

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

Chapter 5

Independence Day

On a day when a gallon of gasoline cost \$4.10 nationwide and a barrel of oil hovered at \$140, both records, I found myself among eight thousand Amish farmers watching a parade of brand-new horse-drawn manure spreaders, combines, and hay balers. The occasion was the 15th Annual Horse Progress Days, an enthusiastic celebration of one of the world's oldest energy sources: animal power. This year, the two-day event took place in Mt. Hope, northeast of Columbus, Ohio.

That its first day fell on the anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence was an irony of illuminating proportions. But I'll get to that in a minute.

Although I went mostly out of curiosity, I wasn't unprepared. My family and I had stopped in Mt. Hope the previous summer for a three-day visit with David Kline, farmer, author, publisher and Amish minister. What I saw and heard during our stay deeply impressed me. I saw a vibrant agrarian community, living and working on a human scale that was wholly alien to me as a child of the suburbs. I saw draft animals at work, manure on the roads, pretty 120-acre farms, smiling faces, and tons of children.

And what I heard, when I asked David for a summation of the Amish experience at the end of our visit, was this: "It's alright to live with less."

I needed to know more, so when I discovered that Horse Progress Days would be coming to Mt. Hope this year, I jumped (on a plane, I know). I had spent my youth around horses – but they were the recreational variety. I knew nothing about draft animals or horse farming, except that after being our nation's main power source for centuries, they had become an anachronism by the time of my birth, replaced in a few short decades by the tractor and the oil pump. I wondered: could animal power be a feasible alternative to our dependence on petroleum?

On the evening of my arrival in Mt. Hope, I unexpectedly witnessed the outline of an answer.

Standing at the railing of my two-story B&B, I watched an Amish family bale and load hay in an adjacent field. The hay had been cut a day or two earlier, to dry, and now needed to be 'put up' before the increasingly leaden sky began to drizzle. There was a calm, methodical urgency to the family's work. The apparent patriarch of the family, wearing the standard Amish uniform (straw hat, plain shirt, suspenders, black pants, and a beard), stood in a red hay baler that was so old it looked like it belonged in a local history museum. It sounded old too – its single-stroke engine, whose job was to compress the loose hay into a square bale and bind it with string, sputtered and choked so noisily that I expected it to give up the ghost for good at any moment.

But it didn't – which was a proper metaphor for the Amish themselves, I suppose.

The engine kept going, and so did the baler, pulled by a team of handsome black draft horses that I later learned were Percherons. Together they steadily spiraled toward the center of the field, the

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

baler excreting – for that’s what it looked like – a tidy, green bale of hay every thirty seconds or so. Not far behind followed another team of horses, guided by a young Amish man – likely a son or son-in-law – who stood on a flatbed wagon. On the ground were three young women, in plain dresses and white bonnets, who loaded the wagon with the freshly minted bales. The work must have been pleasurable because I heard the sounds of talk and laughter from where I stood. When they filled the wagon, the youngsters drove it to a farm across the (very busy) road, returning a short while later to continue their rounds.

In less than an hour, both teams were done. The field had been completely emptied of hay, looking for all the world like a shorn sheep, bewildered, and turned back to pasture.

I was sort of bewildered too. *That didn’t look so hard to do*, I thought. But my mood changed to astonishment a short time later when I heard the sound of another engine fire up. This was not the sound of a coughing relic, however; it had the confident hum of serious machinery. Indeed, it belonged to a John Deere combine of some sort (I know as much about farm machinery as I do about draft horses). Within a minute or two it began sweeping across a neighboring hay field, of approximately the same size, chased, almost comically, by a tractor pulling a large bin on wheels. The combine sucked up the loose hay from the ground and then spit it – for that’s what it looked like – through a long pipe into the careening bin beside it.

And idling nearby, with their lights on and engines running, were three more tractors with bins, waiting patiently for their turn.

In about half the time it took the Amish family to bale and load their hay, the combine had finished its work. All four bins had been filled and the tractors dutifully dispatched someplace over the horizon with their green cargo. The combine, too, took off down the road for parts unknown.

