

# The Changing Lives of Amish Women: Surprising Findings from My PhD Research

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**Abstract:** In the foreword to *Plain Women* (Reynolds, 2001), the ethnographer Simon Bronner writes, “In fact we know far more about Amish men than about Amish women.” His statement prompted me to want to know more about Amish women. My research into how life has changed for Amish women fulfilled both my own intellectual curiosity and fills a gap in the understanding of the lives of Amish women in the wider academic field, although a thorough treatment of the lives of Amish women was subsequently published, which both supports and contrasts with my findings (Johnson-Weiner, 2020). After an initial introduction to Amish women via a gatekeeper, I used snowball sampling to find other Old Order and New Order Amish women, first in Holmes County, Ohio, and later in various communities in Pennsylvania. My fieldwork was based on an ethnographic approach whereby I lived with Amish families as well as interviewed New Order and Old Order women in Ohio and Old Order women in Pennsylvania during visits in 2012 and 2014. This article describes changes identified by those women in homes and gardens, household technology, travel, and vacation habits in their lifetimes.

Submitted October 17, 2023; December 20, 2023; published April 30, 2024

<https://doi.org/10.18061/jpac.v4i2.8418>

**Keywords:** Amish women, farming, gardening, technology, leisure

I spent most of my working life in career management, helping adult clients choose a suitable occupation and gain promotions and then coaching them to do their job better so that they could achieve their long-term career goals. After 27 years, I enrolled in a three-year, part-time master’s program to study “change agent skills and strategies.” This course provoked me to think about how change happens, not just for individuals but for groups, organizations, and societies. Nine months after completing the course, I enjoyed a graduation ceremony at age 58. On the way home from the graduation, I told my husband I wanted to continue studying and was thinking of doing a PhD research degree, but first I had to find a supervisor. This is because in England, where I live, a PhD is research-based rather than growing out of graduate coursework. There are no instructed courses in British doctoral programs except to provide tuition for the necessary research skills. So, first you must find a research supervisor who has an interest in the field you propose to study, and then get an agreement from that person to be your supervisor, which provides support for your application to the institution where you hope to study.

After making approaches to various universities in England, trying to identify a potential supervisor, I was introduced to the person who would eventually become my supervisor at the University of Birmingham, an institution located in the middle of England. He is a professor of



Quaker studies and had an additional research interest in the Amish, so it seemed like it would be a good match. In addition, he worked at a small Quaker research center<sup>1</sup> within the university that specialized in supporting adult students, most of whom were embarking on master's or doctoral studies in their retirement. I told him I wanted to find out how systemic changes, namely the trend away from agriculture and into nonfarm businesses and employment, had affected Amish women. I knew that some work had already been undertaken on the move away from agriculture and that Amish men now achieved much success in small businesses (Kraybill & Nolt, 2004; Wesner, 2010). However, I could find very little research about the effect this change has had on the lives of Amish women. At that time, I had only visited Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, as a tourist, although my husband and I had been fortunate enough on our first visit to meet an Amish couple of similar age and become friends with them. Subsequently, we had returned several times to stay in their home and take them traveling with us to different parts of America.

I began my studies in June 2011 and planned to take six years to complete my research. In actuality, it took eight years, as I had a stroke after the first three months and then, two years later, had to take a year's leave of absence to have surgery, cancer treatment, and further surgery. I finally finished in January 2019, graduating in July of that year. My thesis documented 11 major changes in how Amish women live now compared with 30 years ago. For this piece, I have chosen to focus on the changes in three areas: the household, gardening, and vacationing.

Since my research involved human subjects, the university required me to apply for ethical approval. The field of Amish studies was unfamiliar to the ethics committee and they required detailed information about how I would gain access to the research subjects. At the time I made the application, I was not sure how I would do this, but offered several ideas about how I might meet women and ask them to take part in my research. After some negotiations regarding anonymity for participants, my project was approved. The issue of anonymity for the Amish proved to be more of a discussion point than I might have anticipated. An Amish man asked me, "So you want to use my wife's words but you want to call her by another name so that she cannot be identified?" I said that was what I planned to do. He replied, "Well, that would be a lie to give her another name, so you tell the university that we would rather be protected by God's truth than by a lie." I went back to the university with this response and the ethics committee agreed that I

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<sup>1</sup> The Religious Society of Friends, also known as the Quaker Movement, was founded in England in the seventeenth century by George Fox, the son of a weaver from the northwest of England. He and other early Quakers, or Friends, were persecuted for their beliefs, which included the idea that the presence of God exists in every person. Quakers were also viewed with suspicion because they rejected elaborate religious ceremonies, did not have official clergy, and believed in spiritual equality for men and women. Quaker missionaries first arrived in America in the mid-1650s. Quakers, who practice pacifism, played a key role in both the abolitionist and women's rights movements. In 1681, King Charles II gave William Penn, a wealthy English Quaker, a large land grant in America to pay off a debt owed to his family. Penn, who had been jailed multiple times for his Quaker beliefs, went on to found Pennsylvania as a sanctuary for religious freedom and a place of tolerance. Within just a few years, several thousand Friends had moved to Pennsylvania from Britain. Woodbrooke Quaker Study Centre, founded in 1903 by George Cadbury, has provided courses on the history of Quakerism since that time. It is in the former home of the founder and is part of the nearby University of Birmingham.

could use the women's first names only. Where women could be identified by their work or circumstances, or if they requested a name change, I did change their name to a generic Amish moniker.

