

## Book Review

**Patty Bear. *From Plain to Plane: My Mennonite Childhood, a National Scandal, and an Unconventional Soar to Freedom*. N.p.: Barnstormers Press, 2021. Pp. 359.**

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In July 1973, with a front-page report in the *New York Times*, the shunning of former Reformed Mennonite Robert Bear gained international notoriety.<sup>1</sup> Bear, a potato farmer from Cumberland County, Pennsylvania, had joined the Reformed Mennonite Church in 1952 and six years later married fellow member Gale Gross. Bear had a fraught relationship with the Reformed Mennonite Church due to his criticism of its leadership. In particular, he questioned the moral integrity of an older bishop from Lancaster County. After several years of meetings and letter exchanges between Bear and the leadership, he was excommunicated in 1972 for railing against the ministry.<sup>2</sup> This sparked a decades-long assault by Bear on the Reformed Mennonite Church. In this memoir, his daughter Patty Bear challenges the narrative that he cleverly constructed and successfully sold to the media and public at large over the years.

To understand the context of the Bears' competing narratives, some observations need to be made about the little-understood Reformed Mennonite Church. Numbering about 640 members in 1969 and around 250 today,<sup>3</sup> the Reformed Mennonite Church occupies a unique place within the Plain Anabaptist world. Sometimes mistakenly characterized as Old Order Mennonite because it does not have Sunday school or mission organizations, the Reformed Mennonite Church more nearly parallels the twentieth-century "Pure Church Movement" because it began as an effort to

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne King, "Mennonite Dissident Shunned by Church and Wife," *New York Times*, July 23, 1973, 1, 20.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Shoemaker and Richard Rimmel, *Four Books of Baptisms, Marriages and Deaths of Reformed Mennonites* (books 3:62, and 4:5, 8, 41), file G, J. Richard Rimmel Collection, Mennonite Historical Association of the Cumberland Valley, Chambersburg, Pa. (hereafter cited as Rimmel Collection). Examples of the letters can be found in "Robert Bear Case and Other Church Matters, 1964–1991," file J, Rimmel Collection.

<sup>3</sup> "Reformed Mennonite Church Membership, March 1969," file I, "Ministerial Lists and Church Directories, 1906–2004," Rimmel Collection.



restore the Mennonite Church on what its founders perceived as its original Anabaptist foundation.<sup>4</sup>

The Reformed Mennonite Church was organized in 1812 in Lancaster County by John Herr (1782–1850). He was the son of Francis Herr, a Mennonite minister who had left the Old Mennonite Church in 1784. For over twenty years, Francis held meetings in his home for his family and neighbors. John Herr was never a member of the Old Mennonite Church, but after his father's death, he experienced a religious conversion. Building on his father's disaffection and his reading of Menno Simons and *Martyrs Mirror*, John Herr judged the Old Mennonite Church as being spiritually dead and morally compromised. After two years of holding meetings in his home, Herr, at the urging of his followers, organized a new church, with himself as its first bishop. Over the next thirty-eight years, Herr traveled to distant communities preaching and organizing new congregations.<sup>5</sup>

Many but not all of the new converts were from Mennonite and Amish backgrounds. The Reformed Mennonite Church purposefully appealed to English-speaking people by producing from the start parallel German and English literature<sup>6</sup> and hymnary.<sup>7</sup> Reformed Mennonites

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<sup>4</sup> Chapter 5, “The First Keepers of the Old Way: The Reformed Mennonites,” in Scott, *Old Order and Conservative Mennonite Groups*, is the best to-date overview of the Reformed Mennonite Church even though Scott classifies it as Old Order. Peter Hoover observes: “In America, among the first...to return...to the ideal of the pure church were John Herr, founder of the Reformed Mennonite Church in 1812; Jacob W. Stauffer, founder of the Stauffer Mennonite Church in 1845; and John Holdeman, founder of the Church of God in Christ, Mennonite...in 1859. In all three cases, leaders of the new fellowships turned to the writings of early Anabaptists, particularly to Menno Simons and Dirk Philips, for direction. In the three new movements, a return to a high level of commitment one to another within the brotherhood, coupled with rigid discipline—the ban and avoidance for those who broke fellowship—resulted in extraordinarily close-knit, homogenous fellowships, appealing to earnest seekers. Deep-going trauma and personal distress followed those who were separated from them.” “The Pure Church Movement,” 76.

