

A Story of the Amishmen

By HAL BORLAND

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Down here in Pennsylvania's Amish country almost every one is thinking about the Amish migration to Maryland. It isn't really a migration—only a few families are moving—but Lancaster Countians wonder what will happen if the venturers find hospitable soil, climate and officials down there. They wonder if more Amish will follow. For the Amishmen are master farmers as well as members of a quaint religious sect, and their forefathers were this district's first settlers, when Pennsylvania was still an English colony. Lancaster County could ill afford to lose them.

David Stoltzfus was asked about it, and Dave said, "Yes, they're going, they've bought seven farms down there and they've already plowed and planted for next year's harvest. Now they're fixing up houses and building barns."

"Will they make a go of it?"

Dave ran broad fingers through his long gray hair. "The Amish," he said, "are good farmers." Then he smiled. "I don't know, that's sandy soil down there. It leaks. Fertilizer doesn't stay in it. But maybe they'll make out. It all depends."

Dave—they call him Gap Dave, for there are hundreds of Stoltzfuses and scores of Daves, but he comes from down near the town of Gap—Dave is not dogmatic about such matters. He is an Amishman, one of the strong men of the faith, a leader among his people. He is a prosperous farmer, with rich land, good livestock, strong sons, the respect of all who know him.

He sat in his wife's well-kept kitchen, the lamplight turning his gray beard to silver; he is a bull of a man, with deep blue eyes set in the broad-jawed face of an Old Testament leader. And at his left, near the gleaming coal range, sat Lydia, his wife, watching their eighteen-month-old baby girl as she showed the visitor her doll. Mother and daughter were dressed alike, in plain green dresses. But Lydia's sleek blue-black hair was half hidden beneath her black kerchief; the baby's blond hair was tucked up in baby pig-tail braids.

"Why are they going, Dave? Is it for more land?"

"Partly. Land's high here. But mostly it's the schools."

For years the Lancaster Amish have sent their children to one-room country schools and when they finished with eight grades they were finished with formal education. Two years ago a consolidated school was built with PWA funds in East Lampeter Township and the one-room schools were closed. The Amish protested at sending their children to the big school by bus and finally won their point, but last Spring the issue was revived. When

an Amish delegation carried the matter to Governor James he is said to have told them, "Go home and behave yourselves or I'll pull out your beards." Even in levity, such a response did not go well with the Amishmen.

"Will they have their own schools in Maryland?"

Dave nodded. "The Governor has agreed," he said.

"But why is the school matter so important, Dave?"

"A boy goes through the eighth grade," he said. "He learns what he needs. He is fourteen when he is through, old enough to work. If he goes through high school, that's four more years. Business school is three more still. By then it's too late to start. A farmer should start before that. Otherwise, he doesn't learn to work. A farmer has to work." Dave smiled.

"And none of your people are ever professional men, doctors or anything like that?"

Dave shook his head. "We're farmers. We work on the land. It's an old way of life. A good way."

All through this part of Lancaster County there are Amishmen. Drive the back roads and you see hundreds of rich farms with huge barns and rambling houses, sometimes two and three houses joined together where father and mother, a married son or two, perhaps a grandmother, live their own lives in separate establishments. Well-painted barns and houses, well-tilled fields. Amish farms, with no telephone lines leading to them, no electric lines. And no tractors in the yards, no automobiles. Such things are ostentatious; unnecessary for good life in the old faith.

Go to an Amish farm, if you are willing to forget weird, impossible tales of hexery and superstition. Go as a tolerant friend and you will find kindly, tolerant people. Their ancestors came here more than two hundred years ago to farm these hills and valleys. Gap Dave is of the seventh generation here. "My people came from Berne, Switzerland, in 1732," says Dave. "And after them came the Zooks and the Kings and the others."

The records of Dr. Herbert H. Beck, president of the Lancaster County Historical Society, indicate that the year was 1725, but seven years are of no matter in a span of more than two centuries. They came, they settled, and from eighteen families have sprung perhaps 5,000 Amishmen in this district—5,000 people with only eighteen family names; one understands why they are known as Black Jake and Wild Abe and Old Stephen.

Their ancestors were Mennonites, far back, followers of Menno Simon, who founded a faith in Holland and Germany in the Fifteen Thirties. But his following divided, and in 1620 Jacob Ammon rallied a group of Swiss who would hold to the old religious forms and moral codes when others were deserting them. Ammon's followers increased and spread into the near-by German Palatinate. They met persecution, and when William Penn offered haven in his American woodland to persecuted peoples everywhere the first

of them crossed the Atlantic. From Pennsylvania, groups of them have gone to Ohio and Nebraska and the Dakotas—to many States and even to Canada. But this remains their homeland, the soil where first they put down roots in the New World.

