

# Tradition, Innovation, and Assimilation in Iowa's Amana Colonies

by Jonathan G. Andelson  
photographs by John W. Barry

**T**HREE STRANDS, skillfully interwoven, lend strength, resilience, and durability to the social fabric of Iowa's seven Amana Colonies. First combined over a century ago by pious and resourceful German immigrants, these strands remain intertwined today in a community that has become substantially but still not fully Americanized. Amana is living testimony to the longevity of tradition, the genius of innovation, and the sometimes irresistible force of assimilation. It is a community that has changed creatively while honoring its past and the memory of its founders.

The oldest strand in Amana comes from Germany, more specifically from that section of the country watered by the Main River and by the incomparable Rhine after it leaves the mountains of Switzerland and before it settles into the lowlands north of Bonn: which is to say, the regions of Hessen, Baden, Wuerttemberg, Alsace, and the Rhenish Palatinate. These were the homelands of the founders of Amana, who would leave Germany beginning in 1843 in search of religious freedom in America.

The Amana religion — the second strand — began in the eighteenth century, a time when

many groups of church dissidents crystallized around the doctrines of Pietism. Pietists criticized the state church on many points, including its alleged corruption, its intellectual rather than emotional approach to worship, and its insistence on clerical mediation of individual salvation. The more radical Pietists separated from the church altogether and met in secret conventicles in order to worship according to their convictions. One such conventicle, organized in 1714 in the town of Himbach, Hessen, adopted the name "The Community of True Inspiration." Its members put special emphasis on the teachings of divinely inspired leaders whom they referred to as "instruments [*Werkzeuge*] of God."

Under the leadership of several capable *Werkzeuge*, the True Inspirationists developed a distinctive set of religious beliefs and practices. Their nonconformity aroused the displeasure of civil and church officials, but despite this the group attracted new members and soon comprised dozens of small congregations scattered throughout west-central Germany. A century later, following a period of declining spirituality, the True Inspirationists experienced a reawakening of faith that brought them new *Werkzeuge* but also renewed the persecutions against them. Led by Christian Metz, a remarkably gifted administrator as well as a loving and sensitive leader, several hundred members left Germany for America in 1843. They settled near Buffalo, New York, in a group of villages they called Ebenezer. Twelve years later, in 1855, desiring more land and less contact with "worldly

**About the photographs:** Taken over two or three years in the 1930s, the following Amana photographs are from a rich collection by Cedar Rapids photographer John W. Barry. From the young worshipper with songbook and Bible (opposite), to the cottage weaver loading rags onto a shuttle (page 11), Barry's photos demonstrate community, commerce, and piety, and they document the colonies at a time of great internal change. Our thanks to John W. Barry for loaning these artistic and historically invaluable photographs.

—The Editor







minded people," they began a gradual removal to their present location in Iowa, adopting the name "Amana" from a passage in the Song of Solomon.

The third strand in Amana's social fabric is also the newest. Although the Inspirationists were separatists in Germany and preferred to maintain polite but distinct relations with their English-speaking neighbors in America, they could not help being influenced by their new surroundings. They consciously borrowed some elements from the wider society and unconsciously imitated others. This assimilation of American culture began almost immediately, but it was slower than with many immigrant groups because of the active resistance dictated by the Inspirationists' religious faith.

These three strands — traditional German culture, Inspirationist beliefs and practices, and elements of American culture — have been dynamic factors in Amana's history. They have changed and been rearranged continuously since 1843. All are present today, but to different degrees and in different forms than a hundred or even fifty years ago. The changes can be highlighted by glimpsing Amana at three times in its history: in 1860, a few years after the Inspirationists settled in Iowa; in 1935, following the collapse of religious authority; and in 1988, as Amana enters its 134th year as a community.

