Survival and Social Change Among the Amish in Five Communities

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ABSTRACT: This article will explore the Amish subculture and evidence suggesting that gradual social change is occurring within the five communities selected for study: Berne, Indiana; Ethridge, Tennessee; Intercourse, Pennsylvania; Kalona, Iowa; and, Plain City, Ohio. Data has been collected from 87 Amish families using a 12 page structured questionnaire. Social change is investigated in each major social institution that impacts upon Amish life—and select micro-trends are identified for the mid 1980’s. The “findings” in this sample suggest that the Amish are accepting selective (modest) acculturation—particularly in their work and their search for economic survival. The respondents in this study have sought to avoid extreme dependence on any one aspect of modern life, and they have remained largely unfettered by the national pursuit of success, careerism, competition, one-up-manship, and power seeking.

Amish families have lived in America for more than two centuries. It is uncertain when the first Amish family arrived in America, but Hostetler (1980) has suggested that the early 1700’s was the most likely time for their arrival. From the very beginning, the Amish have lived as a “separatist” group—quietly practicing their religion. The Amish have resisted the “acculturation process” more successfully than most other “subcultures” in 20th Century America.

This article will explore select aspects of this particular subculture, i.e., its value system, its lifestyle, its belief system, and evidence suggesting that modest social change is occurring within the Amish community. The focus of this effort will be primarily restricted to the

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Amish in five communities: Berne, Indiana; Ethridge, Tennessee; Intercourse, Pennsylvania; Kalona, Iowa; and Plain City, Ohio. Although the Amish today number approximately 85,000 within the continental U.S., the vast majority live in three states; Pennsylvania, Ohio and Indiana. The Kalona community in Iowa is regarded as the largest Amish settlement in that state; and, Ethridge, Tennessee, is one of the largest Amish settlements in the Old South.

Sociological Considerations

This article has been written with basically a “social-historical” perspective—in contrast to a strictly empirical research effort. The observations and data offered in this article should help clarify future research directions and suggest possible micro-trends (in contrast to the megatrends of our high tech society) among the Amish.

The author has visited Amish communities (often several within a given region) in the five states identified for research. Face-to-face interviews were conducted with a select number of the local Amish population and some of the non-Amish population who have frequent contact with the Amish population, i.e., local merchants who sell to the Amish, craftsmen, farmers, mailmen, drivers of the local milk trucks who travel to Amish farms almost daily, etc. Also, a structured 12-page questionnaire has been used to collect research data—using a stratified random sample selected from the 1983 New American Almanac and the 1981 Ohio Amish Directory. At the time this article was written, 87 questionnaires and/or personal interviews had been completed among select Amish families.

It is significant to note that although the Amish make up a specific subculture, it is not discreet by geographical area (i.e., as the Amish are scattered in at least 20 states in the U.S., and non-Amish also live in the same areas). Of particular importance, the local post office was a very valuable referral source since almost all of the Amish live in rural areas (often on country dirt roads with unmarked mailboxes) and the postman could give specific directions to a particular Amish family. Also, the Amish Archives, in Gordonville, Pennsylvania, has been beneficial to this researcher in the pursuit of Amish historical data.

The Amish encountered by this researcher were friendly, but they do not necessarily welcome so-called “outsiders” intruding into their lives—particularly tourists.

There are essentially two schools of thought concerning the Amish from the vantage point of the lay population. On the one hand, they are