

A Glimpse At The Amish Way

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Robert Miller in front of his tack shop

We are the English. Why? Because that's the language we speak. They are the Amish. Why? Well, that's a different story.

*We English may think we know about the Amish because we watched the 1985 movie *The Witness* with Harrison Ford. Several conclusions are usually drawn: most of the Amish think alike, act alike and look alike; Mennonites are a more liberal version of the Amish; and the largest population of Amish in the U.S. must be around the Lancaster, Pennsylvania area. Wrong.*

Although Amish people are virtually in all of the lower 48, we English know very little about those plain folks who choose to live a simpler life. In central Michigan there are at least three distinctly different

Amish communities. They, in fact, are more conservative descendants of the Mennonites and the Lancaster area ranks third in Amish population behind northeastern Ohio and northern Indiana.

Robert Miller was born in the Amish community of Rexford, Montana. His family moved to the Clare Old Order Amish community when he was 4 years old. With an entrepreneurial spirit, he works for his father in the family sawmill, operates his own equine tack shop, makes pallets for a company in Clare, hopes to become a horse trainer and is my friend.

Four years ago my wife was in need of a leather craftsman to repair her saddle and a fellow horseman recommended Robert. We obtained directions to the Miller farm/mill off of Beaverton Road and set out for Amish country.

To our surprise an extremely youthful Amish boy emerged from a building with the simple sign saying TACK SHOP on the side. After introductions we spent a good hour talking about horses, racing and the necessary repairs to the saddle. Robert asked a lot of questions.

Over the years there were more repairs, new saddles and a new found friendship had developed. Now a young man of twenty, Robert always greets us with a smile and firm handshake. He always has provided quality workmanship for a fair price and always has more questions.

Trying to be sensitive to the Amish ways, my curiosity got the best of me and I thought Robert would make a fascinating subject to interview. What I discovered was a well-grounded individual who is comfortable in his Amish surroundings but also looking forward to dealing with the English in the 21st century.

ROR: Are you considered an employee of your father's sawmill?

Robert: I am a dependant until I'm 21 or on my own. My parents pay for all I need and want, within reason. The money I make outside the mill is mine. The pallets I make after hours, my father gets a cut for the use of his equipment and materials. I'm saving up to buy some land.

ROR: The work ethic of the Amish is legendary. When did you start working?

Robert: From the time I could walk I was doing something - feeding the chickens and filling the woodbin was my first chores. At around 7 I started working in the mill cleaning up and doing little jobs. Then I began working full-time at 14. At age 21 I will begin paying my own way and draw wages at the going rate.

ROR: How do Amish communities differ?

Robert: We are the Clare Old Order Amish. Most English think we are basically all the same but we're really not. There are New Order Amish in the Rosebush area. They use tractors and their businesses are more modernized. We still use horses for farming and the heavy work. The Gladwin area has the Swartzentruber Amish who are more conservative or stricter and simpler regarding tools and no generator power for example.

ROR: Can you explain the Amish origins?

Robert: Well, I certainly don't know it all but basically my forefathers came from England and were Mennonites. A man named Jacob Amman started what is known as Amish today. My father's family came from Ohio and my mother's from Indiana.

ROR: When someone says "the Amish way", what does that mean to you?

Robert: A simpler more laid-back way of life. For example, when I opened my tack shop in Farwell, I would ride my bike most of the time, which was 20 miles roundtrip. A friend stopped by and asked who drove me to the shop. It blew his mind when I told him I rode my bike. Sure, it takes longer but I don't spend money for gas, I'm in good shape, it's good exercise, I enjoy it - no big deal.

ROR: Explain the clothing...the Amish look.

Robert: Yes, it's plain. We have a dress code for church - suit coats have hooks and loops. We may all have black hats but each community has subtle differences. The Swartzentruber's hat has a wider brim. You may think we all look alike (chuckling) but we're not. You'll see a more individualized style for everyday work clothes - maybe brown or black tennis shoes but no white Air Jordan Nikes.

ROR: How about telephones or cell phones?

