

## **AMISH LIFE IN WESTERN CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY**

(Amish Life in Leon according to Patty Frost along with observations at the Raber's Blacksmith Shop & Mattie Hostetler's Quilt Shop)

**PRESENTED TO THE CHAUTAUQUA COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY**  
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Patty Frost owned the local building supply company along with her husband, Jack Frost, and renovated the Cherry Creek railroad station into The Depot, a gift shop specializing in Amish goods. Patty mentored me in the ways of her Amish neighbors, having lived among them & working with them since they first arrived well over 50 years ago.

Patty was an astute business woman who could see how business patterns were shifting in our rural economies -- the family farms had been declining since the 1970's but tourism was showing promise. An excursion train from Gowanda would bring 200 passengers a trip to The Depot, and the "little gift shop" became a profit center for the Frost enterprises. The Amish goods & Victorian specialties offered drew customers, even some motor coach traffic. About 2000, the excursion trains became sporadic then stopped.

Patty was a great support to me as I opened the Foxe Farmhouse Bed & Barn, a career shift after serving as Executive Director of the Jamestown Area Chamber of Commerce for many years. Now, both of us needed more business and Patty wanted to court the motor coach business specifically, saying "Carol, you like to talk, why don't you do tours of the local Amish?"

Why not? Except that I really didn't KNOW anything about the Amish, so Patty said, "I'll teach you & Jack will make maps of routes to take". So for weeks, after work, I'd pick up Patty at the Building Supply (she never missed a day of work doing books & more for the family business) and we drove the back roads of Leon, following Jack's maps and Patty commenting. One young Amishman she helped to finance his new herd of heiffers; another older couple supplied the beautiful hand woven baskets she sold at The Depot; this neighbors' daughter had just been married; having also farmed all her life, there was a running commentary about crops, canning, butchering -- all the nuances of rural life from someone who lived it.

So, I will reference a number of resources about the Amish that you may wish to explore at the end. But now I would like to read what Patty wrote for me to share with those I toured (must be she wasn't sure that I had taken good enough notes while I was driving... ). Please imagine that you're driving the back roads, similar to those that brought you here today (maybe without the snow... ). We're going by Amish farms like this one, a school house, horses working in the field. From Patricia Frost...

New colonies are started when there is no longer land available or a group becomes dissatisfied with the ways the Bishops are ruling.

Our colony was started in 1949. Noah Shetler came and bought 7 farms. The original farm he bought is still owned by the Shetler family. He sold the other 6 farms to other families that moved in. [On Northeast Road in township of Leon, which today is about 80% Amish]

Farming was the main occupation. Farm work is done with all metal wheeled equipment and horses. No tractors are used. The cows are milked by hand. Women & children help with the milking. They do not have electricity or telephones. Neighborhood rings are formed to help with the harvesting. Each farm sends one or two boys to help with the reaping and setting of oats, and thrashing. The same is done when the corn is ready to be cut & silos filled. The women on that farm are expected to provide meals. Each farmer generally does his own haying. They needed a market for their milk and so built a cheese factory [the Valley View Cheese Factory, Rt. 62, Leon].

The women have large vegetable gardens which is their main source of food. They do a great deal of canning and drying of some fruit. Their cooking & canning is done on wood burning stoves. They have large iron kettles where water is heated for their motor driven washing machines [hooked to gasoline or diesel engines & run off belts like equipment off a tractor's power take-off] and clothes hung outside to dry. Most of them also fill this iron kettle with quart jars when canning & process them. They can get around 30 qt. jars in one iron kettle. Water is also heated in this fashion for bathing. Most of their meats are also canned. Beef & pork are butchered & taken care of themselves. Beef is canned and hams are smoked & cured. Chicken is also canned. The women also sew all their own clothes for the family including dresses, men's pants, shirts and vests. Also jackets and winter coats. The women have black wool shawls which they sometimes buy. There is a large fabric store in our community where they buy their sewing needs. This store also sells socks and underwear. The women also make the laundry soap in 5 gal. pails [lard & lye... and sometimes buy commercial soap from Wal-mart or Aldi's].

