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The Shifting Landscape of Amish Agriculture: Balancing Tradition and Innovation in an Organic Farming Cooperative

Matt J. Mariola and David L. McConnell

In the context of the recent proliferation of alternative operations and marketing schemes across the agricultural landscape, this article examines an Amish organic farming cooperative in northeast Ohio. Contrary to popular perception, the large majority of Amish are not full-time farmers, and those who do farm typically use conventional, chemical-intensive methods. The adoption of certified organic among the Amish is a pragmatic decision that stems from concerns over the sociocultural effects of losing their agrarian heritage, but it also raises challenges that require a careful balance between market imperatives and cultural traditions. We investigate these challenges and the Amish response to them, including: how a culture group largely antithetical to bureaucracy and economic regulation has responded to the demands of external certification standards, how the cooperative has found markets for its products given their reluctance to use the Amish name in advertising, and how a people known for adherence to conservative cultural traditions manages to embrace the alternative nature of organic farming. Our study illustrates the complex ways culture can both facilitate and constrain agricultural innovation.

Key words: agriculture, Amish, food safety, organic farming, small farms

Introduction

The Amish, an American Anabaptist religious community, have self-identified and been known to the outside world as an agrarian people for the large majority of their 300+ years in the United States. However, midway through the second half of the 20th century, that began to rapidly change. Starting in the 1970s, rising land prices and other economic and demographic pressures began swiftly pushing the Amish out of agriculture and into a wide array of cottage industries, prompting a debate over their collective identity that caught the attention of scholars. Amish values and community cohesion had long been based on agrarian principles, so what would happen to that community fabric as the Amish left farming?

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Anthropologist John Hostetler and his colleagues saw the move from farming as the beginning of the end, arguing that “those who cannot obtain a farm may find it hard to remain Amish” (Ericksen, Ericksen, and Hostetler 1980:50). A decade later, in a widely cited article in this journal, Olshan (1991:378) made a more nuanced prediction. He did recognize that the phenomenon of fathers working off the farm had the potential to redefine Amish relations with the non-Amish world by eroding “the ability to control the character and frequency of interaction with the non-Amish.” But in contrast to Hostetler, Olshan (1991:378) saw cottage industries as a “Trojan Horse” that would change the Amish from the inside out: “The survival of the Amish as a distinct group is much less problematic than their ability to perpetuate the values of an agrarian society once agriculture is no longer the foundation of economic life.”

Olshan's prediction has been the more accurate. By 2011, in spite of a demographic squeeze pushing them off the land, the Amish were one of the fastest growing groups in the United States, with a doubling time of 20 years, a retention rate at an all-time high of 85 percent nationally, and a population of approximately 273,000 spread over 450 settlements in 30 states and Ontario (Young Center for Anabaptist Studies 2012). And, contrary to the image of the Amish as an agrarian people, the proportion of adult males engaged in farming full-time has continued to drop—to less than 10 percent in most large settlements (Hurst and

McConnell 2010). The replacement of farming by construction, woodworking, tourism-related ventures, and a myriad of other businesses has been extraordinary (Kraybill and Nolt 2004). Olshan was right in another way as well. Their choice to embrace the small non-farm firm has ensured their economic survival, but it has also opened Amish society to the world of commerce and its entanglements. The solution that cottage industries presented has, thus, given rise to its own dilemma: how to preserve the Amish way of life in the face of increased economic integration with the wider American society?

Manufacturing and tourism will no doubt continue as the main sources of economic livelihood, but a movement is recently underway to resurrect farming as an economically viable occupation. Yet, most of these operations do not look like the Amish dairy farm of two or three generations ago. Some raise chickens in large confined buildings or breed deer or pheasant. Some have moved away from livestock entirely and grow just potatoes or pumpkins or greenhouse tomatoes. A growing number are participating in initiatives usually associated with the alternative agriculture movement, including rotational grazing, community supported agriculture, and, most interestingly, certified organic farming.

Why is the adoption of organic farming by the Amish of interest? In the first place, contrary to the media image of them as all natural “authentic premoderns” (Biesecker 2008:114), Amish farmers readily adopted synthetic fertilizers, pesticides, and hybrid seed during the middle of the 20th century (Schlabach 1991). Organic farming represents a distinct break from this chemical-intensive path still followed by many of their peers. More interestingly, organic farming among the Amish may raise as many challenges as it solves. For example, how does a group that is antithetical to bureaucracy and economic regulation respond to the demands of external certification standards? How can the cooperative promote its unique brand given a reluctance to use the Amish name or image in advertising? And what are the difficulties encountered when an attempt to “re-create tradition”¹ involves the embrace of a decidedly modern and alternative agricultural practice?

One of the largest and most well known organic Amish farming cooperatives is Green Field Farms (GFF) in the Holmes County, Ohio, settlement, whose more than 240 church districts across seven counties make it the largest Amish community in the world (Hurst and McConnell 2010). From 2010 through 2012, we conducted ethnographic research on GFF, including participant observation at seminars and field walks and 22 in-depth interviews with board members, staff, growers, and buyers. We benefited from relationships built up over the previous eight years while working on a different project, providing us with an unusual degree of access to many aspects of GFF’s operations. Our intent was to examine how the formation of GFF created a series of cultural dilemmas and how the cooperative and its farmer members attempted to resolve them.

