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The Amish: An Economy of Values -- An Interview with Glen Schmucker

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Don’t be mistaken — the Amish are not adverse to forming and developing businesses; they are simply mindful of the consequences of doing so. Living the message that they find tantamount to all: “Give Everything Away and Follow Me” “Go, sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me.” Luke 6:38. and Lev. 25:23-24. The land is mine and you are but aliens and my tenants. Throughout the country that you hold as a possession, you must provide for the redemption of the land.

In the heart of Nappanee, Indiana are a string of shops and mills, some owned and operated by the local Amish residents; others employing the Amish. Horse-drawn carriages and bicycles with oversized baskets are prevalent, especially en route to and back from their businesses. And then there is home; a sanctuary for the well-structured family, devoid of items we all take for granted. No mirrors, video recorders, iPhones, televisions, laptops, cell phones or even electricity. Once in a while, one might spot a gas-powered bailer or mower and telephone houses dot the downtown area – just in case someone is walking by and happens to hear the phone ringing.

Traveling past the typical home and farm compounds, the out-of-towner is quick to notice the absence of garden ornaments or even shutters lining the windows of each home. If the item has not practical, useful, or necessary function, there is simply no need for it.

Garment making and farming is typical on a subsistence basis although many farms. Many Amish operate side businesses which include the sale of horseshoes and harnesses, blade
sharpening, candle-making, small machine and bicycle repair, as well as the sale of Belgium horses (the backbone of all major farming chores), bakery items, homegrown fruits, manure fertilizer, small, intimate restaurants, quilts, hay, ceramic pots, rug weaving, books, and garments. These side businesses allow diversity in business and the extra income generated is necessary to keep the family – and the larger community – going.

One misgiving dispelled upon spending time here is the absence of an absolute hierarchy. What is present is an interconnected community where the family plays center stage and where Jesus Christ is the sole focus. The community has adopted certain rules to conform their lifestyles. These rules are not so much biblically dictated, but simply provide guidance in living “a more godly life.” Surprisingly, there is no proselytizing or intentional exclusion of outsiders. The Amish of Central Indiana are regarded as one large family, divided into different districts for better organization.

The Amish regards themselves as stewards of God’s earth; by their activities, they could be regarded as the original proponents of recycling, reusing, and reducing. Everything has a use and a long life span and nothing is wasted; socks are darned, humility is encouraged (no pictures or mirrors permitted), all dress similarly according to age and gender, cut own hair, grown own food, no cosmetics – all of these tenets of living aids the calm, humble life. Each has a windmill to help draw water for household and animal husbandry needs. There is no violence or need for guns, weapons, or locked doors. While travel is rare outside one’s district, on occasion, long distance travel is necessary due to a funeral, a vacation, a wedding, or other event. Since horse-driven carriages are not sufficient for this task, “Amish Haulers,” – or independent contractors – are employed.

With such minimal needs, what do the Amish produce? Many make and sell furniture. This dominant business is more than a way of generating income to pay the necessary bills, but is indeed an unsurpassed art where trees of all varieties are transformed into functional and beautiful - but not ostentatious - furnishings. Furniture-making is accomplished with pride without
boastfulness and great attention to detail. The raw materials are carefully selected and fully replenished. When a tree is taken down, new samplings are planted.

For long-distance traveling and deliveries, hire non-Amish drivers. The price of the items is not artificially increased for the tourist; rather, the proprietor charges the same price uniformly, even to close friends and family. Respect for all things translates into business dealings characterized honesty, a quality product, and good relations with all parties involved.

Surprisingly, women are an integral part of the family business and sometimes run smaller, craft or food-oriented businesses on their land. They often drive their own buggies, unaccompanied at times. And while they are undoubtedly ensure the family’s daily chores, with such large families, usually the oldest take care of the youngest. Regardless, there is still an emphasis on the male children without being overly paternalistic. Fairness and honesty in all aspects in life; there is no pursuit for an accumulation of wealth, just the goal to merely sustain the family.

