

T O U R C H I L D R E N  
D I A N E a n d D A V I D

A Peculiar People:  
Iowa's Old Order Amish

C O N T E N T S

**ELMER W. SCHWIEDER** holds the B.A. degree from Dakota Wesleyan University, the M.S.W. degree from the University of Denver, and the Ph.D. degree from Iowa State University. He is presently associate professor in the Department of Family Environment at Iowa State University. Twice elected Professor of the Year, Dr. Schwieder's research interests are in the area of family, both past and present.

**DOROTHY A. SCHWIEDER** holds the B.A. degree from Dakota Wesleyan University and the M.S. degree from Iowa State University. She is presently an instructor in the History Department at Iowa State University. Mrs. Schwieder edited the book, *Patterns and Perspectives in Iowa History*, and has published numerous articles on Iowa history. She is a member of the State Historical Board of Iowa.

PHOTOS: Page i—ON THE WAY. Photo by Joan Liffing Zug  
Title page—THE HELPFUL "FROLIC." Courtesy of the Des Moines Register and Tribune

© 1975 The Iowa State University Press  
Ames, Iowa, 50010. All rights reserved

Composed and printed by The Iowa State University Press

First edition, 1975  
Second printing, 1976

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Schwieder, Elmer, 1925-  
A peculiar people.

Bibliography: p.  
Includes index.

1. Amish in Iowa. 2. Iowa—History. I. Schwieder, Dorothy, 1933- joint author.

II. Title.

BX8129.A6S38 977.7 75-23420  
ISBN 0-8138-0105-2

Preface, vi

1. The Old Order in Iowa, 2
2. Origin and Growth, 9
3. Religious Practices, 23
4. Economic Organization, 37
5. Family Life, 54
6. Mobility and New Communities, 80
7. The School Controversy, 94
8. The Vital Issue: Education, 113
9. The Beachy Amish, 129
10. The Plain People in the Midwest, 141

Appendices

- A. An Act Relating to Compulsory School Attendance and Educational Standards, 153
- B. Church Organization Financial Agreement, 155
- C. The Dortrecht Confession of Faith, 156

Notes, 169

Bibliography, 178

Index, 185

## CHAPTER NINE

# The Beachy Amish

A frequent distinction made between Amish members is whether they are "house Amish" or "church Amish." The terms indicate a basic difference between the Old Order and the Beachy groups, as the Beachy worship in churches and the Old Order conduct religious services in their homes. Adhering to many of the religious beliefs and social customs of the Old Order, the Beachy groups nevertheless deviate in several significant ways. Overall, they are more liberal in their economic practices and less concerned about maintaining separation from the world. Beachy Amish members work in nonfarm related industries, own automobiles (if they are black), and interact on a more frequent basis with non-Amish people.

### THE ORIGINS OF THE BEACHY AMISH

The Beachy Fellowship has been in existence since the 1920s when it originated in Somerset County, Pennsylvania.<sup>1</sup> During that decade friction developed in the district of Moses M. Beachy, an Old Order Amish bishop of the Casselman River District. The conflict centered around the use of electricity, the ownership of automobiles, and the practice of holding Sunday school. Eventually, the controversy also involved more fundamental church doctrine when Bishop Beachy refused to excommunicate and shun members of his congregation for joining Conservative Amish Mennonite churches.<sup>2</sup> In 1927 the situation reached a climax when the most conservative members of the involved districts withdrew and joined other Old Order church districts so they would not lose their good standing. This division resulted in the Yoder (Old Order) and the Beachy congregations, both being named after their respective ministers at that time.<sup>3</sup>



BEACHY AMISH MAY OWN  
BLACK AUTOMOBILES.

Photo by Joan Liffing Zug

During the next three decades other Old Order church districts followed Beachy's example until Beachy congregations were located in many states throughout the central and eastern United States. In 1974 there were Beachy congregations in sixteen states, the District of Columbia, and five foreign countries, with the heaviest concentrations in Pennsylvania and Ohio. Their membership at that time was 4,069 located within sixty-two congregations. Although there are a few exceptions, the great majority of Beachy Amish are either former Old Order members or their descendants. On rare occasions a non-Amish might join the Beachy group or a Beachy member might marry a non-Amish who then joins. Throughout North and South America as well as Iowa the Beachy Amish constitute approximately one-fifth of the total Amish population.<sup>4</sup>

