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Old Order Amish women and girls wear modest dresses made from solid-colored fabric with long sleeves and a full skirt (not shorter than half-way between knee and floor). These dresses are covered with a cape and apron and are fastened with straight pins or snaps. They never cut their hair, which they wear in a bun on the back of the head. On their heads they wear a white prayer covering if they are married and a black one if they are single. Amish women do not wear jewelry. Men and boys wear dark-colored suits, straight-cut coats without lapels, broadfall trousers, suspenders, solid-colored shirts, black socks and shoes, and black or straw broad-brimmed hats. Their shirts fasten with conventional buttons, but their suit coats and vests fasten with hooks and eyes. They do not have mustaches, but they grow beards after they marry. The Amish feel these distinctive clothes encourage humility and separation from the world. Their clothing is not a costume; it is an expression of their faith. The following answers to questions we received as part of our "Ask the Amish" feature were given by the resident experts at the Mennonite Information Center in Lancaster County: Why don't the Amish use electricity? "Amish people interpret linking with electrical wires as a connection with the world – and the Bible tells them they are not to be "conformed to the world." (Romans 12:2) In 1919 the Amish leaders agreed that connecting to power lines would not be in the best interest of the Amish community. They did not make this decision because they thought electricity was evil in itself, but because easy access to it could lead to many temptations and the deterioration of church and family life. Most of us today would think it impossible to live without the modern conveniences such as electricity and cars. What makes the Old Order Amish unique is not that they get along without modernity, but that they choose to do without it when it would be readily available. The Amish value simplicity and self-denial over comfort, convenience and leisure. Their lifestyle is a deliberate way of separating from the world and maintaining self-sufficiency. (Amish are less threatened by power shortages caused by storm, disaster, or war.) As a result there is a bonding that unites the Amish community and protects it from outside influences such as television, radios, and other influences." The Amish do not use electricity or modern conveniences, yet they have this website. How can that be? "This website is not maintained or created by the Amish themselves. However, those involved in this website are directly in contact with the Amish and Mennonites either by friendship, association, or business relationships. This website, and the "Ask The Amish" feature especially, has been created in an effort to pass along the truth about the Amish and their chosen lifestyle. There is much misinformation about these fascinating people, even here in the heart of the so-called "Amish Country", and one goal of this service is to dismiss that misinformation, and pass along the truth. We are not here to make money off the Amish, or to exploit them in any way. Many local Amish people have seen this website, and have expressed their appreciation for our efforts. Several local Amish businesses have also joined this website as participating advertisers." Why do Amish men have beards, but not mustaches? "There are quite a few scripture that mention beards in the Bible. An example would be Psalm 133:1,2. An Amishman does not shave his beard after he becomes married; a long beard is the mark of an adult Amishman. Mustaches, on the other hand, have a long history of being associated with the military, and therefore are forbidden among the Amish people." Do the Amish pay taxes? "Self-employed Amish do not pay Social Security tax. Those employed by non-Amish employers do pay Social Security tax. The Amish do pay real estate, state and federal income taxes, county taxes, sales tax, etc. The Amish do not collect Social Security benefits, nor would they collect unemployment or welfare funds. Self sufficiency is the Amish community's answer to government aid programs. Section 310 of the Medicare section of the Social Security act has a sub-section that permits individuals to apply for exemption from the self-employment tax if he is a member of a religious body that is conscientiously opposed to social security benefits but that makes reasonable provision of taking care of their own elderly or dependent members. The Amish have a long history of taking care of their own members. They do not have retirement communities or nursing homes; in most cases, each family takes care of their own, and the Amish community gives assistance as needed." What crops are grown on an Amish farm? "Main crops raised by Amish in Lancaster County, in order of acreage, are corn, hay, wheat, tobacco, soybeans, barley, potatoes, and other vegetables. Farmers also grow various grasses for grazing. Corn, grain, and hay crops usually stay on the farm for feeding livestock. Tobacco, potatoes, some grain and hay plus vegetables are raised for marketing. Farming is done with horse-drawn equipment with metal wheels (no rubber tires)." What do the Amish think of tourists visiting their area? "Amish people want nothing more than to simply be left alone. However, for the most part they have accepted the influx of tourism as something they cannot change. So far as their lifestyle, tourists have not changed the Amish. It is true that some have moved away, partly because of tourism, but also because of the high cost of land in Lancaster County. Others have opened small shops and are now realizing profits from the tourists." Why are all the buggies black? "Throughout the United States and in Canada not all buggies are black. The similarity of Amish carriages in any given area allows little for status, but speaks of all being equal. Therefore, members of a particular group can be identified by the buggies they drive. In Mifflin County, Pennsylvania, for example, there are five distinct groups of Old Order Amish living in the Kishacoquillas Valley. The two most conservative groups drive white-topped buggies, another has yellow tops, and two others use black buggies. Here in Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish drive gray buggies and the Old Order Mennonites drive black buggies." How does a barn raising work? "A barn-raising is indeed a community endeavor for the Amish. At daybreak, the Amish buggies arrive at the farm where the barn is to be erected. An experienced Amish carpenter/contractor is in charge and men are assigned to various areas of work. Often the framing is completed before the noon meal and in the afternoon the roofing is installed. Meanwhile the women are preparing a delicious noon meal, sometimes served outdoors. There is always prayer before a meal is served. The children play games and are available to run errands. But they also have a most exciting day as spectators at a truly amazing project of brotherly love—building a barn in one day." What language do the Amish speak? "In their homes and in conversations