“It’s About Preserving a Way of Life”: The Origins of Green Field Farms

While most United States farmers began the inexorable process of scaling up through the widespread adoption of industrial technologies beginning in the 1930s, the Amish resisted two such innovations in particular: tractors and electrification. Into the second half of the century, this staunch line served its purpose. Although most Amish remained farmers, they were unable to expand their farms because of these self-imposed technological constraints. Most farmers maintained only a small, hand-milked dairy herd, as many acres of crops as a team of horses could cultivate, a flock of chickens and a few pigs, and a large vegetable garden. Interaction with the market was limited to the sale of milk and any surplus products such as cream, eggs, apples, and the like (Schlabach 2010).

But even without the use of tractors or electricity, Amish farmers over time fell prey to the same “cost-prize squeeze” that afflicted their non-Amish peers. The cost of all their other inputs—animal feed, antibiotics, fertilizers, and pesticides, not to mention the cost of owning or renting land—steadily inched up even as the prices they received languished year after year (Conkin 2008). Meanwhile, continued high birth rates ran up against a finite supply of land to divide among a farmer’s children. Couple these “push” factors with the pull of cottage industries, and in the span of one generation, the percentage of Amish listing farming as their primary occupation plummeted, giving rise to what came to be called the “lunch pail problem,” a feared dilution of community values as fathers increasingly packed their lunch boxes and left home and family to go to work (Meyers 1994). It is against this backdrop of the loss of an agrarian identity and values that GFF was formed.

The idea for an organic farming cooperative was hatched by a handful of community leaders who came together in 2003 to discuss the “social ills” in their settlement, including erosion of the work ethic, fathers working away from home, and children coming to see this situation as normal. Amish youth who worked in shops and restaurants now had cash in their pockets and time on their hands, leading to excessive consumerism, individualism, and, in extreme cases, drug and alcohol abuse. These problems were especially acute in larger, “peer-centered settlements” such as that of Holmes County (Stevick 2007:12).

Though recognizing that not all Amish viewed the shift to cottage industries as negative, this founding group located the source of these problems squarely in the move away from farming. An Old Order man elaborated:

Farming does work. It’s a given. We know it works because when we farm, we put value on the family and community. Everybody becomes part of the farm, and kids grow up learning responsibility and how to work hard.

The rise of industrial agriculture, however, had threatened this model. “With our small family farms,” he pointed out, “we’re trying to compete in the same arena, and it’s not working. So we asked ourselves, ‘Are we where we want to be? And what can be done about it?’”

The concept of organic farming as an ecological philosophy did not occupy a central place in the initial discussions. One member of the cooperative’s board put it this way: “What is our goal? Sustainable farming. What is that? We have to pay for land by farming—and it’s that simple.” He continued: “It’s not about organic. It’s not about food. It’s not about sales. It’s not about product. It’s about preserving a way of life. *That’s* what it’s about. Farming keeps us from getting too close to that edge.” This founding group concluded that the best way to make small-scale farming viable was to create, in the words of one board member, “more value on less acreage,” entailing “a premium for the product we produce. We have the people, the land, the heritage, the knowledge—everything we need to give those [consumers] what they want.”

Initial Challenges

At the outset, the challenges to realizing this vision were considerable. Externally, they included finding and connecting with markets in an intensely competitive economic environment. By agreeing to serve as middleman between the consumer and the farmer, the cooperative also needed a viable plan for handling legal, accounting, insurance, transportation, and other logistical issues. Finally, GFF had to navigate a slew of government regulations around food safety and organic certification. All of this had to be accomplished within the parameters of a general Amish worldview that, while flexible enough to adapt to changing economic contexts, places high value on “separation from the world” (Kraybill 2001).

One of the biggest initial challenges was internal, and it involved coordinating Amish farmers from different affiliations who were willing to join GFF’s organic experiment. Though outsiders usually see the Amish as a monolithic group, distinct affiliations—clusters of church districts who can share ordained leaders and consider themselves “in fellowship” with each other—live in close proximity to one another in many settlements (Nolt and Myers 2007). In the Holmes County Settlement, for example, 12 different affiliations live side by side, though four of these account for approximately 97 percent of all church districts. From most to least conservative in terms of technology adoption (with a few exceptions), they are the Swartzentrubers (10%), the Andy Weavers (14%), the Old Order (63%), and the New Order (10%) (Hurst and McConnell 2010). The more conservative groups tend to have a higher percentage of families still farming, in large part because their strict church standards limit economic options off the farm. While only 5 to 10 percent of New Order and Old Order heads of household list farming as their occupation (2005 Ohio Amish Directory), estimates are that 60 to 70 percent of the Swartzentrubers continue to farm. As a consequence, the GFF board and office has

ended up working with growers from mostly conservative affiliations, each of which brings its own church standards and sensibilities.

