

Gettin' Hitched among the Hay Stacks: Barn Weddings as a Manifestation of American Attitudes toward Marriage and Tradition

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Abstract

The United States boasts a robust agrarian origin and an even heartier modern commercial industry. Ironically, the same commercial industries in which the urban United States population takes pride also robs the American people of cultural rituals devoid of advertisers' influences. Service industries and invented traditions form a lucrative partnership—the multibillion-dollar wedding industry. Among recent style trends in the bridal industry is the barn wedding. The rustic wedding theme mimics the idyll of the American rural society. Nineteenth century American rural society developed outside of urban society's commercial influences, which qualifies agrarian traditions as uniquely and wholly American. I argue that couples' interest in barn weddings is an attempt to preserve their genuine American heritage and respond to the dismal disposition of modern culture towards marriage. Despite the commercial industry's influence on barn weddings, couples employ the rustic theme in order to infuse commercialized traditions with personally meaningful sentiments.

Keywords: barn wedding, traditions, American, wedding industry

Introduction

Evidence of American preoccupation with the wedding and passionate romantic love manifests itself in the overwhelming collection of bridal magazines, blogs, wedding-focused television shows, and wedding channel options. An internet search for bridal magazine subscriptions yields ten major magazines: *Brides*, *Bridal Guide*, *Martha Stewart Weddings*, *You and Your Wedding*, *The Knot*, *Southern Bride*, *Wedding Style*, *Get Married*, *Inside Weddings*, and *Premier Bride*. Each magazine hosts a website overflowing with wedding style ideas, blogs with picturesque photos documenting the latest trends, wedding gowns on flawless models, and a search engine to locate local vendors. States with the highest number of wedding businesses and vendors are California with 1,293 businesses, Florida with 1,024 businesses, Texas with 894 businesses, and New Jersey with 627 businesses (“Geographic Research”, 2014). Of course, the previous lists exclude the thousands of Pinterest pins on the hundreds of boards under the bridal and wedding categories. Facebook boasts hundreds of pages as well for vendors, event planners, and photographers to publicize their niche services to the public (“Dellwood Barn Weddings”, n.d.; “S Bar S Barn”, n.d.). In addition to the bounty of bridal advertising, American entertainment feeds Americans' appetite for opulent nuptial fodder. *Rich Bride Poor Bride*, *Bridezillas*, *Four Weddings*, *Say Yes to the Dress*, *Platinum Weddings*, and *My Fair Wedding* constitute a few of the wedding-themed television reality series that air on stations like, *TLC* and *Wedding Central*. Wedding reality series propagate popular attitudes and fashion trends within the greater bridal industry.

Currently, theme weddings occupy the attentions of popular bridal fashion sources. Specifically, the eco chic—also referred to as rustic chic or shabby chic—style barn wedding dominates the décor interests of brides across the nation (Geiser, 2014; Shaw, 2014; S Hill, 2014). While there

are several spin-offs of the barn wedding, including rustic industrial and steam punk and country/farm weddings, this paper focuses on the overarching, more general barn wedding. I believe that my argument still applies to the subthemes but, for clarity and brevity, I focus on the barn wedding. The barn wedding replaces champagne glasses with mason jars and the church with a renovated barn (Geiser, 2014). Bosman (2014) and Geiser (2014) reported for the *New York Times* and *The Daily Record*, respectively, that couples from all regions of the U.S. mainland are traveling to Southern states, New England, and the Midwest to host their weddings. Surprisingly, the couples hail from urban areas and have had little to no exposure to the agricultural lifestyle in their lifetime (Bosman, 2014;; O'Brien, 2014). When asked, couples explain that the rural-theme wedding best showcases their uniqueness as individuals and as a couple (Shaw, 2014).

Barn wedding bride Kate Baker, from Rockville, Maryland, agreed that the rural theme “positively affected the meaningfulness” of her wedding ceremony. “Café string lights” and “greenery” instead of traditional floral accents matched her and the groom’s “relaxed” and “fun” personalities. Unlike the more common “uptight” and “fancy” venues in hotels or banquet rooms, the barn acted as a “blank canvas” for the young couple to infuse personal elements reflective of their individuality as a married couple. After the ceremony, guests commented that they could “sense the love and friendship” between the Bakers and their families and friends. A barn wedding allowed the couple to overcome the “orchestrated” feel of traditional ceremonies. As a religious couple, the Bakers felt that the barn wedding “outside, under a giant tree, with wind blowing” increased their awareness of God’s presence than would a “beautiful church wedding” (Kate Baker, personal communication, November 11, 2014). Inspired. Spiritual. Intimate. Perfect. Couples like the Bakers who choose a barn wedding understand the theme to be a holistic, natural means to celebrate their love in contrast with the wedding industry’s commercialized vision.