I arranged to go to Ohio for my first fieldwork trip in 2012 and had a wonderful gatekeeper who arranged for me to talk with Old Order Amish and New Order Amish women of different ages. During subsequent trips back to Ohio and to Pennsylvania, I spoke to 38 women in different places. Each time I stayed with an Amish family and joined in with whatever they were doing. The findings of my research are based on recorded interviews with these women and participant observation based on my involvement in their family activities. Each woman was offered a transcript of her interview. Only one woman did not wish to be recorded.

Living with Amish families allowed me to make observations, some of which challenged my preconceptions. For example, on one occasion I was in a home where the décor did not conform with what I had expected of Amish homes. Traditionally, windows have plain white or green blinds. This house did have those, but on the inside, hidden by the blind, it also had lovely two-tone blue curtains with a swag across the top of the windows, hidden from the outside (see below). Being in Amish spaces as a participant-observer opened up avenues for conversation about change in many aspects of everyday life.



### **Previous Work about Amish Women**

Previous work about Amish women can be roughly divided into two types. The first are books that discuss the lifestyles of Amish women as told in their own words. The second are descriptions of Amish women's lives found in peer-reviewed books and articles.

The first type of books include autobiographical accounts, such as Miller's (2015) chronicle of, to quote the subtitle, "my journey from head majorette to the Old Order," and the Garrett and Farrant (2003) story of going in the other direction, with the subtitle *One Woman's Escape from Amish Life*.<sup>2</sup> Closer to an ethnographic and academic account is Stoltzfus's (1994) book that uses a long series of anecdotes about "the lives and stories" of Amish women, Stevick's (2006) look at Amish lifestyles, including a chapter titled "A Patchwork of Amish Women," and Stavisky's (2022) recent narrative on the daily lives of Amish women that is enriched with a large number of pictures from Lancaster County and other Pennsylvania Amish settlements.

Scholarly accounts of Amish women can be found in a number of books and articles, such as the previously cited works of Reynolds (2001) and Karen Johnson-Weiner (2020). As well, Kraybill and Nolt (2004) devote a chapter to changes in gender roles associated with the shift out of farming. Hostetler's classic book, *Amish Society* (1993), discusses traditional women's roles in the chapter titled "The Amish Family." Hurst and McConnell (2010) and Kraybill et al. (2013) also discuss women's roles in the family and the church, but they do so with greater recognition of changes in the lives of Amish women associated with other changes in Amish society, including the transition out of agriculture. Also, Johnson-Weiner's (2010) book about Plain communities in New York includes numerous references to shifts in lifestyle, such as a greater reliance on store-bought clothes. As well, Johnson-Weiner (2023) recently published an article about what she has learned from the hundreds, perhaps thousands, of letters she received from Amish women over the many years of her research.

### **Changes in the Household**

Each time I met one of the women, I explained that I wanted to know how life had changed in the last 30 years. The first thing that most of the women spoke of was how housework had changed and how they now have more conveniences in the home. Marlene, age 28, lives near Sugarcreek, Ohio, which is on the eastern side of the larger Greater Holmes County settlement. She belongs to the Old Order Amish. She grew up nearby and told me about the changes since she was living at home, before she married.

I could tell you about the technology because that, for sure, has changed and there's more coming. So, my mom, she just had a flat iron and she heated it on the fire, which was made from wood. My brother had a job to keep the wood box full with wood. Me, I have an electric iron. Well, first when I started to use man-made fibers for our dresses, rather than cotton or wool, it was easy to burn them with the irons

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<sup>2</sup> As well, there are books not exclusively focused on Amish women, but largely so, including a series written in diary style by Martin and Susan Hochstetler set in various places they have lived. These include *Life on the Edge of the Wilderness* (1987) about living in Horsefly, British Columbia; *Cabin Life on the Kootenai* (1991) describing their time living near Rexford, Montana; *Farm Life in the Hills* (1989) about their years in Holmes County, Ohio; and the 2005 *Home Life on the Prairie*, an account of living in the Clarita, Oklahoma, settlement.

we had then. So now, what I have is an electric iron and it has a thermostat, so I can control the temperature. It has a plug on the end of a cord, and I have a generator outside the window [they are not allowed to be inside the house] and I run it through an open window and I can plug it in and do my ironing with the window open. If I get cold, I just wear a cardigan.

My mom had a wringer and she used a mangle handle to wring out all the water from our washed clothes. I have a spinner, and it spins out all the water. It's powered by the generator too, so through the window again, and it gets rid of all the water and then I put it outside to dry. I wasn't going to have one but then my son, age 3, got his hands into the wringer and I kept on thinking, "What would have happened if it had been switched on? Or if he had pressed the button to see what happened?" So, when I told my husband, he said, "We should put away the mangle and get a spinner. It's safer with the children around." So that's what we did. I was so grateful to the mercy of God. I kept thinking what would have happened if he had leaned on the switch. I was *geschreken* [shocked and horrified].

