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# LIFE IN THE SLOW LANE: The Old Order Amish Cultural Landscape of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania

*Glenn Miller*

## AMISH ORIGINS

The Old Order Amish are a religious sect that grew out of the Mennonite Church which originated in Germany in 1525, in the early years of the Protestant Reformation. Due to religious persecution by the Prussians, the Amish migrated from Germany's Rhineland to settle in William Penn's colony of Pennsylvania in the early 1700s. The Amish people are often called "Dutch," which is a corruption of the German word Deutsch. The Amish, therefore, are of German descent, and not from the Netherlands. But despite the occasional problem in identifying the ethnic background of the Amish, they nevertheless have become part of America's pluralistic society.

The Amish closely intermarry and usually live in tight-knit communities to offer each other support and to minimize acculturation from the modern world. Because of the close intermarriage, they have only a few surnames, with Stoltzfus, King, Fisher, Glick, Esh, Lapp, and Beiler being the most common. The first names are

almost all drawn from The Bible: Moses, John, Abraham, Aaron, Issac, Peter, Ruth, Rebecca, Sarah, and Rachel.

Basically, the Amish today live similar to the way their ancestors did almost three hundred years ago. They use horse-drawn transportation and do not hook up to electricity. They live a fairly simple life, and are sometimes referred to as "the Plain People." There are about 100,000 Amish in the world today. Their largest settlement is in Holmes County, Ohio, in the east central part of the state. The second largest Amish settlement is the oldest and best known, that of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania. Other Amish settlements are found in over twenty U.S. states, Canada, and several countries in Central America and South America. The author



*Amish Buggy*

was raised in Lancaster County, and its Amish community and landscape are the primary focus of this essay.

## AMISH BELIEFS

The separation between the Amish Church and the Mennonite Church took place in 1693. Although their actions are referred to as a "breakaway," it might be equally correct to say that the Amish Church began as a result of a strong conviction to continue some practices which

the Mennonites dropped. At the time of their schism the Amish and Mennonites appeared identical, and held to the same Biblical faith. The Amish practice of shunning those excommunicated from the Church created the main point of contention. Other minor issues also contributed to a decision to part ways with the Mennonites.

Most of the Amish beliefs are taken from literal interpretations of The Bible. In particular, from the book of Leviticus, God tells his people: "be ye separate." And so, the Amish are separate: in their language, dress, transportation, and many other aspects of their culture. They do live a lifestyle that is distinctively different from their non-Amish neighbors who live in the same region. Most Amish are

extremely devout individuals. The Amish attempt to follow New Testament standards for living. They teach the entire Bible and believe that the New Testament is the fulfillment of the Old Testament. The Amish religion is similar to the Jewish religion in that it can be broken down into Ultra Orthodox, Orthodox, Conservative, and Reformed subgroups. The Old Order Amish of

Lancaster County, the focus of this essay, represent the ultra orthodox, or the strictest way of life.

The Amish live in geographically delineated church districts, with about thirty-five families per district. There are no separate church structures, as they gather every two weeks in the home of a district member. The service starts around 8:00 AM and continues until about noon-time. Men and women sit separately on backless benches arranged in rows. The



Amish believe in clearly defined gender roles, in all aspects of life.

The service begins with the singing of hymns from an old German hymnbook, the *Ausbund*. There are no musical scores, and the congregation sings in unison, unaccompanied, which resembles a Gregorian chant. Following the singing there is a short sermon, silent prayer, and Scripture readings in High German. The main sermon follows which lasts about an hour, and is given in Pennsylvania Dutch, which is more correctly defined as Pennsylvania German, which is a combination of Palatinate German and English. After the main sermon other ordained men give their own comments and the service ends with a lengthy prayer from an Amish prayer book. The service rarely varies from this format. Amish ministers are chosen by lot from the adult male members, and Acts 1:15-26 is the basis for this practice. No special education is thought necessary for the ministry.

