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Postmodern Farming, Quietly Flourishing

By STEVEN STOLL

David and Elsie Kline do not farm like other people. They never view wildlife as a threat to their livelihood. They use no pesticides, herbicides, or genetically modified organisms. They never spray anything. Feed corn will be harvested, dried, and stored in cribs for winter fodder, while the oats will be eaten off the stem when 35 dairy cows chew them down and manure the field at the same time. The Klines' implements for mowing, baling, binding, reaping, cultivating, and threshing date from the 1930s to the 1960s, and all their field traction is provided by draft horses. They produce nothing for sale on the Chicago Board of Trade. "Let those speculators speculate on themselves," says David. "They aren't using me as their pawn." Whenever possible they plant their own seed instead of buying it. By choice, they

have no electric power in their home and own no automobiles. They buy few consumer goods, distrust centralized authority, and dress plainly. The Klines are Amish farmers. They are not dead-end holdouts left over from the agrarian 19th century; rather, their system of food production represents the future of American agriculture.

In the few days I spent with the Klines, I saw how their cultivation anchors their material lives. It is not true that the Amish use no motorized machinery. They simply refuse to use it for fieldwork where it would transform production from a biological to a machine scale. Farmers operating with the latest technology can mow and bale in one operation while sitting alone, fully enclosed behind air-conditioned windows. The Klines need every available family member to pull in the timothy grass (seven people that day, eight counting me), and they like it that way. Elsie and I sat down and talked for a long hour, waiting for David to return from the lower field. When one of their daughters appeared with milkshakes a while later, it all made sense. The work of the farm is the life of the family, so it must always embrace rest and pleasure. It makes no difference that tractors haul things back and forth, or that the Klines switch on a diesel generator to create suction for milking. The principle behind the policy is not difficult to discern. The Amish hold these values above all others: Anything that undermines their ability to cohere as a community of neighbors and linked families, anything that isolates them in their work or places production for profit ahead of the collective process, is prohibited. David adds a corollary: No practice will be allowed to denigrate the wholeness of the land and its capacity to sustain wild as well as domesticated animals.

Agribusiness managers and their advocates at the United States Department of Agriculture represent the counterfactual point of view: Nothing could be more irrelevant than Amish farming. Nice and good

that some people still do things the old way and manage to support themselves. The Klines and their eighbors make central Ohio pleasant to drive through, and their tenacious rejection of popular culture creates a fascinating enclave. Generalize Amish ways to the world's agricultural production, however, and a billion people would be dead in a year. The world has no more high-quality farmland, but it does have a rising population, so all the high-tech tools devised to feed people -- especially those much-maligned genetically modified organisms -- have become the saviors of humankind. We have created a world in which they are absolutely necessary. The rising costs and increasing complexity of food production have caused the rapid depopulation of countrysides from Argentina to India, contributing to the explosive growth of cities. All those people, who once fed themselves, now need to be fed by larger and larger concentrations of government, capital, and technology. Like it or not, so the argument goes, the high-modernist farm is the only option for the soon-to-be world of 10 billion.

Yet just because something is necessary in the present does not mean that it will be around for very long, nor does it mean that it fosters human and nonhuman communities. If agriculture has taken up just a minute in the day of human history, industrial agriculture has been a nanosecond. No one has any reason to believe that it will survive in its present form. It tends to destroy the very systems it depends on: by polluting and overfertilizing lakes and rivers, by causing soil erosion, by radically simplifying biological diversity, and by requiring the constant combustion of fossil fuels. Industrial farming is more complicated than this, of course, and a technological gradient extends from the factory farms of the Imperial Valley in California to the fields of Holmes County, Ohio. Some of David Kline's non-Amish neighbors use the assortment of products that defines them as "tractor farmers."

Yet the vulnerabilities are almost identical in every case, and it remains to be seen whether the petrochemical-genetic complex will find stability or whether it possesses all the fortitude against disturbance of a Roman arch -- its perfect tension failing with any loose stone. An insect or blight destructive to a key species of rice or wheat might evolve that cannot be killed by any known pesticide or genetic modification. Crude oil might soon run out or become too expensive, driving up the price of food. The fundamental natural body sustaining settled society -- topsoil – has disappeared in regions all over the United States, replaced by fertilizers that require manufacturing and transportation. If any of these systems were to fail, a billion people would be dead in a year. The more likely scenario is that family farmers who attempt high-modern agriculture will continue to fail. If that does not narrow the world's food supply, it narrows the limits of human freedom. When none derive their own subsistence or provide for small communities, the countryside will belong to great capital. As Wendell Berry once put it, the question of the survival of the family farm is really the question of "who will own the people."

