

Who are the Amish? Take the time to get to know them and find out!

By Ginna Young

The oldest Amish community in Wisconsin, began in Medford, in 1920, but families have since spread throughout the state.

"The Amish are quite familiar across the country, and have been since the decades after the Civil War," said Mark Loudon, professor of Germanic linguistics, at UW-Madison.

Loudon was in Cadott, June 7, speaking at the Cadott Community Library, on a subject near and dear to his heart. Loudon, who is a Mennonite, serves as a volunteer medical and court interpreter for the Amish, as they primarily speak Pennsylvania Dutch.

"Despite its name, it's actually related to German," he said, adding that the language is actually just verbal. "Their schools are completely run in English."

Amish people first came to North America, in the 1700s, with a very small population originally. To this day, the Amish are only in the United States and Canada, but their population has grown to 400,000.

"That number is still not huge, when you think about percentage...they are the fastest growing group of human beings on the entire planet," said Loudon.

The Amish double their population every 20 years, because of an average family size of six to seven children.

"Technically, no one is born Amish, but it's a choice young people make, when they turn around 17, 18, 19 years old," said Loudon.

Amish came out of a movement that emerged out of the reformation in Europe, five centuries ago. Known as the Anabaptist movement, Mennonites were named for an early leader in the 1480s, Menno Simons. A conservative splinter group off the Swiss Mennonites, led by Jakob Ammann, was formed, whose followers became known as the Amish.

In fact, it's been 500 years, this year, since that movement launched their sect.

"This is a big year, for Anabaptists," said Loudon. "And it all started in Zürich, Switzerland."

Known as "Plain" people, because of their simple and recognizable clothing, Amish were welcomed to Pennsylvania, by the Quakers. They now reside in 32 states and three Canadian provinces, while Wisconsin has the fourth largest Amish population, among those 32 states.

There are a large number of horse and buggy driving Mennonites, in Clark County, known as Old Order Mennonites, so, it's not just Amish who still prefer to plod along in a horse-drawn conveyance. Spread across Chippewa, Taylor, Eau Claire and Clark counties, it's a familiar site to see a horse and buggy, trotting down the road.

That begs the question, why not just drive a car? Why do the Amish reject technology?

"The Amish didn't reject it, per se, but chose to be a little bit more cautious in moving forward," said Loudon. "They sort of pick and choose to see what's best for their communities. That's part of the secret of their success. They just don't change as rapidly and change in the same ways as their non-Amish neighbors."

Most don't use tractors for field work, instead, using draft horses, but most Amish women have motorized wringer washers. Many also have cell phones for business purposes, but only use flip phones, not smart phones and do not keep a landline in the home.

There are no clothes driers or dishwashers, because it's a time for the family to spend together. With the modern conveniences, they would lose that closeness.

"Work is play, play is work," said Loudon.

If an Amish family wanted a change of that magnitude, such as having electricity in the home or some appliance, it has to be voted on by almost every single member of the community.

"Yes, there are church leaders, but the leaders are not decision makers," said Loudon.

That's why reality shows and Amish fiction books have largely proven false, depicting that if a young adult does

not follow the Amish path, they will be shunned or ostracized by the bishop. Most Amish parents want their children to be as happy as they are and don't force their way of life on their offspring.

If a teenager or adult does choose to leave the Amish community, they are always welcome for visits and welcomed back into the fold, if they decide the ways of the world are not for them. They can only be excommunicated if a church member violated church rules in a big way, but still, the "shunning" is not harsh and is not forever.

"The door's always open," said Loudon.

That forgiveness comes from their faith, which is patterned on how Jesus lived His life. A non-radical Christian group, the Amish live out their faith in an everyday way, which is what makes them distinctive.

They practice believer's baptism, meaning they believe it is not necessary to baptize infants, as they are innocent, until the age of consent; the child can join the church later on, when they become an adult. They also believe in moving on, once an offense has been addressed and never bringing it up again.

