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M A G A Z I N E

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## Fauquier's Amish Mennonites

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# PLAIN PEOPLE

*Beachy Amish Mennonites at home in Fauquier*

Text by Marilyn Rumph ❖ Photos by Eleanor Glattly

**W**hen I was a child in the 1950s, my family often went visiting on Sunday afternoons. We'd settle into our black Ford sedan and head toward Catlett on

Route 806. Frequently, we encountered Mennonites also out for a ride in their black buggies. My father always slowed to a crawl, to prevent scaring the horses and to give us a peek at our mysterious neighbors.

To me, the plain people who lived in and around Catlett were anything but plain. They were the living epitome of storybook romance and mystery. I longed to exchange places — to just once step out of the black car and into a black buggy. I hated having to watch from a distance.

Most people, I have found, are equally curious about the Mennonites and Amish in America. Folks would like an insider's look.

Recently, I tried to get just that. In the process, I've discovered many things about our plain Fauquier neighbors: the Beachy Amish Mennonites.

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Stepping inside the narthex of Faith Christian Fellowship (a Beachy Amish church near Catlett) at 10:25 on a Sunday morning, a visitor hears young voices chattering quietly.

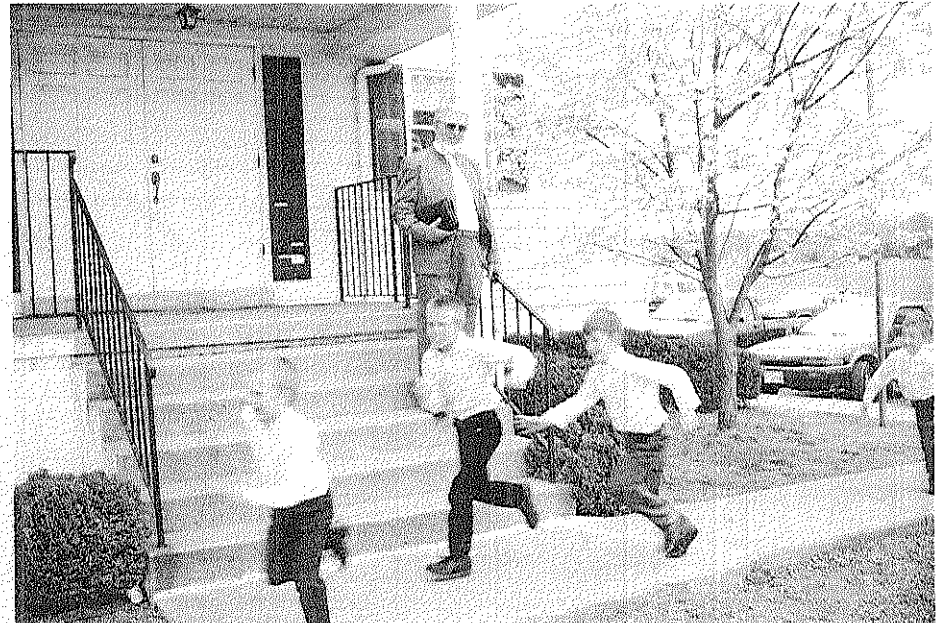
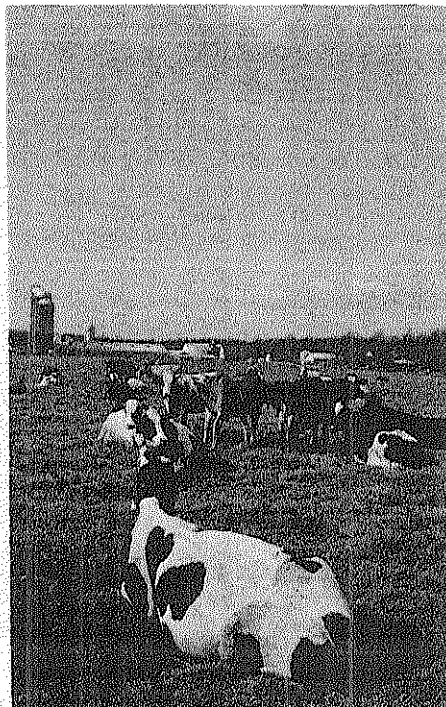
Soon the talk stops, and the children and teens hurry into the sanctuary, joining the adults who are already seated. There's a small blackboard on the wall behind the pulpit and above it, a round clock. No one will be checking watches!