The Iowa Beachy Amish church began near Kalona in 1946. Typical of previous church schisms, disagreement arose among some Johnson County Old Order members over the use of modern equipment. Precipitating the controversy was the fact that Johnson County highway officials had applied an oil surface to roads in the southern part of the county and had then prohibited the use of vehicles with lugs. Members of the North Church District agreed to use rubber on their machinery, but this decision brought an immediate, negative reaction from other districts. Action was taken to prevent the North District from going ahead with adoption of rubber tires, and gradually the question of other modern conveniences and equipment also became involved. Soon members were arguing over the propriety of using electricity, owning automobiles, and installing telephones. The more liberal members began to challenge the traditional arguments with comments like "if it is wrong to own a car or use a telephone then why is it right to hire a car or use a neighbor's phone."<sup>5</sup>

As a result of the bickering, seven families left the Old Order church and began meeting separately for religious services; these Amish fathers were Moses E. Yoder, Willie Helmuth, Enos H. Miller, John Helmuth, Chris Stolfus, Mose Coblenz, and Benedict Kemp. Their place of worship was an unused Lutheran church located northeast of Kalona at Kesselring Junction. Hard feelings continued, however, as many homes were affected with sons and daughters leaving the Old Order and "going Beachy."<sup>6</sup>

Ministers from Beachy churches in other states came to preach until John Helmuth and Moses E. Yoder were ordained as ministers during the winter of 1946. The Beachy adopted the name, Burkholder Church, after a minister by that name who had visited the group. In 1952 the members built a church five miles north of Kalona and

changed their name to Sharon Bethel. From the modest beginnings of seven families, by 1974 the congregation had grown to forty-one families and a membership of ninety-nine.<sup>7</sup>

### BEACHY EXPANSION

Beachy groups, like the Old Order, have experienced difficulty in finding available, reasonably priced land, and this problem led them to establish their second Iowa settlement at Leon. In searching for new areas, the Beachy have followed the same pattern utilized by the Old Order. The procedure is for several members to form a search committee and travel to places where they know land is for sale. Not only is price a factor but also the possibility of additional farms coming up for sale in the future. The Beachy committee discovered when they visited the Leon area that many of the farmers were between sixty and seventy years old and were obviously considering retirement. Land values averaged \$80 an acre. The two prerequisites of land prices and land quantity were thus satisfied. The first Beachy settlers—the Moses E. Yoder family and the Wayne Miller family—moved to Leon in February 1959. The families that followed in the next few years came from Oklahoma, Kansas, Virginia, Pennsylvania, Indiana, and Oregon and brought the total number of families to twenty-five. During the most recent years the Beachy young people have married within their community, and the number of families in 1974 was thirty with a total membership of eighty.<sup>8</sup>

Seldom, however, is the reason for resettlement totally economic. The feeling exists among the Iowa Beachy that the Leon group is the most liberal and that the members who came to Leon were perhaps a little more progressive than their home congregations would have liked. By moving to a new area where they were involved in shaping the rules of conduct, they could accommodate their more liberal feelings. This avoided confrontation in their home congregation and possibly eliminated any desire to leave the Beachy group for a less strict Mennonite church. As with the Old Order, the ability to migrate without loss of prestige or church rights or privileges provides the Beachy members with a safety valve for their discontent.<sup>9</sup>

The Leon community reacted somewhat negatively when news of the impending Beachy settlement began to circulate. Rumors flowed freely that the Mennonite people were invading southern Iowa with forty families in the initial settlement alone and that they would set up an independent economic organization. They would have their own banks, stores, and other service operations so they would have no need

of the services of locally owned businesses. Also heard frequently was the rumor that they planned to purchase all the land and drive non-Amish people from the area. Apparently the Leon residents had mistaken the Amish for the Amana residents located west of Iowa City. They believed that the Amish were going to establish a similar society where the stores, industrial plants, and land were to be owned by a corporation.<sup>10</sup>

Moses E. Yoder began to counteract these allegations by attending the Leon Ministerial Council, which was composed of local ministers. He managed to successfully interpret the Mennonites' religious beliefs and positions as well as their migration plans. The local ministers, in turn, relayed this information to their parishioners. A close relationship developed between Minister Yoder and the Ministerial Council, and no doubt the understanding stemming from this relationship was highly significant in calming many fears about the Mennonite "invasion." Gradually, misapprehensions began to fade and the community observed that the Beachy members were pleasant, hardworking, thrifty people. In fact, many older farmers who were anticipating retirement began to approach Yoder and offer to sell him their farms. It began happening so frequently that Yoder commented, "Everytime some older man drove in, I knew he had a farm to sell."<sup>11</sup>

### GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

The Beachy Amish in Iowa have retained many characteristics of the Old Order, but many areas of contrast continue to exist. Economically, the Beachy are not so concerned about isolating themselves from the outside world. While most Beachy men are farmers, many others seek employment in outside areas. In the Leon congregation some are employed at a ready-mix plant in Davis City and others operate a window factory and a blacksmith shop in Decatur City. Carpentry, mechanical work, and truck driving also attract Beachy wage earners. In the agricultural area, the Beachy use tractors and electrical equipment, undoubtedly saving time and making them less dependent on the manual labor provided by large families. Their acreages remain small, however, so they are still forced to practice extreme frugality in their buying habits, whether the expenditures are for farm equipment or domestic needs. Their machinery is more up-to-date than the Old Order, and many do custom combining throughout their area.<sup>12</sup>

One aspect of their economic activities that presents a conflict for

some Beachy members is working in areas where employees are traditionally unionized. While Beachy members recognize that unions have brought about great improvements in working conditions and wages, they still refuse to identify themselves with any group that might resort to force or power. Pointing out that unions sometimes use mob tactics and violence, they resist membership in such organizations and point out instead that the Bible teaches a better way: ". . . all things . . . ye would that men should do to you, do ye even so to them . . ." (Matthew 7:12). "Let all bitterness, and wrath, and anger, and clamour, and evil speaking, be put away from you, with all malice" (Ephesians 4:31). "And the servant of the Lord must not strive; but be gentle unto all men . . ." (II Timothy 2:24). To guide their members in these areas, the Beachy suggest the following:

1. That members seek employment where union membership is not required.
2. That farmers likewise refrain from membership in farmers unions which also thrive on coercive and sometimes destructive methods.
3. That if and when unions do take control, and if employment or market is restricted to union members, a transfer of employment or market is recommended.<sup>13</sup>

The Beachy recommend one further alternative in the area of employment with a unionized company. The agreement or "basis of understanding" is similar to one prepared by a Mennonite general conference on industrial relations and was approved by officials of both the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organization. Under these agreements the Mennonite employees will:

1. Contribute to a specified cause, usually charitable or benevolent, a sum of money equivalent to the amount of dues paid by the union members.
2. Refrain from interference with or resistance to union activities.
3. In case of conflict resulting in a strike or similar action between the union and the employer, maintain an attitude of sincere neutrality.
4. Abide by the regulations of the shop and union with regard to wages, hours, and working conditions (as long as such regulations do not violate biblical principles).<sup>14</sup>

The unions, in turn, agree to excuse the nonresistant employee from membership in the union, payment of union dues, attendance at meetings, and other union activities.<sup>15</sup>

The Beachy have not adhered as strongly to their separationist

tendencies in regard to education as have the Old Order. The Kalona Beachy group has their own school, Sharon Bethel, with a 1974 enrollment of seventy students. The school contains three classrooms and hires three teachers. In Leon, however, children attended the public school until September 1974, when they opened their own private school. This action stands in sharp contrast to the Milton-Pulaski Old Order Amish who organized a school almost immediately upon settlement of their families in that area. The Beachy do believe, however, that an eighth grade education is sufficient and that private schools hiring Beachy Amish teachers are the best way to educate their children.<sup>16</sup>

The Beachy provide further religious training for their young people at the Calvary Bible School at Calico Rock, Arkansas. Beachy congregations throughout the nation finance and administer the school, and Beachy ministers teach the courses. As the school's name indicates, it is a Bible school and most courses center around that theme. Also offered, however, are elementary courses in music, typing, and German. Three sessions, each lasting three weeks, are held during January and February. At one time or another most Beachy young people from Kalona and Leon attend the school.<sup>17</sup>

Beachy and Old Order members share common religious convictions. The Beachy believe in nonconformity to the world and nonresistance and accept the *Dortrecht Confession of Faith*. They believe as well in the Christian ordinances of foot washing, head coverings for women, the laying on of hands, holy marriage, and the practice of the holy kiss between Christian believers. The major religious difference is the Beachy use of a separate church building.<sup>18</sup>

Like all Mennonites, the Beachy believe in nonresistance and therefore will not serve in any military capacity. They believe that as Christians it is inconsistent for them to "participate in military service, whether combatant or noncombatant, whether in defense or offense, for Christ has commanded us to love even our enemies." To support their pacifist views, the Beachy quote the biblical verse (Matthew 5:39), which states that in the event of conflict, they should turn the other cheek.<sup>19</sup> They believe their people should take positive action by giving financial aid to the needy and distressed, clothing the naked, and in all ways seeking to overcome evil with good. In the event of all-out war, the Beachy believe that the Scriptures require them to "flee, or suffer the spoiling of our goods, rather than to inflict injury even on an enemy." (See also Matthew 5:40-44, 10:32; Romans 12:19.)<sup>20</sup>

