

# Serving Plain Communities in Wisconsin

**Anyone who spends even a short amount of time in rural Wisconsin has noticed the Badger State is home to a number of Amish people, and members of similar religious groups known collectively as Plain people for their non-mainstream style of dress and traditional ways. Who are Plain people and what are some useful things for EMS professionals to know about them?**

There are multiple Christian groups that identify themselves as Amish, but the largest and most familiar is the denomination formally known as the Old Order Amish, whose members dress distinctively (e.g., beards without mustaches for married men; head coverings for women), use horse-and-buggy transportation, and limit their use of technology, especially electricity from the power grid. Even within the Old Order Amish there are multiple subgroups known as affiliations, which differ mainly in the degree to which their members accept certain aspects of technology. For example, some groups have indoor plumbing,

while others do not. Some make use of tractors to operate power tools, but still use draft horses for field work, while others have no tractors at all.

Aside from the Amish, Wisconsin is home to other Plain groups with which they share a spiritual heritage. Most familiar are the Mennonites. Globally, the majority of Mennonites do not dress or groom themselves differently than their neighbors or limit the use of technology, but some do. The most conservative Mennonite groups are also known as Old Orders, some of whom use horse-and-buggy for transportation like the Amish. The Old Order Mennonite presence in Wisconsin is much smaller than the

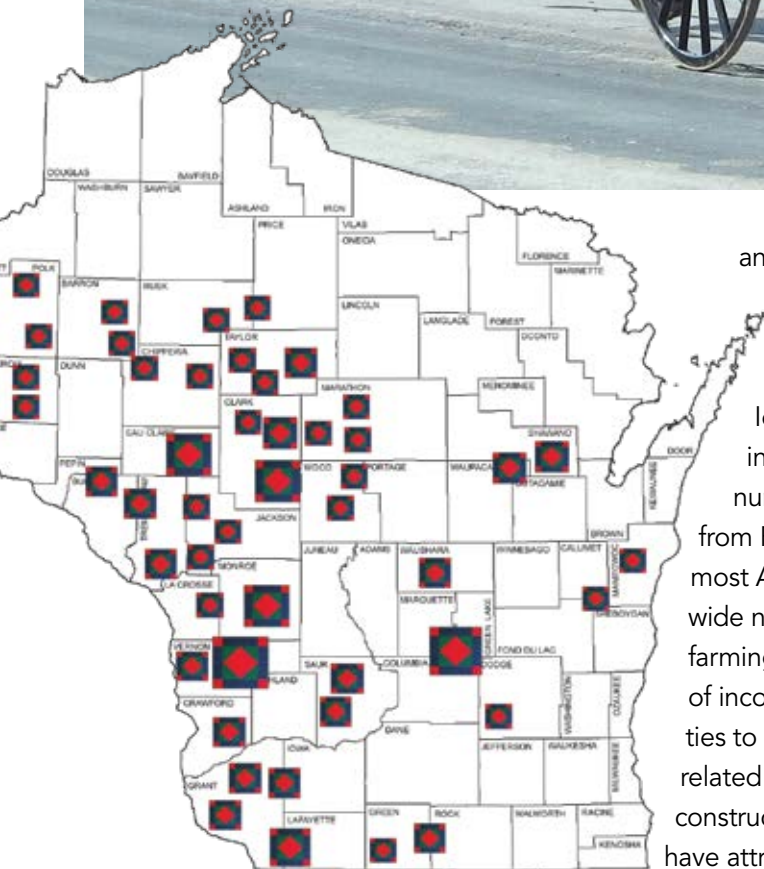
Amish population, with most living in central Wisconsin, especially Clark County, and in the southwestern part of the state, near the city of Lancaster. Another Plain group in Wisconsin are the Old German Baptist Brethren, whose largest community is located in Vernon County, near Hillsboro.

In the Badger State there is a diversity of Amish groups ranging from highly traditional (conservative) affiliations to those that are more modern (progressive). At just over 22,000, Wisconsin's Amish population is the fourth-largest across 31 U.S. states and four Canadian provinces. Due to their large average family sizes (around 6-7 children per family) and high retention rates (85%–90% of children born to Amish parents make the decision to formally join the Amish church as young adults), the Amish are growing exponentially, doubling in size roughly every twenty years.

Amish people have lived in Wisconsin for more than a century



by Amos J. Herschberger and Mark L. Louden



and came here mainly from other Midwestern states (especially Indiana, Iowa, and Ohio), but in recent years a number have migrated from Pennsylvania. Since most Amish families nationwide no longer depend on farming as their main source of income, the opportunities to engage in work related to lumber and construction, for example, have attracted new arrivals to the state. All Amish maintain at

least some connection to agriculture (e.g., large gardens, chickens for meat and eggs) and many families are still committed to dairying, despite the economic challenges.