American consumers have had no reason to protest, since industrial agriculture has always served them first and foremost. The single accomplishment of industrial agriculture should not be overlooked: There is an astonishing amount of food. Hunger has not been eliminated from the United States, but its causes, at least right now, cannot be linked to high commodity prices. The handful of companies that provide chemical and biological products make abundance their stated goal, and they deliver it. Yet abundance has an entirely different meaning to small farmers, most of whom purchase the same fertilizers and seeds as factory farmers but without the same capital to back them. Rigging up the entire process from fertilizer to harvesting, paying the big suppliers every step of the way, exposes small farmers to every sudden drop in price, every dry year, every rise in interest rates. Think of them as

people standing neck-deep in water; they can drown under any rise in the river. The response of agricultural economists has been "Get big or get out," but that is not a prescription for good food, a diversified landscape, or the reign of community values over the countryside.

David Kline's manure-centered husbandry, not much different from what American reformers and their British tutors urged and implemented back in the 1820s, represents an alternative -- a progressive occupancy of land for the 21st century. No matter how unlikely the prospect that people the world over will take up small farms as they once did, that is no reason to reject the Amish as unfit for the future. On the contrary, there could be no land management better suited for a small and crowded planet. Amish farming is highly productive and environmentally stable and represents a profitable way for families to remain in control of rural places. David Kline's land thinking is traditional without being nostalgic, practical without nodding to technology. And while industrial agriculture still has its viability to prove, the Amish hold fast to practices that are 400 years old. Amish farming is not modern, but it might be postmodern.

I am interested in the profitability of Amish agriculture but tread gingerly over the subject at first. The margins between profit and loss among farmers can be wrenchingly narrow. Millions of dollars can pass through a family's hands, though they may end up keeping only hundreds. The Klines do better than that. Dropping his voice and looking at me square, David intones, "It's extremely profitable." Each year he grosses $2,000 per cow, compared with the $200-to-$300 profit common on industrial farms. His harvests may not be quite as large as those on farms where Monsanto has determined the exact combination of crops and chemicals, but they're "very close." When he grew wheat, David harvested 75 bushels per acre. For comparison, I found two reports from different parts of the country. Michigan

wheat farmers collected a record-setting 67 bushels per acre in 1999 -- an accomplishment that local people attributed to "prayers and technology." Kansas farmers brought in an average yield of only 46 bushels per acre in 2000, under good conditions. Just as important as its quantity, David's wheat cost him almost nothing to grow -- just two bushels of seed per acre, selected from his own reserves (though first purchased out of a seed catalog and representing modern breeding). His principal tool for reaping and binding is a simple mechanism with a rotating reel, manufactured by the McCormick-Deering company. Sitting in the shed next to an equally vintage double plow, the reaper looks like the first one ever made.

No one in the county is making a fortune this way. Mean household income for Fredericksburg, Ohio, in 1989 was $23,750, but income from farm self-employment was $30,000 -- the highest category in the county. The estimated market value of land and buildings per farm in Holmes County came to $349,203 in 1997, compared with $449,748 for the United States as a whole, but that $100,000 difference is not at all what it seems. The average American farm enclosed 487 acres in 1997, yielding a per-acre value of $923. Farms in Holmes are much smaller -- just 122 acres, for a per-acre value of $2,862. The people maintain this value and a high quality of life even though they dedicate a significant portion of land to feed 5,000 horses every year.

Yet for all that, income, no matter how high or low, is not the best indicator of the success of the Amish, because they have eliminated the need to shell out cash for all sorts of things. They own no large machinery requiring monthly payments and purchase no chemical preparations for seed or soil. They pay little or nothing for insurance, fuel, or child care. Most of the cherries I picked went to family and neighbors and the rest to market. Farms pass to sons whenever possible, preventing (or internalizing) the most significant source of debt in any rural society. There is never any need to hire labor for wages, no matter how large the task. Community provides the only real insurance the Amish have, and it carries no price.