The ladies and girls, who sit on the left, are wearing violet, pink, green, blue, or yellow cape dresses; some have white or black sweaters. All wear delicate white head coverings with unfastened ties hanging down their backs.

Men and boys, seated on the right, are neatly attired. Many wear home-made black suits with straight-cut collars, but without lapels; others have gray suits, some with vests, and a few men, mostly younger ones, wear no coats — just long-sleeved shirts. Ties are never worn. All the married men, and some single ones, have beards, most of



*Students at Pine Grove Mennonite Church School near Catlett.*



*Alvin D. Byler, a minister of Faith Christian Fellowship, smiles as young parishioners race past (above); farming (left) is becoming less common among local Amish.*

them trimmed.

Singing precedes the 11 o'clock service. The song leader, a clean-shaven young man, pitches hymns with a pitch pipe and unpretentiously directs congregational singing. And what singing!

The men's deep voices and the clear angelic tones of the women's voices create a vivid sound-picture. It's a choir director's dream come true: ordinary people who all sing in tune and with good vocal quality.

At 11:15, after a preparatory talk by the bishop, the minister of the day, Robert Yoder, begins his sermon. He's poised, eloquent and effective. Even humorous a few times. Exactly at noon he stops preaching.

Following dismissals, most people stay in their places to talk to neighbors. A newcomer, walking toward the foyer, is met by the friendly bishop Simon Schrock, who says, "I'm not about to let you get away without a proper greeting." Animated conversation develops.

It's a plain unaffected service, for people with a plain lifestyle. But who are they? Just who are the Amish? And who are their "cousins" the Mennonites?



Fauquier County has been home to both groups, off and on, since about 1890.

Mennonites are a plain-dressed sect, originating in 1525 in Switzerland, who were mercilessly persecuted throughout Europe because of their religious beliefs. Probably 10,000 perished.

Rejecting infant baptism and state-supported churches, they were derisively called Anabaptists or "rebaptizers." By the 1530s, the despised group, who opposed war and practiced non-resistance, took the name Mennonites after Menno Simons, a Dutch bishop who successfully organized many new congregations.

William Penn invited the suffering Mennonites to Pennsylvania. The first arrived about 1683, settling at Germantown near Philadelphia. Soon afterward, in Europe, a schism occurred because some Mennonites wished to adhere more strictly than others to the standards of their Confession of Faith. Led by Jacob Amman of Switzerland, the more conservative Amish were born in 1693.

Today, Fauquier's Beachy Amish are one of only three Amish sects remaining in America.



Another Amish group, Old Order Amish, mark the centennial of their arrival in Fauquier County this year. In February 1892, the first Amishman, probably Noah J. Swartzentruber, moved to Midland from Maryland.

But he wasn't the first plain person in Fauquier. About 1890 a Mennonite from Augusta County, Henry L. Rhodes, had come to the Midland-Bealeton area to manage a farm. Fauquier was "virgin soil for the Mennonites," writes historian Harry Anthony Brunk.

Nevertheless, by 1901, all of the Amish had left and by 1919, the Menno-



A girl at Faith Christian Fellowship.

nite colony had also failed. Why?

It wasn't for lack of effort or advertising. In fact, Henry Rhodes worked unceasingly to attract settlers; later, his son-in-law E.J. Berkey "wrote and published literature from Warrenton . . ." to interest new people. Consequently, many Amish and Mennonites were in and out of the region.

The Amish, especially, seemed to thrive, with at least 18 families in Midland by 1896. The Mennonites, however, struggled along, never able to build their own church, although Rhodes was instrumental in the erection in 1892 of Opal Union Church, "a community project." The Amish, who worshipped in homes, didn't have to worry about building a church.