The Amish have their own schools. There are 18 in our colony. The teachers have no special training. Grades one through eight are taught. They start school at seven years old and when they are through eighth grade they are done. If they become sixteen and haven't reached eighth grade, they are done. They teach reading, writing, and arithmetic and 2 hours of English each day. Parents are supposed to have taught them English before they start school but this seldom happens. [German is spoken at home & among themselves; English is their 2nd language.] Once school starts there are no holidays except for a week off in the fall to help with the harvest (picking corn). Their school year runs the same as our schools but they get out a month earlier because of no vacations. The Amish support their own schools plus pay school taxes the same as we do. After the girls are out of school they work at home learning from their mother how to be good Amish wives. The older children help care for the younger children as they generally have large families. [Sociologist Donald Kraybill suggests 10 children is an average family size; Mattie & Noah Hostetler have 15 children & as of two weeks ago, 70 grand children. Barbara & Uri Miller only have 2 children. Studies show about

1 in 10 leave the community and VERY rarely does someone join the community, after demonstrating that he/she can work very hard, converse in German, and accept the Amish interpretation of the Bible.] The boys also work at home learning from their father. Some of the boys work out at saw mills, carpenter shops, blacksmith shops, leather shops, etc. Everything they earn goes to their father until they are 21 yrs. old. Even if they marry before they are 21.

[This used to drive Jack Frost crazy -- he'd give a gift to a neighbor Amish boy for his birthday and then tell the boy's father he'd better not take it away. Guess they were still friends, because that whole family hired an English driver so they could pay their respects at the funeral home in Gowanda when Jack passed away.]

There are about 25 church districts in our colony. Each District has their own bishop & minister. Church is held in the home every other week. They rotate the homes with a regular sequence. Each District has their own benches which are moved every two weeks to where church is being held. The women and girls scrub their house from top to bottom before church. Also all buggies are washed on Saturday before church. All food is prepared before Sunday. After church a simple meal of bean soup, bread & the little individual moon-shaped pies is served. Some go home after eating and some stay for the day. For those that stay, a supper is served which would be a regular meal. In the evening a "sing" is held for the young people 16 years & older. This generally lasts well into the night. No instruments. During the meal the men folk eat first, then the women, and then the children. If there is to be a wedding, it is announced at church 2 weeks before the wedding. Any other special things are announced at church before they are held. If someone has broken rules of the church such as drinking alcohol, taken drugs or broken laws they are banned from the church for 2 years so this makes it that they cannot participate in things because it would have to be announced at church. [The Amish believe in banning or shunning, one of the things that distinguishes them from the Mennonites who do not practice shunning.]

The Amish have their own cemeteries and never visit their graves after death. [There are a few in this community -- Young Road off Rt. 62 near the cheese factory & Northeast Road near Stoddard are two examples -- all the same markers, no fancy monuments or epitaphs.]

Mail is used a great deal. They write often to relatives and friends and it is used to notify other colonies of deaths and weddings. [UPS trucks regularly deliver supplies to the various shops as well.] Today they often use our phones to call neighbors of the Amish.

Today there has been many changes in the way some of the Amish live. There is not enough land for all to earn a living farming -- some have turned to the following: greenhouses, quilt shops, wrought iron, furniture, leather & collar shop, clock shops, window shop, steel roofing [and many sawmills -- some just dimension lumber: true 2" x 4" 2x4's, green, not kiln dried; others "adding value" by cutting lumber & making sheds, lawn furniture, playhouses, chicken coops, etc.].

If a barn or house burns, the whole community helps to build it back & replace what they lost. [Example was the horrific fire near Panama last year. Amish & English neighbors came together to clear the debris & rebuild -- excavator friend could barely clear fast enough as the new rafters were going up -- family was back in their rebuilt home in less than one week.

Amish do not believe in insurance; do not pay social security, worker's comp or unemployment insurance but they do not collect it either. They DO pay income taxes, property taxes & school taxes plus maintain their own school houses.]

Weddings are held on Tuesday or Thursday. The wedding service takes place in the home of a neighbor of the bride's family in the morning. The dinner is being made in the bride's family home. A large meal is served and some always stay for supper, too, and into the evening [sometimes a "second seating" is done to accommodate the large families & friends]. The next day it is the bride & groom's job to take care of the benches that have been brought in & all the clean up. They generally stay at the bride's home several days before setting up housekeeping of their own [and some stay on with the new husband working on the farm or the bride's family's business -- hence the large homes, adding on, multiple generations in one house].

