

The Amish

An experiment in humility and community



The Amish are a hard working, God fearing society, mysterious and often misunderstood

AMISH HISTORY

The Amish emerged from the Anabaptist movement in Switzerland. They practiced adult baptism as John the Baptist had baptized Jesus. This was the origin of the “Dunkard” church, as well, later known as Brethren. A split occurred in the Swiss Brethren church when the stricter adherents punished “fallen” believers by banning them from communion and common meals. Others were less strict.

Queen Elizabeth I was a Protestant who witnessed persecution by Catholics, especially by Queen Mary (who became known as “Bloody Mary”). She invited the mistreated Protestants to settle her new land. This brought many Western Europeans to Pennsylvania, a colony known for religious tolerance, including the Amish in the 18th century.

Once in Pennsylvania, disputes among Amish communities resulted in restructuring and division into sects. The less strict became Mennonite. The more traditional sects became “Old Order Amish.”

CHURCH AND COMMUNITY

Amish lifestyle varies from community to community as decided by the bishop and the elders. This includes matters such as dress and other rules on technology, etc. Amish believe that children are a blessing from God and stress the “proper” raising of their families. Hard work is considered godly, and some technologies are considered detrimental because they reduce the need for hard work. The Amish believe in salvation by “good works” rather than by grace. So you

could be saved today, but tomorrow swear a blue streak while falling off your silo and go to eternal damnation.

There are thought to be over 300,000 Amish in the US. Approximately one-fourth live in Pennsylvania, with slightly less in Ohio and Indiana. Others are found in other mid-Western states. Amish also reside in Canada, Switzerland, and believe it or not, Ireland and Russia!

The Amish only marry on Tuesdays and Thursdays in November and December (after the majority of the farmwork is done). They have a daylong church service every second Sunday, rotating from farm to farm. The men shave until they are married, thereafter growing beards. They do not grow mustaches. This habit began in the Revolutionary War because they did not want to look like the German mercenaries employed by the British. In fact, this is when many Pennsylvania Germans, not just the Amish, anglicized their names to separate themselves for the same reason.

HORSES AND BUGGIES

Old Order Amish do not own cars. Horses and mules do the heavy work. The shape, size, and color of the buggies reflect that group's identity. Most buggy horses are either Standardbreds or thoroughbreds. Often, these are retired racehorses. Single men do not have roofs on their buggies. Occasionally, one might spot a two-wheel "sportster."



The Amish near my home of Big Valley (Kishacoquillas Valley, Mifflin County, Pennsylvania) use two breeds of workhorses. The "palomino-looking" horses are Belgians. The black ones are Clydesdales.

LANGUAGE

Amish speak a German dialect known as Pennsylvania Dutch. This is a form of “Low German.” Their Bibles are written in High German. At one time there were countless German dialects. This changed when Martin Luther translated the Bible into a High German dialect and integrated spoken language in the Germanic states. (Germany was not a unified country until 1874.)

Martin Luther’s reformation movement provided a basis on which the Anabaptist movement could form. Some of Martin Luther’s descendants settled in Pennsylvania. Johann Adam Wagner (1711-1773) was the seventh great-grandson of Martin Luther and relocated from Germany to Berks County, Pennsylvania. His Son Elias Wagner (1760-1804) relocated to the Beavertown, Snyder County, area. Many Central Pennsylvania Wagners and Gosses can trace their lineage to this family.

Pennsylvania Dutch speakers word phrases in English in a way that sounds amusing to us, such as “make the door open.” In German one would say, “Macht das tur zu.” The Dutch speakers use the German syntax and simply substitute English words. Some favorites:

- How’d it make? (How did it work out?)
- It’s making down (rain).
- It’s really putting down (snowing).
- The roof leaks, still.
- Let me see that “wunst.”
- The kids are not being have (behaving).
- The roads are melting.
- I have choir practice. (I am going to the chiropractor’s.)
- And, of course, the standard exemplar: throw the horse over the fence some hay.

