

The Plain People

LANCASTER'S GREATEST TREASURE

BY MICHAEL FRANCO

Now that you've arrived in Lancaster County ... *Listen.* Do you hear the clip-clopping sounds of horse hooves, counting out time to a different clock? *Look.* Do you see orderly rows of laundry flapping in the breeze or barefoot children playing baseball outside a one-room school? *Smell.* Do you smell the farm-fresh air, the sweet aroma of hay, and the perfume of abundant flowers? *Taste.* Can you taste the rich, earthy flavor of molasses in freshly baked shoofly pie or the homemade goodness of chicken corn soup? *Feel.* Do you feel the smile spread across your face as a little blond boy or girl waves at you from the back of a rumbling buggy?

Lancaster County is certainly blessed with acre upon acre of stunning natural beauty. But there's no doubt that what most tantalizes the senses of thousands of visitors here every year is the fascinating and enchanting culture of the local Amish and Mennonite Communities. They are the caretakers of the richest non-irrigated farmland in the country and the guardians of a simple way of living that has endured through the centuries.

A HUMBLE HISTORY

In sixteenth-century Switzerland, a movement began among Christians who believed in the

wisdom of being baptized as a fully informed adult rather than as a newborn child. These individuals became known as Anabaptists or "rebaptizers." In 1536, a man named Menno Simons joined the movement and quickly attracted a large group of followers who became known as the Mennonites. Approximately a century later, a disagreement arose among the Mennonites regarding strict enforcement of Anabaptist traditions, namely the custom of shunning individuals who had violated a principle of their faith. The Mennonites were moving away from this tradition while a man named Jacob Amman rose to prominence by preaching adherence to traditional ways. Those who followed Amman became known as the Amish. Both groups migrated to Lancaster County beginning in 1710 to escape persecution from the Catholic and Protestant churches and to enjoy the freedom to worship in their own way, as part of William Penn's "holy experiment" of religious tolerance.

SUBTLE DIFFERENCES

Today, members of both the Amish and Mennonite faiths can be found in 22 states as well as in parts of Canada, and the rules that govern their lives are largely decided upon by local church leaders. Broadly speaking, Old Order Mennonites and Amish have remained most closely tied to a traditional way of life. They are the individuals you will see riding

in buggies, wearing traditional clothing, and refraining from the use of much modern technology. Among the Mennonites, there are many different sects ranging from extremely traditional to more modern groups that embrace contemporary technology. Members of all groups however, whether traditional or modern, have a devout belief in the Christian faith and the *Bible*.

TRIALS OF TECHNOLOGY

Visitors to Lancaster County are often bewildered at some of the seemingly incongruous sights they see, such as Amish people using cell phones or riding along the county roads as passengers in automobiles.

It is a common idea, although not an entirely accurate one, that the Amish eschew the use of all technology. Instead, Amish communities around the country carefully weigh the impact any given technology will have on their families and on the community itself.

They may allow the use of a cell phone by certain individuals if it is deemed necessary for that person to conduct a successful business in a modern marketplace. But, the phone will be left outside the home so that it could never interrupt family meals, prayer, or visiting time. Automobiles are banned in Old Order communities because these groups view cars as an invention that speeds up life and draws fami-



lies apart—two things the Plain People never want to see happen to their culture. However, they will take rides in cars or hire drivers if it is a matter of common, practical sense to achieve a certain task. And while they may have modern appliances in their homes such as refrigerators, they will usually be propane powered. This fits with the Amish belief that connecting their homes to a public electric supply would be connecting too closely with the world, and that self-sufficiency is to be prized above a state of dependency.

It is sometimes difficult to fathom why a group of individuals would reject the machinery and technological advances that could make their lives easier and their work faster, but this is not a goal of the Amish. Work is not something to get out of the way, life is not meant to be hurried through, and change is not always a good thing. These simple tenets have allowed the Amish to thrive over the years—so much so that their population is expected to double in the next ten years!

