

Amish newspaper succeeds the old-fashioned way

17 August 2009, By MEGHAN BARR , Associated Press Writer



In this April 15, 2009 photo, The Budget publisher Keith Rathbun is shown in his office in Sugarcreek, Ohio, as he works on the weekly Amish newspaper. Nearly 20,000 people across the U.S. and Canada subscribe to The Budget, a 119-year-old publication that remains the dominant means of communication among the Amish, a Christian denomination with about 227,000 members nationwide who shun cars for horse-drawn buggies and avoid hooking up to the electrical grid. (AP Photo/Kiichiro Sato)

(AP) -- The writers' grievances came in the form of angry letters, carried over bumpy rural roads to the newspaper office serving the Amish community.

In a world where news still travels at a mail carrier's pace, the farmers, preachers and mechanics responsible for filling The Budget threatened to go on strike if the 119-year-old Amish weekly went ahead with its plan to go online.

The writers, known as scribes, feared their plainspoken dispatches would become fodder for entertainment in the "English," or non-Amish,

world. The editors hastily rescinded the plan shortly after proposing it in 2006, and today, only local news briefs appear on The Budget's bare-bones Web site.

"My gosh, they spoke in volume," said Keith Rathbun, publisher of The Budget, a [newspaper](#) mailed to nearly 20,000 subscribers across the U.S. and Canada. "I'd be a fool to not pay attention to it."

Far from impeding the newspaper's success, shunning the Internet actually solidified its steadfast fan base.

As other newspapers increasingly shed staff and reduce the frequency of their print editions in the face of growing competition from the Internet, The Budget is plodding along comfortably in the [recession](#).

Subscriptions, which cost \$42 a year and account for most of the newspaper's revenue, have dropped by just a few hundred in the past year. Advertisers - who are mostly Amish - are not fleeing to the Internet. And plans are in the works to add a couple of reporters to The Budget's editorial staff of about a dozen people.

Rathbun's most pressing concern isn't the threat of the Internet, but ensuring that his readers, scattered across remote stretches of farmland, get their newspapers on time.

"People call The Budget the Amish Internet," Rathbun says. "It's non-electric, it's on paper, but it's the same thing."

The Budget is the dominant means of communication among the Amish, a Christian denomination with about 227,000 members nationwide who shun cars for horse-drawn buggies and avoid hooking up to the electrical grid.

The local edition, mailed to about 10,000 Ohio subscribers, is a typical community newspaper produced by The Budget's own employees, and their local stories are all that appear online. There's a page dedicated to church news and another to farming - there you get the going price for alfalfa and hay.

The national edition - and the source of its faithful following - is a patchwork of dispatches from scribes, which include both fresh-faced teenagers and bearded old men.

"Supper and singing were held at our house last night, so have been busy this morning getting dishes away and house in order," says a writer from Sligo, Pa.

"We've had some nice rain the last few days and grass is greening up nicely," says another in Middlebury, Ind.

On white sheets of paper, or "tablets," the scribes chronicle the fabric of their daily lives, generally writing them by hand and submitting them weekly by mail or fax.

The news isn't always upbeat. They'll write about the child whose arm got caught in a threshing machine, and the family that was killed in a buggy accident. When a gunman shot and killed five Amish girls in Nickel Mines, Pa., in 2006, the scribes detailed the aftermath.

The Budget is published in Sugarcreek, an eastern Ohio town of dairy farmers and bricklayers at the heart of the nation's largest Amish settlement. It was born in 1890 as a series of letters swapped among Amish families who had dispersed across the Midwest.

It is the oldest and largest among Amish publications, which include Die Botschaft, a rival weekly formed in the 1970s by people who believed The Budget was too liberal.

Inside The Budget's brown-shuttered office, tables are piled with handwritten letters and the computers look dusty. On Rathbun's desk is a beige box filled with contacts written on index cards and a clunky

calculator that spits out receipt paper.

The archives, preserved on microfilm, are "a history of a people," explains Fannie Erb-Miller, who edits the scribes' letters. A copy of The Budget is sometimes the only record of a birth in the Amish world, where official birth certificates are scarce.

Amish newspapers provide a sort of social glue for the community, says Don Kraybill, a leading expert on the Amish.

"They may not be able to worship together or collaborate together, but they can learn about each other through these newspapers," Kraybill explains.

Rathbun, who is not Amish, took over The Budget eight years ago after running an alternative weekly newspaper in Cleveland.

The Budget's owners - a local, non-Amish family who own a chain of dry goods stores that cater to the Amish - wanted to bring in someone with a fresh perspective and a background in journalism, Rathbun explains. He later bought a 10 percent stake in the newspaper.

Rathbun grins proudly as he boasts about The Budget's success, but grows nervous when the conversation turns to his readers.

"I need to be really careful about this," he says. "So I don't betray a confidence with them."

Rathbun declined to release The Budget's annual profits but admitted that he worries about the future of the printing industry. Newsprint is expensive, and he has refused to raise advertising rates for the past three years.

Unlike most of its counterparts, The Budget has a staff that is not Amish (The unpaid scribes, on the other hand, are typically Amish). As such, the self-described newspaper of "good news" takes pains not to offend its pious readers, who are quick to revolt at any whiff of impropriety in its pages.

The newspaper rejects advertisements for products considered taboo, such as beer, tobacco and drugs

that treat sexual dysfunction. A public outcry ensued when the newspaper ran an illustration of a woman clad in a bra and underwear.

Sports coverage, some readers claim, "doesn't belong in a Christian newspaper."

But the most common grievance harkens back to the heyday of newspapers.

Arlene Horst, a 67-year-old reader from Geneva, N.Y., calls The Budget's office often to complain about delivery problems. She likes to read her newspaper on Sundays, before the news grows "stale," she says.

"I've learned to know a lot of people and their interesting letters and never even met them," Horst says.

At a livestock auction in Mount Hope, Ohio, where farmers were placing bids on a fat black and white cow wandering around a pen, 76-year-old Ervin Schrock was hurrying home to read the newspaper.

"Oh, I like The Budget," he said. "We've been getting it for years. I've got to read it before my wife gets it."

On the Net:

<http://www.thebudgetnewspaper.com>

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