



TIME STOOD STILL

A FEW DAYS WATCHING THE AMISH WORLD IN MOTION.

WORDS & IMAGES CHARLES ANDERSON



ITS ENGINE ROARED and rattled in the midst of sullen middle American wheat fields drowned golden in the midsummer sun. And then, in a moment, the violence, the noise and the unwantedness was gone – its rattle slowly overlapping with the clipping hoofs of carriage-hauling horses, manned by men wearing beards of a different age.

“They’ve always been trouble,” Mary-Ann Shrock said, standing at the edge of her property. “There has been more than a few almost-accidents.”

The woman of 80 shook her head and lamented the coming of technology, of cars and combine harvesters. Life was easier, she said, not having to worry about things like electricity, the internet or the Democratic primary. She had heard of all those things, of course, but only in passing. It was better not to question their existence too much.

With wrinkled hands, she brushed down her thick purple smock, forced a smile underneath a white cap and, with wrinkled lips, exhaled slowly.

As it was in the beginning and ever shall be: “Come from among them and be ye separate.”

One line tucked into the book of Corinthians. One line that formed the basis of a people bent on living within the world but still quite apart from it. If they could. But these days life for the Amish seemed harder than ever. The earth and its people had moved on from the old way of living. The “English” world – as it was known to them – was best left alone. But being truly separate? They would try their best.

Amish population doubles. It is one of the fastest-growing demographics in the country – all descended from the 200 original settlers. They were, and are, part of America’s many disparate groups of migrants, all of whom came seeking the same thing: freedom.

Mary-Ann had been born just down the road and into that promise. Like all youngsters she was educated in a small room in a house owned by a community member until secondary school age. Then she was pulled out to learn more practical skills, as allowed by a Supreme Court judgement guaranteeing the freedom to practise the religion of her forebears.

It wasn’t long after that period of her life that Mary-Ann met the man she was to marry. Then she moved a farm or four over. It had a big home – more than room enough for their growing brood. The property was so large that when one of her sons also came of age he built a house right there on the same land to raise his own children.

Mary-Ann walked around the plot, pointing out the farm, a group of stray cats that had made its home in the barn and the donkey named Jenny that would scare away coyotes in the winter. A small boy, of about seven, appeared from a wooden building. He wore grey trousers, a white shirt and his blonde hair in a curious haircut which sat on his head like a fluffy bowl. He spoke to her quietly in German before making himself scarce. He was one of Mary-Ann’s 10 grandchildren.

“COME FROM AMONG THEM AND BE YE SEPARATE.” ONE LINE FROM CORINTHIANS THAT FORMED THE BASIS OF A PEOPLE BENT ON LIVING WITHIN THE WORLD BUT STILL QUITE APART FROM IT.

They came in the mid-18th century on a ship called the Charming Nancy. They arrived in Pennsylvania and slowly spread west and south. They were Germans who followed the path to immortality as dictated by Jakob Amman – an Anabaptist leader who believed his followers should forsake the world for the word of God. Misers should turn from fornication and drunkards from drunkenness, he wrote, or they will not inherit the kingdom. Anything that manifested pride would be banned – long hair on men, shaved beards and clothing that was anything other than plain. His followers listened to him and took his name to define their community: The Amish.

Those who broke the rules could be excommunicated. Those that drifted from the way of life would likely be shunned. They could come back if they realised the error of their ways. Their god, apparently, valued calmness and composure and rejected avarice and arrogance.

They came with many others who fled Europe’s high taxes, poverty, religious persecution and military conscription. They settled and populated and now this county boasts a population of about 2,000 amid the more than 200,000 Amish sprinkled throughout the greater United States.

Here in Arcola, Illinois, it began with a three families in the summer of 1865. They grew quickly: every 23 years the

The shop signs tell you first. Head into any Amish community around the country and the signs will bombard you with furniture makers, with quilt-makers, cabinet makers and antique lamp stores. The Amish do commerce.

It was those skills that built and furnished Mary-Ann’s home from the ground up, a two-storey wooden white home with a small verandah and an impressive garden. It wasn’t until after her husband died that the whole place burned to the ground.

An act of God, she called it. He worked in mysterious ways. Fire investigators would surmise, however, it was a faulty gas lamp hanging in the kitchen that sparked the blaze. Mary-Ann did not own any insurance. She did not even believe in it. She had no social security number or bank account. These were some ways she and her people retreated from the world.

There had been challenges before. In the late 19th century Amish communities met to figure out how to strengthen their ties which were already weakening in the presence of the new world. Instead of bringing them together the meetings pushed them apart into differing factions that would decide independently how to live their lives. During World War II there was conflict between those that chose to fight and the Amish that resisted. For Mary-Ann, the challenges had been less philosophical than manifest.



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In the days following the fire, appraisers came by to assess the damage. Deacons and bishops would follow and calculate how much man power they would need to resurrect her life.

Within a few months, the place was rebuilt with hardly a dime from her. The community provided the money they had from selling furniture, and quilts and cabinets. They provided their precious working hours – dictated by the rise and fall of the sun. It was all pooled and yes, Mary-Ann said, God provided.

It was a fine house now. There were no light switches. No ceiling fans, despite being the height of summer. But it was cool. High ceilings and stone floors kept the temperature bearable. There was a loom and panels embroidered with psalms and commandments. And sitting in the corner, atop a recently finished quilt, was a newspaper. The front page of *The Budget* featured, among others, a raft of information from Versailles, Missouri.