By 1894, the Amish had several ordained ministers, but it wasn't until 1900 that the first Mennonite preacher, E.J. Berkey, was ordained. But in 1899, something never entirely explained occurred: The Amish suddenly began leaving. Writer David Luthy points out, "The rush to leave Fauquier County began in earnest in the fall of 1899."

Probably the hot summers, muddy roads in spring, heavy soil, lack of refrigerated train cars for shipping milk to Washington, D.C., and a possible church controversy contributed to the rapid withdrawal. One farmer wrote, "In answer to G. Berner's letter of Kansas, will say if you will furnish paper enough I may give some reasons for selling out."

With the Amish all gone by 1901, the Mennonites renewed their struggles for survival and growth. But the dream proved unattainable. By 1919, the colony had dissipated, with the few remaining members returning to the Valley of Virginia.



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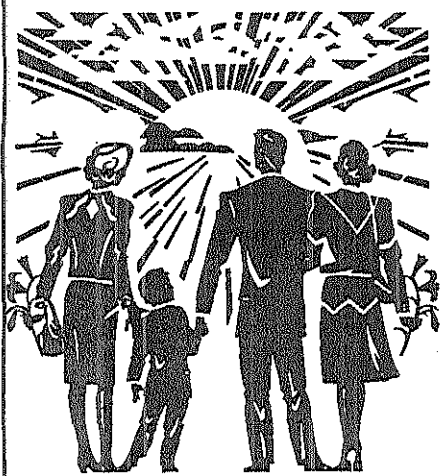
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Marvin Mast      Myron Miller  
David Mast      Lorene Byler  
"We Go the Second Mile"

but the nearly three dozen similar ones that appeared in the "Showers" section of the February 26, 1992, *The Budget* were as real as the requesters' love. (*The Budget* is a newspaper serving the Amish and Mennonite communities in North and South America.) And such charitable attention to others can be found right here in Fauquier.

Esther Miller, 49, of Catlett steps into her large living room and graciously shows several quilts she's completed. Another lies spread out on the floor. In her soft, musical voice she explains that the women meet one day a month at church to work on quilts for the needy.

"There's a 'baling' every August in Pennsylvania when huge bundles of aid for overseas missions are assembled," Mrs. Miller explains. The balings include health kits, layette bundles, school kits, Christmas packages, and comforters.

Dressed in a cotton and polyester green cape dress, socks, flat shoes, and a small head covering, Mrs. Miller doesn't look like a grandmother of eight children. Seated on her couch, she tells how she moved to Catlett in 1952 from Dover, Delaware, because her father wanted to use tractors and electricity.

While two of her grandchildren, recovering from chicken pox, play nearby, Mrs. Miller talks about growing up Amish in the 1950s in Fauquier. "I was my mother's helper, took care of the chickens, and cleaned up the kitchen after school," she relates, laughing shyly.

She attended Catlett School, Calverton School for one year, and finished grade eight at the new Pine Grove Mennonite Church's school for



Esther Miller's family moved from Delaware to Catlett in 1952.

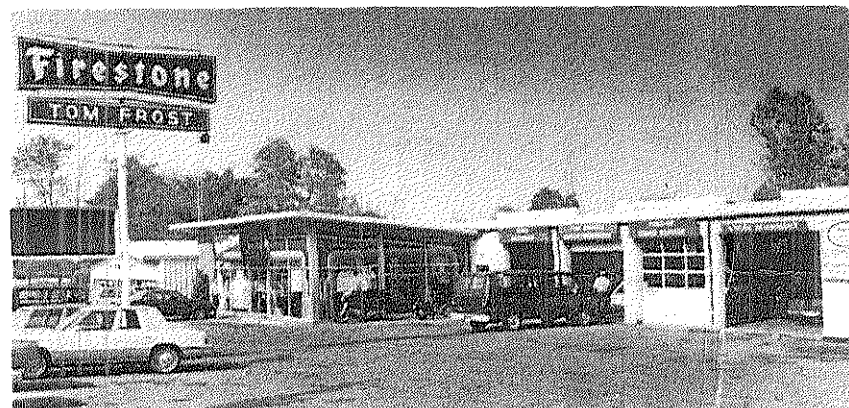
Amish children, started about 1956 in the church basement. Today there are two Amish schools at Catlett: the Pine Grove Church's school on Route 604 and Faith Christian Fellowship school which meets in the church building on Route 606. The latter school goes through grade 12; the former stops at grade eight.