Of the 24 produce farmers who had signed on with GFF for the 2012 growing season, 9 were from the ultraconservative Swartzentruber Amish, 4 were from a small but very conservative affiliation called the Roman church, and 6 were from the moderately conservative Andy Weaver Amish; thus, nearly 80 percent of the produce farmers represented the more conservative end of the Amish continuum. And the reality is even more complicated because, in recent years, the Swartzentrubers have undergone several schisms, resulting in three non-fellowship affiliations in the area (Hurst and McConnell 2010; Johnson-Weiner 2010). Members of the most conservative of these Swartzentruber groups will not join GFF because the organic accrediting agency requires a membership number, and church standards do not allow social security cards or any number that might be the “mark of the devil.” Two other Swartzentruber affiliations do have members growing produce for GFF, 6 from the Joe Troyer affiliation and 3 from the Isaac Keim/Mose Miller affiliation.

Despite their location on the far conservative end of the Amish spectrum, it is a mistake to think of these groups as entirely inflexible, technologically or economically. When circumstances dictate, they can be quite adaptable. Despite a general Swartzentruber-wide prohibition on bulk milk tanks, for example, Johnson-Weiner (2010) describes how Swartzentruber bishops allowed shared bulk tanks in St. Lawrence County, N.Y., when the local cheese factory closed. Nevertheless, on the surface, members of these affiliations were improbable candidates for organic farming. Unlike their more liberal Amish neighbors, most Swartzentruber groups have rejected indoor plumbing, central heating, battery-powered floor lamps, community phone booths, and most mechanized farm equipment (Johnson-Weiner 2010; Mackall 2007). Compared to the neatly landscaped homes of more liberal Amish, Swartzentruber houses and barns have an untidy appearance, reflecting their view that they are “strangers and pilgrims” in a temporary world (Johnson-Weiner 2010). The Swartzentrubers are more isolated than other groups, preferring to have their own schools and rarely serving on settlement-wide committees (Hurst and McConnell 2010). In this context, the novelty of certified organic, its degree of government oversight, the equipment required to wash and cool vegetables, and the high bar set by food safety standards would seem contradictory to Swartzentruber sensibilities and lifestyles.

In spite of these many challenges, however, nine years after its founding, the growth of the cooperative has far exceeded expectations. Fresh produce, eggs, and other products with the GFF label are stocked at over 200 upscale retail outlets in four states, including Whole Foods. An innovative soil amendment program has grown exponentially, and more than 50 farmers supply the cooperative with produce, eggs, and milk for cheese. In a relatively short span of time, affluent consumers throughout the Midwest have gained access to organic produce grown in large part by farmers from the most

conservative and isolated Amish affiliations. How have the Amish orchestrated this degree of agricultural innovation, and what cultural adjustments have been required along the way?

Below, we describe four main hurdles faced by the cooperative and how GFF's board and office have gone about surmounting them: the need for a bureaucratic structure, the need to standardize processes and products across many farms, the challenge of maintaining economic viability in a dynamic and underpriced marketplace, and the difficulty of getting farmers from very conservative affiliations to embrace a decidedly "alternative" form of farming.

Bureaucratization

For most of their history, the Amish have been "profoundly antithetical to the establishment of formal organization" (Olshan 1994:201), as evidenced by their opposition to ecclesiastical hierarchy, rejection of ties between the political and religious realms, and reliance on an unpaid and untrained clergy. In a society whose hallmark has been its flat, egalitarian nature, one challenge for GFF was to fashion the administrative capacity necessary for responding to external political and economic opportunities. How have they managed this balancing act?

A key decision needed to be made up-front concerning the structure of the enterprise. Why a cooperative and not some other entity? Direct marketing schemes were seen as too intrusive for wide-scale adoption. We heard of one farmer, for example, who said bluntly that he did not want consumers coming to his farm. Another option was to sell at the established farmer's produce auction at Mt. Hope, Ohio, which held a high degree of legitimacy in the Amish community. However, that market was saturated with conventional produce, and many Swartzentruber growers would not be able to get their product there easily. In the end, a board of directors and an administrative structure were chosen that had all the elements of a small-scale bureaucracy: division of labor, hierarchy, specialization, and development of general operating procedures.

Twenty respected Amish businessmen were recruited to serve on the board and on committees that oversee particular product lines. "There's lots of brain power on the board," noted one man. An Old Order Amish man with two decades of experience in industry was enticed to serve as director. Because the cooperative was not under the jurisdiction of any one church district, it was able to use a variety of technologies and services that would normally be off-limits: office phones and computers with email, development of a Web site (www.gffarms.com), and hiring of an external vendor for product liability insurance. GFF also hired a non-Amish man to handle sales and a formerly Amish man for produce pick-up, both of whom had their own vehicles—a common strategy in Amish enterprises (Kraybill and Nolt 2004). The administrative structure of the cooperative has, thus, allowed for effective mediation with external constituencies in numerous ways. One board member reflected: "[The structure]

could have been much more informal, but that would have created other problems. The [regulatory] powers-that-be need to know who's in charge."