Contrary to the couples’ rationale, Otnes (1996) and Scott (1996), Penner (2004), and Montemurro (2008)—scholars of advertising, American culture, and social history, respectively—argued that the American wedding industry sells the theme wedding to couples through elaborate marketing strategies. Since the commercialization of the wedding ceremony after the Civil War, industries annually exploit the nuptial ceremony to achieve profit increases (Howard, 2003; Montemurro, 2008; Penner, 2004). Marsh (2005), Howard (2003), and Penner (2004) espoused in their analyses of modern American weddings that the multibillion dollar wedding industry in the U.S. robs the American culture of a meaningful and authentic wedding tradition. In response to popular belief and scholars’ insights, I argue that American couples demonstrate a uniquely American culture through rustic theme weddings despite the wedding industry’s inevitable and inescapable influence. Barn weddings—more so than wedding themes not inspired by the distinctive American agrarian era—allow couples to preserve and emphasize facets of American rural culture through an idyllic pastoral representation that disappears from the physical landscape each year. Couples use the rustic theme as a vehicle to incorporate personally significant sentiments into the ceremony outside of long-established religious and cultural traditions.

The Birth of the American Wedding Industry

Before the birth of the wedding industry, weddings were intimate affairs hosted by families; very little ritual and circumstance characterized the wedding day from any other (Montemurro, 2008). Fancy dinners and extensive guest lists occurred almost exclusively at exorbitantly rich families’

nuptial ceremonies and were outliers from the cultural norm (Marsh, 2005; Montemurro, 2008). However, Marsh (2005) indicates a proliferation of lavish weddings among middle and lower-class brides during the latter part of the twentieth century. Penner (2004) ascribes the shift in working and middle-class brides' expectations of the wedding ceremony to the clever marketing of service industries. Accepted costly components of modern wedding celebrations come from late nineteenth and mid-twentieth century invented traditions that the various markets of goods and services created to increase the demand for their products and acquire a new consumer market (Penner, 2004).

One such profit-motivated wedding practice is the bridal registry for wedding presents. Bridal gifts were not a social obligation until after the Civil War in the late nineteenth century (Montemurro, 2008; Penner, 2004). Industries marketed a need for bridal gifts which matured into status symbols, not only for the newlywed couple, but for the wedding guests who presented the gifts (Penner, 2004). The practice of bridal registries and wedding gifts inspired businesses like department stores to produce catalogs which resulted in families and wedding guests spending all their money at one business location (Montemurro, 2008). Businesses appealed to the American attraction to material status. With the rise of the wedding as a status symbol of wealth and as a prediction of the couple's prosperity, the acceptable price associated with the wedding increased (Penner, 2004). After the mid-twentieth century, what was once a lavish celebration in which only the well-off could indulge became the standard for couples from all socioeconomic backgrounds (Marsh, 2005; Montemurro, 2008). Once the other service industries recognized the power they wielded over the hearts and expectations of the American people, the bridal industry was born.

The markets of goods and services not only appealed to the American greed for status but also to the American people's more sentimental, romantic side. An example of an invented tradition is that of the double-ring ceremony (Howard, 2003). While jewelers promoted the idea that men ought to wear wedding bands like those of the women decades before World War I, the fad did not catch on until the deployment of American young men to fight in the Great War (Howard, 2003). At the start of the twentieth century, advertisers focused on the sentimental value of the male wedding band as a token of remembrance (Howard, 2003). The young soldiers wore symbols of their love and commitment to their wives back at home. The emotional connection with the new practice found its way into Hollywood movies, which cemented the double-ring ritual into American society and expectation (Dowd & Pallotta, 2000; Howard, 2003).