Like the Old Order, the religious convictions of the Beachy prevent them from any involvement in political matters. They believe in

separation of church and state and that one has no right to interfere in the activities of the other. The Beachy further believe that since they subscribe to biblical nonresistance they therefore cannot participate in a system that bears the carnal sword, "for the weapons of our warfare are not carnal" (II Corinthians 10:4). The same beliefs prevent them from participating in political campaigns, political rallies, and elections, "for by so doing we would identify ourselves with the system." The Beachy believe that because of God's absolute power over men, they can accomplish more by their prayers than others can by voting against one another at the polls.<sup>21</sup>

### THE BEACHY FELLOWSHIP

The Beachy church is considered a fellowship as opposed to a specific conference. Like the Old Order, each congregation is autonomous, with a bishop presiding over the membership and assisted by two ministers. The Beachy believe in a support ministry but not a paid one, which means that if the bishop or ministers find they are behind in their own chores because of church obligations, other members of the congregation will assist with fieldwork, harvesting, or whatever needs to be done. The bishop and ministers are chosen by lot. Once a year church officials attend a general assembly to discuss common problems; Erwin N. Hershberger of Myersdale, Pennsylvania, serves as secretary for the National Assembly. Within each church district the bishop conducts communion and performs baptisms and marriages. The ministers assist him with the preaching and give supportive council. In Kalona the church services are conducted in German, but in Leon English is used. Sunday morning church services are alternated with Sunday school. When Sunday school is held, evening church services are conducted. On the alternating Sunday, the young people have a special meeting. Once a month they also hold a social get-together called a "literary." The entertainment consists of games, singing, and the presentation of a skit written and acted out by members of the group. In addition the young people distribute religious tracts in Iowa City, present religious services and singing at the state penitentiary in Fort Madison, and conduct services at the Sunshine Rescue Mission in Cedar Rapids. Disabled persons and widows within the church are also given special assistance.<sup>22</sup>

The age at which Beachy young people are baptised presents yet another contrast with the Old Order, who believe in adult baptism based on confession of faith. The Beachy do not stress the adult aspect but rely instead on the confession of faith. Many Beachy young people

are baptised at age fifteen and sixteen and some as young as twelve and thirteen. One Beachy bishop stated that they feel the time for baptism has arrived when the young person begins looking for something more in his or her life.<sup>23</sup>

The practice of shunning also differs between the two Amish groups. The Beachy will not shun anyone for joining a more liberal Mennonite group, and only under the most extreme conditions will they shun one of their members. They make every effort to work with the wayward one, showing love and concern and aiding in every way possible, hoping that the group behavior will help the individual see "the true way" and return with the proper repentance. They interact with all Mennonite church groups from the most conservative such as the Old Order to the more liberal such as the Conservative Mennonites.<sup>24</sup>

Council meetings are held twice a year, several weeks before communion Sunday. The purpose is to review the rules and regulations with the entire congregation. It is a time when wrongdoings can be pointed out to members; if the problems are solved, they can take part in the communion service; if not, however, they do not partake. Overall, the Beachy elders are not as strict as the Old Order regarding their young peoples' behavior. For instance, the Beachy allow their young people to buy tape decks for their automobiles as long as they contain religious music, while they will not allow them to have regular radios. Their rationale is that one can control what the young people listen to on the tapes, but they cannot control what they listen to on the radio.<sup>25</sup>

Needy and disabled persons outside their own church community are also a concern of the Beachy. Membership in the Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), the official relief and service agency for North American Mennonites, provides a means of aiding needy people all over the world. The MCC coordinates and administers programs in the areas of foreign relief and services, voluntary services, mental health, and peace and disaster services. A Beachy Amish member from Pennsylvania sits on the seventeen-man MCC board that meets annually to review programs and determine future outreach. The Leon group contributes regularly to the MCC through periodic meat canning operations. The Beachy cooperate with the Old Order River Brethren, a small group within the Brethren church located at Dallas Center. The two congregations donate animals or money to purchase them, and a mobile unit operated by the MCC comes to Leon where the butchering is done. A health inspector is always present to certify that the process meets federal government standards. The cans of food are then turned over to the MCC for distribution.<sup>26</sup>