The typical family business is intergenerational, where the formal education level does not go beyond the eighth grade in either private or parochial schools. English is the language of business; however a Pennsylvania Dutch/Swiss German dialect constitutes the exclusive language used at home and in worship. Despite the lack of a formal post-middle school education, the Amish are very astute players in the business world. Limited liability companies have been created and many owners are active members of the local Chamber
of Commerce. In the Nappanee district, there is an Amish bank. Loans are usually not authorized to start a new business but rather to buy a new or first home. Interest is charged. There are no defaults or foreclosures; the Amish bank customers pay their debts and if someone has experienced a hardship, there are a concerted community effort to ensure a continuity of lifestyle. And while everyone knows everyone else, the Amish business person still keeps a pulse on the market and relies upon retailers who suggest the prices that are ultimately charged.

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Interview, June 25, 2010:
Nappanee, Indiana

The following interview was conducted inside the HomeStyle Showroom Furniture Shoppe which is located on the outskirts of downtown Nappanee. The business is owned by two brothers: Glen and Lamar Schmucker. The brothers have equipped their business with a telephone equipped with a voice mail message system – an unusual feature in a wholly-owned Amish business. Although the pair and their family members – like the rest of the district – has not pursued formal higher education, there is a relentless thirst for knowledge, and not necessarily accompanied by a formal degree. But self-teaching and community learning continues. Manuals, textbooks, and pamphlets are required to perform certain necessary tasks. With respect to the Schmuckers, a connection with nearby Purdue University’s extension resources have taught them about the best herbicides and planting methods to use. While all able family members work in their selected business, often for 6 days a week working, the Sabbath is kept holy and therefore, shops are closed on Sundays. To the proprietors, everything is in order. The furniture business appears to be surviving the present economical downturn, even though nearby Elkhart County boasts one of the highest employment rates in the country. The business is a well-greased wheel, devoid of greed and envy. Essential pieces of machinery are new ideas are shared. If something is needed, it is borrowed. Surprisingly, there is little bartering, but rather reliance upon straight currency transactions.

Genuine way of life. “The native American Indian is my hero” – first to respect of use nature’s resources wisely. Spiritual, yes, but difference is Jesus. Happy and content – like those in Africa with nothing. Know the goodies (unlike the Africans), but resist the temptation. Business types centered around this notion. Friendly, know they are the object’s of the tourist’s camera; go on. Did have business cards. Marketing restricted through the Chamber.

Hearty eaters but very strong. No time for leisure activities. Kids pulling weeds, not watching Dora or playing Wii. Fences not to exclude or keep out trespasser – simple wire to keep in the livestock. Easygoing, simple, and loving. Church important – microcosm, authentic. Intelligent. Not ashamed nor boastful.
Q: The Journal of Value-Based Leadership concentrates on input from three primary government officials, business owners, and academicians. Most recently, most feedback has focused on the issues of clean energy, sustainability, and the environment, especially in light of the BP spill in the Gulf of Mexico. In my research of Amish and Mennonite groups residing in certain areas of Indiana, Ohio, and Pennsylvania, one conclusion bears recognition: it is these folks who are really what I term “original environmentalists.” It also appears that there are three predominant businesses in these Amish communities: furniture making, agriculture, and garments. Would that be a correct assessment?

A lot of them make their own clothes but do not sell them.

Q: So is this mainly for subsistence living, for their own families?

Yes.

Q: And so, construction/furniture making, agriculture and garments are indeed the three predominant types of businesses?

Yes.

Q: And with respect to your furniture store here on the main thoroughfare running through Nappanee, through “Amish Country.” Where do you and your family reside?

Just right behind the store.

Q: You have your own farm?

Yes.

Q: So you’re busy?

I’m very busy. Too busy.

Q: And Lamar, you older brother and business partner...

Younger. He just got married Friday, last night.