This conversation highlighted several things. First, how quickly things are changing. Marlene has been married for six years and in that time, she has had three types of irons. Secondly, she mentioned the changes in dress material, which was mentioned by other women as well. This change has meant that laundry has become a much easier task because the dress fabric dries easily and does not need to be ironed. Previously, washing was a two-day operation for many women: they would wash on Monday and put the clothes outside to dry, then iron on Tuesday. Now, ironing has largely been dispensed with by the arrival of drip-dry, man-made fibers for dress material and sometimes, also, for men's trousers.

I was amused by Marlene's admission that they have an electric generator outside the window because it is not allowed inside the house. This interview took place near the beginning of my fieldwork. Later, I would hear more about the ways that Amish find to work around rules. I was interested also in Marlene's description of her husband's reaction to what could have been a bad accident for their son Samuel, and how he made the decision for her to have a spin dryer because it would be safer. Marlene explained to me that they had bought their house from an "English" (i.e., non-Amish) man, but so far, they had not torn out the electrical wires:

We could, actually, use the plugs inside this house though, because when I start the generator, it makes all the outlets active. Sometimes, I'm tempted, but so far I haven't done it....Another thing is that we have an electric charger from Keim Lumber [a well-known hardware store in Charm, Ohio], and it charges up batteries. They have clamps for an inverter so that allows us to have an electric food mixer, a toaster, and standard lamps. I don't have a hair dryer though.

Marlene was one of the youngest married women I interviewed, but in Perry County, Pennsylvania, I met a group of young mothers who all were familiar with this kind of technology in the kitchen. One of them told me her wedding list two years earlier had included an electric iron, a yogurt maker, a smoothie maker, a food processor (not just a mixer), and a mixer that came with blender attachments to make soups and liquidize ingredients for baby food. She told me her next big purchase would be a bread maker.

Anna, a woman in the Greater Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, settlement, had an accident with her automated wringer. Her hand was caught in the rollers, and she could not turn it off. The accident resulted in my husband, Paul, and I taking her to the emergency room and she having 28 stitches in her hand. The next year when I visited, she showed me her new automatic washing machine and told me, "It's really surprising. I can just put the washing in there, switch it on, and go out to do some weeding. I don't have to be watching it."

Having machinery to do some of the work has impacted women's lives in that it frees them to do other work. As explained to me, if they were washing, they had to be at the machine to put the laundry in, then be there to take it out and put it through the wringer, which might or might not be automated. Some women told me that they preferred not to use the automated wringers as they were nervous of getting their fingers caught up in the rollers, just as Anna did and Marlene feared her son would do. The impact of being able to use equipment that allows one to switch it on and go off and do something else should not be underestimated. That is a significant change for Amish women, even if it seems mundane and trivial to the non-Amish.

At the time I was researching, spin dryers were not permitted in Anna's church district in Lancaster, although some districts have now agreed to have them, while others have gone further and agreed to permit fully automated machines. These machines have been adapted by an Amish man who buys and reconditions machines, replacing the control switch with a mechanism by which the spinner can be used with solar-generated current, thus enabling it to comply with the local *Ordnung* restrictions on utility electricity.

Ada, an Ohio woman, summarized:

A lot of the changes are to do with getting more conveniences. We have more equipment so, for example, we have solar dryers so that means we don't rely on there being sunshine outside. We can use our solar dryer to dry the washing inside. Also, a lot of kitchen equipment can be run with solar energy and that's a new thing for us. For the people with large families, there is a Bosch mixer that's huge and it works real well for those with lots of children because they can switch it on and make their bread or cake mix. They don't have to stand and beat it by hand. It's quicker and easier. We can also get vacuum cleaners, floor sweepers, but washing machines mostly have not changed.

After I had interviewed several women, I noted that there were differences between the technology in the kitchens of these young Amish mothers and what I had seen in the homes of the

older Amish women I met. I think about Sarah, whom I have stayed with several times. She and her husband are in their 70s, and they have none of this equipment. Anna's kitchen would be similar, although she does have a food mixer with a blender attachment. But not a yogurt or smoothie maker, nor a toaster. Anna has only had battery-operated standard lamps in the last two years, whereas Sarah has gas-powered lamps. Anna makes her bread with a dough hook attached to her food mixer, just as I do. But she does not have gas piped in from their land. Sarah makes her bread by hand, sometimes making 14 loaves at a time without anything mechanical to help her do it. In Ohio, Sarah's cooker is gas powered, using gas from their land. Gas wells have been drilled on the land of many Amish farms in Ohio, and the deal struck with the gas company enables them to have a free supply of gas piped into their own homes (Hurst & McConnell, 2010, p. 107).