All Amish boys and men like to hunt and fish. [May be an understatement... not only is it important to feed their families but genuine pleasure. Buy licenses same as we do. Noah Hostetler often has a new compound or cross bow at the shop in early Oct. before bow season; later shot gun shells & shot guns as 'siting in' from Quilt Shop window... always "hot conversation" at the black smith shop -- the bear that was taken with a bow, etc.]

Amish boys do not serve in the armed forces. They are conscientious objectors. Refuse to sue anyone.

There is no divorce in Amish. If an Amish man leaves the clan, his wife can never marry again as long as he is alive.

Funerals are always held in the home.

Our Amish are from the Old Order of Amish and are very strict. That is the reason they came here so they could live the way they want.

If an Amish lady wants to go shopping she generally leaves early in the morning. She has to harness the horse & hook up to buggy -- take her children with her & drive several miles.

I've read books by Donald Kraybill & other academics researching Amish life, the romantic novels by Beverly Lewis (Amish romance & Amish mystery are a very lucrative genre written by hundreds of authors), Sue Bender's PLAIN & SIMPLE (chronicles of her observations from living with two Amish families after being infatuated with an Amish quilt), and even seen musicals about Amish (imagine a musical number about barn raising... ) but none, to me, capture the essence as well as these few pages by Patty Frost.

What I have learned from fifteen years of taking my horses to Raber's Blacksmith Shop and folks to Hostetler's Quilt Shop and getting the best donuts in the world from the Millers' Baked Good Stand, is that defining "Amish" is not simple. Amish is a religious order that had roots in the reformation movement in Europe in the 1500's with Martin Luther, continuing with "Anabaptist" movements in the 1600's (many groups believed one should be a fully conscious adult to be able to make a life commitment to the church), and finally fleeing religious persecution by coming to the colonies in the early 1700's at the invitation of William Penn who learned of these industrious farmers. The unbelievable suffering of Amish ancestors (thousands were drowned, burned at the stake, thrown in prisons) has forged deep religious beliefs that are part of daily life -- God is everywhere, everyday, not just on Sunday. So "Amish" is a religion, way of life, social order, political order where the bishops also serve as judge & deliver "sentences" (who is shunned, for how long, is someone getting "too fancy", should Amish businesses be allowed to own cell phones?).

Defining "Amish" is further complicated because the communities are evolving and each district, each bishop sets their own rules so even "Old Order" Amish communities may differ. NEW YORK AMISH book discusses the different groups across our state but similar differences exist across the country -- Amish are in nearly every state in the union. One lady in our community regrets that she didn't learn Spanish from her father who grew up in Mexico?!

In Chautauqua Co., we have the large community from Leon who have "spilled" in to our county, in to the Cherry Creek area -- from 1949 to now, that community stretches to Randolph, South Dayton, Little Valley, and is about 2500 to 3000 strong and VERY CONSERVATIVE. Homes are very plain, often need paint outside; beautiful hardwood floors inside, no upholstered furniture, very simple furnishes -- no mirrors, decorations, etc. maybe a few plants, particularly utilitarian herbs, etc.; outhouses; pump for water inside -- truly living as they did in the 1800's. In the 1970's, other families from Ohio (Middlefield area) moved in to the Clymer area and while consider themselves "Old Order", they have phones for businesses, indoor plumbing (but not electricity), propane lights, some big businesses like the steel roofing & siding co. & Auction Pavilion (twice weekly produce/flower auctions in season); ladies wear shorter & lighter colored dresses; in general look more prosperous. Moved because land was cheap -- sold big farms & bought similar here for considerably less. About 2010, another group from Middlefield, Ohio started moving in around Falconer. Back in the 1980's, Amish from New Wilmington, Pa., started colonizing the Mayville area. Later, some Amish from Conewango started settling in the Westfield area. In the last few years many of them have now relocated to the Frewsburg area. Conewango Amish are the most conservative; little less conservative in the Westfield/Mayville area, and even less conservative in the Clymer area -- but none have electricity, still travel mainly by horse & buggy, and work their fields with horses.

It may be easy to romanticize a people who live so simply with such deep religious faith, or demonize them because they live so differently. I've personally found a deep respect for folks who take life moment by moment, traveling at the pace of their own feet or their trotting horse...

THANK YOU.

QUESTIONS?

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