“Beautiful spring weather. Sun, cloudy and light showers interspersed... Prayer meeting bible school reports were given.”

The newspaper was in its 124th year. Its tagline: “Serving the Amish communities throughout the Americas.”

The Budget was the source for most of this population’s knowledge of the outside world. There were even some based in Guatemala and London. Most of this knowledge simply told of the weather in various areas about the country, and who had married, who had children, who had died. It was about the most important thing – the family. What else was there to know? What else was important?

As the years toiled on from those early times, things had changed. Cars came and clogged the roads usually reserved for horse-drawn buggies. Neighbours bought combine harvesters to farm their fields. The economies of scale became too stretched to make a living off the land.

Increasingly, farmers began renting out their land to “English” farmers who could make an easier profit from toiling on the land. But as the farming life became harder, in Illinois, many Amish turned to furniture and to tourism and to home-style cooking.

The tourists came in shiny metal vehicles and looked in their side view mirrors as they passed the buggies. They would see families all sitting on the front seat, a father holding the bridle, perhaps two children sitting next to him – making their way to or from work. Some of those tourists would try poking their cameras out at speed to grab a shot of these historical curiosities. The Amish did not believe in photographs of their faces. They would be, it was decided, contrary to the commandment – “Thou shalt worship no graven image.”

The graven image of Marius Helmuth toddled out of a white, wood-paneled house lined with blue/grey shirts and sheets hanging in the midday sun. At the roadside stood a sandwich board. “Sarah’s Home Cookin’,” it read.

Marius, a tall man with belly protruding from underneath blue flannel dungarees, extended a chubby hand and ushered the guests inside.

At a long rectangular table on a black stone floor sat the others. They had come from around the region – all drawn by the novel notion contained within the four-word advertisement: “Lunch with the Amish.”

Marius and his wife Sarah had been hosting such lunches for some time. It was how they earned most of their living. Sarah was, among many things, a cook. She served fried chicken and meatballs with plum sauce. There was freshly baked bread with homemade sweet peanut butter. For dessert, three kinds of pie.

One guest swore they heard a food processor churning in the back. No, Sarah, answered sweetly. All by hand, she said. But still, the churning continued.



Marius knew the spiel. He was aware of the misconceptions out there about the Amish. That there was a fanatic streak to them, he joked. He understood, their dress and way of life seemed foreign and strange.

He mentioned a film, *Rumspringa*, about a group of young Amish let loose on New York City.

The word itself meant literally “running around” – a period in an adolescent’s life where they broke away from the church to experience the “English” world. When they returned they would decide if they wanted to continue with the old way and get Baptised. If they did not, they would be excommunicated. Marius alluded to some of the more nefarious activities these Amish adolescents got up to as “fantasy”. The film featured sexual content, drugs and alcohol. That was not what *Rumspringa* was about, Marius said.

But of course he had not actually seen the film. How could he?

His own daughter had recently married but had definitely not engaged in “running around”. The rules varied between communities. Some more progressive Amish would encourage it. Others forbade it. Some would only speak German and hardly allow any clues of the evolution of mankind’s way of life to permeate their own.

In this environment, Amish courting and socialising operated on a sort of pre-technological social network known as a “circle letter”. One person would write a letter and send it on to another friend. That friend would add to it and send it on to another. And so it went until it came back to the original sender. This was how one of Marius’s daughters met her husband and then, with help from the family, moved a farm or four over.

Over an hour of lunch, it became clear that the church followed more the diktats of its own ministers than it did of the Bible. Living in the “old way” was, of course, relative. Each community made their own rules as to what the “old way” actually constituted.

All church members in Arcola had a gas-powered fridge. They usually had a telephone tucked away in the back so not to distract them from the day-to-day things that had to

be done. It had an answering machine. Some, like Marius, also had access to a 12-volt battery which was hooked up to a fan to temper some of the mid-summer fury. Above all, he said, the restrictions were not meant to impose suffering.

He answered questions patiently and with the air of someone who had answered many questions like them over the years.

The way of life had solidified the community, he said, interlocking his fingers over his belly. He had refused most of the more delicious treats Sarah offered around the table. He had lost about 40kg over the last year.

The technological revolution had solidified the Amish existence, not weakened it, he insisted.

As the world grew up around them, the Amish took comfort and passion in their difference. Yet even they could not isolate themselves completely.

They were permitted to travel by motorcar, so long as it was driven and owned by someone else. Often they would pay an “English” neighbour to drive them somewhere if the distance was labourious. Marius had even been across the country to California by Greyhound bus.

They could, technically, even watch television as long as it was not theirs, Marius acknowledged. But “technically”, he insisted, did not mean they actually tested those rules.

On the way out, Marius and Sarah thanked the guests and implored them to sign the book at the entrance of the house. There were names from across the country. All of them gushed about the food and about how the hospitality was wonderful. “Fascinating insight,” more than one wrote.

Then the guests, filled with pie and chicken, hauled themselves into their motor cars and, under the power of internal combustion engines, passed horse-drawn buggies – manned by faces hidden under broad brim hats. In the rear view mirror, Sarah and Marius could be seen waving. Those tourists, if only for an afternoon, piggybacked into the novelty of the past. But in their way, the Amish did the same – resisting the novelties of the future but enjoying some of its forbidden fruits all the same. ▽