**B**Y 1860 THE AMANA COLONIES had been in existence for five years. Only five of the present seven villages had been started: Amana (1855), West Amana (1856), South Amana (1856), High Amana (1857), and East Amana (1860). The villages of Homestead and Middle Amana were added in 1861 and 1862. The population of the communities stood at 572, with additional members arriving from Ebenezer, New York, almost monthly. The Inspirationists owned over 20,000 contiguous acres. In 1860 they planted nearly 300 acres in winter wheat, another 300 in oats, 180 in corn, and lesser amounts in barley, potatoes, and other crops. They grazed livestock on a portion of the

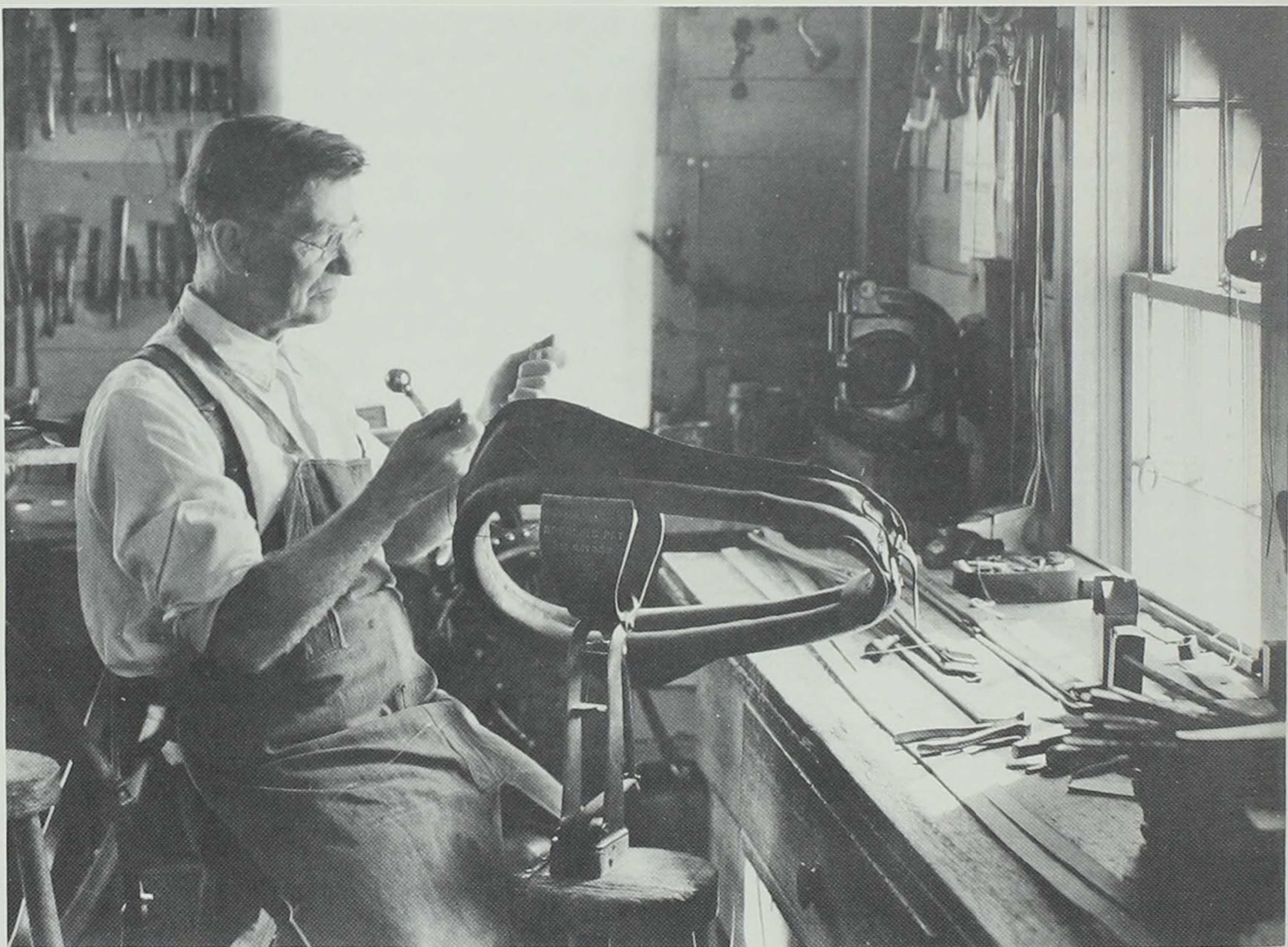
remaining acreage and allowed the rest to remain in timber.

