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## Selling the Amish

**03.16.2012 | Research, Culture and Society** Why are the Amish so fascinating, each year drawing nearly 20 million tourists to their small towns and fertile farms in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana, and generating economic benefits of more than \$2 billion?

In her new book, *Selling the Amish: the Tourism of Nostalgia* (Johns Hopkins University Press), Susan Trollinger, associate English professor at the University of Dayton, finds that tourists aren't just curious about the oddity of these deeply devout people who dress in 19th century clothes and drive horse-drawn carriages — they are looking for answers.

"The middle-class Americans who visit Amish Country come with concerns about themselves and the world they inhabit. They are concerned about how life is changing and who they are becoming," said Trollinger, who has studied Amish tourism for more than 15 years. "Tourists come with real anxieties about how their lives are changing, the impact of technology and what it means to be a man or a woman in today's world. And they worry about time."

Trollinger said Amish Country offers a world that idealizes the past and, at the same time, offers ways for visitors to imagine themselves living life differently with slow food, old-fashioned technology and homemade clothing, resolving their tensions and anxieties about modern life by borrowing some things from the Amish.

"These Amish communities tell stories about the past that encourage tourists to imagine how they might change their lives and alter their future," she said. "This nostalgia for the future is a nostalgia of hope."

Trollinger's research centered in Ohio's Amish Country, home to the largest Amish settlement in the world with more than 260 Amish churches and more than 30,000 Amish people. Every year, 4 million people visit this area, which is located about 50 miles southwest of Akron.

Here visitors find businesses designed to serve tourists, such as restaurants, gift shops, furniture stores, hotels and motels. Although the Amish rarely own businesses that directly serve tourists, many make their living by supplying shops with furniture and other items for sale, she said.

Trollinger said the business owners typically are Mennonites, spiritual cousins of the Amish who drive cars, use electricity and may pursue higher education and often employ local Amish to sell furniture, wait on tables and cook in restaurant kitchens and bakeries.

She studied three of the most popular towns — Walnut Creek, Berlin and Sugarcreek — for the distinct ways their architecture, interior décor, merchandise and amenities tell particular stories and help visitors imagine a different way to live.

In Walnut Creek, for example, Trollinger found the Der Dutchman restaurant's Amish-style cooking — large portions of pan-fried chicken, roast beef, baked ham along with real mashed potatoes, chicken noodles, homemade bread and freshly made fruit, cream or custard pies.

"This food is slow food. It's not the fast food of our freezers and microwaves. It can't be produced, served and eaten in the 45 minutes between arriving home from work and taking the kids to gymnastics and basketball," she said. "This food takes time. To make it requires peeling, chopping, basting, roasting, mashing, rolling and rising."

"And this food is slow not just in preparation time but also in the sense that it takes a lot of time to master the techniques needed to make it," she said. "This food isn't just about taste; it's about time."

Trollinger said when visitors dine at Der Dutchman or other similar restaurants, they aren't just consuming a tasty meal. They are experiencing an idealized memory of the past when families gathered at the dinner table every evening to enjoy a meal that took the better part of a day to make and that was prepared by a woman with decades of know-how.

After the meal, visitors can buy the baked goods, apple butter, jams and pickled vegetables made on site, along with Amish-style cookbooks that show how to recreate this slow food at home, she said.

"Der Dutchman isn't just giving visitors a trip down memory lane. It's also helping them to imagine a future in which slow food and ample time characterize daily life," Trollinger said.

"Amish Country tourism promises that if you buy that loaf of bread or pie or cookbook, you can refashion your life. You can experience a slower pace," she said. "What's so fun about touring Amish Country is that the Amish make the promises of Amish country tourism seem real! Buy this cookbook and you really can change your life."

She found similar threads of idealized responses to modern anxieties in the town of Berlin about technology, and Sugarcreek, "The Little Switzerland of Ohio," on race and ethnicity.

Trollinger also examines the reaction of the Amish to the tourists and asks a group of New Order Amish men about their thoughts.

"I expected them to talk about how silly and annoying tourists are. Instead they spoke with compassion and empathy about how hard it must be to live in the world, with all its pressures and stress. They talked about feeling bad that tourists do not have time for their families, do not generally enjoy their work, and often feel lost.

"They said that tourism is an opportunity to offer a witness to the Kingdom of God to people who may be looking for answers to fundamental questions about their lives. They see the everyday activities that put them in contact with tourists as important opportunities to make visible another way of being in the world," she said.

"The Amish are demonstrating that it is possible to live in the midst of an overwhelming consumer culture in a way that rises above it and provides a peaceful and fulfilling life," she said. "But they demonstrate that it takes more than buying an antique tool, a lace tablecloth or a peanut butter pie.

"And while we may yearn for a slower, less-complicated life, they ask whether we have the courage, the creativity, the vision or the faith to embrace a radically different future," she said.