The De Beers diamond cartel's introduction of the diamond engagement ring into American tradition reconstructed female nuptial expectations and led to an increase in necessary wedding expenses (Marsh, 2005; Otnes & Scott, 1996). De Beers fabricated rich American histories behind the engagement ring in order to integrate its product into women's expectations (Otnes & Scott, 1996;; Penner, 2004). In their article for the *Journal of Advertising*, Otnes and Scott (1996) describes the outcome of De Beers' genius promotion of the diamond engagement ring as an "instilled norm" by the 1960s (p. 37). According to Otnes and Scott (1996), De Beers' invented engagement ring tradition marked the end of the age of ritual innovation. Now, advertisers use the authority they gained from the previous period to determine the appropriate expense for the "ritual artifacts" (Otnes & Scott, 1996, p. 38) of the wedding celebration. Intuitively, one can predict that the industry-certified cost for objects will be steep and, considering the consumerist tendencies of the American public, met. In 2014, the average wedding cost \$30,000 (Hicken, 2014). The

necessity to invest tens of thousands of dollars on a wedding may shock some individuals, but, when one considers that each aspect of the wedding patronizes a service industry, \$30,000 seems like an accurate and reasonable approximation. From the DJ who spins the reception tunes to the barn owner who hosts the venue, modern weddings rely heavily on businesses. According to CNN, the venue and catering alone can cost \$13,385 (2014). Decorations and flowers easily total \$2, 069 (Hicken, 2014). Couples' ideas of what the ceremony should look like is dictated by the individuals who sell them the materials to make it happen. When society allows the "jewelers, gown manufacturers, and caterers set the standards to which American brides...aspire" (Mead, 2007, p. 5), only a flawless wedding satisfies brides and grooms imaginations. Of course, this standard for perfection on one's wedding day relies heavily on costly décor and specialized expertise in order to come to fruition (Mead, 2007). As discovered in both Sniezek (2005) and Currie's (1993) studies on wedding planning, brides, as well as grooms, exert much of their energies to the planning of the nuptial ceremony. There is an external pressure by advertisers and an internal pressure by peers to have a flawless ceremony with an unforgettable reception. Glossy magazines and charming Pinterest posts craft the ideal wedding. Facebook pages that publicize the weddings of friends and friends of friends increase the competition among couples to have the best wedding (Geiser, 2014). Barn weddings are no exception. Although barn wedding brides' attempts to protect their rustic design visions from the wedding industry's influence, Pinterest displays over a 1,000 pins on the Barn Wedding Décor board alone. The wedding industry certainly capitalizes on each opportunity to profit from the barn wedding trend. Like other theme weddings, barn weddings are a boon to the commercial wedding industry.

In addition to Pinterest, antique shops and rural society benefit from the rustic bride's ambition for the sweetest Southern wedding (Shaw, 2014). The revenue that barn weddings generate funds the preservation of the older barns (Shaw, 2014). Therefore, the hearty barn wedding trend stimulates the still recovering economy from the Great Recession all while it serves the rural community it seeks to imitate (Hicken, 2014). Venue fees for historic barns range from \$2,000 to \$6,000 dollars per event (Shaw, 2014). Farmers and barn owners who want to remain a part of the rural landscape benefit and the wedding industry continues to prosper.

A Question of Authenticity

Despite the significant financial gains of historic barn owners, there is disagreement over whether the barn weddings are preserving culture or hurting what culture remains (Bosman, 2014). Rural dwellers complain that the ruckus from the events disturbs their quiet, secluded lifestyle (Mohr, 2014). These complaints reinforce that barn weddings are not accurate holistic reproductions of rural life but independent productions of couples' own inspiration. There exists a conflict between the reality of modern rural society's value system and what urbanites personalize as rural values; couples, like the nineteenth century inventive businesses, exploit the cultural landscape for their own gain. In this instance, the profit is not monetary but experiential. Couples wish to assume the roles of an actual rural bride and groom but, unfortunately, fail to do so because they rely on the commercial outputs of the wedding industry to portray the theme. Instead of an honest reflection of rural life, couples invent settings akin to nothing in reality. Still, I believe that barn wedding couples demonstrate a desire to dissent from the materialistic, commercial-saturated culture around them; barn weddings are a means to that end.

Modern American culture's fascination and romanticism of the rural lifestyle is nothing new. Nineteenth and twentieth century urban society admired the grit of the rural folk culture and adopted a sense of pride for the accomplishments of the rural society (Shideler, 1991). I propose that the rural society finds a timeless favor in the eyes of the non-rural American public today for the same reason it did at the time of the Industrial Revolution: American rural culture resolves an identity crisis among the American people. The Industrial Revolution did not captivate the fantasies of the people because it was not authentic to the U.S. That is, Britain experienced urbanization almost a century before the U.S. (Rosenfeld, 2006). Urban culture is not wholly unique to the American people. Now, with the globalization of culture and businesses, the phenomenon of placelessness assimilates cultural landscapes to look the same and operate similarly. The rural idyll captures the element of uniqueness that people search for, and, in the United States, people worship. In her response to *New York Times* coverage of the barn wedding's popularity, O'Brien (2014) recalls her childhood growing up in a renovated barn; she credits the stability, security, and sentimentality that she grew up with for the urban dwellers' attraction to the rural landscape.