Because members of the community had been in America for no more than sixteen years, and increments were arriving from Germany periodically, the German character of the villages was pronounced. German was the first and, for most, the only language spoken. The Inspirationists also brought with them various germanic folk traditions, including nursery rhymes and children's games, proverbs, and customary foods and beverages. Beer and wine making were part of Amana from the beginning, their consumption accepted by the leaders in moderation. Plain but hearty dishes like sauerkraut, *Kartoffel Kloesse* (potato dumplings), and hearth-baked bread reminded the colonists of their homeland.

Perhaps the most significant element of traditional German culture was a sense of craftsmanship. Men and women alike took pleasure in making beautiful but functional objects by hand. Women's crafts included various forms of fiber art: knitted or crocheted gloves, mittens, and stockings; quilts decorated with stitched patterns such as *Affenschwanz* (ape tail) and *Karo* (diamond) patterns; cross-stitched samplers with religious or folk sayings; crocheted and hooked rag rugs; and embroidered doilies and bureau scarves. Some of these skills were taught to both boys and girls in the Amana schools, though mostly women practiced them as adults.

Whereas items made by women typically remained in the homes of relatives or close friends, items made by men were more likely to be made for community use or even for sale to outsiders. Tinware was vital to many activities in Amana's kitchens, meat shops, farms, and homes. Every village had a basket maker and a plot of ground planted in willows, slips of which had been brought by the colonists from Germany. Several types of baskets served for transporting garden products and foodstuffs or for storage. Other men made watches, leather goods, and carpets. Perhaps the most notable craft was woodworking. Cabinetmakers worked mostly in cherry and walnut, fashioning chairs, tables, beds, sofas, chests, desks, clocks, bureaus, and other pieces for recently arrived families and newly-





weds. Out of the carpenter shop also came a variety of tools for the farms, kitchens, and community shops, as well as toys and other nonutilitarian items such as *Klickerbahnen* (marble machines) and Christmas pyramids.

Aside from folk traditions, other elements of German culture could be found in Amana in 1860. The Luther Bible and the custom of separating the sexes during church services were traditional in German Protestantism. The works of German theologians could be found among the possessions of some members of the community. In the Amana schools, where children were educated through eighth grade, German educational practices emphasizing rote learning and mild corporal punishment for misbehaving children predominated, though Amana doubtless resembled most American communities in these. Finally, while more difficult to pinpoint in early records, the people of Amana must have brought with them from the old country certain general cultural values,

among them a respect for authority and a love of order. These values found expression in all aspects of life in the Amana Colonies.

**D**ESPITE THE MANY ELEMENTS of German culture in Amana, the colonies were not Germany in microcosm. The colonists created an innovative and highly distinctive culture of their own that derived mostly from their religion. In 1860 the inspired leaders of the Amana Church were Christian Metz and Barbara Landmann. Their authority when acting as divine "instruments" was unquestioned. As *Werkzeuge*, Metz and Landmann appointed especially pious male members of the community to be the elders of the church and to assist at all church rituals. In 1860, seventy-four elders guided the spiritual life of the community. Metz was an elder, but Barbara Land-



mann, because she was a woman, could not be. Eleven regular church services were held each week. Women wore black caps, shawls, and aprons; men wore dark suits.

