

The Amish of Gortner



The Amish community after Church on a Sunday morning.

The Gortner Amish Church

The Amish community located along Route 219 in Gortner, Maryland, has prospered for more than 150 years. Established by German immigrants in the mid 19th century, the community has remained viable by maintaining respect for traditional religious values in an increasingly complex society. Biblical teachings have always been central to the Amish community, and it is sacred scriptures that have guided them through decades of economic and social changes.

Peter Gortner, a German immigrant, is credited with being the founder of the Western Maryland settlement following a purchase of property there in 1849. Mr. Gortner and his wife, Barbara, were Mennonites in Germany but later joined the Amish church after establishing themselves

in the fledgling Maryland community. Peter Gortner Jr. later enhanced the original family farm by constructing grist and saw mills, a store, and a post office that was designated “Gortner” in recognition of the founding family. The settlement’s population increased significantly when the Amish from nearby Aurora, West Virginia, decided to join their brethren by moving to Gortner.

The most important institution within the Gortner Amish community has been the church. The Holy Bible directly guides and influences the values and life styles of members who adhere to teachings developed by Martin Luther, Menno Simons, and particularly Jacob Ammann in the 1500s and 1600s. This requires members to remain faithful by separating themselves from the world, including the use of conveniences such as television, internet service, and automobiles. To be separate from the world is to be removed from social evils and material possessions that weaken and distract ones faith in God. Acquisition of

Parrett County

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material goods that characterizes much of modern American culture has been avoided by the Amish.

Those unfamiliar with the Amish believe they are uniform in lifestyle, including dress apparel and modes of transportation. Such is not the case because each congregation has autonomy to interpret certain teachings. The Ordnung, or Ordinances, provide the basic principles that help apply biblical teachings to contemporary life styles. Application of the principles varies among communities depending on the views of the congregations. Once decisions are made by the congregation, however, members are expected to obey.

While there is typically diversity among communities, the Gortner Amish are unique because they welcome Old Order minded and New Order minded members within one church body. Old and New Order Amish hold differing views on the use of electricity, dress styles, Sunday School, participation in mission work, Bible study, and the use of certain conveniences. Amish congregations are typically



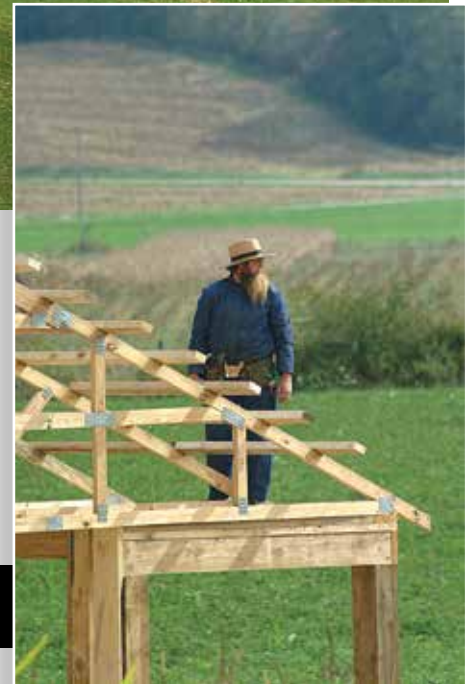


small, uniform in practices, and centered on bi-weekly services held in members' houses. The more inclusive approach taken by the Gortner church has created the

largest Amish congregation in the United States; seventy-one households regularly attend worship services in their church located on Mason School Road.

Above:
The Reuben
Peachey farm.

Inset: Menno
Brennamien
working at a
barn raising.



Garrett's Amish Today

Diversity within the Gortner congregation began to appear during the 1960s when health regulations were implemented by the state of Maryland governing the production and distribution of Grade A milk. Old Order Amish refrained from using electricity that would be required to operate automatically timed and temperature controlled dairy equipment. The traditional method of collecting milk in two handled metal containers was regulated out of business. Since most Amish owned dairy cattle, the use of electricity was vigorously debated because acceptance would influence their traditional lifestyle and occupations.

