

A MEMOIR BY  
IRA WAGLER



G R O W I N G  
U P  
A M I S H



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*Growing Up Amish: A Memoir*

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# Growing Up Amish



*This book is dedicated to my mother,  
Ida Mae (Yoder) Wagler,  
whose quiet inner strength sustained her through  
the long and difficult journey that was her life.  
She never wavered in her deep love for all her children,  
even—and maybe especially—for her wayward sons,  
who broke her heart again and again.  
Her love was her sustaining strength.*



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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My brothers and sisters, all ten of you. Your quiet support has been a rock to me through some of the darkest and most difficult times of my life. I love you all.

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LeRoy Whitman. When I was about to walk away and let it all slip through my hands, you called me back to my senses.

All you faithful readers of my blog. You created the foundation on which all the rest is built.

All those friends, too numerous to mention, whose lives touched my own in some profound way throughout the years.



# PROLOGUE

ONE FATEFUL, STARLESS, APRIL NIGHT, I got up at 2:00 a.m. in the pitch black darkness, left a scribbled note under my pillow, and walked away—all my earthly belongings stuffed in a little black duffel bag.

Seventeen years old, bound for a vast new world. In my eager mind, the great shining vistas of distant horizons gleamed and beckoned. A world that would fulfill the deep yearning, the nebulous shifting dreams of a hungry, driven youth. And it would be mine, all of it, to pluck from the forbidden tree and taste and eat.

I could not know that night of the long hard road that stretched before me. That I was lost. I could not know of the years of turmoil, rage, and anguish that eventually would push me to the brink of madness and despair.

And so I walked on through the night. Within a month or so, all five of my buddies would follow. And the shattered little community of Bloomfield, Iowa, would reel and stagger from the bitter blow. From the shocking scandal, the shame and devastation of losing so many of its young sons to the “world.”

My long journey had just begun.



# **PART 1**



# 1

NO ONE SEEMS TO REMEMBER exactly what was going on at the old home farm that day. Can't say I blame them. There is no particular reason they should.

The one thing everybody does seem to agree on is that it was a typical late August day. Stifflingly oppressive heat. Barely a wisp of a breeze. Not a cloud in the sky. Not that I could confirm or deny any of it. I wasn't there. At least not when the day dawned.

Some of my older siblings claim the threshers were there—though it was awfully late in the season for threshing oats. The menfolk were probably clattering about in the barn loft, sweeping the old wooden granary bins where the oats would be stored. And soon enough, the neighbors would have come rattling in with teams and wagons to haul the bundled oat sheaves. The threshing machine would have been there too, pulled by an ancient hybrid of a tractor and set up by the barn before the first loaded wagons came swaying in from the fields. Sweating in the dust and heat,

the men would have been pitching the bundles onto the conveyor belt that fed the belt-driven threshing machine, where they would have been chewed up, separated, and deposited into the barn as oats and straw. The late harvest was under way.

I'm guessing some of the younger kids were picking strawberries in the field out by the old hickory tree. Seems late in the year for strawberries, too, except for the Everbearing kind. Those plants produced from June until the fall frosts killed them. My father planted gobs of them every year to sell as produce—and to keep the children busy.

If Mom felt extra tired or stressed that morning, I'm sure she didn't let on. After breakfast, she and my older sisters were probably doing what they always did: washing dishes, cleaning the house, and preparing the noon meal for everyone, which on that day would include the threshing crew.

But then, my sisters remember Mom abruptly stopping what she was doing. Stumbling to a wooden chair by the kitchen table, her face twitching with sudden spasms of pain.

"Go fetch your father from the barn," she instructed Rosemary and Magdalena. And off they went.

"Mom said for you to come. Right away," they gasped. Dad dropped his shovel and rushed to the house, the girls tagging anxiously behind him.

Mom was sitting there at the table, white faced. "It's time," she told him. He turned and dashed off to the neighbors' place a quarter mile to the east. "English" people who had a car.

Moments later, my sisters stood silently by and watched as my mother—still sitting in her chair—was carried to the car by my father and one of the threshers. After easing the chair to the ground, Dad helped Mom shift into the backseat. Once everyone was situated—Dad, Mom, and the English neighbor—they headed off to the hospital in nearby Tillsonburg.

Except for Rosemary and Magdalena, I doubt the rest of my siblings had any clue what was going on. They may have noticed that Mom had gained some weight lately and that she seemed tired a lot. But in those days, in that setting, no one spoke of such things. Especially to young children.

Dad didn't return home until supper time, and when he did, Mom was not with him. My sisters remember the children gathering round.

"Where's Mom?"

"We have a little baby," Dad announced, beaming. "A boy."

They murmured excitedly. "A baby!"

"Mom is staying at the hospital tonight. We'll go get her tomorrow."

I'd like to think my birth was an important event, and to some extent, of course, it was. But in Amish families, the arrival of a new baby isn't treated the same as it is in English families, where everyone fusses rapturously. For the Amish, where it's not at all uncommon for families to have upwards of ten children, a new baby just isn't that big a deal.

By the time I came along, my parents already had eight children. Four boys and four girls. An even number of each. I broke the tie. Number nine.

I'd like to think, too, that the choosing of my name was the source of much somber thought and measured consideration. Serious weighing of various possibilities and combinations. Perhaps even reciting the finalists aloud a time or two, just to make sure the name would fit in the flow of all the others in the family.

I'd like to think it was an important ritual. But again, I know better.

Earlier that summer, Dad had hired a strapping young man to help with the farmwork for room and board and a couple of bucks a day. He was Dad's nephew and my cousin, probably

around twenty years old. He was a fine, upstanding fellow, by all accounts. Hardworking, too. His name was Ira Stoll.

And by the time Dad had fetched Mom and me from the Tillsonburg hospital the next day, someone—I suspect it was my two oldest sisters—had come up with the fateful suggestion: “Why don’t we name the new baby boy Ira?”

“After our cousin?” I can imagine Dad stroking his long black beard thoughtfully.

Mom, resting in bed, did not protest. In fact, I’m guessing she was even a little relieved. And so it was settled, in the most lackadaisical manner imaginable. With zero fanfare or fuss, I was saddled forever with the name Ira.

No middle name.

Just Ira.

Ira Wagler.

And thus began my life in the Old Order Amish community of Aylmer, Ontario.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

IRA WAGLER was born in the small Old Order Amish community of Aylmer, Ontario, Canada. At seventeen, frustrated by the rules and restrictions of Amish life, Ira got up at 2:00 a.m., packed his duffel bag, left a note under his pillow, and walked away. Over the course of the next five years, Ira would return home and leave again numerous times, torn between the ingrained message that abandoning one's Amish heritage results in eternal damnation, and the freedom and possibilities offered by the English world.

At age twenty-six, Ira left the Amish for good. He is currently general manager of Graber Supply, LLC, and Pole Building Company in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania.