The Inspirationists observed four distinctive rituals in addition to those celebrated in most Christian churches. In one of these the *Werkzeuge* and the elders examined the spiritual condition of each member of the community individually. The process took several weeks and served to encourage conformity to the community's values and standards. Another ritual involved special services for the younger members of each village, at which the elders admonished them particularly to lead more virtuous lives and prepare themselves for participation as adults in the community's affairs. The third ritual was a *Liebesmahl*, or Love Feast, at which communion was taken and the ritual of footwashing occurred. Finally, in a *Bundesschliessung* (literally "closing the covenant") the Inspirationists periodically reaffirmed their commitment to one another and to the divinely ordained principles by which they lived.

The Inspirationists believed that at death all stood equal before the Lord. In consequence, members were buried under uniform grave-markers, and, as in church, where they sat before God individually and not as families, so they were buried, in order of death rather than in family plots.

In keeping with their religious beliefs about equality, the Inspirationists adopted a communal economic order. Except for personal or family possessions, such as clothing, home-made items, and pieces of furniture, all property was owned jointly, and goods and services flowed within the colonies according to need. They used no money, though they kept elaborate records of transactions, including each member's "purchases" in community-owned stores against an annual spending allowance. Men and women worked collectively — though separated by gender — at assigned tasks without wages. Everyone received food, shelter, and health care at community expense.

Domestic arrangements likewise reflected the communal ideology. Members lived in assigned apartments. Married couples lived

together with their children, and single members lived in small apartments or with relatives. The typical Amana residence contained four apartments, none of which had cooking facilities. Instead, a staff of young women prepared meals in community kitchens, and members dined communally, men and women eating at separate tables and children at a third table. Numerous rules regulated minor aspects of living. Little conversation occurred at mealtime, the view being that such occasions inspired only idle and frivolous talk. Men could not sport moustaches, and "worldly" fashions for either sex were forbidden. Subdued colors and conservative fabrics and designs dominated colony apparel. Gambling, making graven images, and playing musical instruments all were proscribed by command of the elders.

Governance of the colonies lay in the





church. In each village a Council of Elders assigned work and lodging and dealt with transgressions against the rules of the community. A Great Council, elected from among the elders by voting members (men over twenty-one and single women over thirty-five) made major decisions about economic operations, set members' spending allowances, determined the hiring of outside labor, judged applications for membership, and established general policies for the community kitchens. In 1860, only the *Werkzeuge*, Metz and Landmann, had the power to appoint elders, approve marriages, and expel unruly members from the community.

In short, the most innovative and distinctive elements of Amana culture in 1860 included the religion and those economic, domestic, and governmental patterns derived from it. These might be thought of as an overlay (although a very extensive and significant one) on a base of traditional German culture.

**T**HE CONTRIBUTION OF AMERICAN CULTURE to Amana in 1860 was limited, but a degree of cultural borrowing had already taken place. First, American influence showed most heavily in Amana's economy. At no time has Amana had either a self-sufficient or a self-sustaining economy. The colonies depended on selling surplus agricultural and industrial products to external markets to generate operating revenue. The Inspirationists selected crop and livestock types as well as milling and manufacturing activities partially in accordance with external demand. The process of developing Amana's economy was still in its infancy in 1860. Only the year before had work begun on a small woolen mill, wool manufacturing having been the livelihood of several of the members in Europe. A flour mill already served not only the colonists' needs but their neighbors'. Out of necessity the Inspirationists adopted American currency as the basis of exchange, but they also kept most records of economic transactions in English.

Second, Iowa law required that the Inspirationists incorporate as a religious association, something they had done in 1859 as the "Amana Society." They drafted a constitution that spelled out the organization of the community and members' rights within it.

Finally, there is the puzzling origin of Amana's architectural style. The carpenters who constructed the buildings came from Europe, but little can be seen in the Inspirationists' homeland that reminds us of their buildings here. Similar design features characterized structures in Ebenezer, New York, and might have been created by the Inspirationists themselves to conform to principles of doctrine and to solve the problems posed by communal living. Though attractive, this hypothesis becomes less compelling in the face of comparable architecture dating to the same period from eastern and midwestern regions of the United States. Most likely, the basic form of Amana architecture is American in origin with adaptations for communal life made by the Inspirationists.

