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## The Amish Way of Life in Modern American Society

メタデータ	言語: eng 出版者: 公開日: 2012-06-13 キーワード (Ja): キーワード (En): 作成者: Scott, Stephen E. メールアドレス: 所属:
URL	<a href="https://doi.org/10.15021/00002501">https://doi.org/10.15021/00002501</a>

## **The Amish Way of Life in Modern American Society**

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## 1. Introduction

What do people think about when they hear the word Amish? Images of simple rural living free from the complexities of urban living probably most often come to mind. The Amish are thought to be traditional farmers preserving ancient practices of harvesting their crops and tilling the soil with horse-drawn implements in the way their ancestors have done for the last several centuries.

Perhaps the best known symbols of Amish life are the horse and buggy. The slow pace of horse-drawn transportation is in stark contrast to the fast life of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. But the Amish are not isolated from the modern world. Cars race past them even on back country roads, and they drive past the utility poles that carry electric and telephone lines to their neighbors. If they venture onto a major highway that cuts through their community, they face the danger of a constant flow of fast moving motor vehicles hurrying around them.

But the Amish do not try to completely separate themselves from the modern world. They are not able to be self-sustaining, so they must rely on income derived from other people. Signs invite outsiders to their farms where they are offered the products of their agricultural labors. They have also found that their craftwork is in demand, which brings in much needed cash when farming has been less profitable. While they do mingle with the people of the world, a distance is maintained by their traditional plain clothing.

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**Picture 1** An Old Order Amish is driving a horse and buggy (Indiana, photo from research collections of the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies.)

Many of these pictures you see come from Lancaster Country in Pennsylvania and southern Indiana<sup>1)</sup>. As you can see even these people, who have separated themselves from modern society more than most other Amish, are still very much in contact with it every day.

## **2. The Amish**

### **2.1 Language**

The everyday language of most Amish is a German dialect called Pennsylvania German, or misleadingly Pennsylvania Dutch (it is not the Dutch of Holland). It is referred to as Deutsch when speaking the dialect. A minority of Amish speak a Swiss dialect<sup>2)</sup>. All Amish also speak English, but many have a strong German accent. The language of the literature of the church is High German. This includes the Bible, which is the regular Christian Bible, the song book, and the prayer book.

### **2.2 Faith**

The basic beliefs of the Amish are very much the same in all communities and groups. All adhere to a statement of beliefs that was written in 1632 by Mennonites in the Netherlands. The Amish began as a separate religious group in 1693 in what are now Switzerland, Germany and Alsace in France. They were the followers of a Mennonite leader named Jakob Ammann, who felt that the Mennonites needed to make some reforms. The Mennonites began in 1525 in Switzerland and a few years later in the Netherlands. They got their name from Menno Simons, a Dutch leader. The Mennonites were at first called Anabaptists, which means re-baptizers. They believed that only adults should be baptized not babies, as was the practice of both the Catholics and Protestants.

The Mennonites and Amish take the Bible literally in many cases when other Christians do not. The main example of this is the teaching that Christians should not go to war and not seek to retaliate when wronged. They take the teachings of Jesus seriously when He said that we should love our enemies, and pray for those that persecute us that if someone strikes us we are not to strike back.

Dirk Willems was a man living in Holland in the 1500s. He became an Anabaptist, which was against the law, so he was arrested and put in jail. He was able to escape from jail and ran across a frozen lake. The jail keeper chased after Dirk, but because he was a heavier man, he fell through the ice. When Dirk heard his cries for help he ran back and helped the jailer get out of the water, but other people came and captured Dirk again and put him back in jail. Later, Dirk was burned at the stake. Rather than cause another person to die, Dirk gave up his own life. Many other Anabaptists also died for their faith and were severely persecuted in other ways. This is why the Amish and Mennonites and related groups came to where they were given freedom of religion.

The Amish also strongly believe the Bible teaching that we are to forgive those who wrong us. This was made very evident recently when a non-Amish man in Lancaster went crazy and shot ten Amish school girls, killing five of them. The Amish immediately expressed love and forgiveness to the killer's family and were some of the few who



**Figure 1** Dirk Willems's story of suffering love for an enemy continues to inspire many Anabaptists, *Martyrs Mirror*. (Kraybill 2003: 10)

showed up at his funeral. This was perhaps more shocking to the world than the awful murders.