Q: How far does your family go back in this area?
Years and years. That farm I bought from the government originally. It was bought by someone from the Schmucker clan. I’m a Schmucker. It’s been in the family for about 8 to 10 generations.

Q: So if you trace your family tree, in terms of immigration, where would you start?

I’m not sure...probably Switzerland.

Q: There is a notion that certain communities – like the Amish – never leave, that is, when land has been in the family for generations, subsequent offspring, or the next generation, usually stayed put. Is that true in this area around Nappanee, Indiana? Or are more adult children leaving the district?

Very little of that. Very, very little of that. Sometimes if they find a partner that draws them to another community, then they might move.

Q: Did you grow up on your present farm?

Yes.

Q: At what age did you start working on the farm...whether tending the crops, milking the cows, or whatever? Did you get started at an early age, pretty much?

We all work together. For right now, I mow and hay. My son is raking the hay right now. And I do some. But this is my main thing here, the furniture store. I am here most of the time. The farm is not a very active farm, as far as cows go or anything like that. But you know, my Dad always had a farm and he milked cows. And we plucked all our corn by hand and stuff, ever since I was like 6 or 7 years old. We all had our chores that we did.

Q: So your family was pretty much self-sufficient?

Yes.

Q: You basically made your clothes, you made or produced just about everything needed to live?

Yes. I mean, more so then than now. In the past, we had to get the wheat out of the bin and grind it to make grain for cereal. Well, now we have our own eggs. We all have our eggs for the morning. But then we head to school or to the store for the day.
Q: Are you able to stay in touch with the news...with what is happening in this region, this country, and around the world? For instance, are you aware of the Gulf of Mexico spill which is still spewing oil into the water as we speak?

Oh, yes. It’s under 1,000 feet, like a mile down, and after that I don’t know how many miles from the floor it is that they would have to go down to get that oil.

Q: The news reports indicate that 200,000 gallons a day have been leaking directly into the water for the last 5 weeks.

I had a customer in here yesterday who said that there is program where animal fur is cut and sent down there to absorb some of the surface oil. It’s great that people are doing that, but I don’t know how much that is helping.

Q: Many sources are reporting that the devastation will impact the ecosystems and the beaches of Key West, Florida where our only coral reefs exist, all the way around the Gulf Coast states to the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico. It will be interesting to see how businesses, particularly the energy industry, will respond to all this...a real test of values. Undoubtedly, this will stir up the debate about our environment and sustainable business practices. Against that backdrop, how do the Amish combine their values with their business interests? How does your faith impact or guide the way you conduct business, treat your customers, and dictate the products that you make? How do you use natural resources and how are they replenished? In other words, is there a basic philosophy with respect to the way that the Amish conduct business?

I don’t understand.

Q: To put it another way, how do your operations affect people and the environment? It has always seemed to me that even without government regulations, there have always been two groups in this country that really had it right from the get-go with respect to the fair treatment of each other and natural resources: the Amish and the Native-American Indian.

The Native Americans have always been my heroes.

Q: So if you were to speak for the Amish community, do you think that there is a distinct philosophy with respect to business, respect for the land, and respect for each other? Would you say there is a common thread? For instance, it appears that with respect to your business, everything is hand-made by people you know – you, your brother Lamar, and maybe other members of your extended family. Trees are cut. Now one of the biggest, natural items that absorb carbon or greenhouse gases from the air, is trees. So once trees are taken down... .
I love trees. And some people think that, “oh, you should not be cutting down those trees to do this…. You’re taking all the trees.” But it’s very important to cut those trees, so they can regenerate. I have woods and I think the level of education around here is totally different than what it was 25 years ago, you know, about managing a forest.

**Q:** What is the difference?

Now it is very professional. The foresters in this area will come and help you manage the woods. The Extension Office has tons of literature which educates us. And in terms of regeneration, I’ve planted over 10,000 trees, myself, on my farm. Lamar has planted about 30,000 trees, like the cherry tree and the oak tree. There are five different species of hardwood trees that need sunlight to regenerate. They will not regenerate in the shaded forest floor. The maple and some of the trees are not preferable. So some trees need to come out. By maintaining the forest in this way makes it very, very productive.