Marlene went on to tell me:

Another thing I have now that we didn't have before is the Rainbow sweeper. It's like a vacuum cleaner but it has water at the bottom, which heats up so it's like both a vacuum cleaner and a carpet cleaner. You can use it on upholstery too, and carpet, but we don't have much carpet. I have a refrigerator too; it's a big one that makes ice. It runs on gas from the land out the back. I have an electric freezer, which is next door in Trudy's basement. I can get to it any time I want, through the back door and the basement entrance. [Trudy is formerly Amish and lives next door to Marlene.] We have a good relationship with them and, although they were Old Order, we are in a different district to what they were, so even though it's very near, it just happens that we are in one district and they were in a different one, so even though they are no longer Amish and were put out of fellowship, since it's a different district, it's not a problem. Actually, our *Ordnung* changed just recently, and I would now be able to have my own gas freezer at home and we could use gas from our land too. But I don't think they are as good as the electric ones, so I don't want to get one. The electric ones are more efficient too.

I had heard of the Rainbow sweeper from the young women in Perry County, Pennsylvania, but I had not seen it or how it operates. The idea that it washes and cleans made me think, not for the first time, that Amish people sometimes have more advanced technology than that used by the non-Amish. In Lancaster County, Old Order Amish member Anna has the latest Bernina electric sewing machine, which runs on solar power. When she got it, it was the very latest model, not yet available in Europe. Wayne, her husband, has a small manufacturing business, which he runs from home, in a separate building.

Emma, who lives near Sugarcreek, Ohio, also told me how their lights and fuel sources have changed.

When we were at home, we did not have any light except for the kerosene, and then we had oil lamps, and now we have natural gas. A lot of the more modern houses

have the gas pipes right the way through the house, and they have lights in the ceiling, just as if they were electric. In our district, we also have solar- and battery-powered lights. Our cooker and refrigerator both use natural gas. Finding oil and gas on our land has been a real boon for our people. We have a lot of gas wells in this area. In this community, we have a meter and, if you do not have the gas on your own land, you can just pay a small amount towards the community cost of it. The price has really come down because the wells last for many years, but some are shallow and those shallow wells are beginning to run out; a shallow well is two to three thousand feet where a deep well would be six or seven thousand feet. This last winter, we used coal and wood and just used the gas for backup.

From what I was told, change is taking place quickly and people are adapting to it. Some, it seems, are anticipating even greater change. Marlene told me:

We've had natural gas here for 18 years. We bought this house from a man who had already had a well drilled, so that means we have ceiling and wall lights plumbed in with natural gas. What you might not know though, is this: my dad, when he rebuilt our farmhouse, when we went from renting to owning it about 15 years back, he anticipated that there would come a day when we'd be able to have gas piped in and he marked it out on the blueprint, so that when the house was built, although we didn't have it, it would be possible for someone to have it. He wanted the *Ordnung* to change and he knew it would someday, so he marked it on there, ready for the change. Now, my brother is building a house and he's wiring the home for electric and just waiting...

She looked up at me and smiled without finishing the sentence.

Marlene also explained that they do not have to rely on a coal or wood fire for heating now but can have something more akin to central heating:

When we bought this home six years ago, it had been a butcher's shop. The shop front was downstairs, and the family lived upstairs. I needed to paint it—you know how we ladies are, we like to do that to make it a home. So I painted it, and I put Scripture stickers on the walls. We used to have more pictures but now we don't have as many. The style is plainer. But I made the heating so you can turn it on, you don't have to wait for a wood burner. You can use gas or a wood burner, and it heats the boiler, and that's what heats the radiators that are fixed to the walls. It used to be you couldn't have central heating but now, here, we can. We have an outside boiler and it works well for us. It means you can save wood for the cold days. The outdoor boiler uses eco-bricks; they're made from compressed sawdust. It's a by-product from Keim Lumber, and one of the men there saw that they could



make something from all the sawdust that was left behind, and they began stocking them to sell. We also plan to build an oven outside like there used to be. We will use it for making pizza. I've heard wood-fired ovens make the best pizza.

Using the sawdust to make bricks is an example of Amish ingenuity in seeing opportunity in leftover by-products. Such bricks have become a standard in the community; they modernize the heating.

Marlene spoke of decorating her home, and several women told me how that had changed in their lifetime and how it was both a delight and a temptation that was not universally popular. I found that interesting because I had previously understood from my reading that Amish home interiors were undecorated and plain. For example, Stephen Scott (2001, p. 12) wrote: "There is a general lack of decoration in Amish homes but a cupboard with glass doors may display fancy dishes and knickknacks. Framed pictures are taboo, especially those showing people, but calendars showing people are usually acceptable."

But that was not what I saw. I did not always find a lack of decoration in the Amish homes I visited or stayed in. One of the women I visited had no fewer than 16 clocks in her family room. Each was set to a slightly different time, so that, she said, "I can hear each of them when they play on the hour or in between." While I was talking with her, each of the clocks played tunes, tweeted birdsong, struck, or chimed every 15 minutes. It was hard to hear our voices over and above the sound of the clocks! Playing back my digital recorder was an amusing challenge for transcription. There seemed to be a clock making a noise for a large part of the time we were talking.

