



Facts about the Amish

Who are the Amish? The Amish are a Christian church that traces its roots to the Protestant Reformation in sixteenth-century Europe. They give special emphasis to values such as simplicity, community, separation from the world, and pacifism (which they call nonresistance). They are often referred to as the Plain People because they dress in very distinctive dark clothing (women wear bonnets and men wear horseshoe beards), they use a horse and buggy rather than a car, and their homes aren't connected to the public utility grid for electricity.

Where do they live? The Amish migrated from Europe to North America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Today, no Amish remain in Europe. They live in twenty-eight states and in Canada. About two thirds live in three states: Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Indiana.

How many Amish are there? Their population totals approximately 261,150—over half is under the age of eighteen. A typical Amish family has five children.

What language do the Amish speak? The Amish speak a dialect of German known as Pennsylvania Dutch. English, typically learned in school, is their second language. Amish people often refer to non-Amish as “English,” because they speak the English language.

Do the Amish attend school? Amish children end their formal schooling at the end of eighth grade. Most Amish children attend one- or two-room private Amish schools. An Amish teacher teaches all eight grades. Amish schools play an important role in passing on values, developing friendships, limiting exposure to the outside world, and preserving Amish culture.

How could Lily not have known that her mother was having a baby? The Amish have a very modest culture. In almost all Amish communities, pregnancy is a carefully guarded secret. It is never talked about in front of children. Any preparations for the baby would take place after children are in bed. Even cribs are not set up until after the baby arrives.

Are there different kinds of Amish? Yes! There are over 1900 Amish church districts. Each one has its own style of clothing, buggies, occupations, and rules about technology.

Do the church districts share anything in common? Yes, most Amish groups share core values and common practices: use of horse and buggy for local transportation, rejection of electricity from public utility lines, prohibition against televisions and computers, some type of distinctive dress, beards for men, ending of formal education at the eighth grade, meeting in homes for worship every other Sunday, lay religious leaders, and living in rural areas.

Are all Amish farmers? No. In the past, they were all farmers. But today, like Lily's father who hired out as a carpenter, many Amish support their families by working in small shops, businesses, carpentry, construction, retail stores, roadside stands. Others work for “English-



owned” factories, restaurants, and shops. Farming is important to the Amish, though, and most every Amish family has at least five acres for a garden.

Do the Amish make their own clothing? Yes, just like Lily’s mother, the lady of the house sews the clothes for herself and her family. A lot of sewing is done in the winter, when the garden is sleeping and field harvest is over. The mother makes her coverings and bonnet, dresses and aprons to go over the dress as well as capes. She sews pants and shirts for her husband and boys. Most Amish women use the treadle sewing machine, though some may use battery powered sewing machines. Did it surprise you to read that Lily’s grown-up dress and apron was held together with pins? Actual long straight pins! It might seem odd, but Amish women and girls are used to it. It’s a tradition.

Do the Amish wear colored clothes? They do. The women wear shades of blue, green, red, purple, brown, etc. Most colors are darker tones of the color wheel. Men wear colored shirts; white on Sunday or for funerals or weddings. Pants are navy blue, gray or black. Little boys and girls may wear lighter shades of the above colors.

What is a circle letter? When Lily turned ten, her mother told her she was old enough for her own circle letter. Letter writing is a popular pastime for the Amish. It’s one way they stay in touch with relatives, exchange advice, and maintain community. But what is a circle letter? It’s a communal letter that is added to and then sent on to the next recipient on a list. Circle letters may be maintained by friends, cousins, like Lily, extended families, and groups with similar interests, such as teachers or quilters.

What is Courting? Courting is another word for dating, though it is meant to lead to marriage. Family is at the heart of Amish life and young people take courtship seriously. For many of the Old Order Amish young people, "pairing up" begins at Sunday evening singings. The boy will take the girl home in his buggy. Courting is very private. Most couples don’t want to be teased, so they make a great effort to keep their dates secret.

What is an Amish wedding like? About two weeks before the wedding, the engaged couple is "published" in church and their intentions to marry are made known. Most weddings are held on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays are used as days to prepare for or to clean-up after the wedding. Saturdays are not used as wedding days because it would be breaking the Sabbath to clean-up on the following day, Sunday.

The wedding is held at the home of the bride and the sermon and ceremony will last about four hours, starting at 8:30 a.m. There are no kisses, rings, photography, flowers or caterers. There are usually 200 or more guests. After the wedding there will be a traditional dinner of chicken, filling, mashed potatoes, gravy, ham, relishes, canned fruit, plus many kinds of cookies, cakes and pies. And Sweetheart Pudding!