

# Probing Question: Do we romanticize the Amish?

April 18 2011, By Melissa Beattie-Moss

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The clip clopping of horse hooves on a country lane. Barefoot children in straw hats and bonnets. Black buggies, barn raisings, and tables laden with pickles, casseroles and shoofly pie. These are the images that come to most of our minds when we picture the Amish. The "Plain Folk" (as they refer to themselves) have captured the popular imagination of mainstream America for over a century, enchanting many with their simple garb, rural lifestyle and avoidance of modern technology.

But is this an accurate view of the group, or do we romanticize the Amish?

"Since the 1970s, an idealized stereotype has emerged, where Amish

people are seen as products of a happier time when individuals lived in harmony with one another, the earth, and God," said Julia Spicher Kasdorf, a Penn State English professor and poet whose work includes research and reflections on Amish and Mennonite life.

Kasdorf said the current appetite for all things Amish is consistent with the myth of a Golden Age. "We like to believe that life was simpler, better, safer before we fell into the evils of modernity, and that the Amish haven't fallen yet."

Swiss Anabaptist leader Jacob Ammann founded the first Amish church in 1693, believing that stricter separation from the world was needed for spiritual renewal. By the early 18th century, his followers had established themselves in Pennsylvania. Most of the approximately 250,000 Amish across North America today -- the majority in rural Ohio, Indiana and Pennsylvania -- share a common Swiss-German heritage, although the name "Amish" (coined in honor of Ammann) is used to mean a member of the church fellowship, rather than as an ethnic label.

One aspect of stereotyping Amish people, said Kasdorf, is our tendency to see them as one homogenous group. In reality, there's no single entity we can call "the Amish," she says. Instead, there are up to two-dozen different sub-groups, each with varying degrees of conservatism. For instance, the Beachy Amish and Amish Mennonites are permitted to own automobiles and use public utility electricity, whereas most Old Order and New Order Amish groups use horse-and-buggy transportation and rely on gas-powered lighting and appliances, and diesel generators to charge batteries.

Not all stereotypes of the Amish are positive, reminds Kasdorf. Joseph Yoder, an Amish-born writer who lived from 1872 to 1956, sought to counter what he saw as unrealistic portrayals of his cultural heritage. Kasdorf--who has Amish roots and was born in the same Pennsylvania

valley as Yoder--has analyzed his life and work in her book, *Fixing Tradition: Joseph W. Yoder, Amish American*. "The negative stereotypes Yoder addressed in 1940 still persist today, I think," says Kasdorf. "Amish people as a group are regarded as ignorant and hardworking as mules; the men are harsh patriarchs and women submissive drudges; and in general the lifestyle is not viewed as an enviable one."

Positive and negative images are conveyed in the news media as well. When Amish leaders extended forgiveness to the family of a schoolhouse shooter in Nickel Mines, Pennsylvania, many across the country were moved and inspired -- but many also cringed at stories about Amish "puppy mill" operators charged with animal abuse. As with any stereotype of a cultural minority, said Kasdorf, "typical ideas of the Amish exaggerate one distinctive aspect or value of the culture and either regard it as overly negative or positive."

Ironically, an entire tourism industry has sprung up around Amish communities, as the nostalgic appeal of their peaceful lifestyle attracts thousands of tourists. Today, tour buses share the streets with horses and buggies in places like Lancaster County, as modern Americans rush in to get a taste of the simple Amish life -- and an order of shoofly pie to go.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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