O'Brien's experience notwithstanding, American farm life in the nineteenth century was anything but idyllic. The farmers and their large families toiled every day for long hours in variable weather conditions (Shideler, 1991). Frequent hardships and loss fortified the relationships of the rural community members (Shideler, 1991). Once the Industrial Revolution began on the East Coast, wearied farmers left the fields for a less labor intensive life in the factories (Rosenfeld, 2006; Shideler, 1991). Although the reality of farm life in the Midwest was more apparent at the time of the late nineteenth century, an idyll of agrarian culture arose among the members of urban society (Shideler, 1991). In their research on the romanticism of the rural landscape in the UK, Bosworth and Willett (2011) describe a phenomenon similar to that of the one in the U.S. The impression that the "idyllic countryside" (Bosworth & Willett, 2011, p. 196) exists continues to distort perceptions of modern and historical rural society.

The misperception of rural society manifests itself in the design of the barn wedding. Barn weddings depict a lifestyle of sweet tea with hearty lunches and frolicking in fields at sundown. Stacked hay bales bookend the altar with warm pastel color schemes lined up as the wedding party on each side ("Barn Weddings", n.d.). Candlelight chandeliers hang from worn wooden beams of the barns; their light bounces off the gilded geometric frame décor on the walls ("Barn Weddings", n.d.). Poppy arrangements cinch white curtains to beams that frame the banquet table for the wedding party ("Barn Weddings", 2014). A wooden sign directs guests to "choose a seat, not a side" when they arrive for ceremony (Plumley, 2014). "Shabby-chic antique" (Shaw, 2014, para. 33) furniture decorates the spacious barn venue as well as serves a practical purpose as dining tables and chairs (Kitts, n.d.). Lace adorns the antique furniture pieces and, depending on the tastes of the couple, plays a major role in the backdrop of the wedding (Geiser, 2014; Kitts, n.d.). While this description does not accurately depict rural life, I argue that the idyll retains its legitimacy as a component of American identity. People believe this bucolic picture is reality. A reality rooted in traditions and practices genuine—authentic—to the United States culture. Therefore, when couples admire the pastoral idyll with a barn wedding, they do not celebrate the history of rural society; they celebrate the rural idyll. Even though the rural idyll does not accurately represent the historical rural society, Americans still consider it a realistic representation of their rural cultural history and a significant influence on their identity.

Talking Back to the Culture

Marriage comprises an important aspect of the American cultural identity. Rural society considered marriage to be a vital and important institution. With the present societal and cultural concerns about marriage as an institution, barn weddings—manifestations of a cultural idyll—allow optimistic couples to partake in the culture-wide conversation on the relevancy of marriage and its achievability for the long-term. Divorce rates plague the marriage scene with about 48% of women’s first marriages ending in divorce (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). In comparison, divorce rates ranged from 3%-7% between 1867 and 1900, which is the time period that barn weddings reimagine (United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1973). The divorce rates among the American people did not begin to increase in urban areas until the Industrial Revolution (Rosenfeld, 2006). Over the last forty years, divorce transitioned from a social rarity to a more common occurrence with a decreased negative stigma (United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1973; United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). The lack of cultural expectation for marriages to last casts a negative light on marriage as an institution.

In a discussion about the reason why couples’ marriages seem more fickle now than in previous generations, Wilding (2003) attributes the cause to the lack of social barriers that couples must unite against. Dowd (2000), Pallotta (2000), and Wilding (2003) argues that much of the equality movements removed the barriers of social class, race, and culture that separated couples, or united them in rebellion against the societal norms. A sign of the decreased social barriers to marriage, Rosenfeld (2006) presents data that after 1960, interracial marriages in the U.S. began to increase. This would be at the same time as the Civil Rights Movements as well as the feminist movement. In fact, “5.4 out of every 1,000 white women were married to black men” by 2000 (Rosenfeld, 2006, p. 43). Rosenfeld (2006) notes that the increase of interracial marriages occurs largely among the younger generation. The same generation that enjoys the benefits of the equality movements is the same population of people who choose barn weddings.