Additionally, I noticed that, in some homes, there was more than one display cupboard with collections of knickknacks. One older woman had a large collection of Lladro figures in her sewing room. She had removed them from the main family room "in case people think I have too many." The wall decals that Marlene spoke about were more common in homes of younger women than in homes of older women. Some homes had wall decorations that were painted on, while other decorations were decals. Like Marlene's, some were Scripture verses. One young Amish woman I met in Perry County, Pennsylvania, had a mail-order catalog business selling such decals. She gave me a catalog: it offered a choice of 400 designs. She ships her orders all over the United States. Because decorating like this was popular in 2013, she had been able to build a successful business that allowed her to work from home.

But not everyone likes the writing on the walls. Suvilla told me:

There are some really nice Amish homes these days. One of the things that is very popular at present is the writing on the walls in the house. My husband does not want me to do that. I would like it, but he doesn't want us to have it. But I can't say it makes me unhappy that we don't have it. I'd rather have a happy husband.

### Changes in Gardening

Amish women are known for their vegetable gardens and for canning produce for the family to use throughout the year. One of the things women told me was that, although their garden may still be large in comparison to other Americans, it was usually not as large as the one they had grown up with. In other words, gardens are getting smaller. Or they explained that they canned less than previously. Canning some food and freezing the rest seemed to be a clear trend. Thirty-two out of the 38 women I interviewed told me that their gardens are now smaller than they were previously and about half said they preserved food by canning and freezing where, previously, all food was canned. My observation from the families I lived with is that the older women, perhaps those over 50, can more than they put in the freezer, while younger women prefer to freeze more.

Marlene pays for the use of freezer space in two neighboring homes in the form of labor exchange. Marlene works for both neighbors, cleaning in one house for two hours each week and gardening at the other for four hours each week. Marlene again:

I don't do a lot of canning. My garden is big but not as big as where we lived before. Here we couldn't afford so much land, so we decided to rent out our field and get money for it, rather than keeping it for the garden. It has worked out better. This year, I planted corn, tomatoes, potatoes, radish, lettuces, and cabbage. I didn't do watermelon, cantaloupes, and pickles because we haven't got the storage space yet. We only moved here last year and haven't got the house the way we want it yet. We're short of storage space and my husband needs to do some work on the house yet....I think I freeze more than my mom did. She does pickles for me while I can't do that yet. My meat I get from County Meats. It's owned by my aunt. My husband's family butchers their own beef so that's how we get beef. It costs the same or even more to buy it, but it's organic and we know how the animals have been kept, which I think is important. I keep another freezer at Janine's [Trudy's daughter], and it's healthy and we know how the chickens have been raised. We eat a lot of chicken.

Emma, an Old Order Amish woman in her late 60s, observed:

Life has changed a lot. We used to just buy flour, sugar, spices, and crackers, but apart from that, we lived off the land. We never bought vegetables. When I first married and when the children were at home—we have seven [children]—I put up everything we grew: peas, beans, sweet potatoes, corn, cabbage, celery, carrots, leeks, strawberries, raspberries, apples, peaches, and pears. I often would can 250 quarts of applesauce. Our cows provided beef, and we raised pigs for pork. So, we always had meat. And, of course, I had chickens.

Wilma belongs to the New Order Amish. She is another young mother living close to Marlene, and she spoke about technological change that goes beyond food preservation to transform yard work, as well as other household tasks:

I would have been about 4 or 5 years old, and I remember that then we had reel lawn mowers. My mom used to have to push that thing right along to mow our yard, it sloped in two directions, so it was hard work. Now we have a 42-inch walk-behind powered mower, and it is powered by a gas motor. And another thing, my mom had a Coleman iron. It was so easy to burn your dresses with one of those things, but now I have an electric one with a thermostat and we use the generator to make the electric. Our sewing machines have changed too. We all sew—you probably know that we make our own clothes. Well, for so long I used a treadle machine but now we run an electric one, either by battery or from the generator. In Ohio, you can use any appliances you like as long as you make your own 12-volt electricity. You can have toasters, mixers, even a bread maker if you want. I have a gas refrigerator, and I have access to an electric freezer on my neighbor's land. I rent from her. In our district, we can use the electric when it's not ours if a neighbor has it, or if you rent work premises, and in our district then they allow us to use it. Some districts don't, though.

### **Changes in Travel and Vacationing**

The women I spoke to also talked about their vacations and how they liked to travel. I was unaware of this aspect of Amish life, although I knew that Amish households enjoyed trips to visit extended family, especially at holiday times. Hostetler (1993) makes little mention of Amish people traveling, and in some conversations, informants told me that in the past, when everyone was farming, it was simply impossible to travel far or often because the farm animals needed to be fed or milked every day. Today, when so many Amish work off the farm, it is easier to take time away from home. One woman's husband told me that as part of work at a nearby sawmill, he gets a "holiday entitlement," and he always uses it to go traveling with his family, whereas that was simply not possible when they were farming.

Ruth is New Order Amish and has a bulk food store in Ohio. She told me that she had been to California twice and had visited Yosemite National Park and the Oregon coast. Her daughters also like to travel and do so especially through organized mission trips. The three daughters in the family have traveled to Indonesia, Thailand, Mexico, Jamaica, the Bahamas, Brazil, Belize, the Philippines, and Uganda on church-sponsored projects. Such mission trips are more common among the New Order Amish but seem to draw some interest from certain Old Order families I talked to.

