

*The Old German Baptist Brethren: Faith, Farming, and Change in the Virginia Blue Ridge.* By Charles D. Thompson, Jr. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2006, Pp. xxxvi, 264. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$60.00, ISBN 0-252-03103-2; Paper, \$20.00, ISBN 0252-07343-6.)

This book tells the story of a small group of people who are trying to retain their religious faith and traditional rural way of life at a time when modernity confronts them on all sides and bids them change. It is told by a scholar and by his subjects who have a personal stake in the story.

After presenting an introduction that provides readers with an overview of the book's contents, Thompson describes the development of the comparatively small and unknown Old German Baptist Brethren. During the early 1700s, in the Rhine Valley province of Wittgenstein, the Brethren combined Pietistic devotion with Anabaptist discipline outside the legally established Catholic, Lutheran, and Reformed churches. The ruling Duke Albrecht was extraordinarily tolerant which enabled them to escape the martyrdom that Anabaptists had suffered in previous centuries. They were pacifists, avoided involvement in the government, refused to swear oaths, administered the sacraments of (adult) baptism and the Lord's Supper, and the ordinance of foot-washing. Their mode of baptism, immersion in running water, three times, head forward, distinguished them from the Mennonites, and led outsiders to call them Dunkers. Possibly because of Duke Albrecht's death and the fear of impending persecution by his successor, they emigrated to Pennsylvania in the early 1720s. By the end of the next decade, almost all of them had left Europe. Gradually, they coalesced into one of the many denominations in William Penn's "Holy Experiment."

Beginning in the 1730s, the German Baptist Brethren traveled south on the "Great Wagon" (also known as the "Philadelphia") and Carolina roads to the valley of the Blue Ridge Mountains in Virginia. The area now is Franklin County, southeast of Roanoke. Here, they created a tight-knit community, worshipping together, first in their homes and later in plain meeting houses, farming individually but helping each other when necessary. As time passed, outside influences affected the Brethren. Protestant revivalism caused some to hold "protracted meetings" and issue "altar calls" (p. 29), organize Sunday schools, Bible classes, church-centered social gatherings, and to allow "seminary-trained ministers" (p. 29). To some Brethren, these "appeared to have come from popular culture and not from scripture" (p. 29). Consequently, the church split in 1881 with approximately one-fourth of the Brethren holding to the "Ancient Order" (p. 30). They took the name "Old German Baptist Brethren," while the larger group called itself "the Church of the Brethren" (p. 31).

As Thompson and especially his interviewees explained, other changes also occurred among the Old German Baptist Brethren. Initially subsistence farmers, in the early 1900s, they began to concentrate on dairy farming. They acquired their herds, constructed large barns to house them, raised their own feed, and built silos in which to store it. More rapidly than the Amish elsewhere, they adapted as technology provided machines and even robots to help with the milking and trucks to take the milk to the markets. Even though raising cows was a different type of farming, most still considered it their way of life. They believed that not only were they milking cows but also they were raising families and maintaining their community of believers. Farming required the participation of women and children and, at times, the cooperation of neighbors. They hoped that their children would remain on the land. Through hard work and the plain living that their religious beliefs required, they prospered. With members of the Church of

the Brethren and non-Brethren, they made Franklin County the second largest dairy-farming county in Virginia.

Recent developments are challenging the residents of Franklin County, Brethren and non-Brethren alike. Although Thompson identifies these changes in his "Prologue" (pp. ix-xii), he permits his interviewees to use their own words to describe them in greater detail in what amounts to approximately three-fourths of the book. They tell about the arrival of outsiders from nearby Roanoke and speak with greater negativity about those from New York and New Jersey. One farmer reported, "We call them {the northerners} 'Damn Yankees' and then say 'Why don't you go home?'" (p. 47). They wonder if their pastures will become housing developments. The construction of a large lake in the county already has brought summer residents to its shores. State officials' plans to build an inter-state highway through their farms intensifies their apprehension about the potential loss of their community. They charge that these developments have caused an escalation of land prices that prevents young people from buying farms and tempts veteran farmers to sell out. Emerging frequently are complaints about government policies that allegedly subsidize mega-dairy farmers in the West and keep milk prices low while the small-scale dairy farmers' costs increase. As a result, the number of dairy farms in Franklin County is declining. Some say that they or their neighbors are turning to other occupations and are becoming mechanics, furniture-makers, and even realtors. They watch a few of their Old German Baptist Brethren leave Franklin County for other areas where they hope to continue their traditional patterns of life. Thompson laments that "They Go Quietly" (p. 197).

Although Thompson writes accurately, he is not a detached observer. His ancestors and relatives were Brethren who lived in Franklin County where he visited them. It is obvious that he and his interviewees are alarmed by the changes that they see. Nevertheless, Thompson uses scholarly paraphernalia to document his concerns. His endnotes indicate that he relies on secondary works, especially those of the Brethren historian Donald Durnbaugh, for his historical data. For recent trends, he draws on numerous government documents. Photographs that he has taken illustrate his narrative effectively. Maps relate Franklin County to its surroundings. The interviewees' expressions of their opinions and anxieties give the book a distinctive tone, but they are repetitious and lengthen the book significantly. Thompson could have summarized their views concisely and incorporated them into his narrative. That, however, is not the kind of book that he wanted to write. The one that he provides in his own way is informative and interesting but not as "unique" (p. 204) as he claims. Members of other small communities elsewhere are experiencing similar challenges. They, as well as uninvolved historians, sociologists, and ethnographers would benefit from reading about the Old German Baptist Brethren in Franklin County, Virginia.