Five years after its founding, Amana in 1860 already displayed components of German, Inspirationist, and American culture mingled together. Of the three, Inspirationist elements were the most pronounced and far-reaching in the colonists' daily lives. Let us next consider Amana in 1935, three years after the Inspirationists abandoned communalism.

**I**N 1932, members of the Amana Society voted to reorganize their economic system as a joint-stock company. This change, known in Amana as "the Great Change," occurred in response to increasing financial difficulties besetting the colonies. Many blamed communal ownership for a tangle of problems, including feigning illness to avoid work, maintaining inefficient economic practices, and abandoning the faith. Actually, lower demand for the community's products and increasing exposure to America's growing









consumer culture were equally to blame for the colonies' insolvency. The Great Council appointed a committee to consider the situation. The committee submitted a proposal for reorganization, a majority of members approved the plan, and on June 1, 1932, the old Amana Society became two independent bodies, the Amana Church Society and a profit-seeking corporation which retained the name "the Amana Society."

In 1935, three years after the change, German was still the language of religious life in Amana and also of home life for the older people. By this time, however, almost everyone had studied English for eight years in school, and the younger people preferred that language. Furthermore, with less emphasis on self-sufficiency and increasing reliance on external markets, residents needed English for economic transactions more than they had in the past.

Of the germanic folk traditions, many children continued to learn nursery rhymes and games, mostly from their mothers. Customs of food and drink persisted as well; except for wine making, these too were mostly female activities. Women's crafts remained an important part of domestic life. Many accomplished quilters lived in every village, and the energetic hands of Amana's women produced countless pieces of lovely crochet, needlepoint, and embroidery.

Men's crafts underwent more modifications than women's had. Cabinetmaking became an especially profitable line of work, and carpet making met a continuing local demand. Most other men's crafts declined or ceased altogether as demand for the products simply did not exist under the new system. The Amana Society either closed the craft shops or sold them to individuals to run as best they could. Like most places in America, the skills of the tinsmith, cooper, basket maker, blacksmith, and wagonmaker slowly disappeared, their remaining practitioners either retiring or adopting new trades.

Other elements of German culture were comparatively weak in Amana in 1935 for two reasons. First, no appreciable German immigration to the colonies had occurred since the early 1880s, and although some members of the community still received German-language newspapers and magazines, this was not enough to enhance Amana's German identity. (In fact, the people of Amana had gradually become linguistically distinct, speaking and writing an Amana dialect slightly different from the German spoken in their homeland.) Second, anti-German sentiment in America during World War I had caused many Amana residents pain and embarrassment, and many wanted to deemphasize their German heritage and to Americanize.

Distinctly Inspirationist cultural elements had also declined in importance in Amana by 1935. Apart from a decline in the number of elders from seventy-four to fifty-five, a reduction in weekly church services from eleven to eight, and the discontinuation of the yearly spiritual examination of members, the church and its rituals remained virtually unchanged from 1860. The chief difference was the











absence of inspired leaders, the last of whom, Barbara Landmann, had died in 1883.

**D**RAMATIC CHANGES, however, had occurred in economic organization. On the day of the Great Change, each member of the old Amana Society received one share apiece of voting stock in the new corporation and, of a second kind of stock, shares in proportion to his or her years of work for the old community. Henceforth, all work would be done for wages, and members of the new corporation would be responsible for meeting all of their own needs except medical and dental care. The new Amana Society took steps to become more competitive in the wider economy.

Simultaneously, most of the domestic arrangements of the old system were discontinued, so that by 1935 nearly everyone either owned a home or rented an apartment from the corporation. The community kitchens were gone, replaced by private kitchens in each household. Few rules governed the dress or comportment of Amana residents in 1935, except that traditional garb for church continued in use. Otherwise, individuals enjoyed substantial freedom to do as they chose.