The most indispensable economies come from wily agronomy. The Amish strategy for competing with big-business dairy farmers is to radically lower the cost of feed by planting high-quality ryegrass or clover with an energy-and-protein profile to rival that of the traditional combination of alfalfa and corn. Allowing cattle to graze appears to violate the core principle of convertible husbandry. The dung is not collected. In fact, 19th-century farmers often planted fine grasses and then "penned" their animals in the field, letting them manure the ground where they stood. For the Amish, that method saves all the labor of harvesting the hay and spreading the manure. The method requires far less corn than usual methods of feeding, which opens land for other purposes; and because forage grass is perennial, it grows whenever weather permits, whereas corn has a specific season. Most conventional dairies yield 5,000 to 7,000 pounds of milk per acre, but skilled graziers have been known to produce 8,000 to 10,000. The cash savings resulting from this modern adaptation of an ancient shortcut protect the Amish like a storm door against low milk prices. Tim, David's son, who recently purchased a farm of 80 acres, will pay off a $200,000 mortgage in 10 years without difficulty. "Some people are getting $12,000-a-month milk checks," Tim tells me, while the cost of a typical operation is not more than $1,000.

This is not the way farmers are supposed to talk. The televised image of farmers' selling out, no longer able to continue because of mounting debt, bitter and weeping at the sight of their combines and kitchen tables at auction, has been common in news and documentaries since the 1980s. As any farmer in the hard-hit upper Midwest might explain, the reasons have nothing to do with the ability of rural people to raise commodities. They have to do with the fatal collision between prices and debt. All through the 1970s, farmers enjoyed high prices for their crops and low-cost financing for land and new equipment. Thinking the good times would never end, many went deeply into debt in order to purchase the newest machines. Some bought combines costing up to $60,000 and took out additional mortgages for additional acres. Boom expectations inspired those purchases more often than any felt need. When prices slipped and the prime rate bounced from 6.8 percent in 1976 to 18.9 percent in 1981, families owing more money on their loans than the total value of their equity lost it all. Every newspaper story seemed to carry the same photograph of men with hands in their pockets, looking down at the ground, the giant machines stuck and silent.

The worst farm crisis since the end of World War I never hit Amish farmers. The people of Holmes County and adjacent Wayne County suffer the defections of young people to town life, and the total number of Amish farms has declined since 1987, but not because the "plain people" fell into the technology trap. Government representatives have told farmers for a century that they need to secure themselves against the hard and unpredictable winds of the market economy by constantly increasing production. It is ironic, then, that Amish farmers, who never took that advice, live more resiliently (in this respect) than the great majority. Amish farmers are some of the best farmers in the world and the preservers of a genuine land ethic. The cycle of nutrients that recreates the land is not an antiquated idea; it expresses a fundamental ecological principle that has maintained Amish livelihood on this continent for 200 years. Manure and grazing figure in the curriculums of agricultural colleges and are regarded as cutting-edge ideas in environmental thought. There is no mystery about these methods, and David advocates them every chance he gets, convinced that others can take them up. Bucking every trend of contemporary American society, he says, as though calling out over the hills, "We need more people on the land!"

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AMISH ECONOMICS
A Lesson For The Modern Farmer

The Amish have become a great embarrassment to American agriculture. Many “English” farmers, as the Amish call the rest of us, are in desperate financial straits these days and relatively few are making money. As a result it is fashionable among writers, the clergy, politicians, farm machinery dealers and troubled farm banks to depict the family farmer as a dying breed and to weep great globs of crocodile tears over the coming funeral. All of them seem to forget those small, conservatively-financed family farms that are doing quite well, thank you, of which the premium example is the Amish.

Amish farmers are still making money in these hard times despite [or rather because of] their supposedly outmoded, horse-farming ways. If one of them does get into financial jeopardy, it is most often from listening to the promises of modern agribusiness instead of traditional wisdom. His brethren will usually bail him out. More revealing, the Amish continue to farm profitably not only with an innocent disregard for get-big-or-get-out modern technology, but without participation in direct government subsidies other than those built into market prices, which they can't avoid.

