

EDUCATION

UW professor straddles English, Amish, Mennonite worlds



Mark Loudon, German professor from UW-Madison who also is a cultural mediator for the Amish community. He is Mennonite and also speaks Pennsylvania Dutch. Credit: Rebecca Keiser

By *Karen Herzog* of the Journal Sentinel

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It didn't seem right that a high-voltage power line would [cut a 150-foot swath through an Amish settlement](#) that expressly rejects the use of electricity.

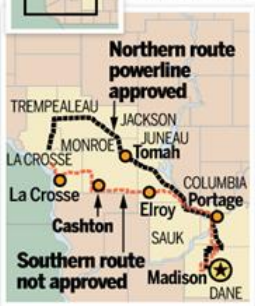
But the Amish take a peaceful approach when dealing with modernity.

So a group of non-Amish neighbors led by Gil and Julie Hoel, dubbed Concerned Citizens of Highway 33, took up the cause of the Cashton-area Amish and put together a team of experts to

Route goes no

UW-Madison German Professor Mark Loudon testified against routing a 345,000-volt power line linking Madison and La Crosse through an Amish settlement near Cashton. A

different route ultimately was chosen by the state Public Service Commission.



Source: American
Transmission Co.

Journal Sentinel



People speak out against the 345,000-volt Badger Coulee Transmission Line in December at the Cashton Community Hall. - *Associated Press*

argue against the proposed power line to the state Public Service Commission. The team included a Madison attorney who worked pro bono, a retired professor from Iowa who grew up in an Amish and Mennonite community, and Mark Loudon, who co-directs the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies.

Loudon was uniquely qualified. The fair-haired, bearded scholar straddles both the modern world and that of the so-called Plain people, whose simple ways and distinctively plain manner of dress are in stark contrast to mainstream culture.

As a professor of German at a major research university and a Mennonite who speaks Pennsylvania Dutch — the first language of the Old Order Amish — Loudon regularly steps into the role of cultural mediator or interpreter for those in Pennsylvania Dutch-speaking communities who don't feel comfortable using English to explain their ways in legal or medical settings.

Loudon also is involved with a UW project to improve health care delivery for Amish and Mennonites. Wisconsin has the fourth largest Amish population in the nation.

Loudon embraced the Mennonite faith 30 years ago, after he began attending Amish and Mennonite churches while a college student in upstate New York, and ultimately chose to be baptized a Mennonite.

The Amish have a more conservative way, traveling by horse and buggy and not using electricity. As a university professor, Loudon said, it made more sense for him to become Mennonite, as they traverse the modern side of the divide, embracing both cars and electricity.

Speaking Their Language

In advocating against the 345,000-volt Badger Coulee Transmission Line running through the middle of the Cashton Amish settlement, Loudon and his colleague from Iowa met individually with about a dozen Amish men to discuss their concerns.

Speaking comfortably in Pennsylvania Dutch, the Amish men shared fears of electrical shock and stray voltage impacting the health of their families and animals. Some Amish told Louden about firsthand experiences of chickens laying fewer eggs, dairy cows producing less milk and horses not drinking from troughs on farms close to power lines. The Amish expressed fears about property values dropping and younger members moving away from the power lines, ultimately splintering the Amish settlement — the largest in Wisconsin.

"He was able to take their sentiments and say it in a way anybody in our culture would understand," Gil Hoel said of Louden's testimony to the Public Service Commission. "There aren't many English people (as Amish call the non-Amish) who speak Pennsylvania Dutch. There was an immediate comfort level."

While the Public Service Commission — in its ruling in late March — stated that the Amish received no special treatment, it did decide to route the Badger Coulee Transmission Line linking Madison and La Crosse along a different path, sparing the Amish farms. The intent of the project is to produce savings for customers and improve the ability to move wind power to Wisconsin from Iowa and Minnesota.

Medical Initiative

Louden serves on an advisory board for the the UW School of Medicine and Public Health initiative to improve health care delivery for Amish and Mennonite communities.

In that role, he gave a presentation last fall at a meeting in the Kickapoo Valley that drew together health care providers and dozens of Amish and Mennonite community members. He had already spent time talking privately with Plain community members who serve on the advisory board.

"What he brought to our group and our work was a dimension that was missing," said Christine Seroogy, the associate professor of pediatrics at UW who leads the project. "He's able to straddle the Plain community and the English community, but he's also the scholar looking at the humanistic and cultural side of it."

Louden was born in Minneapolis and grew up in California. As a student at Cornell University in upstate New York, he befriended an Amish couple with a roadside bakery who invited him to their church.

"It was their nonresistant message," Louden recalled about his immediate attraction to the faith. "Not only are they pacifist, they don't meet violence with violence. They turn the other cheek. The peace messaging is very strong. ... Your faith isn't something you just think about on Sunday, it infuses everything you do."

While still in Ithaca, Louden met an older Mennonite couple in a used bookstore who invited him to their church. He attended the Mennonite church and taught "singing school" for their young people in a one-room schoolhouse.

After finishing graduate school in 1988, Louden got his first teaching job at the University of Texas, about 50 miles from an Amish community. He ended up living on a ranch with Amish.

When Louden accepted the job at UW, he already had Amish friends in the New Glarus and Broadhead area. He decided to join the Milwaukee Mennonite Church.

Louden teaches German linguistics and German-American studies at UW. This semester, he's also teaching a Pennsylvania Dutch language and culture class for German majors. In his free time, he visits schools, community groups and historical societies across the state to share Amish and Pennsylvania Dutch history and culture.

"One of the most important aspects of my job is the opportunity to do public outreach," Louden said. "I see this work as upholding the Wisconsin Idea."



About Karen Herzog

Karen Herzog covers higher education. She also has covered public health and was part of a national award-winning team that took on Milwaukee's infant mortality crisis.

[@HerzogJS](#)

kherzog@journalsentinel.com

[414-224-2193](tel:414-224-2193)