Because church elders had fewer rules to enforce in 1935, the individual village councils no longer existed. Elders did endeavor to uphold church traditions, but Amana residents were no longer required to attend church, or even to belong. In fact, several non-attenders resided in the colonies in 1935. The Great Council did continue, its function restricted to religious matters. A separate Board of Directors managed the corporation's business operations and played no role in the church.

By 1935 the people of Amana had lived together as a community long enough to have elaborated a folkloristic dimension to Inspirationist culture, a folklore which must have existed in only rudimentary form in 1860. The colonists constantly added to their oral tradition of usually amusing stories and verse about themselves and the place where they lived. Most of these were never written down, but they circulated freely throughout the villages

and provided entertainment as well as an understanding of and continuity with the past.

Amana's assimilation into American mainstream culture was substantially greater in 1935 than it had been in 1860. Nearly everyone spoke fluent English, and schooling, once limited to eighth grade, now extended through high school with instruction entirely in English. Contact with the "world" was commonplace. The colonies were almost completely integrated into the American economy. Although not many Amana residents worked outside the colonies, the way was being paved for them to do so. Consumption patterns, once regulated by the elders, now responded to the Sears & Roebuck catalog and "worldly" advertising, and community businesses advertised their own products with increasing sophistication. Both the corporation and individual entrepreneurs formed new businesses, the most important of which became Amana Refrigeration, Inc., founded in 1934.

By 1935, direct contact with "outsiders" was occurring continuously. Pleasure excursions outside the colonies, difficult or impossible under the communal system, became routine once the people of Amana acquired automobiles after the reorganization. The decline of religious authority and the shift to a profit-seeking economic system also made it much easier for outsiders to visit Amana. The opening of the first private restaurant in 1934 symbolically inaugurated the tourist trade, although outsiders had been coming to Amana for several years to purchase woolen goods and meat products.

**W**ITH THE WISDOM OF hindsight one can read much of the course of Amana's future in the events of the early 1930s.

Increasing contact with the outside, increasing assimilation into the mainstream, increasing privatization of the economy, and increasing tourism all characterized the next half century of Amana's development. What did these trends signify for the German and Inspirationist elements in Amana life? How do the



three strands appear today?

The German language is used less widely in Amana in 1988 than it was in 1935. It remains the language of some of the church services, but the elders introduced alternative English-language services a decade ago. Many people over sixty still speak German at home as their first language, but few of Amana's young people are fluent. Even so, some can converse in German and some elect to study it in school. The old nursery rhymes, proverbs, and games have disappeared from most families.

Traditional German folk culture has also weakened. Many older women still produce handcrafted items, but fewer of their daughters and granddaughters do. Traditional men's crafts have undergone several changes. Furniture making is a major Amana business today, and woodworking is an important hobby. After nearly disappearing, basketmaking was revived several years ago by a young woman in West Amana who now teaches the craft to others, mostly women. A man from Middle Amana adopted tinsmithing as an avocation and reproduces old Amana pieces in his spare time; he, too, leads workshops. Carpet making continues to be done, today by both women and men.

Customs involving food and drink have survived with modifications. Traditional Amana recipes are enjoyed side by side with American foods, and many people still make wine in their cellars. Public restaurants, however, of which there are seven, offer fare emphasizing German dishes not necessarily found in earlier Amana cuisine, including sauerbraten, wiener schnitzel, spaetzle, bratwurst, and *Kasseler Rippchen* (roasted pork chops). The restaurants also serve foods reminiscent of community-kitchen dishes, such as sauerkraut and "Amana ham," as well as fried chicken, steaks, lettuce salads, fruit pies, and other American foods.