<sup>5</sup> Herr's first writing, *The True and Blessed Way* (1815), explained his rationale for starting a new church. In *The Illustrating Mirror* (1827), an exposition on the Sermon on the Mount, he added a sketch of his life detailing his religious conversion and the organization of the Reformed Mennonite Church. Both can be found in John Herr, *John Herr's Complete Works*. Further details of the founding of the Reformed Mennonite Church can be found in Daniel Musser, *The Reformed Mennonite Church*, 295–327.

<sup>6</sup> For example, John Herr's first book, *Der wahre und selig Weg*, was published in English as *The True and Blessed Way*. While John Herr initially wrote in German, all his writings were translated and published in English within a few years of their German publication. *A Letter from John Herr, Bishop of the Church of Christ, in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania to a Number of Converts in Erie Co., N.Y.* (1833), reprinted in *John Herr's Complete Works*, 515–520, was first printed in English translation, because, as Abraham Miller of Amherst, NY, wrote Herr, “Your brethren in the Lord have concluded to have your letter printed so it may be read by English people in this neighborhood and Canada. If you are willing, I will make a few small corrections in it in spelling and put it into print.” Abraham Miller, Amherst, Erie County, NY, to John Herr, December 25, 1833, file A, “Miscellaneous Early Reformed Mennonite Letters, 1811–1887,” John S. Kilgore Collection, Mennonite Historical Association of the Cumberland Valley.

<sup>7</sup> The first Reformed Mennonite hymnal, *Eine kleine Lieder-Sammlung, zum allgemeinen Gebrauch des wahren Gottesdienstes für die Gemeinde Gottes*, was a selection of hymns drawn from the Lancaster Mennonite Conference hymnal, *Unpartheyisches Gesang-Buch*. The first English hymnal, *Collection of Hymns Designed for the Use of the Church of Christ*, consisted of hymns written solely by Reformed

initiated the first English translations of the writings of Menno Simons and *Martyrs Mirror*.<sup>8</sup> They seemingly made the transition from German to English without any of the attendant controversy that troubled other nineteenth-century Mennonite and Amish communities.

At the height of its membership, around 1890, the Reformed Mennonite Church numbered around 1,650 persons in thirty-four congregations located in several Pennsylvania counties, as well as in Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Michigan, New York, Ohio, and Ontario.<sup>9</sup> While most of its members were middling artisan and farming folk, the church did include a number of physicians<sup>10</sup> and industrialists.<sup>11</sup> It was the first Mennonite church to have African American members.<sup>12</sup> It was

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Mennonites. The two hymnals were reprinted and often bound together in 1858, 1873, 1895, 1910, and 1918.

<sup>8</sup> Menno Simon[s], *A Foundation and Plain Instruction of the Saving Doctrine of our Lord Jesus Christ, Briefly Compiled from the Word of God*, was translated by German Reformed school teacher I. Daniel Rupp. It included a preface written by John Herr. Rupp also translated for the Reformed Mennonites Thielem J. von Bracht, *The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs' Mirror of the Defenceless Christians from Der Blutige Schau-Platz oder Martyrer-Spiegel*.

<sup>9</sup> Carroll, *Report on Statistics of Churches*, 491–492; Musser, *The Reformed Mennonite Church*, 327.

