In 1932, Lyle Rexford Fletcher submitted that "the study of the Amish social organism leads to the conclusion that the community will eventually disintegrate and disappear."¹ This startling declaration was part of a thesis titled *The Amish People of Holmes County, Ohio: A Study in Human Geography*, that was presented as part of the requirements for a Master of Arts degree at Ohio State University (OSU). Fletcher went on to say that the end of the twentieth century "should witness a tremendous contraction" in the population of the Ohio Amish community. Clearly even the casual observer can quickly discern that this has not been the case. Not only have the Amish maintained their numbers, but they have increased exponentially. Over the past century, the Ohio Amish population has doubled every 22 years; they have grown from an estimated population of 2,600 in 1920 to a conservative estimate of 53,000.²

Why did Fletcher miscalculate the strength and solidity of the Amish population and self-propagation? Indeed, his assumptions were well-founded. Historically, the Amish have been an agriculturally-based society. With the influx of urbanization, Fletcher postulated that the Amish way of life would be altered and eventually curtailed. Again, this was a safe assumption to make; our nation, which was 95 percent rural in 1790, is 90 percent urban today.³ Fletcher felt that the geographic factor of isolation so necessary for the preservation of individualism or individual culture would be destroyed by the modern transportation system. He determined that secular inclusion would overcome the retardation of progress that the Amish's faith-disciplined lifestyle had caused.

However, Fletcher failed to realize several important features about the Amish and their social construction. The Amish have not prostrated at the feet of secular society. Although the Amish have lived with industrialized America for over two and a half centuries, they have moderated its impact on their personal life experiences, their family structure, their community and fraternity, and their core values and convictions. They have maintained their old-world heritage through a stubborn theology that will not be swayed, through censorship of education and errant members, and through hard work and ingenuity.

Based on this thesis, this study will focus on one little-known sect of the Ohio Amish faith. The Swartzentrubers, based around the northern commercial center of the Ohio Amish community, Kidron, Ohio, have not varied in their faith, practice and lifestyle for over 135 years. Often seen by the unsympathetic observer as relics of the past, bound by archaic customs and inflexible standards, these people truly present a stunning image of living history, an image that, I submit, is unparalleled in America today.

The Swartzentruber Amish

The Swartzentruber Amish are the result of a 1911 disagreement in the family of Moses Swartzentruber of Winesburg, Ohio.⁴ Two of his sons, Jonas and John, supported opposing views — one of which maintained the Old Order Amish position of 1868 and one of which led to the formation of Pleasant View, a Conservative Amish-Mennonite Church in Winesburg, Ohio.⁵ Essentially, the two brothers created two new divisions, one more
conservative and the other more liberal than the Old Order position in 1911. Certainly, the conservative Jonas Swartzentruber invented nothing new. The Old Order Amish have long been advocates of "meidung," or shunning, members that have fallen from grace and into unrepentant sin. The Amish will not associate with a member who is in the ban. This is done in an effort to create a "crisis" in which the errant member will be forced to examine his or her life and decide a dramatic course of action. However, the Old Order Church as a body was moving toward a less strict observance of the practice. The majority of Amish congregations in Holmes County felt along with the liberal John Swartzentruber that the ban could be lifted after a period of a few years if the errant member joined a non-resistant Anabaptist church.

But Jonas Swartzentruber and his fellow minister Sam Yoder believed in "strequ meidung," or strict shunning. In their ultra-conservative design, the only "true" church was their own. They refused to recognize the legitimacy of the Conservative Amish Mennonite Church or their Old Order relatives, who condoned the Mennonites by their passive use of the ban. Swartzentruber and his following began to gradually disassociate themselves from the mainstream Amish community. Over the next several years, they migrated several miles (hours, via horse-drawn transportation) north, from their native Holmes County hills into the flat, yet fertile plains of southern Wayne County, where, in 1917, they formed two congregations. This migration is further supported by the testimony of Ralph Ely in a thesis presented for the degree of Master of Arts at OSU in 1942. In the thesis, titled A History of the Amish People of East Union Township, Wayne County, Ohio with Special Emphasis on Educational Problems, Ely stated that based on his research, "the Amish in East Union Township (located in southern Wayne County) have come here from Holmes County, Ohio, in the last 25 years." Today, there are an estimated 2,800-3,000 Swartzentruber Amish in southern Wayne County.