The Amish believe in taking care of their own. While paying taxes, Amish farmers secure an exemption from paying social security if they are self-employed. Grown children take care of their elderly parents in their homes, as it is extremely rare for an Amish person to reside in a convalescent home. They seldom receive Social Security benefits or Medicare. Amish do not take out insurance, except for farm liability, in case one of their animals causes an accident. They believe that when a tragedy occurs it is an act of God. However, when tragedy does strike an Amish family, for example in the form of fire or long-term medical disability, the Amish community will help with the necessary labor and share the costs through the Amish Aid Society. The Amish people will often come to the aid of non-Amish, too,

when a disaster strikes, even beyond the borders of Lancaster County and the State of Pennsylvania.

### THE AMISH LIFESTYLE & CULTURE

Being farmers in the early 1900s meant that Amish families in rural Lancaster County usually sent their children to public one-room school houses, along with non-Amish, or "English" children. As school size increased in the post-World War II era, the Amish felt that too much acculturation took place between them and the non-Amish. Therefore, in



*Amish One Room School House*

1972, the Amish pulled their children from the public schools. Some of the previously abandoned one-room school houses were re-opened, and several new ones were built. Amish education basically means emphasizing "the three R's," which are reading, writing, and arithmetic. Children only complete eight years of education, which the parents feel quite adequately prepares them for life as they know it. As a result of a Pennsylvania Supreme Court decision which allows them to "dropout" early, the Amish meet the requirements of compulsory education until the age of sixteen by receiving agricultural and domestic training at home. They also attend a three-hour Saturday morning ses-

sion of vocational school in their one-room school houses. Teachers are usually young women, often with only an eighth-grade education themselves. Students may spend all eight years in the same single school room, with the same teacher. The older students often help the teacher instruct the younger pupils, many of whom are their siblings and cousins.

The Old Order Amish have retained the strict way of life, which includes wearing a plain garb. Women wear long dresses of solid-colored material, black hose and shoes, a prayer veiling of white organdy material, and a black bonnet over the veiling when outer protection is appropriate. The men wear solid-colored shirts, dark button-down fly trousers, and black felt or straw broad-brimmed hats, depending on the season. Hooks and eyes replace buttons on Amish suitcoats and vests to commemorate their persecution by the Prussians in the 16200s, who were then noted for their brass buttons on their military uniforms.

The children dress much the same as the adults. Most Amish clothing is designed and sewn by Amish women. Dress becomes a visible symbol which strengthens group loyalty. One can never forget his or her Amish identity while wearing the distinctive clothing.

Historically, the Amish have been an agricultural people. They still attach great importance to working the soil and remaining close to nature. The average Amish farm size in Lancaster County is a relatively small 60 acres. In spite of what may seem to outsiders as archaic methods, the Amish are generally quite successful commercial farmers, and usually find it more economical to specialize in their production. Lancaster County is the leading non-irrigated agricultural county in the United States, in terms of the dollar



value of the produce, and is nicknamed "the Garden Spot." The main crops grown in Lancaster County include corn (for live-stock feed), wheat, tobacco, alfalfa, clover, barley, rye, soybeans, and various grasses for grazing. It should be noted that Amish men may smoke cigars, yet cigarettes are avoided totally. The growing of cigarette tobacco as a commercial crop by the Amish farmers, while not being users of the product, remains a paradox.

In recent years, economics, large family size, and a lack of available farm land have pushed many of the Amish into other occupations. Today, they frequently work as carpenters, painters, and masons. Many also work for lumber companies and feed mills, or operate "cottage industries" out of their homes. The growth of employment in non-farming occupations has brought the Amish into greater contact than ever before with the non-Amish population. This is of great concern to many Amish elders, as they worry about continued acculturation.

The Amish tend to get married at an early age, often in their late teens and early twenties. Amish weddings are all-day celebrations, held on Tuesdays and Thursdays in October and November. The reasons for these specific times have to do with their traditional agricultural lifestyle. Weddings involve their extended family members and most of the Amish in their local community. Therefore, weddings have to be held after the harvest season, and before the holy Christmas season. Since many of the Amish earned their living by taking their produce to the local farmers' markets, certain days of the week were set aside for weddings at times when the farmers' markets were closed.

