

## Book Review

**Katherine Jellison and Steven D. Reschly. *Amish Women and the Great Depression*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2023. 186 pp.**

**Janneken Smucker**  
Professor of History  
West Chester University  
[jsmucker@wcupa.edu](mailto:jsmucker@wcupa.edu)

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During the nineteenth century, before the onslaught of American industrialization, urbanization, and modernization, relatively few distinctions existed among the Amish and other farm families. As the twentieth century advanced, this began to change, as new technologies, governmental policies, and forms of religious expression put into sharper relief the characteristics that made the Old Order Amish different from their non-Amish neighbors. These divergences became all the more prominent by the time Americans experienced the turbulence, precarity, and low morale of the Great Depression.

For many rural Americans, including the Amish of Lancaster County, the economic downturn did not usher in a radically different era from which they were accustomed. Many farm families had always struggled to get by. By the mid-1930s, the federal government had identified the Lancaster Amish as an exception to this rule, viewing the settlements in which members of this religious group lived as a model agrarian culture, the living embodiment of the yeoman farmer of Jefferson's imagination.

In *Amish Women and the Great Depression*, social historians Katherine Jellison and Stephen Reschly explore the gaze of the governmental social scientist toward the Amish, contrasts between the Amish lifestyle and that of their non-Amish neighbors, the number crunching that characterized the federal reports generated by New Deal agencies, and the reticence of Amish women to actively participate in such studies. Throughout, they discuss the concrete ways in which Amish women's contributions to their families were instrumental in weathering not only the Depression, but the challenges of farm life in general.

On the surface, this is old school quantitative history. The New Deal occurred, not coincidentally, during the apex of professionalization that characterized the so-called Progressive Era that preceded the Great Depression. With its vast bureaucracy of federal agencies, the government produced an abundance of paperwork. Statistics and reports, even in this age that predated Excel, ruled the day. Historians have both the challenge and the benefit of using these governmental studies as primary source evidence. As the authors note, such quantitative data does not often make for good narrative, and in writing this book they identified more human-centered sources to



complement the numbers. They deftly bring to life 400 Study of Consumer Purchases (SCP) surveys conducted with Amish farm families at the direction of the Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics and the Department of Agriculture's Bureau of Home Economics by weaving them together with Amish women's diaries and memoirs, oral histories, letters scribes wrote to *The Budget*, and governmental photographs taken by the Bureau of Agricultural Economics (BAE), Farm Security Administration, and Works Progress Administration (WPA). WPA workers—employed as part of the government's efforts to give paychecks to out-of-work Americans—conducted these surveys in a number of rural communities to find out how members of farm families spent their time and money. The surveys provide what Jellison and Reschly call a “mountain of evidence” about Amish farm family experiences during the Great Depression (2).

The authors use this evidence to uncover the significant role that women played in the success of Amish farming, demonstrating how farmwives “contradict the archetypal rural women of the period” through their prolific sewing, gardening, canning, cooking, caretaking, managing, and otherwise “helping” on the farm. They note that this word choice of “helping” rather than “farming” was indicative of the “gendered language [that] idealized work-role prescriptions...but not the reality of daily farm life” (54, 59).

This undercurrent of patriarchy pervades the narrative, which is no surprise given that both authors specialize in women's history. They emphasize that despite the male-led religion, women played an outsized role in the success of the farm by crossing “gender-role boundaries” that allowed Lancaster Amish families to surpass “that of many other successful farming communities in the Roosevelt era” (5). It was not just the ways they fed livestock, canned tomatoes, stitched clothing, and sold their wares at curb markets, however. Women's reproductive labor—the act of gestating and birthing offspring who would grow into farm laborers—was also an important factor in the success of the farm.

The dry survey data—reproduced in the book's very useful appendix—does not examine the agency of Amish women or consider whether these women enjoyed sewing clothes for their large families, monitoring a scalding pressure cooker, or weeding vegetable gardens. But Jellison and Reschly's analysis does interrogate women's perspectives, with observations such as that from one informant who recalled decades later, “I always said I didn't know why my dad made me work outside in the fields. I should have worked in the house. My older sister worked in the house, and she'd just as soon worked out in the fields” (53).

In many rural communities, government-employed home economists encouraged farm women to turn away from consumer culture and rely on home production in the face of the economic downturn. For Amish women, in contrast, home production “represented a permanent way of life rather than a temporary survival strategy” (6). In this sense, Amish women's roles in the 1930s were a continuation, rather than a disruption or resumption of older models, as it was in other farming enclaves. Jellison and Reschly share statistics that bear this out, noting the greater relative productivity in the form of food preserved, garments produced at home rather than purchased in stores, and eggs and lard consumed at home or traded for grocery store credit.

As much as Jellison and Reschly reveal the important roles that Amish women played in farming the famously fertile soil of Lancaster County, they also assess the proclivities of the federal workers who studied the Amish. Walter Kollmorgen, a cultural geographer employed by the BAE's Division of Farm Population and Rural Welfare, conducted fieldwork among the Lancaster Amish, investigating why they were so successful. Kollmorgen's division tasked social scientists with studying farm communities to "gauge the impact of New Deal programs on...diverse rural communities and to provide guidance for future planning" (97). Kollmorgen's very sympathetic analysis of Amish life concluded that they were "undoubtedly the most stable and successful rural community in the nation" (96). His fieldwork by and large ignored women, deferring to the patriarchal cultural norms by solely using male bishops and community members as informants, rather than turning to women. He, or perhaps his younger sister Johanna who at times accompanied him, did make many observations about the contributions women made to Amish life, and his final report published in 1942 attributed "the group's agricultural success and high level of community cohesion to their religiously motivated adherence to nonconformity and separation from the world" (99).

Jellison and Reschly reveal much less about the women working for the WPA who administered the SCP surveys. This is no fault of their study. Some SCP "agents" listed only their surnames on the forms, and labor records from the WPA are difficult to navigate. Readers like me wish we knew how these cross-cultural conversations occurred; in my own twenty-first-century fieldwork with the Amish, I am daunted by the formality of consent forms. Yet these agents used lengthy surveys with tick boxes inquiring as to what kind of draperies families used, whether they stocked rolled oats and grits in their pantries, and how much money they spent on recreational activities. I am grateful for Jellison and Reschly's efforts at statistical analysis and their foresight of sharing many of the survey forms in the appendix. Their work provides an excellent model of how to employ a variety of evidence, how narrative and numbers can complement one another, and how to thoughtfully extrapolate nuance and meaning where at first glance we see neither.