For more than two centuries here the Amish have held to a strict religious code and a way of life that has many archaic aspects. Their clothes are cut from patterns that were old when their forefathers came to America—the women's high-necked, long-skirted dresses, the men's plain trousers and black shirts, their long, cape-collared coats, their broad, flat-brimmed black hats. The children's clothes are miniatures of those of their elders. There are no buttons on the dresses and none on the men's coats; pins or hooks and eyes take their place. There is a tale that Amishmen believe the devil can hang evil on a button, but like so many other tales it is untrue; the Amish had never even heard it.

The church is their continuing source of guidance. Yet they have no church building. These are House Amish, the steadfast keepers of the old faith. There is a group called Church Amish, or Gay Amish, who have simple meeting houses and even own automobiles—plain cars with their chromium trim hidden under black paint; but they are dissenters. The House Amish gather each Sunday at some farmer's home, or in the well-swept loft of his huge barn if it is Summer, and there a lay preacher leads the service. The preacher is one among them, a farmer wise in the church law and the Bible. He is one of several nominated for the post by the congregation, but his final call is by lot, where God can have a part in the matter.

The service itself is in old high German. The congregation hear the Word of God as it stands in the Book. They sing hymns handed down from mouth to ear for perhaps fifteen generations. There may be public confession of sin or error, which cleanses the soul. But when the service is ended and the Book is closed, there is laughter and feasting and talk in English or in Pennsylvania Dutch, which is neither English nor German but a mixture of both.

Amishmen have no need for courts of law and they avoid oath-taking. They are confirmed pacifists, and it is said their beards and clean-shaven upperlips date from the time when Europe's professional soldiers shaved their chins and wore flowing mustaches as a badge of their military profession. They settle their own differences with common sense and the Word of God. Disputes with outsiders are virtually unknown. If in public they are a black-clad people who shun ornament and ostentation, cling to horses and buggies in an automobile age, object to modern schooling and shun all publicity, at home they are a hospitable folk, kindly, fun-loving, fond of color, proud of their families, proud of their homes and their farms.

And Lancaster County is proud of the Amish and their farms. This is a county of notably good farms and farmers, and it has a large population of

Plain People of many sects—Mennonites of several degrees, some Dunkards, as well as the Amish. But mention farming here and you are referred to the Amish as outstanding.

They grow corn, wheat, tobacco, potatoes, in regular rotation. They have the best of farming tools, and they treat them well. But the tractor has no place in their economy. "Tractors," as one Amishman put it, "don't make manure and never foal."

The home is the women's province. Big houses, to accommodate big families; big kitchens, big pantries, big cellars, all well-provisioned. There is color in the home. The women wear color there, green and blue and pink and plum. There is color in the linoleum and the rugs, lovely color and artistry in chair covers and table runners, color in treasured glassware and china. And there is priceless colonial furniture in many an Amish home, heirlooms with a history. Kerosene or gasoline mantles light the room and coal does the cooking, but occasionally one finds a "Summer" stove that uses bottled gas.

Grandmother Zook lives in her own home beside such a big house, the house of her daughter, Priscilla, and her son-in-law, Elam, and their children. Grandmother's house is smaller, fitted to her needs, but it is a house apart, her own. She sat beside a window working on a cross-stitch chair cover when the visitor entered. Her blue eyes twinkled behind her spectacles as she made him welcome. Her white hair is softly yellowed with 83 years, but she is yet young, although she has eight children, thirty grandchildren, ten great-grandchildren.

There is talk of Amish customs. What of the blue gate, so widely believed to indicate the presence of a marriageable daughter? "I had five marriageable daughters," says grandmother, "and I never had a blue gate. They all got married, too!" The legend seems to have sprung from the fact that years ago an Amish Bishop moved to a new farm and painted his gate blue as a guide to his friends. But today blue gates are as rare as telephones in the Amish country-side.

Talk turns to other matters. Elam asks about the World's Fair; he would have liked to see the foreign exhibits. He talks of the European situation. It's bad. Particularly Finland. Why can't they let a quiet, peaceful little nation like that live its own life? Perhaps there is no thought of parallels, but grandmother looks out the window and asks, "If you had a farm like this, would you want to move off to Maryland?" She sighs. Only a few families are going to Maryland. "It is good here," she says.

And that's what most of the Amishmen seem to think. They are still buying farms for their sons, even at \$200 an acre. They are preparing for next Summer's crop, and looking to the long years ahead. The many clans of Stoltzfuses, the Zooks, the Kings, the Lapps, the Rennos, the Reihls, they continue the old way, the good way, on the familiar farmland.