Unexpectedly, some new instances of German influence can be found in Amana in 1988 which were not present before. Mostly these are related to tourism. Some workers in tourist businesses wear dirndls or lederhosen, costumes traditional to Bavaria and not to the Inspirationists' homeland. Oktoberfest, also associated in popular conception with Bavaria,

was celebrated in Amana in 1987 and in earlier years as a tourist event. *Fachwerk* (half-timbering) construction lends an Old-World flavor to several newer buildings, as does gothic lettering to some of the tourist signage. Modest German influence also can be found in some of the interior and exterior private space in the colonies, often the result of colonists' trips to Germany.

Elements of Inspirationist culture remain a prominent part of Amana life in 1988. The church, though not unchanged, retains all of the essential features it had in 1935. Women still wear the traditional church garb, and women and men still sit separately. Two services are held every Sunday, one in English and the other in German. The order of worship has not changed; the presiding elder reads from Scripture and testimonies of the *Werkzeuge*, and the congregation sings hymns a cappella. The number of elders, however, has fallen to about twenty, although this includes



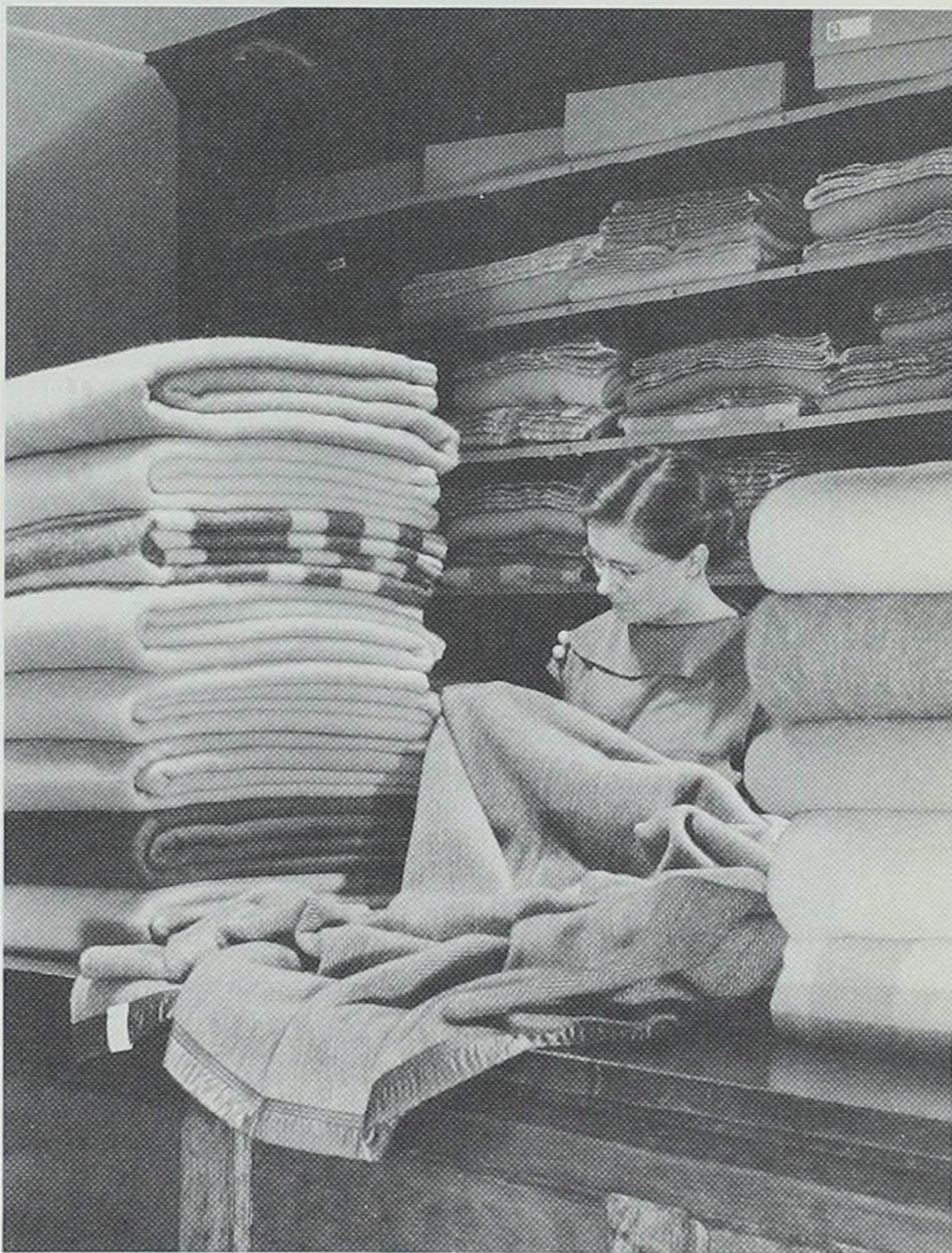


some younger men who accepted the calling recently. One reason for the fewer elders is that the number of church members has declined as some residents, usually through marriage to outsiders, have joined other churches. Perhaps three-fifths of Amana residents belong to the Amana Church, and for them the Inspirationist faith continues to be an integral part of life.

As noted earlier, many elements of Inspirationist culture disappeared following the 1932 reorganization. Some, including the economic and domestic arrangements predicated upon religious ideals, are unlikely ever to be restored. Other traditions declined more slowly: some of the crafts, architectural styles, and in general an appreciation of the old lifestyle. These traditions have made something of a comeback in recent years.

After several decades of assimilation into mainstream America, Amana, like many ethnic or otherwise distinctive communities, experienced a heightened consciousness and appreciation of its past. Fortunately, this awareness came while the traditions were still vital and retrievable. Evidence of efforts at historic preservation are visible throughout the colonies as residents restore old buildings and launch efforts to save others from