**Q:** So in order for certain species to grow, other types of tree need to be cleared?

Walnut, cherry, and oak. These are trees that need to have sunlight to regenerate.

**Q:** Right. So this is important to you to replant in terms of offsetting what has been taken?

It’s very important to me. And it’s important to customers or people who have woods. Some people who have woods who are not Amish, won’t let anyone cut down trees. They believe letting nature take care of itself. And they’ve got the ugliest woods. God put us here to take care of the Earth. What we need to do is to educate ourselves and read up on material that tells us how to best do this … educate ourselves on what it takes to maintain the Earth, not just let it go. I had another customer who owns property down in Kentucky. The property has a big pond and he wants to build a cabin and to plant trees. I told him to get trees from the state; they’ve got beautiful trees, very healthy, great trees, at great prices. I told him I have phone numbers of people who could plant them for him quickly and spray right behind the tree so the tree has a good chance to grow. But he said, “but that’s not right to use a spray.” And I said that as long as you don’t abuse it, its practical. I told him, “don’t even plant trees; don’t even go in there and plant them because it’s going to be a waste of your money. You’re so critical if you don’t want to spray them; you might as well save your money and do nothing with them.” These new trees need to be taken care of for at least the first 2 years. That gives them a chance to grow. There are extremists who want nothing to do with any sprays; nothing to do with any chemicals. Some chemicals are useful if they are not abused, but very carefully used. You have to mix them in the right amounts.

**Q:** Is this to confine the chemical to the tree rather than taking a chance on it being washed away?
That’s very true. I’ve got a pond. I love my pond. And I take a great interest in it. I attended a seminar a couple years ago held by the Purdue University extension offices. They had a huge crowd of people here. Part of the reason we had that seminar was because in this area there are some people who have ponds and who want to go buy chemicals to put into the water. And that is very, very wrong, I guess.

**Q:** Why do they want to chemicals into the water?

To control the weeds, the algae. And they can get it for a lot cheaper, those type of chemicals. But it’s not made to break down in the water. They could buy something that has the same ingredients to put in water and it’s made to be put in the water to control the algae and to keep the pond healthy. It also will not kill the fish. It’s formulated differently. And one is made for water and one is made for land. And these products should only be used for what they were made for. If you’re supposed to buy chemicals from the co-op that’s made for water, then just apply them very minimally. You can go and swim in it the next day; you can use the water for irrigating and you can drink it safely. The chemicals made for land will not break down. They are formulated differently; they won’t break down if they’re not made for water. They will be in there for a long time. So I was hoping the extension people would educate the locals as to these differences in uses to do what is right and good.

**Q:** Is there a good relationship between the locals and the people at the Purdue extension?

Yes. Much more than it used to be. A lot more.

**Q:** Is there somewhat of a mutual education between the two groups?

Yeah. People do things because it has always been done that way. Grandma did it because Great Grandma did it. But much is changing. For instance, I have fruit trees – peach, apple, and pear – that I take a lot of interest maintaining them. I have tons of books to educate myself on the right way to grow and keep them healthy without hurting the land or water or anything else. I think everyone should want to do everything possible to educate themselves. What does it take to make a nice healthy meal? I’ve read a lot on organic farming.

**Q:** Do a lot of people follow your example? Before they jump into things, do they educate themselves fully with respect to what they are doing, to what they are growing?

Oh, yeah. I know a guy who was planting about 50 to 60 peach trees to help earn part of his income. And he’s done well. He knows what it takes to grow healthy trees.

**Q:** How many brothers and sisters do you have?

There are nine of us. Two boys.
Q: Where do you fit in, in terms of age?
Right in the middle. My brother is younger; he's next to the youngest one.

Q: And do they all live in this area?
All except one sister. She married a guy and they live in Shipshewana.