The Amish do not think of themselves as better than other people. They are very aware and admit that there are many faults and shortcomings among them. One time I traveled with a group of Amish, and when the others were in a store a woman approached me to express how much she appreciated the Amish and that they never do anything wrong. I told this to the men when they came back. One of the men, who was a minister said, "I hope you told them that's not true."

### 2.3 Church Services

The church is the most important part of an Amish person's life. The Church is not a building to the Amish, but the congregation of Christian believers. The members of the church take turns having the services in their homes. The service lasts about three hours. Most of the people sit on backless benches. There is singing at the beginning and end from an ancient German book. The tunes are very slow and chant-like. There are no musical instruments. Bishops, ministers and deacons are chosen from the congregation and do not receive pay or training. There is a fellowship meal after every church service. In addition to regular church services, weddings and funerals are also held in the homes. The form of worship has changed the least of all aspects of Amish life, and the practices among the various communities and groups of Amish are fairly uniform.

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**Picture 2** Old Order Amish gathering for their worship at a farmhouse (Indiana, photo from research collections of the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies.)

## 2.4 Education

All Old Order Amish believe that eight years of education is all that is necessary for their way of life. They have their own schools and are taught by their own teachers.

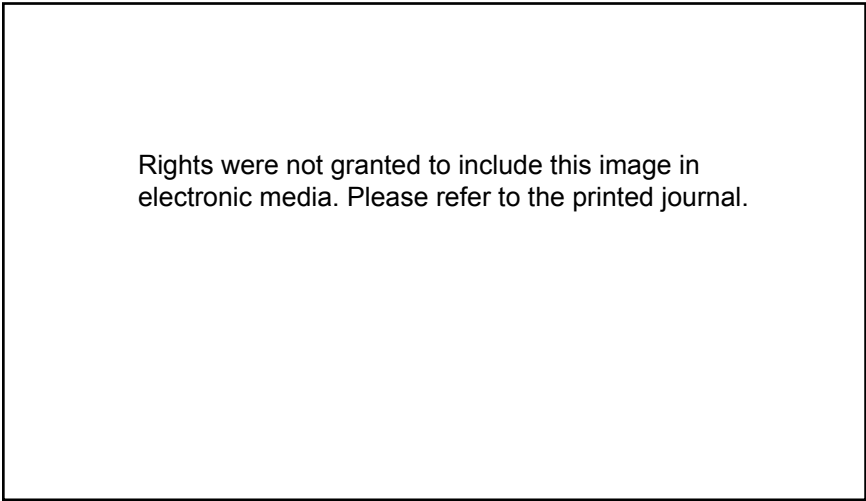
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**Picture 3** Old Order Amish children playing in a ground of a one-room school (Indiana, photo from research collections of the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies.)

These are usually one-room schools with an average of 15 to 40 students. There is usually only one teacher who is most often a young woman; she may have helpers, however. The language of instruction is English, but there are German language classes.

## 2.5 Dress

There are many differences among the Amish, but they also agree on many issues. All Amish feel that it is very important to wear plain, modest clothing. They believe it is taught in the Bible that Christians should look different than other people since they are not part of any earthly kingdom but belong to God's heavenly kingdom. Amish clothing is like a uniform that identifies who they are to each other and tells other people who they are. They take the Bible literally when it says that women should cover their heads and not cut their hair. Adult Amish men wear beards. Women do not wear trousers.



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**Picture 4** Old Order Amish family walking for their worship on Sunday (Indiana, photo from research collections of the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies.)

## 2.6 The Barn Raising: Helping Each Other, Helping Others

The Amish believe strongly that they should help each other. When a person or family suffers loss, the other church members come to their aid. The best example of this is the barn raising. If an Amish barn burns down, very soon after the fire many Amish people come and build a new barn in just a few days. They do not charge for their work. Even

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**Picture 5** Old Order Amish men doing barn raising to rebuild a barn for their neighbor (Indiana, photo from research collections of the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies.)