<sup>10</sup> In Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, an extended family of Reformed Mennonite physicians included Benjamin Musser (1820–1883), Frank M. Musser (1850–1885), and Jacob H. Musser (1819–1890). Jacob G. Weaver (1840–1930) and Letitia Frantz (1858–1931) also practiced medicine in Lancaster County. All the male doctors with the exception of Jacob H. Musser graduated from Jefferson Medical College in Philadelphia. Letitia Frantz graduated from the Women's Medical College of Philadelphia. Benjamin Frantz (1824–1907), a well-known Reformed Mennonite physician in Waynesboro, Pennsylvania, also graduated from Jefferson Medical College. “Death of Well-Known Citizens,” *Semi-Weekly New Era* (Lancaster, PA), July 21, 1883, 5; “Sudden Death of Dr. Frank M. Musser,” *Lancaster (PA) Examiner*, September 16, 1885, 4; “Dr. Jacob H. Musser,” *Inquirer* (Lancaster, PA), March 8, 1890, 1; “Dr. B. Frantz Called Suddenly,” *Waynesboro (PA) Record*, February 6, 1907, 6; “Dr. J. G. Weaver,” *Lancaster (PA) New Era*, May 12, 1930, 3; “Dr. Letitia Frantz Dies Here, Aged 73,” *Lancaster (PA) New Era*, December 18, 1931, 1.

<sup>11</sup> For example, the Frick Company, a major nineteenth-century manufacturer of steam engines in the industrial town of Waynesboro, Pennsylvania, was founded by Reformed Mennonite George Frick (1826–1892). His nephews Amos, Ezra, and Franklin Landis also founded two late nineteenth-century industries in Waynesboro: Landis Tool Company and Landis Machine Company. Frick Company, *A History of the Frick Company*, 3–16; Burdge and Horst, *Building on the Gospel Foundation*, 492–494.

<sup>12</sup> Peggy Turner (1791–1897) was an African American woman who in her later years lived in an apartment in the New Danville Reformed Mennonite Meetinghouse. According to her obituary, “During more than sixty years she was a consistent member of the new Mennonite Church.” “Died at the Age of 106. Lancaster County's Oldest Resident,” *Semi-Weekly New Era* (Lancaster, PA), March 19, 1897, 5. This would put her joining the Reformed Mennonite Church sometime in the 1840s. She is buried in the New Danville Reformed Mennonite Cemetery, along with thirty other African Americans belonging to the Ashton, Jones, Martin, Middleton, Richardson, Shaw, Spencer, and Toliaferro families. Among them is a Menno Simons Richardson. A number of these persons were members of the Reformed Mennonite Church (based on my survey of the New Danville Reformed Mennonite Cemetery on June 20, 2020). In the 1930s, several African Americans from Memphis, Tennessee, responded to an advertisement by Reformed Mennonite bishop Jacob L. Kreider and were received into the church. There are still several members there today. Scott, *Old Order and Conservative Mennonite Groups*, 112–113. I spoke with one of the current African American members after the examination meeting at the Sterling, Illinois, Reformed Mennonite Church on October 14, 2017.

also the first American Mennonite group to have an urban congregation.<sup>13</sup> The Reformed Mennonites managed all this while at the same time being strongly separatist and nonconformist in their ethos.

However, there was much more to Reformed Mennonite spirituality than ethics. It was based on an inward transformative experience made possible by Christ's sacrifice and actuated through the convert's cooperation with the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Unlike many other nineteenth-century Mennonites, Reformed Mennonites recounted their conversion experiences. Typical was that of Benjamin Frantz (1824–1907), son of Reformed Mennonite bishop Christian Frantz (1786–1862) of Franklin County, Pennsylvania. In 1842, while in Lancaster County studying medicine, the younger Frantz wrote to his father describing his conversion and the struggle that preceded it (quoted in Burdge and Horst, *Building on the Gospel Foundation*, 195–196):

I write to inform you that I have resigned myself to the will of God, resolving to walk according to His will, and to forsake this vain and sinful world; to follow Christ Jesus who redeemed us from all our sins, that we might be made partakers of His heavenly kingdom, if we follow him and do his commandments.... It has pleased the Lord to visit me with heavy conviction from an early period of my life to the present time.... I still thought I ought to finish my studies and be settled in business and have some pleasure in the world before I would accept the offer of grace tendered to me. My conscience at last became as a gnawing worm preying upon my soul.... But I still put it off...until I at last began to feel more easy, but then I paused. I thought maybe this is the last warning.... I began to read the Scriptures diligently, and at last by the grace of God I became willing to take up the cross and follow Him.