Q: Which is close by?
About 30 miles away.

Q: I would imagine that you have quite a few cousins?
Oh, yeah.

Q: How many children do you have?
Seven.

Q: How do they split in terms of gender?
We had three and three and then on January 4, we had another boy.

Q: So let's get back to the subject of your business. Is the furniture business your primary way of earning a living to support your family? And does the farm basically allow you to be self-sustaining to a certain degree?
Yes.

Q: When you say you educate yourself with respect to your business interests, would you say that this is what you’re teaching your children as they grow up —doing things correctly and making sure you’ve got all the facts before beginning a project or starting a business? Is that something that was passed down to you that you will pass on to your children?
Yes. My dad was very technical, very precise with everything he did. He raised hogs and farmed on a smaller scale, but everything counted. Every detail mattered. And I’m not as bad as he was. But in those days, everything had to matter.
Q: When you say the word “technical,” what comes to mind are computers.

No. It’s just how he fed them, how he raised his corn...he was never wasteful. He was very careful to use everything available to him.

Q: So there was very little waste?

Right. There was just no waste. There is quite a bit more waste for me than there was for him. With this hogs, he would go to a great extent to make sure that, in their feeders, they didn’t push out any of the feed. There was just no waste.

Q: Are you business partners with your brother Lamar in running this store? Do you alternate your time here?

We are both here most of the time during the week. Today he is delivering store shipments. So he’s on the road. Often one can take off liberally. Today he left at 2:00 and went home.

Q: So as a family business, do all family members contribute in some way?

Oh, yeah. My mom is out here about every morning, cleaning. I bought the farm from my parents and my mom still lives in the other house on the farm and she’s out here every morning.

Q: Is there formal business education available in this region? Are your kids attending regular public schools?

Parochial.

Q: And after high school, do any attend college?

They do not attend high school.

Q: So they complete up to what grade?

The eighth grade.

Q: And then at that point are they recruited into the family business?

They try to find something, some work to do. It’s harder than it used to be. When I was out of school I was more at liberty; there were no strict rules. Now you have to be very careful. I worked down the road at the hardware shop and ran a machine. And that was through the
winter. Then during the summer, I did construction work. Then I worked a couple different jobs.

**Q:** When you said something could be found for a son, what is done for a daughter? How would you say that females, in the Amish community, factor in as business owners, operators, or entrepreneurs?

Well, like my daughter. She’s cut out to do a little bit of this and that; I’m hoping to teach her this trade. And sometimes, my son, who is baling hay today, is given jobs in the morning to do for the day. And one of the girls here teaches at the parochial school.

**Q:** So women generally function as assistants or as teachers outside the home?

Do they run their own businesses? One man who makes my tables has a wife who is very active ... very, very active in the business. Actually, she kind of started it. She actually started a business of making crafts, handling crafts, and a lot of people who make crafts brought them there. She was a distributor. But it got too much for her and she sold the business to her brother-in-law, finally.

**Q:** So it’s not frowned upon for a woman to run her own business?

She is usually the homemaker.

**Q:** Do you see that role changing at all?

Not much. I mean, they might have their own businesses at home; this is meant for them to be active somewhat. But the housewife is very much encouraged. It is the family as a whole that is encouraged to run their own business.

**Q:** So the family unit is really....

Strong.

**Q:** So is the family a very big cog in the wheel, with the wheel being the community?

Oh, yes. And it’s changed a lot. Years ago, the primary businesses were in farming and construction. Within the last 15 years, it’s more in furniture. And the way we do business has really changed a lot. Ten years ago hardly anybody had voicemail. And now you need it to run a business.

**Q:** You have a website, too?
A member of our local Chamber of Commerce asked me for some pictures so I gave him some and they put up that website.

**Q:** It certainly seems to help with name recognition and to draw in customers. Again, with respect to your business philosophy... the family unit, you said, is being directed away from agri-business and heading into furniture-making. Is that an accurate assessment, not just here, but with respect to the Amish communities in Pennsylvania and Ohio?