Those in favor of electrical service held the view that its use was vital to their livelihood. One long time church

member recalled the discussions. "Those favoring the use of electricity believed that if we couldn't make a living on the farm, we would be losing a place to raise our children. It wasn't that we welcomed the change; it was more of a necessity. Farming is important to the Amish because the work we do there is a good way to teach children responsibility."

Another member holding Old Order views considered the issue differently and expressed concerns that electrical service would bring the Amish closer to modern conveniences and a worldlier lifestyle. He stated, "I told them if electricity came, it wouldn't stay in the barn for long. And it didn't. The change wasn't necessary for me."



Faced with the economic realities of agri-business and reduced opportunities to purchase land, some Amish entered nontraditional occupations including, carpentry, baking, masonry, and construction. Most Amish, however, chose to remain in farming and accepted the use of diesel tractors to increase efficiency while their commercial brethren embraced telephones and fax machines to communicate with customers. Acceptance of electric ovens, lights, and refrigerators were also gradually integrated into some Amish communities even though they were not essential for economic survival.

Gortner's adaptations to contemporary life have evolved in a systematic manner. According to Curtis Duff, a member of the Gortner Church, "We understand that changes will occur. At the same time, we hold certain principles as being important to us. We use those principles to blend the past with the present. Church and family are important to the Amish, so we strive to maintain a simple lifestyle keeping focused on them."

Defining the meaning of a simple lifestyle has become increasingly difficult because of the proliferation of electronic devices that enhance business operations while fostering social interaction; one is not easily separated from the other. Recent discussions focusing on cell phones

Above: Schrock Equipment of Oakland, MD.

Inset: Women from the Sewing Circle gather at the Pleasant Valley Community Center to make comforters for CAM (Christian Aid Ministry).

Most members of the Amish community eventually agreed to accept the limited use of electricity. In the spirit of cooperation, the church did not divide into two districts but instead elected to become a New Order congregation that would embrace Old and New Order minded members.

State regulations were not the only cause for change in the community. One of the most pressing concerns was figuring out how to be competitive with limited crop yields. In recent times the American economy experienced small farm consolidations leading to agri-businesses and more efficient operations.



Amish students are joined by family and friends for a day of fellowship during “Family Day” at Swan Meadow School.

could be considered an extension of past conversations concerning telephone use. While most Old Order Amish refused to embrace the devices, others sometimes used a communal telephone or an English (non Amish) neighbor’s private phone. As one member of the local church stated, “The Amish were using phones that belonged to their neighbors, so using telephones was a practical change for the Amish. As long as we don’t compromise biblical principles, we are not opposed to the phone service. The device was never the issue; it was more of a concern about what the device might bring.”

Acceptance of the telephone has been eclipsed by more recent discussions concerning internet service. According to a resident, “Our guiding principle is whether the device will promote or destroy a sound Christian life. We have to visualize what technology will do to our children. We know our children will find things on the internet that are not good, so we do not allow it.”

Internet service has grown to affect many aspects of contemporary life. One congregation member recently decided to change occupations because internet service was his only means of accessing a spare parts inventory and related correspondence for his business. Conscience and

biblical principles were paramount factors in reaching the decision that was brought before the church.

Devices that are considered useful for work or personal safety are not a problem for church members, nor is it correct to assume the Amish automatically reject all new technology. “Cell phones and fax machines have gained acceptance in recent years for business purposes and for use by farmers who are often working alone in the fields. Mennonite historian John Hostetler correctly summarized our approach toward new technology when he stated the Amish want to control technology, not have technology control the Amish,” stated Mr. Duff.

According to Mr. Duff, “The necessity for change has affected most Amish communities because farming has been changing for years. Our family recently bought additional land to expand but in some Amish communities, additional land isn’t available, and the existing farms have been subdivided for two or three generations, so they can no longer be divided. Cottage industries have developed, and we have some of that process in Gortner.”

Recent changes have involved the application of sophisticated agricultural skills and methods, such as Yoder’s Tomatoes where family members utilize hydroponic technology to nurture the fruit. The cultivation of plants grown in nutrient solutions defies the traditional image of a rural landscape.