with each other, the Old Order Amish speak Pennsylvania Dutch, which is a dialect of German. We understand that it is similar to "Platt" that is spoken in parts of northern Germany. When children go to school they learn English. In their worship services the sermons are given in German. The German language, "Deutsch", is also taught in Amish schools." Why do Amish men wear black hats? "Here in Lancaster County, the Amish men wear broad-brimmed hats of black felt. The width of the brim and hat band and the height and shape of the crown are variables which gauge the orthodoxy of the group and individual wearer. A wide brim, low crown, and narrow hat band denotes the oldest and most traditional style. Within church groups, one's age and status is often reflected by the dimensions of one's hat. For warm weather, straw hats are preferred by plain men." Do Amish families play games? "Yes, Amish families do play games and read together in the evenings. Parents are involved in their children's activities. However, there are not long evenings in an Amish family. When the children get home from school, there are chores that must be done. At an early age, children have responsibilities assigned to them. After the evening meal, the school homework must be tackled, and before long it is bedtime. Amish are early risers and therefore go to bed early." Do the Amish still milk their cows by hand? "Very few Amish, if any, do their milking by hand. Today they have modern milking equipment — not electric, but operated by alternate sources of power. In order to ship milk, the Amish must have modern refrigerated milk tanks. They also have modern barn-cleaning equipment. Children get involved in daily chores at a very early age — even before they start school. However, the chores are suited to the age of the child." What holidays do the Amish celebrate and why? "Holidays observed by the Amish are the religious holidays: Thanksgiving, Christmas, Good Friday, Easter, Ascension Day, Pentecost, and Whit Monday (the day after Pentecost). The reasons for these observances are to fast and meditate on scriptures related to these days. We should also mention that December 25 is a solemn celebration of Christ's birth and "second Christmas" on December 26 is a time for visiting and family dinners." Do the Amish use modern medicine and doctors? "Here in Lancaster County, funeral and burial usually takes place three days after death. A funeral director from the local area assists in a minimal way, which usually includes embalming, and sometimes includes supplying the coffin and the hearse. In death, as in life the simplicity is evident. A plain wooden coffin is built. Often it is six-sided with a split lie - the upper part is hinged so it can be opened for viewing the body. It is very simple - no ornate carving or fine fabrics. Traditionally a woman will wear the white apron she wore on her wedding day. In some Amish communities both men and women wear white for burial. The tone of the two-hour Amish funeral service is hopeful, yet full of admonition for the living. There are no eulogies. Respect for the deceased is expressed, but not praise. A hymn is spoken but not sung. There are no flowers. The grave is hand dug in an Amish church district cemetery. There will be only a simple tombstone to mark the spot, much like all the other tombstones in the cemetery - in death as in life, we are all equal and do not elevate one person above another." Is it true that dolls for girls have no faces? "Our understanding is that years ago, most of the dolls for little girls were rag dolls without faces. The Amish have retained this custom. We believe the reason is similar to the refusal to have pictures of people and is linked to the second commandment. (Exodus 20:4-6) At an early age children are learning not to have images, likenesses, idols." I have heard the Amish will place a small mistake or imperfection in a quilt or other handmade item. Why is this done? "We've heard that many years ago sometimes a scrap of fabric that didn't quite match was used inconspicuously in a patchwork quilt to give it "identity." We question whether this is true. We don't know of any quilters who would do that today. Amish quilts are all hand quilted; stitches are very small and uniform. But, no matter how hard one tries, the stitches are not all identical and perfect. A quilt may have an imperfection, but it wasn't on purpose." Do the Amish play any form of musical instrument? "No. Musical instruments are forbidden by the Old-Order Amish community. Playing an instrument would be "worldly." It is contrary to the spirit of "Glasenheit" (humility), and would stir up the emotions of those who are involved." I know that the Amish don't own automobiles, but in our area it is common to see them riding in other peoples' vehicles. Some even have made a business of offering rides, for a fee, to them. If the Amish don't believe in owning automobiles, it seems strange that they would ride in them. Seems inconsistent to me. Why is this? "Maintaining Amish standards, but accepting some modernization to meet needs of living, requires compromise that must not disrupt the social structure. By rejecting certain types of modernity and accepting others, some Amish appear to the outside world to be contradicting themselves - hypocrites. However, from the viewpoint of Amish culture, there is no contradiction. One of the more pronounced inconsistencies is the use of an automobile, although he may not own a car, a member may accept rides and willingly hires an automobile with a driver to transport him from place to place. There was little hesitation when the Amish decided "no" to car ownership. It would separate the community in various ways. If only wealthy members could afford it, the car would bring inequality. Proud individuals would use it to show off their status, power and wealth. Cars would speed things up dramatically, disrupting the slow pace of Amish living. So, they will use them but not own them, for then things will surely get out of control." Do the Amish believe in gas power? "Yes, the Amish use gas. Bottled gas is used to operate water heaters, modern stoves and refrigerators. Gas-pressured lanterns and lamps are used to light homes, barns and shops." Is it true the Amish are exempt from Medicare and Medicaid withholding? What legal basis is used for this? "Medicare and Medicaid are a part of the Social Security system. Old Order Amish believe that if the church is faithful to its calling, many government programs and commercial insurance are not needed. That conviction forced them to testify before Congress because they did not want to receive Social Security benefits. What they wanted instead was the right to look after their own elderly. They were finally given approval, if self-employed, to be exempt from paying the tax. Seldom do Old Order Amish individuals accept Social Security, Medicare, or Medicaid." Learn more about the Amish in Lancaster County » Explore Amish-made furniture, handmade quilts, and other Amish-made products. Amish Businesses, Amish Attractions, & Amish Made Products

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