The last statement by Frantz is a key to understanding the Reformed Mennonite integration of inward religious experience and outward ethical action. To put it in theological terms, the tension between the spirit and the letter, typical in many Protestant theologies, is resolved by an insistence that a regenerated person will obey the commands of Christ. Reformed Mennonites would view as false any profession of Christian faith by persons who resist violence with force, swear oaths, are conformed to the world, are sexually immoral, and do not correctly practice baptism and the Lord's Supper. This is framed by an understanding that the visible Church of Christ is characterized by a unity of faith, a purity in doctrine and practice, and love. This leads Reformed Mennonites to conclude that all other religious groups outside their church are part of Babylon (the fallen, unredeemed world). Therefore, they do not attend meetings of other churches, join in prayer or

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<sup>13</sup> In 1855, the Reformed Mennonites purchased a building from the Methodists on East German Street in Lancaster City. They met there until 1904, when they built the much larger James Street meetinghouse. In 1906, the James Street congregation numbered 227 members. "The Society of Christians Known as New Mennonites," *Lancaster (PA) Examiner*, May 16, 1855, 2; "To Hold Services in New Church," *Semi-Weekly New Era* (Lancaster, PA), December 3, 1904, 1; "Reformed Mennonite Church of Lancaster City, Penna. 1906," file I, "Ministerial Lists and Church Directories, 1906–2004," Rimmel Collection.

worship with non-Reformed Mennonites, or listen to outside preachers, not even at a funeral of a family member or friend. Reformed Mennonites are exhorted constantly to maintain this unity, purity, and love. In the case of those members who do not, the ban and social avoidance are applied. Social avoidance includes not doing business with a former member. In the case of a shunned spouse, it means not sharing the marriage bed.<sup>14</sup> It was his wife's observance of martial avoidance that provoked Robert Bear's assault on the Reformed Mennonite Church.

In many bulk-mailed open letters to the Reformed Mennonite Church and in his 1974 book, *Delivered Unto Satan*, Bear's sexual frustration is explicit. It is also evident, though somewhat muted, in the numerous newspaper reports covering Bear's case. The 1973 *New York Times* article was more explicit than some reports. Bear is quoted as saying, "The bishops and I are like two stags on a mountain. My wife is the doe standing at the top. A fight is inevitable."<sup>15</sup> This was not how the Reformed Mennonite leaders would have viewed the situation. However, their absolutist understanding of nonresistance, which included not answering back to a false accusation, kept them silent as to their side of the story. This is a silence that that has remained largely intact even today.

Their silence, in which Gale Bear as a church member participated, allowed Robert Bear to frame the narrative. He did so with the help of a publicity firm he hired. His story boiled down to a single theme, articulated in newspaper headlines like "Church 'Shun' Disrupts Ref. Mennonite Family," and "Criticism of Church Costs Farmer His Family." It was a trope that resonated with the news media and dominated their coverage, despite Bear's abduction and rape of his wife, assault on a Reformed Mennonite bishop and his wife, and defacing of church property. He successfully employed it to win an acquittal by a jury on a charge of kidnapping, even though he readily admitted to the abduction during his trial.<sup>16</sup>

In *From Plain to Plane*, Patty Bear brings clarity to what was really happening in her family behind the public persona of victimhood her father had created for himself. She was eight years old when Robert Bear was placed under the ban. While acknowledging this as a watershed event in her family's life, her description of her father before his excommunication reveals a domineering

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<sup>14</sup> These points are drawn from Lehman and Lehman, *Christianity Defined*.

<sup>15</sup> King, "Mennonite Dissident," 1, 20.