Amish from different groups help each other in this way.

The Amish also help other people when there is a great need. The Amish, as well as other related groups, help in the work of several organizations which aid the victims of natural disasters, such as floods and hurricanes<sup>3</sup>).

### **2.7 Care of the Sick and Aged**

The Amish believe it is the responsibility of the family and church to care for the elderly and sick. For this reason, they rarely accept Social Security benefits from the government. The aged are respected, honored, and cared for. A special addition to the house or a separate small house next to the main house on the farm is built for grandparents<sup>4</sup>). Nursing homes are only resorted to in extreme situations. The Amish have no problem with modern health care, but many tend to make use of alternative forms of medicine. Since conventional health insurance is avoided, hospital bills can be a great burden on the community. Children with handicaps are loved and cared for and accepted as God's special gifts. They are provided for with special schools to meet their needs, but help from special public schools is also accepted.

### **3. Not Ignorant of the Modern World**

Many people believe that the Amish live differently than other people because they do not know about the modern world. Over twenty years ago a television program appeared which involved a fictional story of an Amish family who, due to unusual circumstances,



had to move to California and live in a modern house. One of the scenes showed a woman being frightened by the electric light going on when she opened the refrigerator. This is very unlikely. It made the Amish look like some primitive tribe who were being exposed to the modern world for the first time.

In 2004 there was another television program called “Amish in the City” this “reality” program featured five supposedly real Amish youth being uprooted from their rural homes and placed in California where they lived with modern urban youth. The idea was that it would be entertaining to see how sheltered Amish people would react to modern living. All these young people, who were actually from Amish families, probably were in the process of leaving the Amish and were already very much acquainted with modern living. Five years later, only one of the five youths, were part of the Amish community.

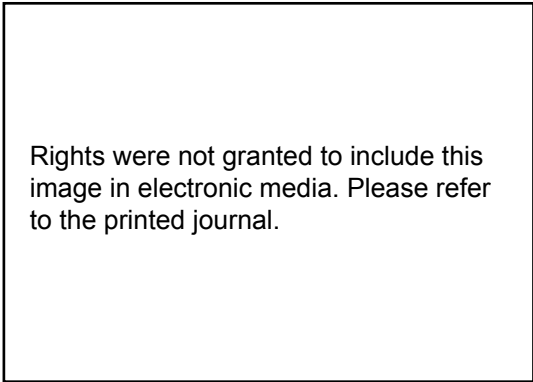
### **3.1 Change**

It has often been written that the Amish have not changed since the group began three hundred years ago, and that they object to all modern technology. Some aspects of Amish life indeed have not changed. When one observes their horse and buggy transportation and the absence of power lines going to their homes, it is assumed that Amish are frozen in the 1800s. Some people have the idea that the Amish want to keep things the way they were over a hundred years ago. This is not really their goal at all. They are well aware that they are not living like their great-grandparents. They are not trying to preserve an historic way of life the way it is done at living history museums, like Colonial Williamsburg, and Sturbridge Village in the United States and perhaps Japanese Meiji Mura Museum, where life in the past is demonstrated by costumed actors.

The Amish are not opposed to all change, but they are very cautious about it. Each new invention or innovation is considered individually as to whether it will be acceptable. The decisive factor is whether the new thing will draw the community closer together and closer to God, or whether it will scatter the people in the community from each other and away from God. Thus, the car is seen as an invention that keeps people away from home and makes it easy for them to go places they should not go. Electricity in the home brings many unnecessary things and can be the source of bad influences with television, radio, and the Internet. Labor saving electric appliances may save work, but the Amish do not try to avoid work and look for occasions to work together and socialize. Centralized heating allows family members to isolate children in their own rooms rather than congregate around the stove in the living room.