Weddings are all-day occasions, and up to 300 guests may arrive at the bride's home around 8:30 AM on the wedding day. As with their church services, the men and women sit separately on backless benches. The wedding ceremony consists of hymn singing, Scripture readings, short sermons, the main sermon, and the wedding vows. A huge noon meal follows the ceremony. In the afternoon the people sit around tables and sing. Guests stay and have another large meal at supper, and continue to visit and sing until after 11:00 PM. Guests do not take gifts to the wedding, but give them to the couple when the newlyweds visit in their homes in the

triggered a major tourist boom in Lancaster County. Since then, Lancaster County has become one of the leading tourist attractions in the United States, with over 3,000,000 visitors per year. The Amish themselves do not operate any of the tourist attractions, yet they sometimes benefit financially from tourism by selling produce and handicrafts at stalls outside their homes to tourists passing by. When the movie "Witness" was released in the early 1980s, featuring the box office star Harrison Ford, many of the Amish feared a second wave of tourism would strike the region. Tourism was up significantly the following year, but some of the

increase was probably due to an increase in terrorist acts in Europe. Tourism in the "Amish Country" has continued unabated.

The Amish often turn their backs to a tourist's camera. They take no pictures themselves and usually do not appreciate anyone photographing them. As with many of their practices, they base their objection to photographs on biblical Scripture. Specifically, the Second Commandment handed down from God to Moses states:

"Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." (Exodus 20:4)

The Amish's reaction to tourism varies, as do the tourists' reaction to the Amish. Many tourists respect the Amish and do not intentionally cause offense. Most who are fortunate enough to become acquainted with Amish people genuinely like them and find them to be, indeed, "real people." Not surprisingly, the Amish appear to discipline themselves and obviously take the tourism better than many



*Amish Farm*

weeks following the wedding. Gifts are always simple and practical items. Marriage vows are taken very seriously by the Amish. Divorce is extremely rare among the Amish, and would result in the excommunication of the member.

### IMPACTS OF TOURISM ON THE AMISH IN LANCASTER COUNTY

For the first half of the Twentieth Century the Amish basically kept to themselves, and no one seemed to both them. However, a 1950s Broadway play entitled "Plain and Fancy" that depicted Amish life





*Lancaster County Place Names*

non-Amish residents of the region. Most learn to ignore or endure the insults and the stares, unlike the scene from *Witness* in which Harrison Ford, dressed as an Amishman, attacked his tormentors.

Non-Amish who live in the Lancaster County tourist region are often frustrated when driving because of the long lines of slow-moving, mostly out-of-state cars. Many locals empathize with their Amish neighbors and feel that tourism often unfairly exploits them. However, another faction of the local population welcomes the tourist dollars with open arms while operating the various tourist attractions, motels, and restaurants.

#### THE FUTURE OF THE AMISH

Will the Amish people and their culture survive the impacts of tourism and modern-day society? Some feel that tourism will "kill the goose that laid the golden egg." Unlike Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia, which is a restoration, and Old Sturbridge Village in Massachusetts, which is a reproduction, the Lancaster County Amish live in an authentic landscape which transports us all into the living past in modern times. Although it has been found that tourism does not directly force the Amish out of the region, the tourism industry has driven up the cost of farmland which has indirectly caused many of the Amish to seek cheaper farmland elsewhere, away from the areas easily accessed by tourists.

Another great fear is that increased exposure to local non-Amish residents and tourists that come from many states and countries will have a negative influence on the Amish lifestyle and threaten the continuance of their strict religious beliefs, especially among their young. In spite of the relatively strict lifestyle in which they are raised, Amish youth usually choose to remain in the Amish faith. A small percentage will leave to join less "plain" churches. However, a strong and stable family unit and church loyalty will keep most Amish members within the fold, probably for generations to come.



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