Robert: We can have telephones at our businesses but not in the home. The Old Order doesn't have cell phones but that's something that may change. Our church is very common sense oriented. We're dealing with the 21st century business world and they understand that. Change is slow but they want to make it easier for us to conduct business and still keep it laid back.

ROR: Tell us about your religion and church.

Robert: It's a Christian religion - every word of the King James version of the Bible. We have 4 churches in our community - two open

each Sunday. The church wagon (tables, benches, chairs, etc.) goes to the designated homes for services and there is a rotating schedule. The Bishop is the head of the church; the Deacon handles the church finances and depending on size there are usually two ministers per church.

ROR: What is a typical Amish service - time, size, etc.

Robert: We have service from 9:00 to noon. In the evening we have supper and sing songs. An average size service would be approximately 10 families.

ROR: When can you join the church?

Robert: That is everyone's own personal choice. You have to take an instructional class that teaches you the how's and why's of the Amish. Then when you are ready you are baptized into the church.

ROR: When does the beard come in?

Robert: It's my understanding the beard is grown when you're married and you have to have joined the church before you get married. I think it's a tradition rather than a rule.

ROR: You are clean-shaven, which makes you an eligible bachelor, right?

Robert: Well, I have a girlfriend and hopefully will get married. The average dating period is about 2 years. Some get married sooner, some later. Weddings are traditional with some similarities but also unique just like the English weddings. We have a wedding wagon come to the home with all the necessary furnishings for a large gathering.

ROR: Are your weddings and church services spoken in German?

Robert: Yes and yes. But our German and Pennsylvania Dutch (a German dialect) are spoken with an American accent. At one point in early American history, the primary language in many places was Pennsylvania Dutch. There was a vote for a national language and English won out by just a few votes over German.

ROR: When did you get your first buggy and when did you father let you solo on the road?

Robert: My father gave me my first one as a gift or bonus for working for him. Going out on the road is up to each family but my first trip on the road was a short one at about age 14. The average age for regular trips is 16 or 17 years old. We are given a driving course in school.

ROR: Buggies and automobiles can be a hazardous mix. What problems do you have and how do you deal with them?

Robert: Road rage is a big concern with us, as it is with the English. Our community tries to be as safety conscious as possible. My carriage has reflecting tape outlining the back with a slow moving vehicle sign and LED running lights.



ROR: There have been several serious accidents...

Robert: Yes, I'm very concerned and hope that our school course becomes more extensive because of the road issues we deal with. I appreciate when people give me room and in return I try to do the same. That's another problem the Amish and English must continue to work on in the 21st century.

ROR: English teenage boys are always talking about their cars...

Robert: I imagine it's the same but we ask how fast our horses go not how much horsepower- we deal mostly with one horsepower. But we also comment on how sharp a carriage is, getting it rigged and looking just right too.

ROR: Have you ever driven a car?

Robert: I haven't. A driver's license isn't allowed. I have driven tractors for farming and ATV's for work and we have LP powered fork lifts at the mill.

ROR: You mentioned school. Tell us about your schooling.

Robert: We go from 1st through the 8th grades, which is probably equivalent to your high school. We learn the English language through school. We're taught how to get along, how to take care of ourselves and as change comes in terms of modernization that is included also. There is the usual - reading, writing and arithmetic. I look at it as getting the basics to graduate onto the school of life. But I'm still learning.

ROR: How about insurances and banking, checking accounts, credit cards, etc.?

Robert: We are self-insured. Michigan, Wisconsin, Ohio and Indiana churches contribute to a fund for fire and medical coverage. As far as banking, I have a savings account at the First Bank of Clare. I'll probably get a family checking account when I'm married and possibly a credit card. But the less paper work I have to deal with, I feel I'm better off.

ROR: What happens to an Amish person who wants to live the English way?

Robert: When you join the church you understand and agree to accept this way of life. If you choose to "jump the fence" you are excommunicated. We don't shun the people but our contact is dramatically reduced because we no longer share a lifestyle or have much in common.

ROR: Is the Amish community aware of the Middle East conflict and what's happening with our troops in Iraq or Afghanistan?