You know, Pennsylvania is not much into the making of fine furniture; those communities are more into crafts. The Ohio communities are furniture makers and they are way ahead of this community. But all of that is changing. This area is known for top quality, best product, best price. The prices here are much better than in Ohio. They have much of the furniture items shipped and dispense it locally, but that has also changed the last 5 years or so. It’s very competitive. There’s more of a demand in Ohio because there’s a larger community.

**Q:** So you foresee your children and your brother’s children eventually taking over this business?

Definitely, yes. Ultimately that’s usually what happens. There is a home-based business which will be handed down.

**Q:** And is the primary language in this industry English?

English is our second language; we don’t speak English at home. It’s a Pennsylvania Dutch type of dialect. Not a lot of people know Pennsylvania Dutch who live outside the community. It’s a form of a High German dialect. We get customers from Germany and I can usually understand them.

**Q:** I would imagine it’s also a great way of talking about customers who give you a hard time!

[Laughs]. The Pennsylvania Dutch has more English mixed in with it. And it gets worse with time. But we read the High German.

**Q:** Are your children taught languages as part of their formal education?

The Pennsylvania Dutch just comes naturally as it is spoken in the house. It was difficult for our oldest son to speak anything else because he didn’t really have any playmates or somebody who took special efforts to teach him, even during the 3 or 4 years he went to a public school.
Q: So your children do attend public schools?
Yes, there’s a fair amount who go. We encourage our own schools, but it’s more expensive to do this.

Q: And the public schools are free, right?
Yes, but it’s the parochial schools that we try to support.

Q: And that is too great of an expense?
Yes, but we do pay some fees at the public schools, so it’s not totally free.

Q: But then the formal education stops after the eighth grade? And do the children ever express the desire to go on to high school and ultimately to college? Is that a topic that is ever discussed openly?
Actually, I know one that did.

Q: But is that frowned upon?
Yeah, somewhat, it is. That has changed somewhat too, going to school.

Q: Especially in light of this community’s connection with Purdue University. With such exposure, I am wondering if those ties spark any interest with the children who may wish to further their education. You said that Purdue is conducting more seminars in the area and that the locals are trusting the information that they are being given. With this trust and increasing exposure, I’m wondering if 10 years down the road, they may be more apt to want to go to college?
Yes, but that would be frowned upon. If that person is a member of the church, that wouldn’t be allowed, going to college. But there are other ways to educate them at home, with the books and the literature and everything that’s available.

Q: So as a member of the church and as a businessman, if you were to say, “I’ve got this great business. I want to learn more about accounting, finance, and law so I’m going to enroll in a Purdue extension class.” Would the church frown upon that?
Now what would that consist of?
Q: Basically, you would first have to obtain the equivalent of a high school degree before you apply to college.

What do you call that?

Q: A “GED.”

Yeah, people do that sometimes.

Q: But if you wanted to go further... I mean, I don’t know if you handle your own accounting needs or prepare your own taxes or if you delegate that to anyone else.

Actually, there’s an Amish guy who does all the accounting for the community. He’s very professional. And he works a lot with lawyers. And actually, we have our own bank, too. We call it *Amish Bank* or AMMF for Amish Mutual Mortgage Fund. And he’s the treasurer of that, and every customer of that bank is Amish.

Q: Did he go to college?

No. He was a teacher at our own school for 15 years. The lawyers he works with are pretty close with Amish community, too. And sometimes they conduct seminars in the community on everything from truck ownership to banking.

Q: So the emphasis is on education. It’s just where it is conducted, who is doing the teaching, and what is being taught and all of that is pretty much locally determined?

Right.

Q: But let’s say if you did have a child who wanted to leave the community, whether he or she wanted to pursue a more formal education or choose a different career, or simply explore new places. How would that affect the family unit and the Amish community in general?

Well, then, they wouldn’t be Amish to do that.

If I’m a member