In addition to satisfying external demands, GFF also needed to build trust among internal constituencies. Why was this a challenge for a cooperative restricted to horse and buggy people? Since members of the more conservative Swartzentruber and Roman affiliations typically refrain from serving on committees, the GFF board—comprised of 1 New Order member, 12 Old Order members, and 7 Andy Weaver members—is skewed towards the more liberal affiliations; yet, more than half of produce growers are from the Swartzentruber or Roman churches. To help build trust and ensure good communication, GFF hired an Amish "field man" to provide consulting services to the farmers, as well as a self-taught Amish agronomist to coordinate the soil amendment program; importantly, both of these individuals were from the moderately conservative Andy Weaver affiliation. In addition, the formerly Amish driver who picks up produce at the farms speaks Pennsylvania German; his weekly visits keep transportation costs down and provide access to refrigeration while helping farmers in the very conservative affiliations avoid unnecessary interaction with the public. Probably the single biggest confidence builder has been a policy of giving back to farmers a percentage of the sales fee that GFF charges on each outgoing order. "The last two years, we've been able to send out that check, and that is the clincher [for gaining trust]. If there is a profit, they will get it."

Overall, GFF put together a diverse mix of talents and people that enabled it to simultaneously navigate the non-Amish world and respond to the concerns that might arise from Amish farmers. As Weber (1968:224) predicted, "When those subject to bureaucratic control seek to escape the influence of the existing bureaucratic apparatus, this is normally possible only by creating an organization of their own that is equally subject to bureaucratization." GFF created nascent bureaucratic structures that mirrored the surrounding legal and economic bureaucracies, allowing it to hold board meetings, file financial reports, attain product liability insurance, and meet the requirements of certifying agencies. In so doing, it built on a track record fashioned over the past few decades in which the Amish have become adept at forming small-scale bureaucracies (safety committees, school committees, mutual aid committees) that are highly responsive to church members (Olshan 1994).

Standardization

In popular discourse, organic food is often equated with tradition and set against modern, chemical intensive methods of food production. Yet insofar as "grades and standards are part of the moral economy of the modern world" (Busch 2000:273), the adoption of certified organic production takes the Amish into unfamiliar territory. It sets new norms for behavior and seeks to create uniformity in products, workers, and markets. The Amish are no strangers to "standards," as

each church district has its own Ordnung—a set of unwritten but detailed prescriptions and proscriptions that regulate minute aspects of personal behavior, such as dress, buggy styles, and farm and shop technology (Kraybill 2001). Yet, certified organic is a horse of a different color. Because it is based on standards imposed by a distant federal government and requires verification by strangers, it runs counter to the moral economy of the Amish, which is largely based on trust and rooted in their baptismal vows.

The adoption of certified organic production by Amish farmers requires a reorientation of practice as new elements are introduced into the farming process: bar codes and packing boxes, standardized procedures for picking and washing vegetables, record books, and outside inspections. Inherent in this process is the possibility of falling short of the standards set by certifying agencies, endorsed by the cooperative, and touted to consumers. “Are you doing what you tell us you’re doing?” one board member queried farmers at a seminar. “We don’t want to be made into hypocrites.” GFF staff are involved in a delicate balancing act as they try to teach best practices without appearing heavy-handed or “holier than thou.”

Some church standards create logistical headaches for GFF. For example, Swartzentruber Amish in the Joe Troyer affiliation are prohibited by their churches from owning hydraulic pallet jacks, which creates difficulties in loading pallets of vegetables onto the GFF truck. GFF has toyed with the idea of trying to build a non-hydraulic pallet jack, but for the time being, they rely on a cooperative-owned pallet jack that accompanies the truck. In addition, the method of washing vegetables in the very conservative affiliations relies on buckets and a sprayer run by a diesel engine rather than on the continuous conveyor belts used in more liberal churches. “In the line of getting products clean, if they could use the same produce washers we do, that would be good,” commented one Andy Weaver board member. Yet, because these practices are tied to church Ordnung and do not contradict the standards for certified organic, GFF has not pushed too hard. “That’s part of who they are; we don’t force them to change,” noted the GFF director. “As a cooperative, we respect each other’s church standards.”

One change that GFF’s own standards have brought to these farms is the systematic organizing of labels and standardized packing boxes. Far from being a point of contention, most farmers seemed glad for the accountability it provides. One farmer noted that the bar codes accentuate “the food safety factor,” meaning “how we’re getting people to buy food from us. . . it takes the grocery store off the hook.” Recast as a form of risk management rather than a burdensome regulation, this form of product tracking is made more palatable. “With food safety,” commented another farmer, “they’re coming down on that, and I agree with it.” In addition, at GFF’s urging, all farmers have now built a loading dock and designate an area for storing produce.

More demanding is the keeping of careful written records as required of all certified organic farmers. One farmer commented, “When I got the record book, I thought, ‘Wow, this

looks like something.’ But after trying it out, it wasn’t so bad.” Annual inspections of farms are carried out by Ohio’s only federally accredited organic certifier. The process usually takes about an hour and a half, during which time the inspector goes through the paperwork and walks the farm with the farmer. “One thing that really helps is if you have your paperwork done,” admitted one farmer, “but if you say, ‘Oh, I didn’t write that down, I forgot,’ [it’s a headache].” “I did have to go back three years and show I didn’t put chemicals on it,” commented another. Once approved, the certification document is given to the farmer and to GFF. Farmers acknowledged that some slippage inevitably occurs between the ideal and the actual practice of recordkeeping, but not a single GFF grower has had his organic certification revoked since the cooperative began.