Southern Wayne County has been the home of Swiss Mennonites for two centuries, and more recently, Conservative Amish Mennonites, but they provided little distraction for the ultra-conservative Amish. Their Swiss dialect was far different from the Pennsylvania German dialect the Swartzentrubers spoke, and a line of demarcation had been clearly drawn in the "Great Schism" of 1868, when the Old Order Amish had separated themselves from the "worldly" Mennonites and Amish-Mennonites of the area.

Migration has been essential in resisting acculturation for the Amish. Much like the Jewish Diaspora and subsequent shtetl development in Eastern Europe, the Amish developed "stranger and pilgrim" societies in their diaspora in America. Indeed, the Amish who remained in Europe have long since coalesced with other Protestant sects or Catholicism. Although the migration of the Swartzentruber Amish was so slight it seems almost insignificant, the impact of this separation was a major factor in defeating the proposal made by Fletcher in 1932.

The Impact of Swartzentruber Amish Theology

The Amish adhere to the 1632 Dordrecht Confession of Faith. According to this creed, the church of God is composed of those "who have truly repented, and rightly believed; who are rightly baptized . . . and incorporated into the communion of the saints on earth." The Amish have developed a philosophy that allows for a "true church" and a "fallen church." Unsurprisingly, they feel they represent the true church. This thought can be summed up nicely by a statement made by an Amish man in Holmes County: "You don't have to be an Amish man to get into heaven, but it sure helps." While they would not openly condemn a slightly different interpretation of scripture, in the Swartzentruber faith, one that leaves the "truth" of their practice can no longer be a true follower of Jesus Christ. The Amish church is seen as a redemptive community, or Gemeinde. This concept is known as unschr liebt, or "our people," in the Swartzentruber experience, and expresses all the essential ingredients of Amish fraternity: the church, congregation, and community. The Swartzentrubers emphasize moral living as the rule of spirituality. This is well illustrated by a statement defended by Swartzentrubers to this day that was presented to the liberal majority of Amish-Mennonite ministers by 18 Old Order Amish ministers at the National Amish Ministers Conference held in Wayne County in 1865:

Now my beloved brethren and sisters in the Lord. May the loving God purify us through his holy and good Spirit that we may continue in the faith which we have embraced until a blessed end that we may leave behind what is destructive to our salvation and contrary to God's word and help root out all plants which our heavenly...
father has not planted. But at the present time a spirit has come to light which allows that this and that signifies nothing and may be considered neither good nor bad. Now we should consider whether this is a spirit from God or a spirit of enticement. First some things are appearing which we think serve to express pomp and pride and lead away from God namely: . . . [the use of] speckled, striped, flowered clothing made according to the style of the world. Also not to trim the beard according to the style of the world. Likewise not to carry hidden photographs made in the likeness of man or to hang them on walls in the house to be seen. Also we declare that spiritual songs and also spiritual tunes should be used in worship services and not notes or fast tunes, which belong to the world . . . .

Much like the tradition of other theocentric societies, namely the mishna of Judaism and the hadiths of Islam, the Amish depend on the oral tradition passed down from their forefathers to justify their interpretation of right living: "This we declare as right and good and similar and in agreement with the Word of God and our Articles of Faith and thus we have been taught and instructed by our forefathers and we intend to stay with the same, as we agreed to do and promised in our baptismal vows." The simple dogmatism of the Amish is found in their central belief that their community itself is divine in that they recognize themselves as "chosen people of God." If errant members humble themselves and return to the faith and demonstrate in "works and deed" that they are truly repentant, they will be restored in full fellowship into the gemeinde, "for as the Savior says, ‘whoever does the will of my Father in heaven, the same is my brother, sister, and mother.”