Robert: Most definitely we are concerned. Those are big topics of conversation. We aren't involved with the military but we understand what they do. We don't have the instant updates from TV or radio but our news comes regularly from newspapers and magazines.

ROR: Where do you see yourself in 10 years?

Robert: Hopefully married. I can't see myself as a family man right now but I'm sure that will change. I would like to have a large horse training facility and be considered an excellent equine care practitioner. I'm reminded of an old saying, 'the outside of a horse is good for the inside of the man'. I want to get the most out of both horse and man. That's where I'll be in 10 years.

ROR: Thank you Robert. It's been a pleasure.

A GLIMPSE OF AN AMISH WEDDING

It's been over a year since we last visited with Robert Miller. You remember Robert the Amish, who gave us a peek at the Amish way of life. Well, things have changed just a bit in Robert's life and I thought I'd get you caught up.

Robert doesn't have his tack shop any more but he's still working on my wife's saddle. I think he's worked on it twice in the last year. As a matter of fact, with the racing season over, he's working on it now - maybe its time to get a new saddle.

You may recall Robert worked for his father at Miller's sawmill making pallets. The economic conditions have hit the lumber business hard, which forced Robert to seek employment elsewhere. He landed a job only a few miles from home at a local foundry.

It was hard, dirty work – a job no one looks forward to but Robert has never shied away from hard work. Just as the foundry work started to slow, another industrious Amish man stepped into the picture and asked Robert if he'd like to work for him. That man is Jonas Hershberger.

If you've never been to Hershberger's Hardware Store on Leaton Rd. in Clare take the time someday because it's a treat. Yes, Lowes and Home Depot are probably cheaper with most items but you'd be pleasantly surprised at what Jonas offers for a very reasonable price. You might even get a glimpse of several Hershberger kids driving Stormy (the family pony) around the yard.

When Jonas asked, Robert said yes for five excellent reasons. First, working in the hardware store was a good steady job and second, it was MUCH cleaner. Third, Jonas is a self-employed smart businessman and Robert has an entrepreneurial spirit. Robert wants to 'be his own man' someday and he knows he can learn a lot from Jonas.

The other two reasons require some detail. We previously learned that Robert was soon to turn twenty-one and would begin paying his way while living at home. He was saving up to buy some land. Well, that dream has come to fruition. Robert purchased 10 acres about 5 miles from the Miller farm and has already put up a decent sized pole barn.

The last and most important reason is Robert took the plunge and got married. You may recall he had been dating a girl and someday would

hopefully marry her. That girl was Verba Byler and as of August 7, 2007 she is now Mrs. Robert Miller.

My wife and I were overjoyed when we received our invitation to Robert and Verba's wedding. When we confirmed our intentions to attend we got our instructions.

We were informed that the ceremony would begin at 9:00 a.m. at Viola Byler's (Verba's mother) residence with a reception to follow immediately at noon. When I questioned Robert about the time frame...THREE HOURS? He smiled and said 'yes sir, but you "English" are expected to show up around 11 o'clock.'

He also informed me that the entire service would be in German/Pennsylvania Dutch and a little English (very little!) and the English all sat in one section. Gifts were welcomed but not expected and be prepared to eat...a lot.

I had cheated a bit and asked Jonas what the newly weds could use. He told me tools and any household item would be fine. He also chuckled and told me someone had ordered a picnic table as a present and 'Robert's out back building he wedding present now.' My wife and I settled on a nice wooden breadbox for Verba stuffed with horse books for Robert.

When we arrived (about 10:45), the Bishop seemed to be just getting warmed up. The men sat on one side, women on the other, facing each other with the wedding party (Robert, Verba and two "witness" couples) in the middle.

It was, as a friend once described, 'hotter than the hubs of hell' but the Almighty had provided a rain shower the night before to keep the humidity down. My first thought was 'why don't they have some fans going?' Duh, no electricity Rick!

We were somewhat of a curiosity to most of the Amish children. There were two other couples sitting with us in the "English" section and the kids would stare until dad would politely turn their head.