A big reason for that success is the groundwork laid by the GFF office itself. One effective intervention was devising a sample record book to give to all farmers, which included pages for field sketches, planting and harvesting information, a tracking guide for all pickers, and sanitation records. To the amazement of GFF staff, the state agency had no such guidebook available; in fact, according to the GFF director, they have “complimented us on these books and asked if they could copyright it.” In his view, the ability of produce farmers to keep good records “is because we simplified [the forms].” On occasion, however, a tougher approach is required. “The best way to get [growers’] attention is to ship product back, and we’ve done that numerous times,” commented one Andy Weaver board member. An Old Order board member reflected, “They [the Swartzentrubers] will try to get by with some stuff.” As an example, he said he had turned away produce that was brought to the GFF office in the same trailer that had been used to haul animals to the livestock auction.

The uneasiness generated by the prospect of a heavy-handed approach was clearly evident at a growers’ meeting. Playing to the deeply rooted Amish skepticism of government, one of the board members asked the crowd what they would do if “the FDA” showed up at their homes and asked, “Who’s in charge of food safety?” He continued: “Just keep records! We’re not asking you to get stainless steel wagons.” He then raised the prospect of a new policy whereby the GFF office would periodically check on the farmers’ records themselves. Recognizing the sensitivity of the issue, he threw out the question, “*Who* should check?” Several growers piped up that GFF’s “field man” would be the logical person, to which the speaker asked, with a note of concern, “Will any of you think, ‘Oh, here comes the police again?’”

What is interesting is how forward-looking GFF has been in terms of meeting certified organic and food safety standards, with strong support from Swartzentrubers, who have often refused to “negotiate with Caesar” on other issues such as buggy safety and immunizations (Kraybill 2003). Some of the credit for GFF’s proactive stance goes to one Andy Weaver board member who is well connected to the broader sustainable agriculture community and has served as a key liaison with growers from the very conservative Amish

groups. It is also worth remembering that reacting to outside regulations is nothing new for Amish farmers, and it helps that GFF can point to external requirements (federal organic standards, the 2011 Food Safety Modernization Act) and to consumer demands as the impetus for their own policies. Finally, a compelling reason that farmers acquiesce to these new forms of bureaucracy and standardization is the potential profitability of organic farming, to which we now turn.

Economic Viability

GFF's formation has happened in parallel with niche marketing initiatives throughout United States agriculture, from grass-fed beef to organic flowers to local produce auctions (SAN 2005). What they all have in common is steering away from the low-margin, high-volume commodity model and towards an emphasis on quality and direct marketing to customers. This solution to the depressed agricultural marketplace is not without its own set of challenges, however, some of which are unique to an Amish cooperative. For GFF, three distinct challenges presented themselves: advertising, controlling excess supply, and retaining a degree of independence from the wider economy.

Advertising Amish

Before GFF, the only major outlet for Amish produce growers aside from a roadside stand was a produce auction, where farmers bring their produce in bulk and have it auctioned off to grocery stores or distributors buying in volume for low dollar. The organic cooperative gave the promise of higher prices, but unlike a produce auction, they would now have to "go out and find a market," as one farmer informed us. The problem is that, for reasons of humility, modesty, and cooperation "the moral boundaries of Amish culture severely restrict some types of advertising," notably radio, television, and Internet publicity (Kraybill and Nolt 2004: 146). There may be great affection from American consumers for all things Amish, but no consumer can tell an Amish tomato from a non-Amish one. As a farmer put it, "I know that this is the right thing. I feel that this is the right thing, but will the consumer pay the premium? You've got to educate the consumer."

The reluctance to self-promote can be seen on the farms themselves, where certified organic signage is almost nonexistent. Only a single farm we visited had a hand painted sign that read "Organic Produce." Compare this to the dairy cooperative Organic Valley, whose producers nearly all display a company sign at the end of their driveways. The tension between relying on the Amish "brand" without exploiting it was evident across interviews. One of the cooperative's founders, who is not involved in day-to-day business decisions, told us, "We don't want to exploit the Amish name." Its director of operations, meanwhile, remarked that "from a marketing standpoint, we all understand that the Amish name sells." How must this fine line between cultural and market forces be navigated?

One way is through social relations. The GFF leadership works to develop relationships with buyers, who will do the bulk of the advertising for them if they are convinced of the value of the product. But it is not merely the quality or freshness of the produce that is on display; it is also the cooperative's "Amishness." One way to court potential distributors has been inviting them to orientation days that include a glimpse behind the scenes of Amish life. The buyers have been taken to a working icehouse and served a home-cooked lunch in an Amish home. This is not just selling an empty image or a rural fantasy: it is a canny utilization of the Amish brand, because buyers are observing a real slice of Amish life. As the cooperative's director stated, "Our goal is to make it memorable for them. If you serve them a meal in an Amish home, that's the highlight, that's what's memorable for them."