Another woman named Emma, this one Old Order Amish and in her 70s, told me that she and her husband use a horse and buggy to travel locally, like all Amish, but that for vacations they hire

a van and a driver. She told me they had been in all the states in the U.S. except Kansas and North Dakota:

We've been to California and all the way up the West Coast to Edmonton in Canada, through the Canadian Rockies on the train, with our driver and his wife. We went to Montreal and were away for seven weeks. We stopped in many places across Canada. We also went to Mexico with his sister for her medical treatments. We've been there three times. We also go to visit our oldest daughter and her family. They live in Sarasota, Florida. They just got back from being in Africa, on a missions trip to build a new church building. This change is taking place over the years, getting out and about and meeting more people and going traveling. It used to be that you could not do that, where the leaders did not want you away, but also when you had a farm, you just could not leave so easily. These last years, we've been in Louisiana, Georgia, North and South Carolina, Texas, and Arizona. Well, actually, we were to every state except North Dakota and Kansas. As people stopped farming, they could go away more and do more traveling. Also, there used not to be people who would drive us about, and it was difficult if you wanted to go somewhere that was too far for the horse and buggy. But now there is a choice of drivers and you can decide what kind of car or van you want to travel in, and when you want to take a trip.

Talking with Emma was one of the first times I had heard an Amish person discuss such regular, extensive travel. Nor had I heard about the importance of having a choice of vehicle and driver and the way that it created such a close relationship between the Amish and their drivers. What I noticed as I listened to more women talk about travel is that genuine friendships have formed between certain Amish people and their favorite drivers, so that the drivers are not simply their drivers. The women describe going on long trips with their friends, who happen to be English and, it turns out, able to drive them where they want to go. I know one Amish couple in Lancaster County whose friendship with an English couple means that they meet up regularly as a foursome to play very competitive games of Scrabble. Later, another woman told me that some of the drivers provide digital tablet devices to occupy Amish children on long drives and that there is a choice of device, some simply having electronic games and others with internet connectivity. The more elaborate devices cost more, a price factored into the van's price for hire, but some families consider it worthwhile if it occupies the children. Other women told me that they would not allow their children to use any device that had internet access, but they were happy with them having the electronic games. Maybe the real change is not the advent of the devices themselves, but the possibility of choice to travel (or not), having different drivers who may become friends, and different ways of passing the time on the journey.

One of the first women to tell me she and her husband liked to go on cruises was the mother of one of my first interviewees. When I visited her, Mattie and her husband had just come back

from their third cruise, this time around the Caribbean, and she told me how much they had enjoyed it. They had previously been to the West Indies and especially enjoyed Barbados and Jamaica. Her favorite had been a visit to Bermuda. They were away for three weeks. They told me they were already looking at brochures for another cruise next year.

In Pennsylvania, Lydia also told me how much she enjoyed going on a cruise, a possibility that represented something new for her:

It's a good thing you weren't here last week. We were away. We were on a cruise. I never in my whole life thought I'd go on a cruise, but we love it. We went to the Bahamas out of Florida. We like to go to Florida for about six weeks a year. It's so lovely to meet up with friends and it's warmer too than our winters. We have a little place there a bit away from Sarasota and when we were there we saw a cruise advertised and I said, "I'd like that," so he [her husband] said we should go. We loved it, and now we've seen another one that goes out of New York City. We'd love to go on that one. It's not just older people like us. My granddaughter just went on a cruise for their honeymoon. They sailed to Barbados. She's 23. I would like to go on a Sail and Sing Cruise. They're Christian cruises and go out of Miami. But I don't know if we will go because we also want to go on the one out of New York and we probably wouldn't do both, but I don't know.

Later, I met Miriam. She told me:

Definitely, people do travel more than they did. My husband's mother, she was never out of Millersburg [Ohio]. Never in her whole life. And people even go on cruises, which some people in our church feel is not right to do because it's too worldly and we're with too many worldly people. But I said, it all depends what you're going to do on that cruise. We went on a cruise last April for our 30th business anniversary. It was our third cruise. I told them, "It's a floating city. You can do bad things on a boat but you can do those same bad things in a city. You just have to make the right choices." But most of the time on the boat, I was just sleeping when we didn't have shore visits. We went to the Bahamas. Aruba was really nice there, warm and sunny. I'd say more and more people are going on cruises, and the church is going to have a hard time stopping them. Next place I want to go is Hawaii. I saw a brochure about the cruises there and it looked wonderful.

She told me that on one of the cruises they took, 28 Amish people signed up together, traveling as a group. Still, there seemed to be some limits on vacation cruises. Miriam also told me she had planned to take a cruise with two of her daughters and their husbands. They booked the trip and

then one of her sons-in-law was “hit by the lot”<sup>3</sup> and was ordained as a minister, so they decided it would not be appropriate for them to go on the cruise. This decision would seem to indicate that cruises do not have the wholehearted approval of the church, since ministers, who are to set an example of a model Amish life, should not be taking cruises.