Thank goodness Robert's Uncle Henry sat next to me and helped with what was going on. He is a New Order Amish from Rosebush and admitted his German was a bit rusty. I don't know much German but the Bishop sprinkled in a few words that made me scratch my head: redemption, disastrous, unbeliever. And they were spoken with a raised voice and a lot of finger pointing.

But then there were words like love, marriage, natural and happy. There were several prayer sessions where everyone kneeled and there were bare-footed Amish kids running around everywhere.



Groups of the women would periodically jump up and leave only to reappear after a few minutes. Then a group of young men would do the same – all with the Bishop never missing a beat. Henry explained they were tending to preparation chores for the reception.

One whole wall was lined with, what I assumed were religious dignitaries. As it turned out, that's who they were and near the end each one gave a little prayer. Maybe it was a best wishes sort of thing.

The highlight at the close of the ceremony was when they all sang a tradition Amish hymn that Henry said was often used to end an Amish wedding. Its difficult to describe, almost like Tibetan monks chanting. All I can say is the sound must have been heard all the way to Beaverton and was beautiful.

We (the English) were marched into the reception barn and treated to a feast fit for royalty. Robert and Verba were wedged into the “wedding corner” and almost looked like deer in the headlights but you couldn't have prided the smiles from their faces.

At the end of the meal everyone sang two hymns. One was written and sung in German but the closing line said in English, ‘Love is a gift

from God and only He who created hearts can unite them.’ The other was sung in English and was titled “A Beautiful Wedded Life.”

There was no way to get close enough to converse with the newly weds but I caught Robert’s eye. I could tell he was not only the happiest man on earth but was also very pleased we were there to share this day with him.

We considered it such a privilege to be a part of Robert and Verba’s special event. We were two of only ten “English” that were a small part of a 300+ wedding service. The Amish have BIG weddings; there were black buggies everywhere.

I’ve seen Robert several times since then and had a chance to have a nice chat about that day and what’s been happening with him and Verba. They are currently living upstairs at Robert’s brother-in-laws farm until they can procure living quarters on their own property.

The breadbox sits prominently on the counter but the horse books have already been read so I guess I’ll need to dig up some more for him. He’s already trying to grow a beard and they went to Florida on their honeymoon. I’m thinking we’ll need another update very soon.

A GLIMPSE AT AN AMISH MARRIAGE



This week marks a one-year anniversary of an event not witnessed by many “English.” It was just last year on August 7th when my wife and I attended Robert Miller’s marriage ceremony, which I wrote a column about called “A Glimpse Of An Amish Wedding.”

Robert and his bride-to-be Verba Byler were married in a jam-packed pole barn during a three-hour marathon celebration. I described the day as “hotter than the hubs of hell” but I remember most the glorious smiles on their faces at the wedding reception.

We met Robert when he was just fifteen (chronicled in another column - “A Glimpse Of The Amish Life”) and I can report, at the ripe age of twenty-two, he still looks fifteen...with a bit of fuzz on his face though!

Following the wedding, the Millers took a brief trip up north with friends before Robert returned to work at Hershberger’s Hardware – just a brisk bike or buggy ride from the latest farm established in the Old Order Amish community.

They took up residence at Robert’s brother-in-law’s farm temporarily while he worked on getting the property suitable for his bride. In addition to his barn he now has several acres fenced in for the horses

and a nice little cabin built on the property. A few months later they went on their “official” honeymoon to Florida.

Shortly after their return, the Millers moved to John Henry “The Quilt Man” Yoder’s farm to housesit while John Henry headed for Florida himself to winter. As signs of spring and the month of March rolled in, they moved into their own place.

Although the cabin is small, a little more room had to be made with a new addition to the family coming. In July, almost seven pounds of Kenneth Lee Miller came into the world to make it an Amish trifecta.

I met up with Robert at the hardware store and we had a nice chat. He informed me that an opportunity came up for good work out west. So come September, he is returning to his birthplace of Rexford, Montana.

His experience working at his father’s sawmill would be very helpful as he is going into the Big Sky woods to be a lumberjack with the U.S. Forestry Service. Family on both sides and both states were pulling the Millers – east to stay, west to go.

