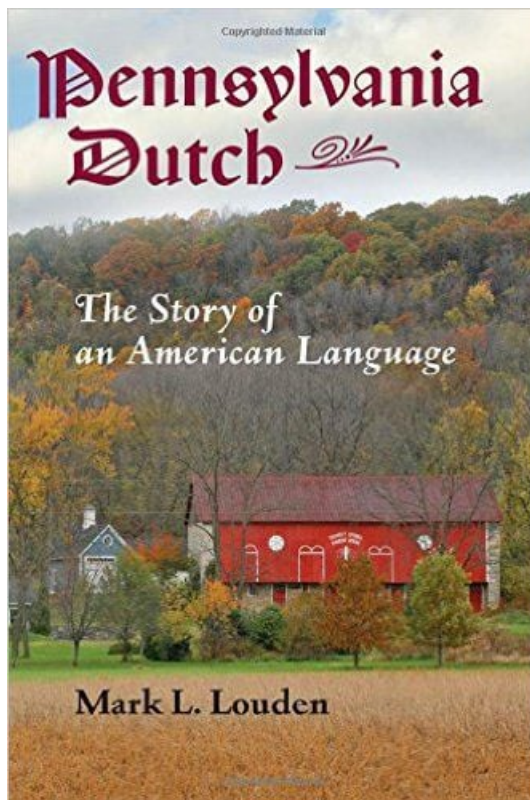


The Scribbler: ‘Pennsylvania Dutch’ is thriving in America

JACK BRUBAKER | LNP Columnist
Aug 23, 2016



"Pennsylvania Dutch" has been published by Johns Hopkins University Press.

Mark Loudon, author of “Pennsylvania Dutch: The Story of an American Language,” surely has written the definitive guide to the subject. He also has definitively answered such burning questions as: “Is it ‘Pennsylvania Dutch’ or ‘Pennsylvania German’?” and “Is ‘Pennsylvania Dutch’ (or ‘German’) dying?”

Here in the heart of Pennsylvania Dutchland, we care about such questions. And we care about the history of a language (or is it a dialect?) that most of us do not speak but still recognize as a major influence on our culture.

So this book by a professor of German linguistics and co-director of the Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison is welcome for a number of

reasons.

The language should be called “Pennsylvania Dutch,” Loudon contends, because, despite its apparent historical inaccuracy, that term “is grounded in the usage of the majority of the speakers themselves, especially those residing in Pennsylvania.” In other words, the speakers of a language get to call it what they like.

The “Pennsylvania” part of the phrase may be more problematic, Loudon says, because the language is spoken by far more people living outside than inside Pennsylvania. Most Amish speakers live in the Midwest.

Pennsylvania Dutch is a language, not a dialect. “Although it is closely related to German ... it is an autonomous language — structurally, lexically and sociolinguistically — that arguably deserves its own branch on the family tree of Germanic languages,” Loudon writes.

Pennsylvania Dutch, although influenced by Palatine German, is “a profoundly American language, because it has been “indelibly influenced by American English.” Indeed, it would be a different language, Loudon notes, if its speakers did not have to “think in English.”

Contrary to some reports, Pennsylvania Dutch is not dying; in fact, it’s thriving. While nonsectarian speakers are dwindling rapidly, Loudon explains, Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonite speakers are increasing in number throughout the country, thereby ensuring that the language will continue to flourish.

The most interesting sections of the book, to this reader, discuss the early history, literature and popularization of Pennsylvania Dutch. Here are two examples that focus on Lancaster County figures.

Pennsylvania Dutch existed as a fully formed language at the latest by 1800, Loudon says. Simon Snyder, during his losing bid for state governor in 1805 and his winning race in 1808, drew considerable support from the Pennsylvania Dutch. As proof, Loudon quotes from letters to the editors of German-language newspapers.

Snyder, the commonwealth’s first Pennsylvania Dutch governor, was popular with rural Germans because he was one of them. Born in Lancaster County in 1759, he was the son of Palatine German immigrants and spoke Pennsylvania Dutch.

Loudon devotes several pages in a chapter on “Pennsylvania Dutch in the Public Eye” to Phebe Earle Gibbons, a Lancaster author who “put the Pennsylvania Dutch and their language on America’s popular cultural map.”

Gibbons (1821-1899), of Bird-in-Hand, published “Pennsylvania Dutch and Other Essays” in 1872. She is the mother of The Scribbler’s great-grandfather’s second wife.

Loudon acknowledges that Gibbons attempted to present the Amish sympathetically but, by contrasting Pennsylvania Dutch with both German and English, “left some readers with the impression that Gibbons took a generally dim view of her neighbors and their language abilities.”

Loudon quotes from a number of negative contemporary reviews of Gibbons’ essay on the



Pennsylvania Dutch. Her concentration on “Dutchisms,” says one reviewer, misses the point that the speakers are using English provincialisms that have nothing to do with Dutch.

We are heading into the arcane and, in any case, have run out of space. For those interested in Pennsylvania Dutch: Read the book.

Jack Brubaker, a retired LNP staff writer, writes “The Scribbler” column twice a week. He welcomes comments and contributions at scribblerlnp@gmail.com or 669-1929.