The kinship between the Swartzentruber Amish and the twelfth-century Benedictines who lived their lives in tranquility, without emotion or crisis, is undeniable. Life for both groups was disciplined against excessive contact with the outside world and against individualism within their own; neither had a plan for spiritual growth. In reality, the Amish’s outlook for the future is practically the same as the past. Amish life is based largely on maintenance, not on any real movement in any direction. The affinity of the moral program of the Swartzentruber Amish and earlier agricultural monastic communities is obvious, despite apparent differences in the exponents of these societies.

One could attempt to shape Amish religion in a Buddhist’s “Wheel of Life.” Christ’s life and teachings are the center axis of Mount Meru, and from this apex radiate spokes that represent a variety of virtues, each of them equal. There is movement of course, but much like modern Theravada Buddhism, there is little hope of ever obtaining enlightenment or some high spiritual plain in one’s own lifetime. Security of salvation is found in a purely defensive struggle to maintain the faith of the predecessors of the participant and in the redemptive qualities of peace and fellowship within the gemeinde. There is no attempt to grow closer to Christ. The Amish hold to realism, and reject any romantic notions of spirituality. The maintenance of their “redemptive community” has essentially become an end in itself.

The Effect of Censorship of Education and Errant Members

All Amish ordnungs, or orders, advocate very limited birth control and exponential procreation. Based on a Biblical command to be “fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth,” most Amish families produce around ten children. Among the agriculturally-bound Swartzentrubers, this number may be slightly higher; in a pseudo-Maoist supposition, the Swartzentrubers rightly assume “many hands make light work.” Among the Old Order Amish of Holmes County, 40-50 percent of all children join and remain in the Amish church. In the Swartzentruber gemeinde this number is much higher — 60-80 percent. There are several reasons for this discrepancy, but all of them are rooted in censorship.

As Ely made painfully obvious in his 1942 study of Swartzentruber education, the Swartzentrubers “reject all new features of education and are content with the bare rudiments which they consider necessary to carry on their farm activities.” In their view, modern secular education is a threat to their security, and must be limited to the state minimum of eight grades. Ely went as far as to say that if the influx of ultra-conservative Amish was not stymied, “chances are that the enrollment may fall low enough to force discontinuance of the local high school.” This view of secular education is shared with the Old Order Holmes County Amish, and has been a major exponent of Amish growth in the community. Young people are incorporated into farming and
handcraft apprenticeships at a young age, making them dependent on, and accountable to, the Amish fraternity.

If an individual wishes to leave the Swartzentruber Amish church, he or she must move from their immediate community and develop entirely new business, social, and religious relationships. In a heavily publicized case in 1947, Andrew Yoder sued Swartzentruber Amish Bishop John Helmuth for placing him under a streng meidung because he had joined a more liberal Beachy-Amish Church and purchased a car. Yoder claimed that the meidung had caused him great financial loss because he could no longer buy or sell with many of his neighbors. John Helmuth did not hire an attorney to defend his case. He came to court as summoned, and answered questions the jury presented. His firm position was that shunning was not a boycott since its purpose was not to harm Yoder but rather to help him. Helmuth also submitted that Yoder had voluntarily become a member of the church, with full and clear knowledge that if he persisted in disobeying the rules of the church, he would in time be banned and shunned. Nevertheless, the jury ruled in favor of Yoder and awarded him 5,000 dollars in damages. Because Helmuth would not voluntarily concede payment, a public auction of his farm was ordered – an action that was not resisted.

In summary, the censorship of education and errant members creates a proclivity for simple living by default. It becomes more difficult for a Swartzentruber Amish participant to live apart from the gemeinde than to remain a member of the fraternity no matter how difficult the Amish lifestyle. The Amish are disciplined against excessive contact with the outside world and against individualism within their own by a loving, yet limiting restriction.

The Product of Hard Work and Ingenuity

Fletcher was right in his 1932 assumption that the modern transportation system and urbanization would change the majority of the Amish lifestyle. However, geographic modernization also allowed for the maintenance of a minority of "true church" believers – the Swartzentruber Church. As "Amish Country" became inundated by tourism and lifestyle exploitation, the Swartzentruber sect quietly began to buy or sharecrop the abandoned farms of progressive Old Order Amish and Mennonites in Holmes County. In a microcosmic reflection of American society, the majority of Ohio Amish are no longer agrarian. However, in a statement of their maintenance, the majority of Swartzentruber Amish remain subsistence farmers.