What happened to the horses and buggies? Most of the Amish switched to cars "by the mid-1950s," she recalls. In fact, she delights in telling how she learned to drive at age 15. "My mother thought I drove mighty fast, she

wouldn't let me go over 40 (mph)."

A quick survey of her house and a few questions reveal that she has all the modern conveniences, including a microwave oven. However, "Television and radio are frowned on," she admits. Sometimes she listens to inspirational or classical cassette tapes. She also reads Christian novels and magazines like *Country Woman*.

Even cooking styles have changed. Forget scrapple. "We don't eat as much pork and beef as we did. My husband has to watch his cholesterol."



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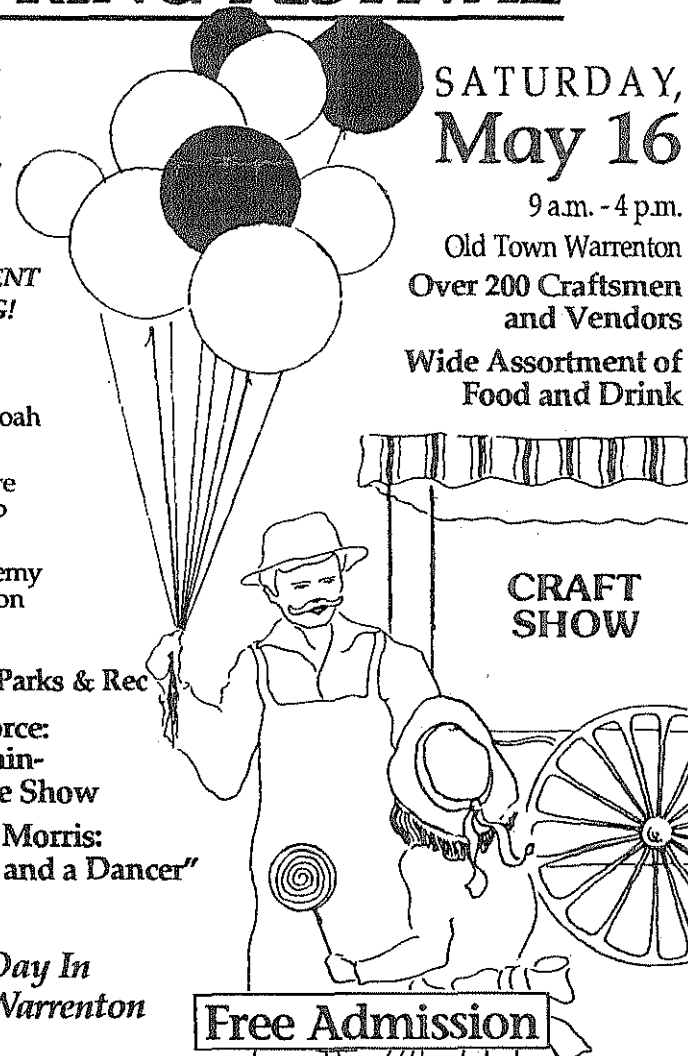
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Her husband, Alvin Miller, who works at Dulles International Airport, was in India at the time of the conversation. Mrs. Miller explains that he goes there periodically to check on the needs and progress of a mission church that Faith Christian Fellowship has begun and supports. Mr. Miller also visits Haiti once a year where "a nutrition center for children" is being built.

Faraway projects are impressive but so are the things Amish do and have done at home: taking homemade baked goodies to more than 30 elderly each Christmas and caroling for them; helping out folks during disasters like hurricanes; rebuilding a burned-down business, Tall Pines Ceramics, for the owners, John and Anne Scott of Catlett; volunteering in the community, such as working on the rescue squad. And does anybody remember that the Amish helped search for bodies and survivors after the flood in Nelson County in 1969?

A modest, quiet lady, Esther Miller states simply, "We help wherever there's a need."