Another method is a marketing strategy inspired by the Jewish kosher seal. GFF has developed a logo that shows a team of four horses plowing a field as the sun sets, with a windmill in the background and the words "Certified Organic," as required by law. Just below this logo there is another image—a silhouetted horse and buggy and the word "CERTIFIED" beneath it in all caps (see Figure 1). But what does this second "certified" refer to? The implication would seem to be "certified Amish." Of course, legally there is no such thing, but this misses the point. In a consumer's mind, the seal translates to the suite of positive qualities associated with Amish agriculture: small-scale, family-centered, and, as a farmer stated, "quality—that's what we're really trying to do, quality. That's the bottom line." The label calls attention to the Amish origins of the product, with all the attendant connotations of quality and naturalness, without explicitly using the word "Amish." It harnesses what Comaroff and Comaroff (2009) call the "identity economy," yet skirts the cultural disapproval of using the Amish name to promote products.

Figure 1. The Green Field Farms Logo and "Certified" Seal



Supply Management

If the history of United States agriculture in the 20th century can be boiled down to one theme, it is productivity. As Conkin (2008) documents, the rise in output per unit of labor or technological input has been staggering. But what may be a boon for consumers in the form of low food prices is anything but for farmers. Constantly ratcheted up by technological capacity and held aloft by government subsidies, the sheer productivity of the farm sector has led to chronic surpluses of products from corn to cotton to milk, with prices for most commodities stagnant for decades (Hurt 2002).

Despite the difference in scale, the relationship between production and price still applies at a small organic cooperative. If there are too many tomatoes when tomato season hits, the price drops for all tomato producers. Rather than let pure market forces and farmers' whims dictate what is grown for the cooperative, GFF adopts two strategies for buffering this tendency towards surplus production.

Most strikingly, they place caps on the amount of certain products that their farmers may grow. All farmers must submit a sheet each winter indicating what they are planning to grow the following year. Two of the cooperative's leaders sit down and compare these figures with expected demand from buyers. If it is clear that too many growers plan to grow a certain vegetable, they inform the farmers with the least seniority that they should not plant that vegetable. One of these leaders was quite direct about this form of market intervention: "If you're a first-year grower, you're gonna grow what we have to offer...and we tell them that up-front."

The second strategy is not to allow unbridled growth of the cooperative even in the face of rising demand. The cooperative only adds three to four new farmers each year, even though by all accounts there is enough demand from buyers to support more. The rationale is at least partly rooted in their emphasis on quality produce. Given their bare-bones administrative infrastructure that includes only a single "field man," bringing on more new farmers risks lowering the aggregate quality of the product. The cooperative has also decided to add only one new major produce buyer each year. The increased sales that would accompany more unrestricted growth are not worth the administrative and quality control hassles. It is also notable that this careful balance of both supply and demand keeps prices at a healthier level—"that's [why] we look to grow it together," in the words of an administrator.

Farm Inputs and Market Reliance

One of the draws of small-scale dairy farming has been the agronomic independence it afforded. Until the mid-20th century, most dairy farmers were part of a self-reinforcing nutrient cycle requiring few inputs imported from off the farm (Gunderson 2011). The farmer grew the grains and forages that fed the cows, whose manure was returned to the fields to replenish nutrients and grow more grains and forages. By virtue of their crops, GFF produce growers break open

this nutrient loop: their product is not fed to animals but is exported off the farm, leaving them no option but to seek out fertilizers to replenish soil nutrients.

Acquiring fertilizers and even organic amendments is not difficult in an agricultural community, but it is problematic in several ways for GFF farmers. For one, most fertilizers only contain the "big three" macronutrients (nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium) while GFF's agronomic philosophy is to treat deficiencies in trace minerals. And even when trace minerals are available, as the director informed us, "most of these nutrients are not available in small amounts for the local grower." A third concern is how this newfound reliance on supplementing soil nutrients would counter the cooperative's fundamental goal of economic independence.

One way to meet this challenge is to reduce the use of inputs in the first place. For example, the cooperative strongly advocates that its members use cover crops, which are grown only in order to plow them back into the ground where their biomass replenishes the soil. Long a staple of ecological agriculture, they fit the ethos of GFF because they reduce reliance on outside sources to the bare minimum of a bag of seeds.

Except in optimal situations, however, these green manures cannot satisfy all nutrient requirements, so the second solution has been to capture the input stream by constructing their own soil amendment facility. This consists of a large shed containing bags of raw minerals and an industrial-scale mixer. Nutrient recommendations from soil samples can be met by custom blending a mixture of the exact nutrients the farmer needs, rather than relying on pre-blended commercial formulas. Thus, the cooperative retains more economic independence while reducing costs for its farmers.

What is also interesting about the soil amendment program is that it has proven to be quite lucrative. Anecdotal evidence from nearly every farmer that uses a custom blend suggests that they help reduce weed and pest pressure and produce higher quality vegetables, and, as one board member told us, "Word of mouth is your best advertising." The farmers have become so enamored with these effects that sales of soil amendments are the fastest growing revenue stream at the cooperative. It now has over a dozen distributors of its nutrient blends in multiple states, and there is talk of setting up a retail display to sell smaller quantities for gardeners. This entrepreneurial form of problem solving is in keeping with previous accounts of Amish innovation (Kraybill and Nolt 2004; Wesner 2010).