I disagree with the scholarship that believes that barriers for couples to fight against fell with the equality movements. I argue that the fight changed. Barriers to a couple’s success are just as tall today as in previous generations. While opposition to the marital union of a couple previously based itself on superficial characteristics, current opposition manifests itself in low expectations for a marriage’s survival which, while less tangible, are just as ostensible and harmful. Barn weddings allow couples to both rebel against negative mainstream attitudes and emphasize positive aspects of modern society. For example, historical rural society was “more often patriarchal” than the modernly preferred “partnership” between man and wife;; however, the rural families boasted a strong sense of “family, self-sufficiency, independence, individuality, and neighborhood community” (Shideler, 1991, p.19). Modern couples forsake the antiquated gender roles but maintain an affection for strong communities and robust individuality. With the barn wedding, couples can pursue marriage with greater gender and race equality not present during the historical rural period, and instill the sense of commitment from the old rural society.

Destination Barn Wedding

Rustic weddings are a bit like cultural patchwork. Couples take from the strengths of past rural society and stitch them together with the progressive ideals of today. For example, the difference in gender roles. The joint selection of wedding details reflect “an ideology of partner equality and harmony” (Sniezek, 2005, p. 223) between the couple. In a rural wedding during the late nineteenth century, the man would have little to do with the planning of the ceremony. Now, men typically take on a more aware, if not active role, in the event’s planning process; however, rarely, if ever, do the efforts of the groom eclipse that of the bride (Sniezek, 2005). In Sniezek’s (2005) study on labor division between fiancées in the wedding planning process, she observes an increase in couples’ use of the pronoun “we” to describe the vision and desires for the wedding ceremony as compared to earlier generations (Sniezek, 2005). Sniezek (2005) believes that the pronoun choice is reflective of the couples’ view of the planning as a “joint enterprise” or “joint effort” (p. 222). The dreamy quality of a barn wedding allows couples to create a society all their own where the security that comes from firm gender roles mixes well with the modern, more fluid, equality of the genders. Also, the rural commitment to nature encourages a purer perspective on love and marriage untainted by the materialistic hunger of the urban life (Shideler, 1991;; Wherry, 2013). Couples’ emphasis on a strong connection to nature refutes Wherry’s (1993) idea that they are marrying more for material gain and status elevation but for love and commitment. Ironically, couples still hold onto the traditional cultural understanding that the more perfect—which translates to expensive—a wedding is, the more prosperity a couple will experience (Penner, 2004).

The atmosphere of the barn wedding provides an experience that *Economic Times* likens to a destination wedding (Reddy, 2012). The barn wedding invites guests back to a time—although the time may only exist in the daydreams of urbanites—where the realities of divorce were unknown by most and marriage lasted through trials of sickness and worse. Rustic theme weddings present to society what a couple values—family, devotion, partnerships, work, commitment, admiration for nature, and pure love—and shout back to a refusal to acquiesce to the negative forecast for marriage success rates.

The barn wedding experience is a type of escapism. It allows couples to retreat away from the culture’s often dismal and sometimes hostile disposition toward marriage. In a study on escapism and its prevalence and manifestations, Rutgers Distinguished Professor and scholar of psychology Elizabeth Hirschman lists three primary ways that people achieve an escape from their concerns: a person assumes another role, uses products to change his present perception of the world, and enters into an environment that sections him off from the unpleasant realities around him (Hirschman, 1983). Hirschman (1983) also lists potential escapist activities: “dancing, attending a religious service, [spending time] in nature, eating and watching dancing” (p. 66). The barn wedding satisfies each of these criteria. The bride dons a pretty, often simple, gown, and the groom wears the couple’s imagination of a farmer’s wedding garb (“Barn Weddings”, n.d.;; “Barn Weddings”, 2014;; Shaw, 2014). Humble, antique period furniture pieces create a setting that facilitates the couple’s escape to the rural idyll (Geiser, 2014). A barn venue set back in the still country fields of a rural area secludes the couple from the hustle and bustle of urban life, where they associate the location and source of the negative realities of marriage survival (Bosman, 2014; Rosenfield, 2006). Amidst the countryside backdrop, the couple and their guests participate in Hirschman’s list of escapist activities. While almost all wedding celebrations include the listed escapist outlets, the barn wedding combines the activities within an environment that, since it occurs within a picture-perfect setting, intensifies the experience of the wedding.