I gave a speech to an organization of farmers concerned with alternate methods of agriculture in which I commiserated at the length with the plight of financially depressed farmers. When my talk was over, two Amish men approached me, offering mild criticism. "We have just finished one of our most financially successful years," one of them said. "It is only those farmers who have ignored common sense and tradition who are in trouble." What made his remarks more significant is that he went on to explain that he belonged to a group of Amish that had, as an experiment, temporarily allowed its members to use tractors in the field. He also was making payments on land that he had recently purchased. In other words, he was staring at the same economic gun that's pointed at English farmers and he was still coming out ahead. "But," he said, "I'm going back to horses. They're more profitable."

Whenever I got to know an Amish farmer well enough, I asked about farm profits. Always the answer was the same, spoken with careful modest. Not as good as in the 70s but still okay. I heard that in l983, '84 and even '85m when finally the agribusiness magazines admitted that agriculture faced a full-blown crisis. It is in agriculture that the Amish raise economy to a high art. After the ballgames, when talk got around to the hard times in farming today, the Amish said a good farmer could still make a good living with a herd of 20 to 25 cows. One of our players countered with mock seriousness: "Don't you know that you need at least 70 cows to make a living these days? Ohio State says so." "Oh my," an Amish dairyman replied, not entirely in jest, "if I could milk 70 cows , I'd be a millionaire." The Amish farmers all agreed that with 20 cows, a farmer could gross $50,000 in a good-weather year, of which "about half" would be net after paying farm expenses including taxes and interest on the land debt if any. Deducting $8,000 for family living expenses still leaves a nice nest egg for emergencies, bad years and savings to help offspring get started in farming. These income estimates agree closely with those Wendell Berry reports in The Gift of Good Land, a book that demonstrates the sound fiscal foundation of small-scale, traditional farming, even or especially in a modern world.

According to Ohio State experts, with the price of corn reckoned at $2.40 a bushel [lower now} a non-Amish farmer would gross $360 per acre against $393 in expenses for a net loss of $33 per acre, leading one farmer to comment, "It's a damn good thing I don't have a bigger farm." Meanwhile the Amish farmer would realize a net profit of about $315 per acre. Even if you allow fixed costs in English accounting, Amish farming is better than expert farming by about $150 per acre.

Where Amish are active, countryside and town are full of hustling shops and small businesses, neat houses. solid schools and churches and scores of roadside stands and cheese factories. East central Ohio even has a small woolen mill, one of the few remaining in the country. Compare this region with the decaying towns and empty farmsteads of the land dominated by large-scale agribusiness. The Amish economy spills out to affect the whole local economy. Some farmers, like Lancie Cleppinger near Mount Vernon, have the great good sense to farm like the Amish, even though they don't live like them. They enjoy profits, too. When discussing the problems agribusiness farmers have brought on themselves, Cleppinger just keeps shaking his head and repeating "What in the world are they thinking?" Gene Logsdon, Whole Earth Review, Spring, 1986. Original consist of seven pages. Ken Hargesheimer

THE FARM FIA$CO

How federal agriculture policy squanders billions of dollars a year, sacrifices the poor to the rich and gives congressmen and bureaucrats vast arbitary power over American citizens.

The abolition of federal farm programs could actually help the family farmer stay on his land. Without federal price guarantees, farmers will worry less about maximizing their yields and more about minimizing their out-of-pocket expenses. Farmers would rely less on chemical inputs and expensive machinery and more on their own labor. Dennis Avery observes:

> **Federal farm programs have led to an overcapitalized agriculture with less actural employment than what it otherwise would have. It turned farming into a yield contest and the farmer that could wring the highest yields out of the acre could afford to bid the most for it. The medium-technology farmer who could wring average yields from his land got a buyout offer he couldn’t refuse. The trend was limited only by the amount of land that the high-tech farmer could handle with the largest equipment available. If you took out the support price and prices varied again, farmers would not want to have high debt loads--they would not want to buy more machiner. I think the biggest farms would find themselves with a capital cost structure that would be too large to compete.**

Once subsidies are abolished farm families with free labor will have an advantage. Farmers who are content with an average American income--instead of the $115,000 per year that many full-time farmers now receive--could survive and compete with much lower crop prices. Once the government stopped shutting down more than 70 million acres of farmland each year, there could be more work available planting, harvesting and transporting crops. Set-aside requirements, by forcing farmers to plant on a smaller amount of land, encourage reliance on fertilizers, pesticides and heavy machinery. A more

extensive farming system would encourage more reliance on labor and management rather than chemical injections. James Bovard,1-800-326-0263

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