumerism. Over time, this path led to prosperity for some and failure for others.<sup>29</sup>

For the Old Order Amish, in contrast, productive activities represented a continuation rather than a resumption or extension of earlier practices. The Old Order Amish belief that the Lord had commanded them to lead a labor-intensive life on the land lay behind their strong, sustained, and highly successful commitment to production activities involving all members of the farm family. Home production and consumption of their own farm products 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, their extensive role in farm production was not a temporary survival strategy in hard economic times but a permanent way of life. As the SCP data indicate, women's long-established and wide-ranging production efforts—and their limited involvement in consumer activities—helped Amish families weather depression conditions more successfully than the majority of other farm families and allowed them to maintain a stable life on the land for decades to come. As a result, the USDA's Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE) published a series of reports in 1942 proclaiming the Old Order Amish of Lancaster County to be the most stable and successful agricultural community in the nation.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup>For discussion of farmwomen's activities in other northern U.S. communities during this period, see Chapters 5 and 7 of Deborah Fink, *Agrarian Women: Wives and Mothers in Rural Nebraska, 1880-1940* (Chapel Hill, NC: 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, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992); Chapters 3 and 4 of Jellison, "Entitled to Power"; "Conclusion" of Grey Osterud, *Putting the Barn before the House: Women and Family Farming in Early Twentieth-Century New York* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2012); and material throughout Mary Neth, *Preserving the Family Farm: Women, Community, and the Foundations of Agribusiness in the Midwest, 1900-1940* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

<sup>30</sup>Walter M. Kollmorgen, interview with Katherine Jellison and Steven D. Reschly, Lawrence, Kansas, March 20, 1994; Carl C. Taylor, "My Memory of the Conceptual Development of the Community Stability-Instability Study," August 28, 1944, General Correspondence (1923-1946), American Farm Community Study Project files (1941-1946), Box 538,

The importance of Amish women's contribution to agricultural success is perhaps most evident when comparing their experiences to those of their counterparts in the BAE report that designated the dustbowl farm families of Sublette, Kansas, as the nation's least stable agricultural community. With the exception of the area's small Mennonite community, these residents of southwest Kansas invested in expensive mechanized farm equipment, focused almost exclusively on farming wheat, and relied only lightly on unpaid family labor. As a result, at a time when Lancaster County Amish families averaged \$1,444 in annual sale, trade, and use of agricultural products, one-fourth of Sublette area families sold, traded, or consumed less than \$250 worth. The economic disparity between the two communities resulted in part from the differing levels of women's participation in the agricultural economy. In contrast to the ubiquity of gardening among Lancaster County Amish women, for instance, only 13% of Sublette area women raised vegetable gardens. The author of the Sublette community case study in fact questioned whether the women in most area farm families even identified themselves as agriculturalists at all, noting that many of them drove to town every weekday to work as office or retail clerks.<sup>31</sup>

Unlike their counterparts in southwestern Kansas, Amish women were direct participants in the farm economy and unquestionably saw themselves as partners in the agricultural enterprise. As they catalogued their contributions to the family farm in laborious detail to SCP investigators, these women could not help but recognize that their work had an obvious impact on the standard of living and community status of their families. As evidenced by their insistence that they were

Record Group 83, National Archives II, College Park, Maryland.

<sup>31</sup>See material throughout Earl H. Bell, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community: Sublette, Kansas*, Rural Life Studies, Vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1942). For further comparison of women's activities in the Lancaster County Amish and Sublette communities, see Katherine Jellison, "An 'Enviably Tradition' of Patriarchy: New Deal Investigations of Women's Work in the Amish Farm Family," in Catherine McNicol Stock and Robert D. Johnston, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of the Modern State* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 240-257.

homemakers who merely “helped” their farmer husbands, Amish women performed their labor within the constraints of a patriarchal family and religious system. The system in which they worked, however, had prescribed and valued roles for all members of the family as they worked toward a common goal: maintaining their sacred way of life on the land. In contrast to photographer Dorothea Lange’s “Migrant Mother” or novelist John Steinbeck’s *Ma Joad*, the Amish women who participated in the Study of Consumer Purchases were not victims of the Great Depression but contented survivors whose accomplishments contributed to their self-esteem. Looking back on the 1930s at the end of the twentieth century, Lydia Stoltzfus undoubtedly spoke for other Lancaster County Amish women when she noted, “On our farm I did whatever needed to be done. I stripped tobacco. I mixed donuts. I papered the house. Whatever needed to be done, I did it.”<sup>32</sup>

Rejecting the separate spheres prescriptions of modern experts, the Amish instead maintained the practice that seventeenth-century advisor Wolf Helmhardt von Hohberg had once described as helping “one another harmoniously.”<sup>33</sup> While their rhetoric upheld the notion of a rigidly patriarchal labor system in which men alone performed cash-making outdoor work, Amish families’ real-life labor and cash-earning experiences represent a different reality and demonstrate the interwoven nature of women’s work and men’s work—and family life and farm labor—on the Amish farm.

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<sup>32</sup> Lydia Stoltzfus, interview with Louise Stoltzfus, Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, April 14, 1995. Although she was a member of the Old Order Amish during the Great Depression, Stoltzfus belonged to the less traditional Beachy Amish-Mennonites by the time of her 1995 interview and agreed that the authors could identify her by her real name. Interview notes are in the authors’ possession.

<sup>33</sup> Hohberg quoted in Gray, p. 73.

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