AMISH SECTS

The information I have gleaned indicates there are eleven major “sects” of Amish in the US:

- Pennsylvania Lancaster affiliation
- Ohio Holmes Old Order, Geauga I, Geauga II, Danner, and Schwartentruber
- Indiana Elkhart-LaGrange, Buchanan/Medford, Nappanee, and Swiss
- Iowa Kalona

In Mifflin County, Pennsylvania, three sub-sects are seen and distinguished by their buggy color. I am unfamiliar with the names and differences, but I have heard the “white tops” referred to as “Nebraska Amish.” In the US,

Other sects include the Russian Amish. They moved to South America during communist rule, but are now making their way back to Russia. The Hutterites of the USA and Canada formed

independently in Moravia, as an Anabaptist sect separate from the Amish. They also speak a different German dialect.

SURNAMES

PRESENT DAY SPELLING	NATIVE NAME	MEANING
Byler	Beiler	German. "Measuring stick" - an occupational name for an inspector of measures or a maker of measuring sticks.
High	Hoch	German. Topographic name or for a tall man.
Hooley	Holly	Flemish. "Holy."
Kanagy	Gnaegi	French. Meaning unknown.
King	Koenig	German. In service of a king or head of a craftsmen's guild.
Bitsche	Peachey	Swiss German. Meaning unknown.
Smoker	Schmocker	German. Occupational name for a charcoal burner
Stoltzfus	Stoltzfuss	German. A nickname for someone with a haughty gait or who walked with a limp
Yoder	Joder	German. Originated in Switzerland. A shortened version of the name Theodorus.
Zook	Zug	Swiss German. Various meanings.

HOUSE KEEPING

The following excerpt is from "History of the Lerch Family 1560-1942," Public Domain:

Thinking of our Ancestors how they toiled; first [they] had to clear the land from trees, from the wood, then prepared and built their homes, with no seed drill, grass cutting machine, or self-binder, no factory, to make their clothes, but had to sow flax, cut it, bleach and prepare it for the linen material. Raised sheep, cut the wool, washed and bleached for weeks near a stream sometimes two miles away from their homes, and went on horseback twice a day to sprinkle it. They had to do that because they had no big cisterns [three] hundred years ago and the limestone well water would not answer the purpose.

First, they raised the cattle. In butchering, they gathered the tallow, melted it, and poured it in forms called candle forms. This process is used at the present time, as candles are always in use around the holiday seasons.

Their floors were mostly bare, but were scrubbed bright and clean, decorated with silver sand every Saturday. No bakers came around, and there was no need for a tin can opener. They dried most of the berries, apples, etc. They even made their coffee from oats and some bran and wheat. They had bags full of dried tea, and other needful things. But they had to do it. Think of the blue Mondays. Rubbing first of all, by hand, next they rubbed on a smooth board. To boil their soap they would splash water on wood ashes (for they had no coal) and strained them. That they called lye, and made very good and healthy soap,

They knitted their stockings, mittens, made their shoes. The writer saw shoes where the hair of the animal was still on the inside of the shoes, while the outside were of nice leather treated with a liquid called shellac made from the sap of certain trees, They were neat, sewed and strong and nice.

In summer they went barefooted, even to Church, and Sunday School, they would wear Shaker sunbonnets, made of linen, and pasteboard. When frost, and cold weather would set in, they would wear warm woolen stockings and shoes. Carriages and buggies were scarce. The women, as well as the men had riding horses, to go to Church and business places. Stones measuring 27 to 30 inches [tall] were permanently placed for them to alight and get on their horses. They used wooden baking troughs, or molds, with covers where the bread was kneaded. After it was baked, they scraped the dough from the mold and then by putting water on it made the paste resembling yeast to start the next bread.

It was in the Eighteenth Century that people learned to bake wheat bread and pies. Before, it was barley and rye. They would get one dress a year. The flax was woven into a fabric, after the women spun it, at home. The dress worn Sundays the previous year would then be the weekday dress. The same principle was carried out in footwear. Often one pair served for weekdays and Sundays. Every Saturday evening they would thoroughly clean, and grease them with sheep tallow prepared for that purpose, and those were strict "rules."

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