### Healthcare and Plain people

When it comes to healthcare, there are no formal limitations stemming from the Christian faith practiced by the Amish. Amish people access medical treatment like their non-Amish neighbors. However, there are some distinctive aspects about how they interact with the healthcare system that are useful for providers like EMS professionals to be aware of.

One important fact to be aware of is that Amish, for religious reasons, do not carry private or public medical insurance. That means they pay medical bills out of pocket, which in many cases can be very high. When an individual family has reached the limit of what it can afford, the community pools its resources to see that bills are paid. In particularly catastrophic situations, fundraising events are held. Many healthcare providers who serve Amish and other Plain families in Wisconsin also offer discounts and special payment options.

Because they pay for their healthcare themselves, Amish people seek to reduce costs whenever possible. For example, when given the choice between traveling to a hospital by ambulance or a private driver, most will prefer the latter, less expensive option, as long as it is not against medical advice. And when they are admitted to hospitals, Amish will typically ask more questions than other patients about the necessity of certain diagnostics and treatments to keep an eye on the bottom line.

Cost also plays a role in the degree to which Amish people access care at all. EMS and ER professionals have remarked that if an Amish person seeks care from outside their community, it must be serious. But the caution that Amish and traditional Mennonites bring to accessing healthcare is not just tied to questions of cost. As members of traditional groups that stress self-reliance, Plain people often prefer to treat illnesses or injuries at home, with the help of

community members with special expertise. Herbal and other natural forms of therapy are especially popular, but one particular example of alternative care is worth discussing in some detail.

### Burns and Wounds Treatment

More than 30 years ago, an Amish man named John Keim began developing a method for treating burns and severe wounds known today as B&W (“burns and wounds”). The B&W method involves a honey-based salve (B&W ointment) that is applied to scalded burdock leaves, which are then used to dress wounds. The B&W method is not FDA-approved, so its use is essentially limited to private homes and clinics and hospitals with special approval. There is an emerging body of scientific literature that suggests that B&W/burdock is as good as, or superior to, conventional forms of treatment.

The proper administration of the B&W method, in which a caregiver must be formally trained, often leads to healing with little or no disfigurement or dysfunction, making skin or tissue grafts unnecessary. Just as important is the pain management aspect. Burdock leaves have powerful analgesic properties that control pain at the actual site of a wound rather than globally, through opioids such as oxycodone or fentanyl, which is the conventional method of relieving the severe pain associated with serious injuries like burns. The smooth texture of the salve-applied leaves also makes dressing changes much less painful than when gauze is used.

It is important for EMS professionals to not be surprised to encounter injured Plain people whose burns or wounds have already been dressed with B&W/burdock. If at all possible, these dressings should not be removed, as Plain people prefer the use of this method over other therapies. They do recognize the necessity of adequate hydration in the case of serious burns, especially with children, and will not resist having a burn victim receive IV fluids. In many situations, a patient or his/her family will want a trained B&W caregiver to accompany a patient to an emergency facility to work with staff who may be unfamiliar with the method.

Understandably, healthcare professionals are at times uncomfortable allowing their patients to receive a treatment like B&W/burdock that is not FDA-approved. This makes it all the more important for information about the method to be disseminated. In Wisconsin, a committee of Amish persons has been formed to advocate for B&W and to serve as a point of contact between Plain communities and medical professionals. This has led to positive





working relationships, notably with the staff of the UW Burn Center in Madison, which serves the parts of Wisconsin where most Amish and Mennonites live.

### Be Aware of Additional Facts

There are other facts about Plain culture that are useful for healthcare providers to be aware of. One has to do with language. All Amish and Old Order Mennonite adults speak fluent English, which they begin to acquire when they start school. English is the language of instruction in all Plain schools and is the main language they use for reading and writing. But within their communities, they speak a German-related language called

Pennsylvania Dutch. In stressful situations, some Plain people, especially children, may have difficulty expressing themselves in English, so healthcare providers are wise to be patient and avoid using technical vocabulary that may be unfamiliar.

One question that sometimes comes up is whether Plain patients prefer treatment provided by a person of the same gender. Although gender roles among the Amish and similar groups are well defined and positions of church leadership are filled by males, there are no limitations on men being treated by women and vice versa.

Other questions that pertain specifically to EMS workers have to

do with transportation. Amish generally do not fly, therefore they prefer to avoid being transported via helicopter unless it is absolutely necessary. As mentioned earlier, most will prefer to hire private drivers over riding in an ambulance for reasons of cost, but only when appropriate. When an ambulance arrives at a Plain home, the residents prefer that the siren and flashing lights are turned off, if possible.

It is important to remember that Plain people, despite their distinctive appearance and culture, are human beings like everyone else. That means it is important not to make generalizations about the group as a whole based on individual experiences. Like their outsider neighbors, Plain people are grateful for the care they receive from skilled healthcare professionals, including EMS personnel, and welcome the opportunity to build relationships based on mutual respect. 🔄

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