The Beachy also have their own separate mission organization, the Amish Mennonite Aid. Founded in 1955, the headquarters are located in East Rochester, Ohio, with the governing board composed of Beachy ministers located throughout the United States. The agency's main emphasis is upon overseas mission work, with most attention directed to British Honduras, El Salvador, and Costa Rica. Missionary work is also being carried out in Germany. The Beachy purpose is stated as follows in their "Overseas Voluntary Service Manual":

1. To help meet physical, spiritual, and emotional needs of individuals which otherwise would not be met.
2. To demonstrate a positive witness which testifies to the love and power of God and to the life of a Christian by helping others to help themselves by providing information, encouragement, love, tools, and materials.
3. To live together as a group in a way that will demonstrate what true Christianity really means.
4. To strengthen the outreach of the church through daily, consistent life, and by easing the sufferings of those less fortunate, thereby demonstrating Christianity in shoe leather; by assisting the work of missions whenever this is jointly agreed upon by those who are responsible.<sup>27</sup>

The group's domestic work consists of sponsoring and operating the old folks home in Harrison, Arkansas, and children's homes at Plain City, Ohio, and Mission Home, Virginia. An additional function of the mission's overseas program is that it provides many young Beachy men with the opportunity to fulfill their Selective Service requirements for military exemptions through voluntary missionary work.<sup>28</sup>

As well as their own missionary group, the Beachy also have an official publication, the *Calvary Messenger*, published by Calvary Publications, Meyersdale, Pennsylvania. Many Beachy families also subscribe to *Family Life*, a magazine published eleven times a year by Pathway Publishers, Aylmer, Ontario.<sup>29</sup>

Perhaps it is in the area of general social behavior that the most noticeable differences appear between the Beachy and the Old Order. Both groups believe in the precept of nonconformity to the world, but the manner in which they enforce it depends upon their interpretation of what is worldly and what is not. This interpretive process apparently affords considerable latitude for the Beachy in determining their social behavior. Beachy members wear more modern clothing, have increased business contacts with non-Amish people, and take part in extension

programs, all of which indicate a more liberal interpretation of the nonconforming principle than that made by the Old Order.

The Beachy lack the uniformity of dress that is so much a part of the Old Order. The older men wear the traditional Amish garb of broadfalls trousers and plain colored shirts, but wear shorter beards and have their hair parted in the middle and cut quite short. The women wear a long cape style dress, but often made with bright-colored material. They have dark stockings and a prayer cap that is smaller than in the Old Order. In general, their dress is simply less old-worldish. Beachy young people dress with varying degrees of modernity, as some young men wear regular short-sleeved sport shirts and work-style trousers during the week. However, on Sunday they wear traditional garb. Some young men who do wear the front-drop trousers have abandoned suspenders and started wearing belts. With the emphasis today on longer hair styles and beards, it is difficult to distinguish between many of the Beachy young people and the general non-Amish population.<sup>30</sup>

In their day-to-day activities, Beachy members interact to a high degree with non-Amish people. At different times Beachy members have taken part in short courses offered by county extension officials, such as a tailoring course. In one instance, five foster children were placed in Beachy homes, necessitating continual contact with welfare officials. The involvement of a Beachy minister in the Leon Ministerial Council offers another example of their social relationships with non-Amish people. Overall, this high degree of interaction is apparently regarded positively by both Beachy and non-Beachy Amish groups. On the other end of the spectrum, there appears to be little social interaction with members of the Old Order. While business contacts are maintained between Beachy people in Leon and certain Amish communities such as Jamesport, Missouri, some Beachy members have never visited the Amish community in Buchanan County.<sup>31</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The two Beachy congregations in Iowa have grown steadily since their beginnings in 1946 and 1959. Nationwide, the Beachy group is enlarging at an even greater rate; since the 1960s Beachy congregations have multiplied so rapidly that many Iowa members have not been able to remain knowledgeable as to the total number of groups and their locations. They exhibit the same high degree of mobility as their more

conservative counterparts, and there is every indication that the Beachy group will increase both in membership and in number of settlements. Within Amish society the crucial question is, How many Old Order members will go Beachy? Undoubtedly they will attract a small percentage, but as they become more modern in their dress, more worldly in their economic habits, and increase their social relationships with non-Amish people, this will increasingly discourage Old Order members from joining their church. The closer the Beachy remain in religious thinking and practice to the Old Order, the more converts they will attract. The trend, however, appears to be in the direction of the Beachy becoming more worldly and thus attracting fewer Old Order members. As they move in that direction, dropping the word Amish from their name and thus becoming the Beachy Mennonites becomes more probable.