Amish also think that church and state should be separated, while their Sunday worship service, weddings and funerals, remain unchanged, over the last 500 years. The group are pacifists, don't serve in a violent form in the military and do not defend themselves.

"Most Amish homes have firearms, but for sport or hunting, not for self-defense," said Loudon, adding that there's a misconception that abuse cases run rampant.

"Sexual abuse, in particular, is quite rare among the Amish, but it does occur. Amish communities take this very, very seriously."

Loudon feels if someone wants to read authentic Amish fiction, they should check out Linda Byler, who is an Amish writer.

Another misconception, is that Amish do not pay taxes or vote in elections. Every Amish family pays county, state, federal and school taxes, and is subject to the laws of their state and country.

"They do have opinions about politics," said Loudon, adding that Amish rarely vote, as it is their policy, that, if they tell politicians what to do, politicians will stick their noses right back in their business.

The Amish do not have their own financial institution and do their banking in whatever town is closest, while the children attend one-room schoolhouses, unless they are in need of special education services.

Their loved ones are buried in private cemeteries; like with a schoolhouse, a landowner will donate land for the cemetery, but they do have to follow zoning laws. The main thing, is that Amish think about the most vulnerable in their population – the widows, elderly and orphans.

"We're here to support each other," said Loudon. "What all this adds up to, is what I call a culture of community."

That means that their elderly rarely go into a care facility, but live as one big happy family, with grand and great-grandbabies around them. What the Amish call mutual aid, is a fund set up for a widow whose husband has died and left her without a means to live; to take care of orphans; to rebuild a barn that burned down; and to pay for severe medical expenses.

There is no health insurance for the Amish, but they will not accept what they consider charity, and insist on repaying (considered a donation) Medicaid or the hospital.

"No one else does that," said Loudon. "There's a high value that's placed on integrity and honesty."

There are very few genetic disorders, as the Amish have good genes and live a purer life, consisting of a lot



Mark Loudon

of time outdoors and fresh, homegrown foods. However, few actually rely on farming as their main source income and have businesses, such as construction, woodworking, sawmills or bulk food stores.

"That being said, they all have really amazing gardens," laughed Loudon.

School ends at eighth grade for the Amish youth, unless they have no wish to stay Amish, then they do go on to further education. In some states, Loudon is aware of areas where Amish need GEDs to get good-paying jobs in factories and where Amish girls go to school to become nurses.

Once youth reach 16 or 17, they are allowed to socialize with each other, without adult supervision. A parlor in the girl's house serves as their courting space, with the date possibly going until 2 a.m.

"By and large, it's very chaste," said Loudon.

The Amish don't celebrate Halloween, but they do celebrate Christmas, but have no lights, since there is no electricity to plug them into. There's also a Christmas program at the schoolhouse, and family comes, sometimes, from far away, for a big meal and special cookies.

Birthdays are small, though, because a family usually has a lot of children and it's too expensive to get gifts for them all. Instead, they let the kids pick the meal they want and their mother makes a cake.

In fact, one of the most popular things requested for dinner, is soft pretzels and ice cream.

"Food is a big deal," said Loudon, adding there's always room for one more. "Food is a way to socialize."

For most people, wearing identifying swag says something about who they are and it's no different for the Amish, they're just not as flashy, although Loudon has seen some buggies sporting green and gold colors.

"Many of them actually do like the Packers," he said.

The Amish love exercise, but will not play on competitive sports teams, but take an interest in competitive sports. As an example, Loudon was once at the Ohio State football campus hotel and struck up a conversation with an Amish man he noticed standing at the reception desk.

Come to find out, the Amish person rode the bus with the local public high school team, who was the State game played in the stadium. His response of why, was interesting.

I just wanted to kind of cheer them on.

That shows that the Amish

are more like the non-Plain people than thought. They like to shop at the same places as other people, such as Walmart and Costco, and are always ready to pitch in outside their community, when there's a need.

When there's a hurricane or other natural disaster, the Amish show up in droves, to build or rebuild homes.

"They're also the biggest blood donors, probably of any community in the United States," said Loudon. "It's a way of giving back."