And suddenly all was quiet.

What had just happened? Two fields of similar size had just been cleared of hay – one principally by horses, the other by horsepower. I wondered: how many gallons of precious diesel had the ancient, coughing red baler used in comparison to the purring combine and speedy tractors? The difference must have been huge. And where did all that industrially gathered hay go? How many miles down the road would it travel to its ultimate destination? I had no idea – but I knew exactly where the Amish hay went – across the road, to be used, I’m sure, to feed the farm’s dairy cows this winter. The contrasting images bounced around in my skull. Prodigious. Frugal. Gone. Stayed.

I soaked up the silence.

The next morning I drove to David Kline’s farm, a few miles away. The day was cool and foggy to the touch. My quite agreeable chore was to transport David and wife Elsie to the site of the horse fair. The Amish don’t drive cars, of course, but they don’t mind lifts, especially if there are boxes of books and magazines involved. In addition to managing their organic dairy farm, the Klins edit and publish one of the most charmingly subversive magazines in the nation, called,

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

naturally, *Farming*. It's charming because it has a jaunty, colorful feel, full of poems, good stories, good humor and testimonials to the agrarian life. It's subversive for precisely the same reasons.

It had been a rough year for David. During the winter he endured a farm accident that hurt his back, and the spring he endured the loss of a sister. I think he looked eagerly forward to the positive energy and camaraderie of Horse Progress Days.

The celebration took place on the fairgrounds of the Mt. Hope auction barn, which covers a large expanse of hilly land. After dropping David and Elsie off, I parked in the vendor's lot, where the quantity of black, horse-drawn buggies outnumbered the cars. Taking a moment to wander among the carriages, whose tethered horses dozed dreamily, I noticed that every buggy had a large, orange reflective triangle attached to its backside – and I knew why. On the drive from Columbus, I was startled and then annoyed by the number of reckless motorists on the road, many of whom impatiently rode my bumper. But my annoyance turned to alarm when I entered Amish country. The reckless behavior continued despite the narrow rural roads, the hills and bends, and the sudden appearance of numerous horse-and-buggies. Where were these drivers going in such a rush? Why weren't they more respectful, or careful?

I ditched these thoughts and entered the fairgrounds. My eye instantly caught the many hundreds (and eventually thousands) of people milling about purposefully, nearly all of whom wore beards and bonnets. Some clustered around the harness and tack vendors. Some strolled through the small village of horse-drawn equipment manufacturers. Some lined up at the food tents, seeking homemade pies and fresh coffee as a brace against the damp air. Some lingered at the logging demonstration site, while others stopped at the farm-animal petting zoo or took rides in carriages pulled by miniature horses through the mud.

Other senses got involved. The smell of BBQ-laden smoke hung in the still air like an aromatic blanket. The wet ground sucked greedily at my shoes. In a distant tent, I could hear the amplified voice of a horse expert instructing a crowd how to gentle a colt. I heard adult laughter and the keening sound of children and the insistent buzz of a woodcutter's chainsaw and the clop-clop of passing horses – huge horses! The biggest I've ever seen. Teams of black Percherons, tawny Belgians, and bay Shires, often four-a-breast, in full harness, clinking merrily as they made their majestic way down a road. Giant, peaceful horses, whose reins rested in the hands of earnest Amish boys, many of whom could not have been more than twelve or thirteen years old.

It felt medieval, but in a good way. There was a rightness, a humanness, to what I saw, a rightness to the scale, the relationships, the smells, and the laughter. No wonder smiles abounded.

But this wasn't a party. There was serious business going on. I learned this when I drifted over to the demonstration of the latest manure spreaders. It was a remarkable sight. Maybe a thousand Amish farmers, men and women, stood thoughtfully on either side of a freshly-plowed strip of soil, watching a steady parade of horse-drawn manure spreaders do their thing – literally. Manure flew high and low as each spreader ran a gauntlet of discerning eyes.