Organic as Alternative

Organic agriculture is only one of a set of alternative agriculture models that have been proliferating for decades. They take a wide variety of forms (biodynamic, grass-fed, community supported agriculture), but they all have in common an explicit break from the industrialized, high input mode of conventional agriculture. Alternative farming is not a mere tweak to the conventional model but a divergence that some scholars have characterized as a different *paradigm* (Beus

and Dunlap 1994). This aspect of organic is not such an easy sell for the Amish, however. Though tradition is constantly reconfigured and “cultural fences” are moved over time, the Amish are “slow to make decisions regarding the adoption of new practices” (Kraybill 2001:299).

Even breaking with the longstanding small dairy model to grow vegetables was seen as unprecedented. As one farmer put it, less than two decades ago the idea of growing produce commercially “was a new thing for the community.” Said another, “Most of the community laughed at the idea of growing produce. They would have committed us to the institution if we had talked of organic!” Even today, GFF must be mindful of the fact that some struggling Amish dairy farmers may look askance at the rush to grow produce. GFF’s policy of picking up produce at the farms, for example, can be seen as giving farmers from conservative affiliations an end run around church restrictions because it provides access to coolers, a luxury that their leaders have not allowed.

Though GFF farmers were not the first Amish to go organic, the farmers we spoke with were well aware they were breaking with the farming practices of their fathers and grandfathers. As one farmer put it, “Some people just have this idea that ‘this is a new thing.’ And we don’t try to push the new things. If we pushed the new all the time, we’d have tractors!” Another noted that there are still Amish farmers “who think this organic stuff is a pile of B.S. [They ask], ‘What’s the difference?’” A leading produce grower stated with a note of sarcasm that some groups of Amish continue to resist simply because it’s “different from how our forefathers did it.” How, then, do GFF producers reconcile this tension?

One strategy is to reframe this “new” style of farming as being *within* the ancestral Amish tradition of small-scale farming. The key is reinterpreting conventional agriculture as the type of farming that actually goes against Amish principles of soil management. The conventional farmer degraded the fertility and physical capacity of his land. “We abused our soils for so many years,” as one farmer put it. Another referred to his peers still “stuck in that rut” of chemical fertilizers. The role of the new ecological farmer is to revive the soil, and with it, the Amish ethos of land stewardship. As a third producer stated, “Some people just charge forward with chemicals. Others stop and ask, ‘Is this the best way to be doing it?’”

A related sentiment we heard repeated again and again from farmers was the idea of the soil being “out of balance” or “unnatural.” “If you’re puttin’ a chemical in the ground, how can you expect a good product growing out of the ground?” asked one farmer. Another noted, “Vegetables are not just vegetables. Anything that’s grown with chemical fertilizers won’t have the taste.” Some of these sentiments are expressed in religious or moralistic terms: “God didn’t make that soil to be bare” or “You can raise something [conventionally], but not the way it *should* be.” Such sentiments revive the historical Amish ideal of “the cultivation of the soil as a moral directive” (Ericksen, Ericksen, and Hostetler 1980).

A final way that farmers reconcile their newfound belief in organic with the conservative strain of their culture is by reclaiming the very pragmatism that first pushed farmers down the chemical-intensive path to begin with. The logic behind conventional farming is now being turned on its head as increased pest and disease problems and declining soil fertility yield diminishing returns. As one man put it matter of factly: “Farming the way we used to is not paying for our farms.” And so, these farmers have decided that the best way to convince the skeptics is to show through deeds, not words, that organic can be a viable way to farm. “The way I look at it is, I’m gonna do it, and then people can see my fields, my crops. . . . You can lead a horse to the water truck, but you can’t make ‘em drink. Seeing is believing.” Another put it most succinctly: “Just prove it; that’s the only way.”

And indeed, farmers in the cooperative can make anywhere from \$1,000 to \$5,000 per acre, with melons on the low end and tomatoes the most valuable. One farmer told us he netted \$7,000 per acre on his 10 acres after accounting for inputs, an astonishing leap up from the prices received by most grain or dairy farmers. For conventional commodity crops, returns net of operating costs rarely exceed \$150 per acre, and when all overhead costs are added, net returns are usually *negative* (ERS 2011a)—one reason for federal crop subsidies in the billions of dollars every year (ERS 2011b). As a response to a bleak agricultural marketplace, growing produce for an organic cooperative has proven to be a very sound market strategy.

Discussion and Conclusion

This pragmatism and an adroit ability to accommodate tradition while encouraging innovation were on full display at a GFF producers’ meeting in December 2011. In the free-flowing discussion between the farmers, seated on wooden benches in a member’s shop, and the leader with the longest experience growing produce, the most important concern raised was not related to agronomy but to food safety. The farmers’ many questions to the presenter tell the story of their concern: What kind of cleaner should I use to wash produce? Can we wash our hands only with hand sanitizer? What’s the cleanest way to transport produce from the field to the pack house?

Looming in the background of questions like these is the passage in January 2011 of the federal Food Safety Modernization Act, a sweeping set of protocols which widened the net for stringent food safety standards from meat and seafood items to include fruits and vegetables. The thrust of this act is preemptory rather than reactive, so suppliers such as GFF are now required to carry out “enhanced traceability systems” that identify points all along the stage of a product’s life where a pathogen could potentially enter, including every container and set of hands that comes into contact with it (Hoffman 2011).