### **3.2 Washing Machines**

Several changes in technology have been made even in the most conservative Amish communities since 1900 or even more recently. With very large families Amish mothers spend a great deal of time washing clothes. They still iron clothes the old way with irons heated on a stove, but they have welcomed synthetic fabric which requires little ironing. Washing machines of the old type pictured here are accepted by even the most traditional of all Amish. Of course these still require much more labor than automatic washers because each piece of clothing must be fed by hand through the rubber rollers. Only a



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**Picture 6** Washing Machine used by Old Amish family with a small gasoline engine (Pennsylvania, photo from research collections of the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies.)

few Amish use hand-powered washing machines. It may be of interest to know that small Honda and Kawasaki gasoline engines have been very popular among the Amish for powering their washing machines. Of course, the Amish do not use clothes dryers, but hang their wash on long lines to dry.

### **3.3 Propane Gas and Solar Power**

Along with these advancements in technology, some of the largest Amish settlements, including Lancaster County, have also accepted the use of propane gas, which is used not only for cooking and heating but also for lighting and refrigeration. So, with all these normally electric appliances run on gas, air, and hydraulic power, Amish kitchens often look quite modern. The most obvious difference is that the lights are not turned on with a switch.

An even closer duplication of electricity from the power lines is the recent widespread use of solar power among the Amish. Its use has been somewhat limited to a few applications like electric fences, water heaters, and buggy lights, but solar technology can be utilized for any kind of electric appliance. This does make a big problem for many Amish who wish to control this kind of modern living.

## **4. Dairy Farms**

Whereas electricity has been prohibited or restricted by most Amish, gasoline and diesel engines have not. When these engines are used in making a living, they are seen as an economic necessity. The Amish are not self-sufficient farmers. They must sell their products to those outside their communities, so they often place an advertisement directed at the Amish community.

In Lancaster County Pennsylvania the Amish have been forced to use diesel engine powered dairy equipment to compete with non-Amish farmers. Milking machines were accepted in the 1950s. Later, state regulations required that milk sold to the public must be cooled to a certain temperature in mechanically refrigerated storage tanks. Then, it was ruled that the tanks had to have an electric device which stirred the milk. The Amish accomplished this by using a battery charged by a generator which in turn was powered by a diesel engine, which also powered the milking and refrigeration equipment.

#### **4.1 Farm Implements**

The hum of engines is also heard in the fields on Amish farms. The great majority of Amish do not use tractors, but a large percent do permit motorized machines if they are pulled by horses. The most common of these is the hay baler. The mechanism is powered by a gas or diesel engine, but instead of a tractor pulling it, there is a team of horses.

So why do the Amish not allow tractors? Having a tractor is considered the next step to getting a car, and this is something the Amish want very much to avoid. Many Amish do make limited use of tractors for powering machines that are not pulled through the fields, like silage cutters and threshing machines. To prevent the tractors from being used for transportation, they have steel wheels and not rubber tires. Some of the most traditional Amish have engines mounted on carts rather than tractors. A very few Amish do not use any engines at all and use only horses for all power.

#### **4.2 Small Businesses**

It was thought in the past that the Amish identity was very much connected to farming. But in recent decades farming has not been very profitable and many Amish have had to supplement their income by other means. The Amish found that there was a demand for many things they could produce in small shops and their skills as carpenters and builders. Eventually many Amish discovered that they could make a better living from these non-agricultural businesses than farming. Some of the businesses grew rapidly, and some hired many workers. Today probably less than half the Amish in Lancaster County are farmers, and in other large communities in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois the percentage of farmers is even lower. Many of those who do farm often have additional sources of income.

For a number of years a non-Amish businessman has published the Lancaster County Business Directory. Most of the advertisers in this book are Amish. A sampling of the advertisements in this publications show the kinds of businesses the Amish have become involved in as an alternative to farming. Some of the ads are quite elaborate and feature the work of professional photographers. Most surprising are the very modern looking ads for traditional Amish products.

Amish businesses have a much higher success rate than American businesses in general. This is no doubt due to the Amish work ethic, the employment of family members in most of the businesses, and the Amish lack of need for as much profit to live their simple lifestyle.

Nonetheless, many Amish people have become comparatively wealthy. Sometimes

this is shown by the large houses the rich Amish build which are not as simple as the older style. But true to Amish humility, wealth is not displayed in clothing or vehicles. Many also help less fortunate people financially.