<sup>16</sup> Katy and J. Kenneth Beaver, "Far-Reaching Effects of Church Doctrine: Church 'Shun' Disrupts Ref. Mennonite Family," *Public Opinion* (Chambersburg, PA), May 5, 1973, 1, 23; Andrew Wallace, "Criticism of Church Costs Farmer His Family," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 13, 1973, 1, 18-A; "A Victim of 'Shunning': Reformed Mennonite Church Doctrine Has Farmer Wondering 'What It Is to Have a Wife That's Mine,'" *Washington Post*, December 15, 1977, A3; "Shunned Man Tried for Kidnapping Wife," *Record Herald* (Waynesboro, PA), December 3, 1979, 1; "Around the Nation: Ex-Mennonite Tells Jury Why He Abducted His Wife," *New York Times*, December 4, 1979, A12; "'Shunned' Husband Accused of Rape," *New Mexico Daily Lobo*, December 4, 1977, 7; "Robert Bear, Ex-Communicated Reformed Mennonite, Says He Abducted His Wife," *New York Times*, December 4, 1979, 12; Pete Shellem, "Shunned Mennonite Convicted Upper Frankford Man Found Guilty of Assaulting Bishop, Wife," *Patriot News* (Harrisburg, PA), June 16, 1987, A7; Joshua Vaughn, "Cumberland County Man Sentenced for Gluing 'Posters' to Exterior of Church," *Sentinel* (Carlisle, PA), January 19, 2017, [http://cumberlink.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/cumberland-county-man-sentence-for-gluing-posters-to-exterior-of/article\\_ddedfb09-8424-5df9-9f43-24a32caa901a.html](http://cumberlink.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/cumberland-county-man-sentence-for-gluing-posters-to-exterior-of/article_ddedfb09-8424-5df9-9f43-24a32caa901a.html).

and selfish person who ridiculed those he perceived as less intelligent or physically weaker than himself. Angered by his excommunication, Robert Bear turned increasingly vindictive. Publicly, his vindictiveness was directed against the Reformed Mennonite leaders. Privately, his main targets were his wife and children, with one of his sons being singled out for special mistreatment. The pettiness of his vindictiveness is astonishing at times. After moving out of the farmhouse to a trailer on his farm, he cut off the electricity to the house where his wife and children lived, carted off freezers containing the family's food supply, and refused to provide any financial support for them. Terrorized by his rages, his wife and children escaped from the farm and went into hiding. They continued to live in fear that he would discover their whereabouts, but his interest in them was episodic and they seemed mainly to serve as a foil for his victimhood narrative.

That more of this backstory was not publicly known (though a discerning reader of the newspaper reports could get hints of what was happening) is due to the constraints Gale Bear felt as a Reformed Mennonite not to defend herself in any way.<sup>17</sup> Reformed Mennonites have the most absolute position on defenselessness of any Plain Anabaptist group. Like many Plain groups, they will not press legal charges, but they go even further by refusing to even report crimes to the police. Thus, in telling her story, Patty Bear also gives her mother a public voice for the first time. It is a voice long overdue. Sadly, Gale Bear died in February 2021, as *From Plain to Plane* was being released. However, she had read the manuscript and “gave her imprimatur” for her daughter to “write my story without reservation.”<sup>18</sup>

As the pun in the title, *From Plain to Plane*, indicates, Patty Bear's memoir is also a story of liberation and self-actualization. Hers is a liberation not only from her father's abuse, but also from what she characterizes as the narrow and restrictive environment of the Reformed Mennonite Church. While not impugning the validity of her lived experience, the emotional truth it conveys, nor for that matter the personal choices that she has made, there are a number of problems with her description of the Reformed Mennonite Church. Some are rather minor, but curious for someone who grew up in a Reformed Mennonite home. Reformed Mennonite women's bonnets are gray, not black, for example, and Reformed Mennonites do not have only black cars.

Patty Bear states unequivocally that among Reformed Mennonites, “higher education is discouraged, because you might get educated away from the Truth and then you would go to hell” (18). While other Plain Anabaptists discourage higher education and make sure their children are educated in an environment reflecting their values, this has never been the case for Reformed Mennonites. Children growing up in Reformed Mennonite homes attend public schools, as did Patty and all her siblings. They are free to participate in school activities—Patty ran on the track team and played in the school band—though they would not expect their parents to attend such events. Nor are children expected to dress plain if they are not church members, as Patty's sixth grade and high school graduation photos illustrate. College is not off limits. As Patty noted, her

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<sup>17</sup> Gale Bear did not go public with her story even after she left the Reformed Mennonite Church in 1987. Bear, *From Plain to Plane*, 349.