My wife put together a good ole home cooked meal and we went a call’in on the Millers to get caught up. Robert has been so friendly, open and willing to share with us “English”, so I thought you’d enjoy an update too.

ROR: Now that you are married, do you sense a difference in how you are treated or viewed in the Amish community?

Robert: There is a bigger difference in the family. When I was there everyday and they had a bone to pick with me, it was immediate. Now that I’m away from home and married they treat me with more respect.

ROR: So the Amish go on honeymoons much as the English. You went to Florida. How did you get there, what did you see and what was the biggest surprise?

Robert: We saw the ocean. That was a first for both Verba and me. We went to Sea World, the Jungle Gardens and we hung out at the ice cream shop a lot. We hired a driver to take us to Shipshewana. They have a seasonal bus that goes to Florida twice a week. We saw lots of countryside. The biggest surprise was how much the interior of Florida reminded me of Montana – big herds of cattle and no palm trees.

ROR: What’s the most pleasant surprise you’ve had in your marriage?

Robert: Discovering married life...coming home to a hug and having my wife here waiting for me. We are totally in love and growing more

in love each day – we’re committed to making it work and never looking back.

ROR: Who does the finances, the cooking and daily chores?

Robert: I handle the finances and she does ALL the cooking (laughing). She does most of the inside work and I’m the outside person. But she does mow the lawn and help in the barn. Now that the baby is here, I’ll probably be helping more inside too.

ROR: Has the Amish family life evolved and changed?

Robert: Yes, even from my parents time. It was a more simple life; there wasn’t as much going on back then. Today it is much faster paced. Working at the store and interacting with so many more people makes it a more stressful lifestyle. But you do what you’ve gotta do.

ROR: You are moving to Montana. How are you getting there...I’m assuming you won’t be hitching up your buggy?

Robert: No, we’ll be letting Amtrak handle that.

ROR: So you can’t drive or fly there but you can take a train. Can you explain the difference?

Robert: When the automobile was invented many of the Amish weren’t educated as to what exactly its purpose was and considered it an evil contraption. The same thing occurred with the airplane. Many Amish communities don’t have a problem with plane travel but around here to keep peace amongst the communities, we stick with that standard...go along to get along. As far as accepting train travel, you got me there, Rick (laughing).

ROR: You’ve seen Montana and some of the west and now Florida. What other places would you like to see?

Robert: Arizona, the Grand Canyon; Texas and Old Mexico; California and the West Coast...some day.

ROR: How and where was the delivery for Kenneth Lee?

Robert: He was born at a mid-wife service called Country Cottage. Verba was in labor all night. She is a small person...lots of hand holding but a great experience. He was six pounds, thirteen ounces and had some fluid on his lungs so he spent a little time in the emergency room but as you can tell he’s fine now (as we hear Kenneth Lee piping in with gusto in the background).

ROR: You mentioned experiencing more stress on the job and now with a baby is there even more?

Robert: Have you seen the price of Pampers...wow! The responsibilities that go with our marriage and now with a new baby weigh heavy at times but the joys make it all worthwhile.

ROR: What are the hot issues the Amish community is talking about these days?

Robert: I've been a little out of the loop lately but the primary topic has been modernization of equipment. Our businesses have to compete in the English world, too. There have been more liberal changes. The Amish way of life is ok but has to adapt where necessary. There is more electricity and heavy equipment being used in businesses so they can make a living.

ROR: Has this caused strife in the community: generational attitudes or thinking?

Robert: It has caused "rumblings." But surprisingly it's not generational. Many of the older people are very forward thinking.

ROR: When I first interviewed you I asked 'where do you see yourself in 10 years?' Your answer was 'hopefully married...I can't see myself as a family man right now but I'm sure that will change...' That has come true in two years. What about the next eight years?

Robert: Well, we'll see what Montana has in store for us. We may come back or we may have a place for you to come visit but for sure we'll let you know.

ROR: We'd like that very much. Success and prosperity to you always and may our paths cross again soon. Thanks Robert.