Like dairy farms, Amish woodworking shops make much use of modern equipment. While not using electricity from public utilities they do use diesel engine power units to run air compressors and hydraulic pumps. Tools made for electricity are converted for air and hydraulic power.

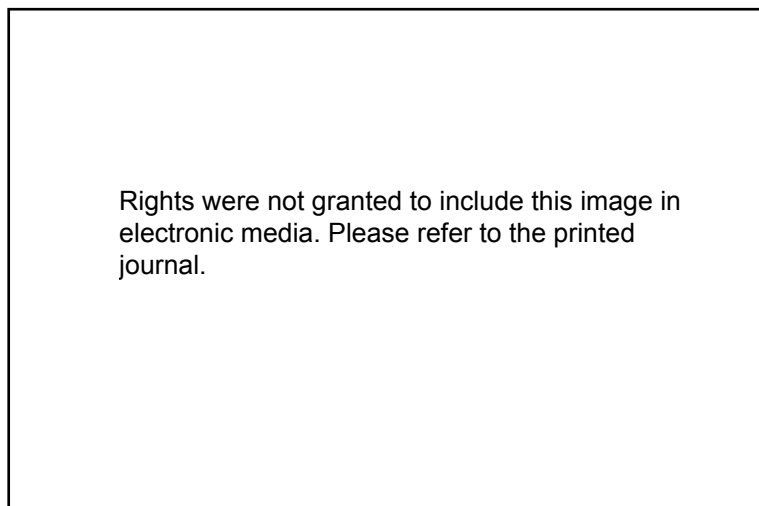
A further development is that air and hydraulic lines are extended to the home where Amish women can make use of the power source for sewing machines, washing machines, and even food processors.

## 5. Communication

### 5.1 Telephones

Another change that the move away from agriculture has brought is an increased use of telephones. Formerly, the Amish in Lancaster County and other places, arranged to have telephones placed in centrally located small sheds so that several families could share them. Later, in some districts, Amish businesses could have these telephone sheds very close to their shops. Eventually phones moved into the shops. Now all these rules are meaningless because of the widespread use of cell phones. Although cell phones are discouraged if not forbidden, many Amish people use them.

I once saw an Amish boy rollerblading down a busy road near my home talking on



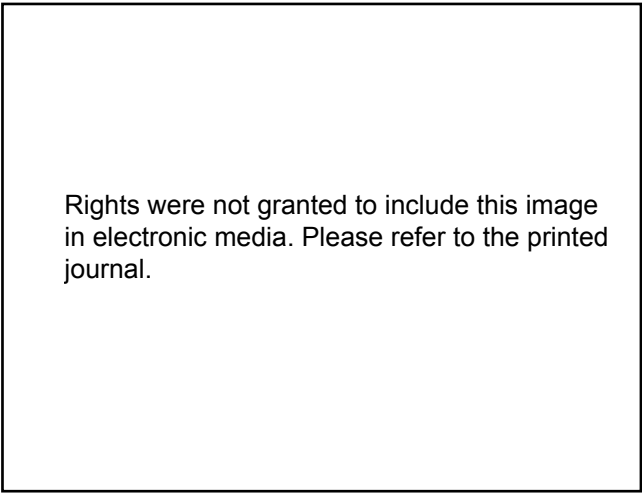
**Picture 7** Telephone sheds located close to their shops (Lancaster, photo from research collections of the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies.)

a cell phone! This boy was known to be somewhat rebellious, but his use of roller blades was not contrary to Amish rules.