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

As I snapped photos, I noticed overhead the silent, silvery threads of heavy-duty, electrical transmission lines. I also noticed a non-Amish farmer in overalls videotaping the action. At nearly \$5-a-gallon diesel, I had little doubt what motivated him.

But it wasn't all gravitas. One vendor had on display a horse treadmill, which employed a variety of big Belgian horses almost continuously. More amazingly, a drive shaft of some sort connected the revolving treadmill to a generator in a mock Amish home, where, I swear, it powered a washing machine, a small grist mill, iceboxes, and, a short distance away, a small sawmill. Talk about alternate energy!

In mid-afternoon, the sun broke through the remnants of the mist, bathing the fairgrounds in bright, sticky light. It reminded me that I had forgotten to bring a hat. By that time, I was getting pretty good at distinguishing fair-goers by their headgear. Bare heads and ball caps revealed non-Amish, of which there was a decent number by lunchtime. Among the Amish themselves, there seemed to be important, though obscure (to me), patterns and variations among the straw hats and silk bonnets. David told me there were even significant variations in the choice of suspenders they wore, though he might have been pulling my leg.

By late afternoon, my eyes, ears, and mind were full. Calling it quits for the day, I climbed into my rental and drove in the direction of a hotel in Berlin, a touristy town not far away (the B&B was booked for the night). I was as worn out from walking all day as I was from absorbing the cavalcade of sights and sounds. Reflexively, I turned on the car's radio.

I immediately regretted it.

The chatter of self-appointed pundits suddenly filled the car – and all the talk was of “energy independence” on this Independence Day. Our addiction to foreign oil was shameful, they opined, though not as shameful as the opposition to increased domestic drilling by Democrats in Congress, especially a certain freshman Senator from Illinois. In contrast, the Republican candidate for president, they noted, had recently changed his position on off-shore drilling – he now supported new exploration in ecologically sensitive areas! Public opinion had quickly followed suit. Finally, they prattled, we would get our cherished independence!

Yeah, right, I thought – in a decade, maybe. Here's an idea: why not leave the oil in the ground for our grandchildren instead? I switched the radio off.

David Kline's words came back to me as I drove: “It's alright to live with less.” I think I understood what he meant, finally. By the evidence I saw that day, not only was it *alright* to live with less, it was *possible*, even practical, which is why the farmer in overalls was there with his video camera, I suspect. But it was more than that. Judging from the positive energy that flowed through the fairgrounds, maybe it was even *beneficial* to live with less stuff.

That was not the judgement, of course, of the on-air pundits. More drilling is freedom, they argued; increased dependence is independence. And so on. I shifted uncomfortably in my seat. Everything in our daily lives shouts that it is *not* alright to live with less. Moreover, no one in a

A Chronicle of the Age of Consequences

responsible social position, including Democrats, says anything to the contrary. And who could blame them? What politician in their right mind would run on a platform of *less*?

At the same time, we're beginning to understand that there's only a finite amount of *more* in our future. Take oil, for example; its production will likely peak in the next three-to-five years. Then there will be less and less of it. It's the same with other precious (i.e. nonrenewable) natural resources. We are also beginning to see that *more and more* has begat serious consequences for the planet, including the climate change trouble we presently find ourselves in. We are beginning to see that Business-As-Usual is both unsustainable and destructive. We perceive, dimly, that we have to change things before things get changed for us.

But will we do more than burnish the rough edges of our behavior? I don't know. As I said, it's complicated. At least it's comforting to know that 'seeds' of an agrarian alternative, such as horse power, are out there, being cultivated by knowing hands.

I pulled into the hotel parking lot.

At sundown, I drove to nearby Millersburg, the county seat, to watch the 4th-of-July fireworks. I parked near a bridge and meandered down to a big field where townsfolk sat in knots, talking quietly. I found a comfortable spot and settled in for the show, which turned out to be superb. As I watched the colorful explosions fill the darkening sky, I couldn't help but think: we live in revolutionary times too. A different sort of tyranny is in charge, of course, two-hundred and thirty-two years later, requiring a different sort of liberation. But the goal is the same: independence. Liberty. And the pursuit of happiness.

All worth fighting for, I think.