As Fletcher aptly pointed out, the land within the Holmes County Amish community was already too crowded for profitable agrarian production in 1932. Though the Swartzentrubers did not migrate north for this reason, the vacant plains of southern Wayne County were perfect for their agrarian pursuits. Ely pointed out that to add to this initial success because of "the clannishness of the Amish," many "non-Amish farmers sell out because they do not want to be surrounded." The lifestyle of Swartzentruber Amish is distinctive in that religion and custom blend into a way of life. The two are in fact one. As Leroy Beachy said, "There is something spiritual about heritage." The core values of the fraternity are religious beliefs. Not only do the members worship a deity revealed through the revelation of the Bible, but their patterned behavior has a religious dimension. The Swartzentruber Amish world view is shaped by first-hand experience with nature. The ordered seasons and the perpetual ebb and flow of life provide them with a sense of purpose, even destiny. Their beliefs determine their concepts of the self, the universe, and man's place in it. Religious considerations determine hours of work and the daily, weekly, seasonal, and yearly rituals associated with personal life. Occupations and the means and destinations of travel are determined by religious considerations.

In the Swartzentruber experience, all occupations must be limited to farming (powered by the results of animal husbandry) or closely related activities, such as operating a "line shaft" driven saw-mill, carpentry, or masonry. This is not the case among the Old Order Amish of Holmes County. Today there are many Old Order men in executive positions in area businesses. While yearly-income is limited by a maximum of 30,000 dollars among the Swartzentrubers, there are many millionaires among the Old Order Amish.

In the Swartzentruber experience hard work, thrift, and social concern find sanction in the Bible. The city, on the other hand, is held to be the center of wickedness, laziness, and foolish living. Man occupies his right place in the cosmos when he is caring for the things in "the garden," or the natural creation of God. The agrarian experience of the Amish has, throughout history, been conducive for isolation characteristic of the ideal folk society; in turn, it has greatly increased its...
religious stability. Because of this motif, the Swartzentrubers refrain from private motorized transportation. In southern Wayne County, there is a public bus that runs a circular route through the Swartzentruber to Kidron and other major centers of commerce. This old school bus is operated by the county and used solely by Swartzentruber Amish people. Swartzentrubers will hire a van or car for medical emergencies, but this is used only as a last resort. Sometimes these men will travel a full day by horse and buggy to visit an ailing relative in a Massillon hospital. On the other hand, the Old Order Amish of Holmes County hire private chauffeurs almost daily. One Old Order minister, when asked what kind of horse he had, stated, "I don't know; I only use him on Sunday for church." The Swartzentrubers are the only major sect of the Ohio Amish that depend upon their horses for transportation. It seems the majority of participants in other Amish sects use them in solely spiritual ways.

Now, in the face of modernization, the Swartzentrubers are the only Amish group in the Ohio Amish Community that maintains a strict observance of the traditions maintained by their forefathers in 1868. By providing a communal fraternity of support, the Swartzentrubers have enabled themselves and their children a future of indifference to the competitive capitalistic society of America.

Conclusion

Because the religion of the Amish is highly patterned, one may properly speak of the Amish as a tradition-directed group. Although the Bible is the central motivation of their lifestyle, their worldview is supplemented by several centuries of struggling to survive in community. John A. Hostetler said, "Out of intense religious experience, societal conflict, and intimate agrarian experience, a mentality has developed that prefers the old rather than the new. While the principle seems to apply especially to religion, it has also become a charter for social behavior, 'The old is best, and the new is of the devil.' The continuity of conformity is assured by an integrated and shared system of meanings. Oral tradition, custom, and orthodoxy have created a group that functions as one body. Much like the grip of Confucianism on the soul of the Chinese individual, the Swartzentruber Amish have created a dependency on their culture that will not allow any behavior by the participant that is not isolationistic. By further exploiting dependence on community by censoring those who leave, the Swartzentruber Amish have combined commitment and culture to produce an extra-stable human existence.