<sup>18</sup> “Gale G. Bear, September 30, 1938–February 4, 2021,” accessed September 23, 2021, <https://www.cocklinfuneralhome.com/obituary/Gale-Bear>; *From Plain to Plain*, Acknowledgements.

uncle, Bishop Glenn Gross, had attended college. Today in the church's two Pennsylvania congregations, three of the four Reformed Mennonite ministers graduated from college. Patty may have had this mistaken notion because of her father's personal attitude toward higher education: "Daddy has told us many times he doesn't want any of us going to college.... eighth grade was good enough for him, and it's good enough for us too" (18).

While Patty felt some pressure to attend the Reformed Mennonite meetings, it appears to be self-imposed due to a desire to support her mother. Once they reach adolescence, if children of Reformed Mennonite members do not want to attend church, their parents will not make them. In fact, Reformed Mennonites are wary of providing too much of a hedge around their adolescent children, because they want a decision to come to the faith and the church to be motivated by the moving of the Holy Spirit in their inward being, rather than on outward communal conditioning. Consequently, the majority of children of Reformed Mennonite parents do not join the church. Thus, Patty's portrayal of being locked in by the expectations of the Reformed Mennonite Church sounds a bit forced.

Patty Bear reserves her severest criticism of the Reformed Mennonite Church for its adherence to traditional gender roles for men and women. According to her, she heard Reformed Mennonite ministers, "endlessly quoting scriptures where women were the property of men" (94). She may have meant this as hyperbole, as is certainly her claim to have heard such "in sermons a thousand times."<sup>19</sup> Certainly, Reformed Mennonites would subscribe to the New Testament instructions about wives being submissive to their husbands and that women should be silent in church meetings. As Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt observe about the Amish, another Plain Anabaptist group that subscribes to traditional gender roles, "subordination means neither inequality nor lack of importance. Outsiders' assumptions about rigid patriarchal frameworks obscure the many ways in which Amish women's agency is respected, affirmed, and operative. Gender relations in Amish life reflect a 'soft' patriarchy, whose sinews stiffen and relax in different situations."<sup>20</sup> The same can be said about Reformed Mennonites. Women members, while not in leadership, are not voiceless. Formally, they are heard in the biannual examination meetings before communion where major decisions are made. Their counsel and consent are taken just as seriously as that of male lay members.<sup>21</sup> Nor, as Patty Bear herself recounts when the Reformed Mennonite leaders asked her mother if she was shunning her husband, did Gale Bear consider herself powerless. She told the leaders that their questions "went beyond the pale.... If you're going to keep asking these kind of questions, I'm done. I'm leaving" (85). Chastened, the bishops backed down. Her father never did, as he unambiguously viewed his wife and children as his property. Whatever the ministers preach about "the need of women to be submissive," Patty Bear may have

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<sup>19</sup> Since 2015, I have regularly listened to the recorded sermons from the Middlesex Reformed Mennonite Church (the same congregation Patty Bear attended as a child) and have never heard any sermon on women's submission or even a passing reference to it.

<sup>20</sup> Kraybill, Johnson-Weiner, and Nolt, *The Amish*, 194.

<sup>21</sup> In the examination meeting, each member speaks one-on-one with one of the church leaders, where they express their peace with God, their unity with the other members, and any concerns they have, and they give their voice on any question the ministry has placed before the members for their consent.

only been capable of seeing as refracted through the lenses of her father's attitude. Nonetheless, she considered the ministers' sermons to be "violent and hateful rhetoric" and thus she rejected any consideration of ever joining the Reformed Mennonite Church.

As with many Americans with limited financial resources, Patty Bear turned to the military as a way out of her circumstances. She won an appointment to the United States Air Force Academy and trained as a pilot, completing her perceived transition "from plain to plane." Flying became for her the metaphor of her liberation, even though she encountered at least as much misogyny in the Air Force as she ever had in the Reformed Mennonite Church. This is not the only irony of her story. There is that of an Air Force pilot, who "served as an aircraft commander in Operation Desert Storm" (349) inveighing against the violence of shunning. There is perhaps the subtler irony that her liberationist trope functions much in the same way as her father's victimhood trope, albeit in a less damaging way. It resonates with stereotypes that outsiders have about Plain Anabaptists and validates the search for self-assertion even as it conforms itself to the dominant American cultural ethos.

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