The concern of the farmers at the meeting was minor compared to that of the presenter himself, who hammered

home the importance of food safety again and again for nearly an hour. He noted that some people in the Amish community consider food safety unnecessary and begrudge the new law: “We’ve been growing food for umpteen years and never got anyone sick.” He tried to divert these concerns and remind the audience that taking food safety seriously was not a question of obeying the law, but of a sound business strategy: “Lots of people can get upset, but when the dust settles, someone else will make a decision about food safety...the consumer!” And he proceeded to give detailed pointers on best practices:

Build a produce wagon, so that you cannot haul an animal in it. And build the floor of the wagon out of something other than wood: there’s no way to kill E. coli once it gets into wood.

Nothing that comes out of an animal’s body can enter the produce chain.

If your produce buckets get muddy or if you set one down outside your animal pen, you can contaminate them.

If your pasture is uphill from your strawberry patch and it rains, you’re in trouble.

Leave boots with cow shit on them outside the packing house and change boots. Can you afford a new pair of boots? Yeah, you can.

He then summed up this way: “We want to be careful that we as Plain [i.e., Amish] growers do not lose our rights to use horses in the field... Quality and the food safety program is what will sell your produce, not price.”

This give-and-take about food safety is remarkable in several ways. At first glance, the challenges facing these Amish farmers in keeping a clean chain of custody are daunting. They live on sprawling farms with many outbuildings, pets and barefoot children, bathrooms without running or hot water, and manure being freely deposited inside dirt pens. The opportunities for contamination are many, and GFF’s reputation could be ruined with a single traceable food pathogen outbreak (Hoffman 2011). It would seem to the casual observer a tall order for these farmers to produce food that a safety inspector would pass. As a Swartzentruber farmer from the Joe Troyer group reflected, “There’s some things we wish they [GFF] wouldn’t push as hard on... Like we keep horses, and on a farm it’s hard to have a separate area for vegetables where there’s never any manure.” Yet in spite of these challenges, the farmers we talked with were surprisingly receptive to the message that a reorientation of farm practice was necessary for success in the organic market.

The focus on food safety at the annual meeting is noteworthy in another way. The Amish have a long history of conflict with federal, state, and local governments over issues ranging from military service and compulsory education to social security and buggy safety, and skepticism of government regulations runs deep in Amish circles. Yet GFF has positioned itself on the cutting edge of responsiveness to government regulations, not only through a proactive stance on food safety but by creating a farmers’ operational checklist that has become a model for the whole state. It has been able to do this and to convince farmers to go along not through

a newfound sympathy for government regulations but by appealing to the power of market forces. The message to the farmers is clear: You *can* be Amish—of *any* affiliation—and still produce organic vegetables. You *can* have a large family, use an outhouse, keep animals, use only horse-drawn equipment, and still grow produce for a discerning modern audience. You just have to mold your operation to comport with these standards. At the end of the day, said the presenter, “the determining agent will be the food buyer,” an individual with great fondness for the idea of an Amish family farm but zero tolerance for food contamination.

In a larger sense, then, the annual meeting and much of what we observed at GFF illustrate the ongoing tension between marketing the Amish brand and maintaining cultural boundaries. GFF is a small cooperative competing in a challenging food marketplace with strict food safety and organic certification standards. Like members of many ethnic groups making profits by commodifying their identities, Amish entrepreneurs rely heavily on their brand (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). But the adoption of organic farming comes with cultural tradeoffs. It requires a fairly high level of bureaucratic capacity, as well as adherence to a whole new set of grades and standards, which in turn require access to technologies such as coolers, pallet jacks, and produce washers. Some of these are off-limits to the conservative Amish who comprise the cooperative’s main set of growers. It also requires a more self-conscious marketing of Amish identity than is normally found. GFF board members and staff use their cultural identity to their advantage in recruiting buyers, and the GFF seal of approval boasts “Amish” in all but name. On the other hand, by locating most of these “cultural concessions” within the entity of the cooperative, individual farmers are able to maintain social distance from consumers, and the different *Ordnungs* of the various groups can be honored. The cooperative acts as a buffering force between the outside market and cultural imperatives within.

Most outsiders still view the Amish as rigid adherents to religious doctrine, stuck in the 17th century as modernity passes them by. Nothing could be further from the truth. The Amish surprised some scholars with their resilience and their capacity to fashion new economic livelihoods in a post-farming world (Ericksen, Ericksen, and Hostetler 1980). Writing in this journal, Olshan (1991) was more realistic, arguing that the move away from farming would result in a loss not of Amish identity, but of agrarian values. Our study highlights the interesting ways those values adapt to a shifting agricultural landscape, straddling a new identity with one foot in the realm of agrarianism and one in the highly modern world of certified organic farming. GFF staff and farmers must become adept *managers of culture*, using it as a facilitator of innovation in some situations and accepting its constraints in others. Overall, their ability to blend organization, culture, and identity in the organic marketplace is further evidence that the Amish are not a vestige of a bygone era but are charting a new way forward as small-scale agricultural entrepreneurs.

Notes

¹We follow Hobsbawn and Ranger (1983) in viewing tradition as constantly being reinvented and refigured to meet current needs. In the Amish case, their “keen sensitivity to the various ramifications associated with the acceptance of different types of innovations” (Olshan 1994:189) means that tradition is never just a static holdover from former times.

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