### Reflections on Change

While most of the Amish women I interviewed appreciated the changes that have taken place, there was not universal approval for all changes. For example, Wilma, the New Order woman in Ohio, spoke about the benefits and drawbacks of having a telephone:

Before, we had a phone across the yard and it took messages only, because we never heard it ring. Although we could make phone calls on it. So, we never heard it ring and you’d just go and take down the messages every few days. But now we can have a phone in the house, and that is a good thing and a bad thing. The good thing is that if we ever had an emergency, we would know, and I like that, because Mom and Dad are getting older. My dad is legally blind, and you never know if he would have a fall or something like that. My mom did have a stroke and the phone was useful then. But it’s also a bad thing, because people think they can call Wayne [her husband] with orders or queries any time of the day or night. So sometimes, we just do not answer it.

Other women were more unambiguous in their critique of change in the Amish community and clearly felt that some segments of the community were losing a part of their heritage. These women self-consciously chose to stick with more traditional ways. For example, Suvilla told me how important it was to her that Amish maintain their plainness and continue to do what they have always done and maintain the way they have lived for 300 years. Maintaining their lifestyle means making deliberate choices to retain the old and not embrace the new simply because it is an innovation. It also means accepting the fact that retaining an old practice may not bring the greatest financial reward. For Suvilla, maintaining the status quo was important, but she recognized that others in her church district do not see it the same way:

We have six children, four boys and two girls. One of our boys is a hired hand on a farm, and we feel very blessed to send our boy to that farm. There are fewer farms now, so not so many opportunities. He only gets \$20 a day. He’s there from eight in the morning until dark, and we could send him to the market for much more money. He does actually help [our neighbor] here [she points out of the window to

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<sup>3</sup> Amish churches select leaders through a process that includes the casting of lots. Men do not volunteer for or aspire to the position of deacon, minister, or bishop, but if “hit by the lot,” must accept this unpaid, time-consuming, and lifelong role, which brings with it many changes for their own life and that of their household since the ministry is expected to uphold and model church *Ordnung* with little or no variation.

the neighbor's building]. It's an Amish trader who has a wholesale craft place, and he [the son] works there on Saturdays, and he gets like \$50 for his day there and his days are not so long. But we feel that the experience he is getting there at the farm is worth the smaller amount of money because he's with our people who are doing what they always did, and he gets to share their experience, and he is learning from the men there, not just from his parents telling him how to live.

Although Suvilla spoke of maintaining connection to the way her people lived 300 years ago, I do not see this as running counter to the examples of how life has changed. Rather, I think it demonstrates the variety within Amish communities and shows that people are free to make their own choices about what to accept and what to reject, within the limits of the *Ordnung*. Some communities have retained more agrarian practices, while others have embraced more change, such as in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where many Amish work in farmers markets or have manufacturing businesses.

Suvilla then said that, in her view, not all the changes that are taking place are good or beneficial:

In my greenhouses, I am sometimes overwhelmed with all the work, but then I remind myself that this is much better for the children. We're busy, and it's better for them to be busy than if they didn't have enough to do, because too much leisure time just brings a lot of bad things, things that don't lead to good. Like Amish going on vacation, children being disobedient: those are two things I've seen since I was old enough to take notice until now. One thing is how different, different [groups of] Amish are. It depends how they live. So, for example, the church districts in here [points to the Lancaster Amish directory], not all the churches are alike. There are certain areas where you'd see people dressed much fancier and other areas where they're more laid back and their dress is plainer. There's a church down near Welsh Mountain area, and there are no farmers at all in their district. It's a big change. So, what happens then is that the children, they know nothing about farming, but they're used to being at market and they even talk differently. Their parents go to market, they know all about cell phones, texting, Facebook—all of that is not new to them. And then there's the other half of Amish where their children wouldn't even know those words. There's a big, big difference among us. And, that's a fraction of the Amish that don't even know how the other half lives.

She went on to talk about how changes in technology have made it more important that people know how to make good choices so that they can maintain their distinctiveness:

One of our bishops, he said he can see that there is coming a proud heart under a Plain dress but he cannot see how there can be a humble heart under a fancy dress.

I just cannot disagree with that. It's a constant thing I have to work on, when I'm here in the sewing room. I make all our clothes and it's fun to get nice colored material, put some fancy stitches here or use a different color there. But each time I do that, I'm paring away at what the church teaches. The church used to work on things like that more than they do now and it seems like we're going...like things are getting out of control, because any more, there's ladies that don't even speak German with each other and their children can't speak the Dutch. I've seen it after church services—that's when they're talking in the English language. That's *not* how we were taught. And the dresses they wear, the colors they put their little children into, brilliant colors. I don't want to say too much because I have to work on it myself, but I cannot see it's right.... I cannot see it's right. I personally feel that people who work on staying Plain, dress plain, have a good goal. Maybe five years ago people were doing things differently, you know, going to a park for one day with their family or going for a swim, but now that's leading to them having whole weeks away with their family to the beach, three or four days, then a week, then two weeks. So that leads us back to farming, because they wouldn't be able to do that if they were still on the farm. And some people now have really beautiful homes, exotic, I'd say. The church leaders want us to give money to the poor rather than be spending it on vacations or fancying up our homes. Putting writing on the walls, that's another thing. My husband does not want me to do that.... Also, I've heard there's a lot of young marrieds, for their honeymoon, they go on cruises. Have you heard that?