destruction. The Amana Preservation Foundation spearheads this effort, while the Museum of Amana History focuses on preserving all records of Amana's past, including material culture, documents, and oral traditions, and interpreting those records for Amana natives and tourists alike. Private efforts towards these ends also exist, for revitalization of crafts as well as for preservation. The Amana Arts Guild plays a major role in stimulating awareness of and interest in not only traditional Amana arts but the arts generally. At least some aspects of Inspirationist culture, then, are more evident today than they were thirty or forty years ago.

In Amana, change has been constant, and yet one finds there perhaps more of the past incorporated into the present than in many communities. It is the blending of the three strands of German, Inspirationist, and American culture that has given Amana the balance it enjoys between progress and tradition, innovation and preservation, works and faith. □



#### NOTE ON SOURCES

The standard work on Amana is Bertha M.H. Shambaugh's *Amana That Was and Amana That Is*, published in revised form in 1932 by the State Historical Society of Iowa. This compassionate and beautifully written account covers only the period up to Amana's "Great Change" of 1932. An even earlier publication is William Rufus Perkins and Barthinius L. Wick's *History of the Amana Society or Community of True Inspiration* (Iowa City: University of Iowa, 1891), which is especially useful on the Inspirationists in Germany. *A Change and a Parting: My Story of Amana*, by Barbara S. Yambura in collaboration with Eunice W. Bodine (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1960) is a fictionalized account of an Amana expatriate's reminiscences of growing up in the colonies about the time of the change. The period since the reorganization is treated thoroughly and capably by Lawrence L. Rettig, an Amana native and resident, in *Amana Today: A History of the Amana Colonies From 1932 to the Present* (Amana: The Amana Society, 1975). A recent scholarly work, *Amana: From Pietist Sect to American Community* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), is by Diane L. Barthel, a sociologist and descendant of Inspirationists. Several earlier *Palimpsests* dealt with Amana, including March 1963, April 1971, and March/April 1977. The author has written numerous scholarly articles on Amana, the most recent of which is "The Gift To Be Single: Celibacy and Religious Enthusiasm in the Community of True Inspiration," *Communal Studies* (Vol. 5, Fall 1985).