Alvin D. Byler, a minister of Faith Christian Fellowship, knows a lot about the Fauquier Beachy Amish. In his study are numerous books, many relating to church history. On his desk lies an open Bible with English text on the left and German text on the right. Mr. Byler reads German and says he preached in Pennsylvania Dutch until about 1970.

He first came to Catlett in 1948 from western Pennsylvania. Two years before, in 1946, the Amish had rediscovered Fauquier. "The first here was Alvin Kauffman who lived near Calverton," Mr. Byler recalls.

Others arrived fast after that from Pennsylvania, Delaware and Ohio. They built the first Amish church (now an Amish school) on Route 604 "about 1949." By the next year, there were 26 families living near Catlett.

Byler, a pastor since 1961, is 61 years old and the father of "12 living children." Generally serious and sometimes intense, he has a playful twinkle coming and going in his eyes, softening his countenance.

He explains that the Beachy Amish

Forget pastoral scenes of Amish farms. They are disappearing from the Fauquier landscape. "Only about four families" in his congregation are involved in farming, Mr. Byler states.

separated from the more conservative Old Order Amish around 1927 and take their name from the founder, Moses M. Beachy. There are about 100 Beachy Amish congregations in America.

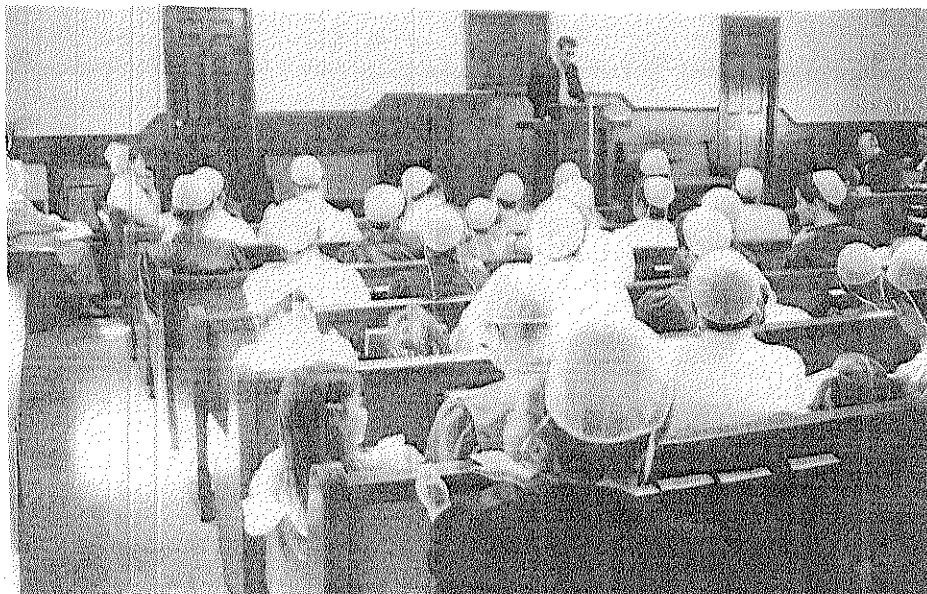
Catlett has two Beachy Amish churches: the older and more conservative congregation, Pine Grove Mennonite Church, on Route 605 and Faith Christian Fellowship, built in 1977, a church with about 95 members on Route 606.

Forget pastoral scenes of Amish farms. They are disappearing from the Fauquier landscape. "Only about four families" in his congregation are involved in farming, Mr. Byler states. He and a son run a hardware store in the heart of Catlett.

The Amish are known for hard work. Less known is their sense of humor. Alvin Byler demonstrates his humorous side in Pennsylvania Dutch, a German dialect with English expressions mixed in. Obliging a guest, he utters a soft sounding sentence. When asked to translate, he chuckles, "I said, 'You don't know what I'm talking about.'"

One subject he is adamant about is pacifism: it's not a word he would use to describe Amish beliefs.

"Pacifism? No. Pacifists are people who march" or in some way actively lobby for peace. "We believe in non-



The girls and women all sit on the left side of the sanctuary, as Bishop Simon Schrock addresses the congregation.