At that point, I had not yet met any young women who had been on cruises or who were keen to go on one. But I had met older couples who were now off the farm or who were retired and who talked to me about how they enjoyed cruises and had been on several. This did not fit with my preconceptions about the Amish and the plain lives they were supposed to lead.

Later, I asked Mary, an unmarried businesswoman in Ohio, what she thought about people traveling more and taking cruises. She was very forthright in her reply:

We're supposed to be Plain people, living plain and simply. Not fancy. Don't they know that? What's Plain about going on a cruise? Nothing. There's nothing Plain about it. They should give their money where it will do some good. That's what I think about it.

I was initially surprised how vocal Mary was about this, but as we continued talking I learned that she was forthright, indeed blunt, in her assessment of many things. I asked how she had decided to start her business. She told me that she worked for more than 20 years for the same man, who then sold the business. Although she could have kept her job, she quickly realized “that the new man who had bought it was a jerk, and he would not be able to keep it running.”



I saw he was not going to give a good service to the customers we'd looked after for years. Some of them had already told me I should run the business when it was up for sale, but I didn't think I could. But when I saw how the business was going to be with the new guy.... I really liked most of our customers, so I decided to leave and set up on my own. And I was right, some of the customers did come to me. He closed down soon after, so I would have been out of work anyway. That was how I came to start.

The person who had introduced me to Mary had said she was a woman of strong opinions. When I spoke with her and heard her speaking about those who go on cruises and her description of her new boss as a jerk, it reminded me of something I had read: "The Amish are not taught or they're not exposed to people skills. So, they can be beastly blunt with no malice intended. It just comes out that way" (Hurst & McConnell, 2010, p. 191). Mary spoke in a very matter-of-fact way and did not give the impression of any bad feelings about the business closing. She just seemed to be explaining that she did what she needed to do. But I could not help reflecting how amusing her plain-spokenness was, and I was glad I had been forewarned.

Alongside stories and examples of change, I also met many women who balanced their desire for change with a genuine respect for their community and regard for the counsel of their church. Once, when I was visiting Miriam, I commented on her house. Apart from the large amount of space, the most surprising thing was that it had a double-height ceiling and a mezzanine floor. She told me that their original house had burned down in a fire, and they had this new home designed and built five years earlier.

I had seen this model and some pictures of this house. So, when ours was being built, I asked my husband, "Can we have one like this?" And we asked, and they said we could if we didn't have too much fancy on the walls. So, between us we settled on what we could have. You see, houses have got pretty much more modern over the years.

This was an interesting and telling explanation. Miriam stated that she and her husband asked and "they said." She was explaining that she and her husband had sought the opinion of the church leadership. I know from visiting other homes in that church district that this house was fancier than most. It has a combination of white-painted walls and exposed stonework, made to look old even though it was newly built. Taking the opportunity to upgrade their home to replace the one that burned down might be a natural response from Miriam's standpoint, but would also be of interest to the church since the church helped finance the rebuilding through Amish Aid, a church-based mutual aid program in lieu of insurance.

The house looked to me as if it could have come from an interior design magazine. It was extremely spacious, with a polished wooden staircase out of the living room that split into two at

the top of the stairs, and it had a mezzanine floor, rather like an interior balcony. Off the top of the staircase, two more sets of stairs led up to the top floor of the house. The walls were painted white and varnished wooden timbers and exposed stonework showed the structure of the house. The walls were decorated with quilted wall hangings. It was simple but elegant, tasteful, and attractive. While it was in keeping with Amish tradition in some ways, it was very different from many other Plain homes I had visited. It did not have much in the way of pictures and, although quilting is part of the Amish tradition, it was clear that the quilted wall hangings had never been used for their original purpose as warm bedding.

When Miriam spoke of being allowed to have this upgraded house style, I think she and her husband must have asked their church or at least the ordained men in the church. They wanted to maintain their relationships within the church. Having a new, renovated, or modernized house when rebuilding could be viewed as becoming more “worldly,” and Miriam and her husband wanted to avoid this. It was important to them to remain within the church and not be seen to be “crowding the fence,” meaning pushing the boundaries of the *Ordnung*. Her statement “Between us, we settled on what we could have” indicated willingness to listen to the community and compromise.

## Conclusion

What I learned from visiting and talking with these women was that life for some Amish women has changed beyond how they might have imagined. Directly or indirectly, the changes seem to be associated with the Amish shift out of agriculture. The introduction of labor-saving devices in the house has enabled them to complete their housework faster and easier than their mothers could. This frees up time for other activities, which many of them spoke about and which previous generations of Amish were unable to do. These activities have given them the opportunity to meet and mix with many more English people than their parents did and, for some of them, that has enriched their experiences. None spoke of that change as detrimental. In terms of the traveling they have been able to do, most admitted they had never thought they would be taking a cruise and more than one said they just imagined going once, but when they found out how much they liked it, they were keen to do it again—just like so many English.

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