Fauquier's Amish Mennonites

They Bring Old Log Cabins Back to Life

The Piedmont's Growing Mushroom Business
When 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.

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 homemade 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 at Faith Christian Fellowship, smiles as young parishioners race past (above); farming (left) is becoming less common among local Amish.
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—a true church singing! 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 Henry Anthony Brunk.

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

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

Mr. 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 Kaufman 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 64 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 are 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.

"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. "Pacifists? No. Peacemakers are people who march" or in some way actively lobby for peace. "We believe in non-violence in its purest form."

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

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 laughers 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 Memno Simons Historical Library at Eastern Mennonite College in Harrisonburg.