Amish and Mennonite owned businesses in the Gortner area now include a variety of enterprises: Elijah Bender’s Farrier Service, Yoder’s Fabrics, Paul Yoder’s Pioneer Seeds, Blue Ribbon Concrete, Schrock’s Equipment, Pleasant Valley Dream Rides, Pleasant Valley Greenhouse, Beachy’s Barns, Sugar and Spice Bakery, Valley View Country Store, Albark Kennels, Eastern Horizon Enterprises, Kinsinger Central Tractor, Matt’s Diggin’s, Mt. Valley Produce, Ridgidply Rafter, Yoder’s Tire, Lynndale Greenhouse,



Children at play (clockwise from left): Joanna Beachy, Alivia Swartzentruber and Eric Swartzentruber.

**Inset below:
Susannah Kauffman.**



Kards by Karen, CN Metals, Pleasant Valley Custom Butchering, Sam Yoder's Produce, and Mark's Welding. A survey of all Gortner businesses reveals that most are service related, thereby emphasizing the diverse economic environment of the region.

Change has not diminished volunteer efforts that have been a hallmark of Amish life. The Gortner Amish actively support the Christian Aid Ministry (CAM), a non-profit umbrella organization for conservative Mennonite and Amish churches that responds to natural disasters, supports overseas missions, and coordinates a number of relief efforts that minister to the physical and spiritual needs of individuals. Gortner Garment Charities, located in the old Amish church building, annually accounts for more than 2,000 bags of clothing that are directed to needy individuals by CAM. The volunteer efforts are accomplished quietly and without material rewards. As one church member explained, "If people see God in your life, they will ask about Him."

Quilting and sewing also remain a vibrant part of the women's community. The "Sewing Circle," formed in the 1960s, involves a monthly gathering at the Pleasant Valley Community Center where creativity is combined with fellowship. Daughters typically learn the quilting skills following the 8th grade of formal schooling and may participate in the sessions. Quilts may be offered as wedding

gifts, donated for benefit purposes, treasured as family keepsakes, or sold to provide money for making comforters for CAM.

More common than quilting is the crafting of comforters, a type of two layered blanket typically made with insulating materials between the fabric layers. The layers are fastened in place by "comfort knots" that also help to form

a decorative pattern. While quilting takes time and enhanced skills, producing comforters is faster and more easily taught. According to a Sewing Circle member, “On a good day we can complete 15-20 comforters. We work on the comforters for the purpose of donating them through CAM to needy people in the Balkans countries and other locations. We only quilt when there is a request. Most of the time our Sewing Circle works on comforters and baby bundles.” Baby Bundles are packages also donated to CAM that contain blankets, diapers, shirts, and other materials that a new mother would typically need for a new born child.

Frolics, an Amish term for volunteer work gatherings, are ongoing and recognized by the general public when barn raisings occur. Less labor intensive frolics occur regularly and draw volunteers from Somerset, Pennsylvania, and other nearby churches.

Amish traditions have been well documented in an oral history project completed by the students and staff at Swan Meadow School in 2008. “Piece of Quilt of Gortner,” a 98 page booklet, is available for reference use at public libraries in Allegany and Garrett Counties and the Swan Meadow School located along Route 219 in Gortner.

Successfully adapting to changing realities has meant growth for the local Amish community and members

across the country. The Amish population is currently doubling every twenty years, thereby accelerating the move into nontraditional occupations. And there is no reason to believe the growth rate will slow. Balancing traditional values and economic survival in the modern world will require continued vigilance, thoughtful discussions, and application of biblical principles. The Gortner Amish Church has always met those challenges in the past and continues to embrace them when looking to the future. “We are used to change, and we act on it as a community. That is how we grow and prosper,” summarized Mr. Duff.

“The Amish of Garrett County” and accompanying photographic images were prepared and published with the cooperation and approval of the Gortner Amish community.



Below: Students of Swan Meadow School enjoy a game of baseball during “Family Day.”

Right page (clockwise from top left): Martha Yoder, Elsie Peachey, owner, and Rachel Kauffman prepare goodies at Sugar and Spice Bakery; Ray Miller of Pleasant Valley Dream Rides with one of his young colts; Ruth Yoder of Yoder’s Fabrics; Jason Bender; and Pleasant Valley Greenhouse with its summer bonnet of petunias.