## 5.2 Roller blades and Bicycles

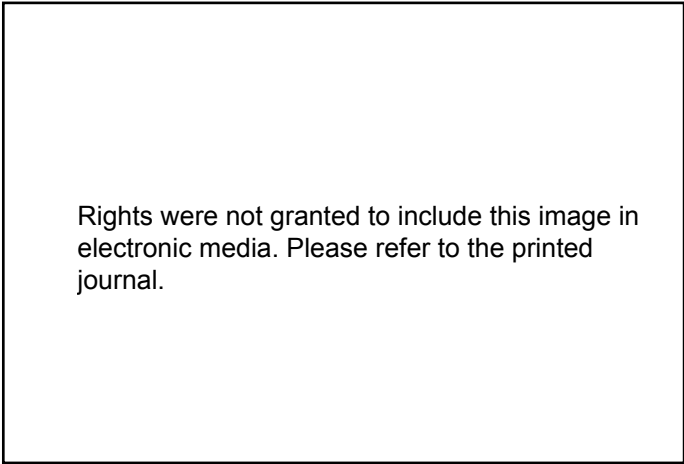
It is very surprising to many people that the Lancaster Amish have no problem with roller blades. What could be more modern than roller blades? The Amish don't see it that way. They have always considered ice skating a harmless form of recreation and did not object to roller skates when they were introduced. So what's the difference between roller skates and roller blades. The Amish just see them as a form of non-motorized transportation.

It is perhaps difficult to understand that the Lancaster Amish do object to bicycles. They would see these as providing too much mobility. However, scooters are very popular. These are the kind one stands up on and pushes with one foot. In other large Amish communities in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois, bicycles are very popular and are used by all ages. In the Amish community at Sarasota, Florida, there are no horses and buggies, just bicycles.



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**Picture 8** An Old Order Amish woman going on the road with roller blades popular among Amish in Lancaster, Pennsylvania (Lancaster, photo from research collections of the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies.)



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**Picture 9** An Old Order Amish young man going on his scooter, one of the characteristic features among Amish in Lancaster, Pennsylvania (Lancaster, photo from research collections of the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies.)

### 5.3 Taxi Service

Another matter which has brought the simple life of the Amish closer to modern living is the increased dependence on motor vehicles. The Amish do not allow their members to own or drive cars, but it is permitted to ride in motor vehicles. They do not feel that motorized transportation is wrong, but they do believe that each family having a car would be disruptive to their simple way of life. By limiting the use of cars, the harmful effects are better controlled. In most Amish communities some non-Amish people provide transportation for the Amish in vans. This is not considered inconsistent because the Amish have never had a problem with riding in trains, and when buses were introduced, these were also acceptable. However, nearly all Amish prohibit air travel. The exception to this rule is making use of emergency helicopters for taking the sick and injured to the hospital.

## 6. Resistant to Change

### 6.1 Entertainment

The one area of life that the Amish have been most resistant to change is entertainment. Radios, television, and CD players are universally forbidden by all Amish. Admittedly many Amish youth do secretly make use of these items without the permission of the church. The Amish spend much time singing, both in German and English. Some children may sing Christmas carols for a non-Amish neighbor. An Amish house is very

quiet—no radio, TV, or stereo. Adults and children enjoy reading very much and playing table games as well as working puzzles. Women sew, knit, and quilt.

## **6.2 The Conservative Minority**

I have been talking mostly about the Amish in the largest communities, especially Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, where I am from. These Amish have accepted many advancements in technology and are able to convert conveniences and tools that normally use electricity to run on compressed air, hydraulic pumps, and propane gas. There is also much use of gasoline and diesel engines on the farm.

Not all Amish have accepted all these new things. The very most traditional Amish have tried to limit technology more than the majority. This minority of Amish have rejected all horse-drawn farm machinery powered by gasoline or diesel engines. Engines may be used for a few farm machines but not tractors. A symbol of these very traditional Amish is the hay loader which is used instead of the motorized hay bailer. Corn is still picked by hand in the fields, and milking is done by hand. Milk is stored in old style metal cans rather than the large tanks. Refrigeration often comes from ice, which is cut from lakes and ponds in the winter and stored in insulated buildings. Lighting is from old style kerosene lamps, not gas burning lamps. Cooking and heating is done with wood and kerosene, not propane gas. There are no indoor bathrooms, and water must be pumped by hand. No air compressors or hydraulic pumps are used in the shops. Buggies have only kerosene burning lamps and no bicycles, scooters, or rollerblades are used. These Amish have also kept older patterns of dress and other traditional practices.

These most conservative Amish do not represent one group, but are composed of many groups which withdrew from the larger Amish communities at various times. Often they moved away from the larger settlements, but in Holmes County Ohio many different Amish groups exist within the same community. The largest and most conservative of the Amish groups originated in Holmes County in 1913. They are called Swartzentruber Amish after one of their early leaders.