In 1933 Abraham Yoder, 10, and his family left the Swartzentruber Amish Church, based around Mt. Eaton, Ohio in the southeast corner of Wayne County, and joined the Old Order Amish in northern Holmes County. That was 70 years ago. Known for their organic approach in gardening, Swartzentruber produce is widely regarded as the best in the area. Last summer, Abraham's wife, Fanny, attempted something she had never tried in her life. She tried to purchase strawberries from one of her Swartzentruber neighbors. As a conservative Mennonite who speaks fluent Pennsylvania German, Fanny is not normally treated with suspicion in dealing with plain people. However, in this case, the Swartzentruber woman quickly sensed something was amiss. She asked Fanny who her husband was. Fanny replied, "Abraham Yoder." The Swartzentruber woman quickly responded, "Oh, I'd love to some sell you, but I just can't." Seventy years prior to this incident, Fanny's husband had left the redemptive community of the Swartzentruber faith and entered a lonely wilderness apart from the "true church." As long as he remains apart from the gemenide, he is under the streng meidung advocated by the Swartzentruber founder, Jonas Swartzentruber, and the still earlier voice of the concerned conservatives of 1868. In seventy years of social evolution, the Swartzentruber attitude toward Abraham Yoder has not changed – they will obstruct any business or social transaction with him.

What Fletcher failed to realize in his thesis written 71 years ago, is the strength and stability of the theology, censorship, and innovation of the Swartzentruber social-organism. He failed to realize that through migration and subsequent isolationism the Swartzentrubers would allow themselves to remain largely unchanged by the turn of the century.

Their houses are still adored by pictures, carpets, or built-in cabinets. Their buggies do not have glass windshields or glass rear-view mirrors. In direct noncompliance to government regulations for slow-moving vehicles, the Swartzentrubers do not place reflective orange triangles on their buggies, although they have been convinced in recent years to place one small kerosene lantern on their buggies to warn vehicular traffic of their presence at night. The
Swartzentrubers are labeled by the derogatory term, *gnddela rullahs*, or "lump [fecal matter] rollers," by more liberal Amish. According to one source, this is said because when the Swartzentrubers milk their cows by hand, their long hair and beards gather lumps of manure from rolling or rubbing against their cows.38 In general, the Swartzentrubers are seen by other members of the Amish community as dirty people who "think they will find salvation in not taking baths."39 Often those most unsympathetic to them are those who deal with them in practical, daily life.

However, if one was to take a step back and observe the asceticism of their lifestyle, ignoring their ignorance and lack of education, the Swartzentruber Amish are worthy of respect, no matter how grudging it may be. A century ago, hardly anyone knew the Amish existed or thought they were unusual. Seventy-five years ago, scholars such as Lyle Fletcher doubted the durability of their society. Twenty-five years later, indoctrinating patriotic democrats like Ely viewed the Swartzentrubers as an obscure unpatriotic sect legislated by ridiculous customs, as stubborn people who resisted state education and exploited the labor of their children. Today, the Swartzentruber Amish are the unwilling subjects of photography and tourism. They are well-regarded as hard-working, thrifty people with enormous agrarian resilience. By some they are viewed as a living statement of the staying power of communal interdependency. Others revere them as "islands of sanity" in a complex culture gripped by materialism and the secular present.40 In my mind, they are a fascinating preservation of the world prior to 1868. They are living history.