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# Amish by choice — not by birth

Alexandria resident Steve Russell was not born Amish: He chose to be Amish. The 38-year-old bachelor has never regretted his decision.

Raised in southern Maryland until his teens, Russell first noticed the Mennonites and Amish when his family moved to rural western Maryland where some of his classmates were Mennonites.

Although Russell was a member of a mainstream church, he says he wasn't converted until age 17, when, "I recognized my sinfulness before God." So he began searching for a church that practiced what he'd been reading in the Bible.

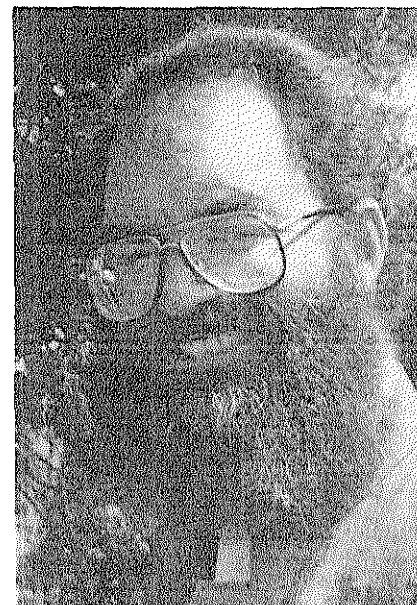
That church was Mountain View Amish Mennonite Church in Garrett County, Maryland. "I'd been reading the history of the Reformation and the Anabaptists, and they (the Amish) caught my attention," he explains.

Some of his friends and relatives asked, "How can you do this?" and "How can you give up things?" However, Russell maintains he had little trouble adjusting.

"There were cultural oddities like Pennsylvania Dutch and other little customs," he admits, but he felt the new life, a life based less on "worldly interests" and more on "relationships."

Steve Russell performed voluntary service for the Beachy Amish church. He worked two summers in Germany (where he perfected his German); spent six months helping out at a halfway house for parolees; and he worked one year for Choice Books, a Christian book distributor located in Fairfax. He did all this for "pocket money."

Today he holds degrees in European history and church history. He puts it all to good use at Choice Books where he manages the walk-in store and handles mail order busi-



Steve Russell.

ness. And he finds time for Christian Faith Fellowship.

Russell joined the Catlett congregation in March 1981. Chuckling, he admits that the Catlett folks are "fairly liberal" compared to some other Amish churches he's been in. And he's seen more than a few. Before he took his present job, he taught school in three Amish and Mennonite church schools in Maryland, Pennsylvania and Illinois.

All Amish, he says, emphasize faith and family. "They evaluate everything in light of those. We don't reject inventions or technology for the sake of it . . . We pick and choose what will fit into the pattern of our lives."

Today there are Amish from all races. After German was dropped for use in church services, potential converts felt more at home with the Amish community. Steve Russell may seem unusual, but he's really just one of many who have chose to be Amish.

resistance" which isn't compatible with political activity or demonstrations against war.

Other Amish beliefs include believer's baptism, church discipline and a simple lifestyle, which results from their understanding of New Testament teachings. Writer John Hostetler says they follow the triad of "obedience, simplicity and love."

But non-Amish people haven't always shown love towards the Amish. Mr. Byler talks easily about the days when people used to laugh at his clothes or beard.

It happened mostly before the 1960s, he recalls, prior to the popularity of "long hair." He tells a story about his cousin Adam Byler.

One day Adam Byler was walking down the street of a small town. A smart-alecky youth approached him, and smirked, "Are you Noah?" The

long-whiskered Amishman truthfully replied, "No, I'm Adam!"

After the belly laughter dies down, Alvin Byler sums up Amish beliefs. "I believe we should live out our faith. We are an epistle. We are being read like an epistle."



The black buggies at Catlett are gone; so is the old black Ford my father drove. What is more important is that the coming century will find the Amish in Fauquier, instead of leaving it. ●

*The author wishes to acknowledge the kind assistance of Lois B. Bowman, associate director of the Menno Simons Historical Library at Eastern Mennonite College in Harrisonburg.*