Conclusion

Escapism, the rebirth of the rural idyll, and the combination of the cultural benefits of rural society and modern equality allow the couple to reinvent themselves apart from the mainstream culture. Not only do they preserve the aspect of their heritage that is authentically American, but they also respond to the popular and scholarly conversations that doubt a modern couple's ability to survive. Couples symbolically prepare themselves to fight against the overwhelming lack of expectations for their commitment, much like the agrarian couples from centuries past who prepared themselves for the tribulations that would threaten their survival. While it is too early to evaluate the success of modern couples' efforts, one can surely see the passion behind their actions.

As Dr. Tamara Sniezek (2005), a professor of sociology at California State University Stanislaus, notes in her exploration on the labor distribution in wedding planning between fiancées, the wedding is an opportunity for the woman to “construct her identity” (p. 216). The wedding is not only an occasion to celebrate her union with another person, to select the right color scheme, or even an opportunity to don a beautiful gown. According to Sniezek, the wedding is like a rite of passage into adulthood (2005). The ceremony provides one of the most visible projections of who an individual is and who she hopes to become in the future. For brides from the relatively young United States, there lacks plentiful cultural artifacts and rituals to enrich the ceremony; individuals must draw upon the hollow traditions created by popular culture and firms (Wherry, 2013; Otnes & Scott, 1996; Penner, 2004). Barn weddings are an example of how couples introduce meaning to the smothering abundance of wedding commercialism. The rustic ceremonies remedy the perceived lack of originality in American wedding traditions. Since the wedding is central to how individuals process the abstract passage into adulthood, it is of interest to focus on how individuals cope with commercial influences on American traditions. Currently, rustic wedding themes are the vehicle of choice. So, I contend that a careful review of the relationship between popular wedding trends and the American wedding ceremony will increase understanding of the complexities of American culture and identity.

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Reflection Essay: Research as a Conversation

When I began the research project for “Gettin’ Hitched among the Hay Stacks: Barn Weddings as a Manifestation of American Attitudes toward Marriage and Tradition” in September, I saw research as gathering a list of sources to bolster a predetermined argument. Dense scholarly sources intimidated me; I thought that I was in no position to engage with them. In my previous research experiences, I devised a plausible thesis and searched for sources to support it. I relied on the *Google* search engine/*GoogleScholar* and general library databases to gather all of my sources;; I avoided “naysaying” sources. Through research strategies led by Professor Alison Thomas, I learned how to participate in the scholarly conversations within academic sources, how to allow research to shape my argument, and how to access the diverse variety of library resources.

Since I embarked on the barn wedding project with the misconception that research is a sterile and rigid process, I experienced frustration when my argument seemed messy or unclear. Although not always in this order, I researched, wrote, edited, and revised; I spent the majority of the time pondering how to apply ideas from scholarship to create a deeper understanding of popular culture’s barn wedding trend. Thankfully, there were several tools and strategies to help with the pursuit and organization of the research. I used Boolean Operators to narrow and widen search results from large search engines like *EBSCO*, *LexisNexis*, and *SearchBox*. To increase the efficacy of my searches, I kept a list of terms associated with my topic and related subjects. When I came across a related term in an article, I logged it and used it later to generate new applicable search results. The *ProQuest Flow* source organization tool allowed me to keep track of over a dozen diverse sources. Furthermore, when American University did not have a print source that I needed, I submitted a request through the Consortium to have the material delivered to me directly at Bender Library. In addition to the library resources that retrieve research, I benefitted from the advice and guidance of Associate Librarian Alex Hodges. He offered creative suggestions for how to obtain the types of specific information that I needed from interesting sources like *Simply Map*. Alex also suggested subject specific databases like *GenderWatch* and *Sociological Abstracts*, which provided the journals and census data that the project required.

With a level of expertise on barn weddings and a familiarity with American Studies scholarship, I felt well-equipped and confident to enter into a conversation among scholars. Once I completed a second annotated bibliography an argument emerged. I honed my skills of summary and paraphrase with two annotated bibliographies that encouraged close reading and comprehension of dense sources. I can now discern when to summarize a source’s main points and when to paraphrase a scholar’s idea. Because I allowed the research to guide my conclusions, I developed a valid thesis that not only possessed supportive evidence, but also addressed naysaying sources.

After I realized that the research process is fluid and flexible, I pursued an argument open to whatever I might discover. Now, I see scholarly literature and popular sources as contributions to a greater conversation. Equipped with strategies and tools to access research tools and resources, I am empowered to participate in the greater conversation. My research experience led to a personally increased level of information literacy and a dynamic contribution to American Studies scholars’ conversations about wedding traditions and marriage in the United States.