Notes

1 Statements made by Lyle Fletcher (1932): 84-85 in, *The Amish People of Holmes County, Ohio: A Study in Human Geography.*
4 Based on research done by Leroy Beachy (2003).
5 According to Leroy Beachy(2003) the term "Conservative" which is generally used alone, locally seemed a misnomer in the early years since they were actually more liberal than the parent body, but after the word Amish was dropped from their title in the early 1960s the name Conservative Mennonite better fitted their designation. In the past ten years this church has become far from conservative by Mennonite standards, leaving quite a discrepancy between the legacies of the two Swartzentruber brothers.
6 Based on articles 16 and 17 of the *Dortrecht Confession of Faith* and selected scriptures (I Cor. 5:9-11; Rom. 16-17) according to Leroy Beachy, Amish members in the ban employed by the Amish will lose their jobs. Wives and children often follow their husbands in "rebellion," but if they do not they will be forced to live in separation. The ban is so effective because it truly isolates an individual.
7 Christians who believe in non-participation in war and revenge; the baptism of "accountable" believers and rejection of infant baptism.
8 From Ralph Ely (1942) A *History of the Amish People of East Union Township, Wayne County, Ohio* with Special Emphasis on *Educational Problems*, p. 47. Ely went on to display his ignorance by disagreeing with Henry Smith (1930) who said the Amish-Mennonites of Wayne County were among the most intelligent and progressive of Ohio Amish. Smith was referring to the Swiss Mennonites and the Conservative Amish Mennonites established by the Great Schism of 1868, not the recent phenomenon of the Swartzentruber arrival that were inundating southern Wayne County. Ely, the Apple Creek Schools Superintendent at the time, was quite biased and unsympathetic in his treatment of the "backward" Sawartzentruber Amish of 1942.
14 Statement by Jeremy Yoder of Millersburg, Ohio.
16 Translated by Paton Yoder (2001) from *Begegebenheiten in der Amische Gemeinde von 1850 bis 1898* (Millersburg, Ohio: John Y. Schlabach [ca. 1963]), pp. 69-71. The "spiritual songs" referred to are songs from the Amish song book *Ausbund*. Ironically, the tunes used in the *Ausbund* are based on secular German Folk songs from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. According to Milton Good of Dalton, Ohio the Swartzentrubers are the only Ohio Amish group who completely abstain from "modern" non-Amish hymns in their worship services.
17 Translated by Paton Yoder (2001) from *Begegebenheiten in der Amische Gemeinde von 1850 bis 1898* (Millersburg, Ohio: John Y. Schlabach [ca. 1963]), pp. 71
18 Translated by Paton Yoder (2001) from *Begegebenheiten in der Amische Gemeinde von 1850 bis 1898* (Millersburg, Ohio: John Y. Schlabach [ca. 1963]), pp. 71
Based on information obtained from Dr. Nolan Byler, a physician among the Swartzentruber and Old Order Amish of Wayne and Holmes County. Biblical command found in Genesis 9.1.

Based on research done by Leroy Beachy (2003).

From Ralph Ely (1942) *A History of the Amish People of East Union Township, Wayne County, Ohio with Special Emphasis on Educational Problems*, p. 53.

From Ralph Ely (1942) *A History of the Amish People of East Union Township, Wayne County, Ohio with Special Emphasis on Educational Problems*, p. 31.


Based on conversations with Amish and Mennonite historians: Leroy Beachy, Allee D. Miller, and Milton Good.

From Ralph Ely (1942) *A History of the Amish People of East Union Township, Wayne County, Ohio with Special Emphasis on Educational Problems*, p. 4


According to Milton Good the Swartzentrubers approve of line shaft power only. This power is derived from a gas generator and an extended shaft which turns rubber belts connected to the prescribed appliance.

Based on conversations with Leroy Beachy, excess yearly-earnings are given to the church to help feeding farmers buy land, interest free.


Based on conversations with Dr. Nolan Byler.

Quote from Milton Good (April, 2003).


Based on conversations with Abraham Yoder's grandchildren Zachary and Janice Yoder (April 25, 2003)

According to Milton Good, this is done in an effort to maintain the style of the forefathers, who did not have built-in kitchens, but rather, the easily moveable cabinets of emigrants.

The Swartzentrubers support their position by citing the Bible, saying: "It is better to serve God than man."

According to Mennonite, Janice Yoder (2003), the term has evolved into a general term for the lack of hygiene among Swartzentruber Amish.

Common attitude found in interaction with the Amish community.


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**Bibliography**


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**The Maintenance of Heritage**