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For Ohio's Amish, living off the land had become too hard to do, and living any other way was eroding the values of their culture

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When Raymond J. and Mary Yoder show up in the aisles of Northeast Ohio supermarkets, they know they have some explaining to do about their Amish food products and their way of life. But one incident not long ago seemed a little much.

A woman approached Raymond, who was handing out samples of their organic, Amish-made cheese and eggs, and grabbed his beard.

"Is that real?" she asked. "I could just pull that off."

Yoder just shakes his head and laughs as he tells the story.

"It's real," he told her.

Yoder endures the questions, the staring, even moments of rudeness because he hopes to tell a story that will ultimately help put his people back on the farm. Just 30 years ago, 90 percent of the Amish in the Holmes County area lived and worked on a farm. Today only 10 percent live that way, forced off the farm by high land prices and competition from mechanized farming.

As part of a solution, the Yoders have joined Greenfield Farms, an organic farm co-op based in southern Wayne County near the Holmes County border.

After three years in business, the exclusively Amish-owned-and-operated group has more than 90 member farms across Ohio and western Pennsylvania, making it one of the largest, if not the largest, Amish food co-op in the country.

To continue in business, they must double their annual sales of eggs, cheese and produce within a year.

If they had their choice, Raymond would be home working with his sons on their vegetable-growing and greenhouse-building businesses and Mary would be in the kitchen, cooking for him and the six kids.

"Mary and I go wherever we are asked," says Yoder. "We've done six, eight, 10 different stores. Most people just love it.

"Maybe," he adds, "my children or my grandchildren will benefit from what I'm doing today."

If anybody knows how far the Amish have strayed from the farm, it's Greenfield Farms general manager Wayne Wengerd. He is also co-owner and CEO of Pioneer Equipment Inc. in Dalton, a company that manufactures horse-drawn wagons and farm equipment.

A map of the world hangs outside Wengerd's office. Pushpins show how far Pioneer's equipment has been shipped: Africa. Australia. Dollywood in Tennessee.

While his company is successful, Wengerd is among those in his Amish community who had to adopt nonfarming work when local land grew scarce.

His pastoral region is the center of the world's largest Amish community and increasingly popular with non-Amish landowners. The price of farmland has risen to around \$10,000 an acre, too big a debt to bear if you're competing with conventional, mechanized farms.

To stay in the area, many Amish have become masons, carpenters, salesmen and saleswomen,

receptionists, janitors.

"This transition has had an impact on us as a people, as a culture," Wengerd says. "A lot of it has not been positive. The further we get from agriculture, the more we acquire the same social ills of the non-Amish community, what we call 'the world out there.'

"We lose the work ethic. We have more people concerned with leisure, pleasure, sports and entertainment instead of our traditional moral values, principles and history."

Wengerd sees the culture eroding when Amish buy potato chips and other processed foods. Or when they purchase \$75 baseball gloves rather than used equipment from a yard sale. Or when they go on vacation.

These things seem small to the rest of us, but within the centuries-old, Bible-based community of adult-baptized Christians, the leaders fear their people are on a dangerous track of "keeping up with the Joneses."

Farm life, Wengerd says, is a different existence. It can give families a way to be together, to teach by example, to feed themselves and to simplify their lives so they can focus on relationships with one another and with God.

Wengerd was part of a group of Amish farmers, bishops and businessmen who met a few years ago and started talking about the issue. They wanted to invest in the kind of farming that would allow a family to make a living on a smaller property.

Their answer: Organic food.

Their bankroll: \$500,000 from board members and shareholders, all of them Amish and conservative Mennonite.

"Our feasibility study showed that 50 percent of Americans don't care what they eat as long as it's quick, cheap and tastes good," Wengerd says. "The other 50 percent care, but maybe 20 percent are willing to pay a premium for it. They're looking for wholesome food that is safe and they want to buy it from people they trust."

In the language of organic certification, the Amish did not instantly qualify. Many use common chemical pesticides.

Robert C. and Rachel Yoder of Apple Creek were among them, but like many of the Amish, they say, they used chemicals on a limited basis. When the co-op was created, the Yoders eagerly went organic.

"We like it better," says Rachel, who works alongside her husband, milking their 40-head Jersey herd twice a day.

"Neither of us ever liked using containers with a skull and crossbones on it," Robert adds.

The two hardest parts are the paperwork documenting organic practices, he says, and the leap of faith it takes to leave the chemical habit behind.

Robert now finds himself enraptured by books on the current state of food production, including Michael Pollan's "Omnivore's Dilemma," Eric Schlosser's "Fast Food Nation," and "Our Stolen Future," a report by three scientists looking into the effects of chemical contamination on the human body.

Reading them, Yoder says, "just made us happier about what we were doing."

Innovating without losing values

Greenfield Farms got a major production boost last year when it signed an agreement to provide milk to the Wisconsin-based cooperative Organic Valley Family of Farms, the country's largest producer of organic milk. Their agreement gives Greenfield farmers a regular buyer and first rights to buy back milk when they need it to make their own cheese.

"It's not very often you see that outside our Amish community, where competitors work together for a common goal," Wengerd says.

Philip Nabors of the Mustard Seed Market stores, produce buyers Terry Romp of Heinen's and Dave Graf of Buehler's Markets have bought from the Amish for many years, both directly and through auctions. Each lent Greenfield their expertise, explaining what can be sold, how it should be graded and packaged.

"Their future is to innovate and change their business practices, but within their value system," says Nabors, co-owner of Mustard Seed Markets. "If they succeed, they could probably roll out their idea in other plain

communities throughout the country, if not the world. They are just the kind of people we want in this business."

One of Greenfield's immediate goals is to pack more of its eggs in its own cartons. Surpluses are sold to another co-op in Kalona, Iowa, and locally to Sauder's, which has an organic line.

Along the way, the Greenfield members decided they needed a way to distinguish their products from the many others labeled Amish but not necessarily made by or marketed by the Amish.

The result was a horse-and-buggy logo, a kind of Amish seal of approval that certifies the food product is 100 percent Amish-made and committed to improving life inside and outside the community.

It's a clever idea, but not unanimously loved. Raymond Yoder says there was a strong lobby on the board against it.

"We struggle with the issue to this day," he says. "We do not want to sell our religion. But we also want to tell our story in an honest way, a real way.

"We hope that with time and good product recognition, it could be taken off."

And plain people would be seen in city supermarkets a lot less often.

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