## **7. Conclusion: Amish Survival**

The Amish came to America seeking religious freedom over 250 years ago. They were given the liberty to worship God in their own way, but over the years, the Amish have had many conflicts with the U.S. government and the secular American society. There have always been pressures on the Amish to conform to the ways of the world but never so much as in this present age. Will the Amish change? Will they survive? Yes, no doubt changes will continue to happen, as they always have. Perhaps many Amish will be assimilated into American society. Many groups of Amish have taken that course in the past and are no longer recognizable as Amish. But I believe there will always be a remnant who will keep the faith. It is the faith of the Amish which will endure no matter what hardships, pressures, and persecution might come their way.

## Notes

- 1) There are various Amish groups branched from original Amish due to their different opinions concerning practices based on the Bible. For more information, see chapter one.
- 2) Old Order Amish groups that are keen to preserve their tradition try to continue to use Swiss German in their everyday life in the United States.
- 3) They often do volunteer work and give things to Christian Aid Ministries (CAM) run by Amish-Mennonite and the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC) run by Mennonites. Collaborating with more transitional or transformational groups, such as Amish-Mennonite and Mennonite, Old Order Amish are able to use their power to help others. For more information, see chapter one.
- 4) This house is called “Gross daadi” Haus. These days many affluent Old Order Amish have a house whose shape is something like “English” people’s; however, from this additional part of the house, we assume that an Old Order Amish family is living in that house.

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## In Memory of Steve Scott

Stephen E. Scott, Research and Administrative Associate at the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies, died unexpectedly on December 28, 2011. His funeral was held on January 2, 2012.



Steve was born on April 12, 1948, in Portsmouth, Ohio, and grew up in Beavercreek, Ohio. He attended Cedarville College and Wright State University in Ohio. His religious convictions led him to become a pacifist and he did alternative service at Lancaster Mennonite School starting in 1969. While living in Lancaster County, Steve joined the Old Order River Brethren and eventually met and married his wife of 38 years, Harriet (Sauder) Scott. They have three adult children, Andrew, married to Emily (Wenger) Scott, Hannah Scott, and Catharine Scott, and four grandchildren, Heidi, Wanita, Liliana, and Isaac Scott, all of Lancaster County.

Early in life, Steve developed a curiosity about various cultures, especially Native American peoples. He also had a strong interest in history. These early interests led to his lifelong study and interpretation of plain churches. Steve conducted wide-ranging, detailed research on the distinctive traits of plain groups, including their dress, modes of transportation, family life, schooling, music, and rituals. His interests led him to develop close personal friendships with members of many of these groups across North America.

After working for Good Enterprises in Intercourse, Pennsylvania, for twelve years, Steve was hired at the Young Center in early 1997, where he worked until his death. Steve was instrumental in broadening and deepening the Young Center's research on Anabaptist and Pietist churches, especially plain groups. His publications include *Plain Buggies* (1981), *Why Do They Dress That Way?* (1986), *The Amish Wedding and Other Special Occasions of the Old Order Communities* (1988), *Living Without Electricity* (1990), *Amish Houses and Barns* (1992), and *An Introduction to Old Order and Conservative Mennonite Groups* (1996), as well as entries in reference books and articles in periodicals.

Steve contributed significantly to recent books by Donald B. Kraybill, including *Concise Encyclopedia of Amish, Brethren, Hutterites, and Mennonites* (2010) and a current project on the Amish in America. Steve's ability to track and retain minute details built a renowned reputation for the Young Center's annual update on Amish migration and population growth in North America. He was an invaluable guide to researchers from around the world, from high school students to senior professors, who visited the Young Center to study Anabaptist or Pietist groups. Steve was also a popular speaker in many venues and was invited to Japan in 2009 to give presentations about the Amish.

Steve's deep faith and care for people revealed his gift for humor and his humble attitude in relating to others. His depth and breadth of knowledge were sometimes underestimated because of his personal humility. He will be remembered both for his contributions to scholarship and for his friendships.