# The Amish People of Pennsylvania, USA

**Gerald P Higgins**

EACH YEAR thousands of people visit the beautiful rolling countryside of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, USA, to learn something of its fascinating inhabitants, the plain people–mostly Amish & Mennonite–of the Pennsylvania Dutch Country. Observing their traditional farming practices during a recent visit, I was reminded of the way of life in the community in which I grew up near Mohill during the 1930s and '40s.

The Amish are a religious group who live in settlements and follow a literal interpretation of the Bible and an unwritten set of their own rules of order. They maintain simple lifestyles and place emphasis on humility, family, community and separation from the wider world. They drive horses and buggies rather than cars, they do not use electricity or telephones; kerosene lamps light up their homes and places of work. Children are taught to primary level only, in one-room schoolhouses, after which they work on the family farm or business until they marry.

Mennonites were part of the early Anabaptist movement in Europe during the Reformation in the 16th century. Anabaptists believed that only adults who had confessed their faith should be baptized, and that they should separate themselves from society at large. Many early Anabaptists around Europe were put to death as heretics by both Catholics and Protestants, and many others fled for refuge in the mountains of Switzerland and southern Germany. Followers of a Swiss Bishop, Jacob Amman, who broke from the Mennonite church in 1693, became known as Amish. Thus began the Amish traditions of farming, isolation, self-sufficiency and holding worship services in private homes rather than in churches.

In the 18th century the Amish were granted a haven from religious persecution in America by William Penn* and the first sizable group of immigrants arrived from central Europe to Lancaster County in the 1730's as part of Penn's holy experiment in religious tolerance. Today, approximately 80,000 Amish live in 22 states across the USA, 80% of whom are in Pennsylvania, Ohio and Indiana.

Amish communities are small (about 300 people), close-knit and mostly rural. Each has its own degree of orthodoxy and interpretation of rules they call the Ordnung. They practice shunning for any member who breaks these rules. Most people are trilingual; at home they speak a German dialect called Pennsylvania Dutch (or Deutsch), they use High German at worship services and learn English at school. They have preserved a mentality of separation from the world and their inclination is to hold outsiders at bay; they marry within their own community. If you wave, they will not wave back. Silence is regarded as a powerful communications tool; a sign of humility and wisdom. Similarity in dress, house design, carriages etc. and the scorning of modernity and materialism removes any sense of status and speaks of all members of the community being equal.

*Gerald Higgins (on right) and a friend in an Amish farmyard in Pennsylvania.*

Amish worship in their homes rather than in church buildings, as members of the Baptist and Seeker denominations did in the Mohill area when I was growing up. It also brings to mind the House Station Masses held regularly in Catholic homes. Amish ministers and bishops manually work the land, just as a neighbouring farmer, close friend and Baptist bishop did in Curraun many years ago.

The Amish are hard-working industrious people who to a great extent are self-sufficient. They do not accept government subsidies. A typical Amish farm consists of 100 acres of rich fertile ground, 35 milch cows, and five or six horses for working the land and transporting the family. Tractors are not used. Maize, tobacco, wheat, barley, potatoes and vegetables are grown. Cows are sometimes milked by hand though milking machines, not electrically powered, are mostly used nowadays. Families live in stone-built houses and when a son marries, he does not build a new house but adds a wing on to the existing dwelling for himself and his wife. He is also given about 15 acres for his own use. A similar practice was common in Ireland years ago. I am aware of farms with poorer quality land

sub-divided in this manner until the family units were too small to make a decent living. Three generations or a couple of different families sharing one house were not uncommon either.

The Amish don't abide by daylight saving time. They operate on slow time dictated by the sun, getting up at sunrise and going to bed at sunset. This brought back memories of several neighbours round Curraun who never changed their clocks forward in spring, but retained them on wintertime the whole year round. Known as God's time it usually meant they worked from dawn to dark regardless of what the clock indicated.

Amish people wear plain functional clothing, fastened with hooks-and-eyes, not buttons. These distinctive clothes encourage humility and separation from the world. Clothing is not seen as a costume, but as an expression of faith. A married man will grow a long beard in lieu of a wearing a wedding ring. Men wear broad-brimmed black hats, coats without lapels, solid coloured work-shirts and plain-cut dark trousers. Women wear ankle-length plain coloured long-sleeved dresses. Their hair is never cut but shaped in a bun on the back of the head, and covered with a white prayer bonnet if they are married and a black one if they are single. No jewellery is worn.

Some communities go barefoot, and shoes, when they are worn, can be well tattered, reminiscent of my schooldays when in spring and early summer we walked barefoot to Adoon School; our shoes reserved for Sundays and visits to Mohill. Going barefoot was common at the time and not a sign that shoes could not be afforded.

17th century traditions are difficult to maintain in 21st century America. While Amish people want to simply be left alone – photography is forbidden–for the most part, they have accepted the influx of visitors as something they cannot change. Some however have left Lancaster County because of rising land prices and challenges maintaining their orthodox lifestyle. But many now rely on tourism as their source of income. Today, there is a large demand for Amish food preservatives, hand made furniture, crafts, intricately inlaid bed-quilts and organic farm produce.

Since visiting Lancaster County I have learned with interest that one of our own, Desmond Doonan, Gubadruish, Gorvagh, regularly did business with the Amish community while he resided in the United States. He found them reliable, honest and forthright.

* William Penn, a Quaker and sole proprietor of the State of Pennsylvania (granted by Charles11 in lieu of a debt owed to the Penn family), was determined to create a pacifist society which would be a haven for religious toleration and representative government.

*The author, Gerald P Higgins is a native of Curraun, Mohill, which he visits regularly. He now resides in Limerick.*

## Dignity PJ Martin

**The establishment of Credit Unions, which are financial co-operatives and owned by the share holders, created a spin-off which is not quantifiable and this perhaps is due to the confidential nature of the business in which they engage.**

**Apart from the saving facility provided, the loan system provides for all types of productive enterprises which includes the purchase of various types of agricultural equipment, housing, water installation etc. Loans are available for the purchase of cars, insurance, household goods, building and reconstruction but best of all it provides members with a facility for getting rid of old debts which gives people back their dignity and this is most important to ordinary people. Many people in the past could not see themselves getting rid of the debt. Now they can look the merchant 'straight in the face', as they now have the money in their hands. Instead of looking for credit they can look for discount. It is felt that this is one of the greatest benefits, not counting the insurance that goes along with shares and loans.**

**The Ballinamore Credit Union is to be congratulated on extending their premises which provides greater space for shareholders doing business, a Manager/Treasurer's Office, a spacious Board Room, storage space and toilet facilities.**

**The shareholding of this Credit Union, which was established over forty years ago by a courageous group of local people, are now proud of a share-holding of around fourteen million, much of which is on loan to members for all types of productive purposes and community enterprises.**

**Ms Mary Bohan, who was Chairperson of the Board on the occasion of the official opening is to be congratulated on a job well done.**

**Mr Padraic Leydon is to be congratulated on producing a very comprehensive report & history of forty years of credit unionism in the Ballinamore Area.**