TRADITIONAL SCHOOLING

On any given day outside a one-room Amish schoolhouse, you're sure to see rows and rows of scooters and a gathering of children of all ages engaged in one type of ballgame or another. The Amish system of schooling is unique in America and is legally protected by the landmark Supreme Court decision of 1972. This ruling provides federal dispensation for Amish youth to end their education at the eighth grade. They are then free to go on to study the skills and trades that will be more practical to their lives in their own communities.

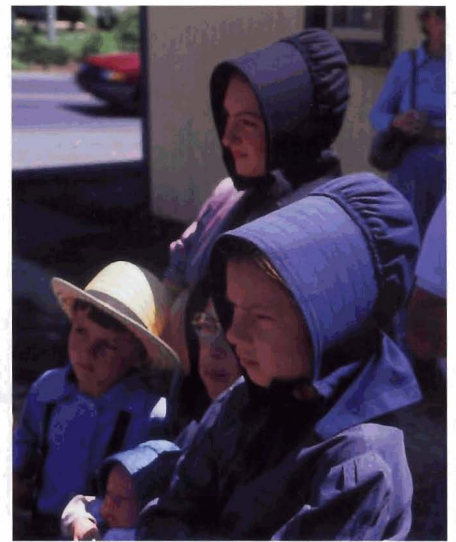
SOCIETY AND GOVERNMENT

The Amish and Mennonites are fully recognized citizens of the United States. As such, they are free to vote in local and national elections, are subject to the same laws as all other citizens, and need to pay taxes as well. The only exception here is that self-employed Amish are exempt from paying Social Security tax for the simple reason that they do not collect Social Security, unemployment, or welfare benefits. The Amish rely heavily on their families and communities to care for them "from cradle to grave." This is also why the Amish do not have health insurance, even though they use modern medical facilities and care. Any Amish person who works for a non-Amish—or "English"—employer must pay Social Security tax like all other Americans.

Due to their strong pacifist natures, the Amish also have Conscientious Objector status in wartime, although they will engage in non-violent activities to help support human beings whose lives are affected by war.



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LIFESTYLE AND TRADITIONS

Amish and Old Order Mennonite men, women, and children are most readily identified by their style of dress. Clothing is designed for practicality and modesty and is not meant to be a sign of status or to highlight individuality.

Women wear dresses made from solid fabrics whose colors often reflect those found in nature. These dresses have long sleeves, descend to below the knee, are covered by a black apron, and are fastened by straight pins or snaps. Buttons are not used because they were once considered highly ornamental. Amish women never cut their hair throughout their entire lifetime and they all wear it in the same style – rolled and put up in a bun on the back of the head. A white prayer covering is always worn with the exception that a young unmarried woman over the age of 16 may wear a black head covering to church to signify that she is single.

The men and boys wear dark suits, suspenders, solid shirts, black socks and shoes, and either straw or black hats. While the Amish do not wear wedding rings, it is easy to tell whether a young man is married or not. If he is clean shaven, this signifies his bachelorhood, while a beard indicates that he is married. Amish men never grow mustaches because it would be reminiscent of the mustaches displayed by the Prussian soldiers who once persecuted them.

Amish youth are free to choose their own partners in marriage, and weddings are typically held on Tuesdays and Thursdays in November, after the harvest.

Most Amish are trilingual, speaking High German in church, a patois of German and English known as Pennsylvania Dutch in their

homes, and English when dealing with people outside of their community, whom they also call "English."

Because the Amish were forced to practice their religion in secret in Europe before they were granted freedom in America, they do not have churches to this day. Instead, Amish church services are held every-other Sunday at a different member's home. The alternating Sunday is known as a "visiting" Sunday when family and friends engage in Bible study, family gatherings, and visits to neighboring parish churches. Both modern and old-order Mennonites do practice their faith in church buildings.

Perhaps the most important thing of all to know about the Amish and Mennonite communities is that, while they have no greater wish than to live their lives in peace, they make no judgments upon the rest of the world. They do not dislike their "English" brethren and in fact will usually be happy to share a smile, a wave, or even a conversation with you if you approach them respectfully and obey their requests regarding no photography—a belief that has its grounding in the biblical passage banning "graven images." Understanding the Amish and Mennonites is the first step toward enjoying the richness of their culture and may one day lead to the formation of a friendship you will treasure for life!