

The Challenges of a Cultural Right of Passage: Law Enforcement and Amish Youth (Part I)

*This month's article is from Tom Fitch of the Shipshewana Police Department. Tom presented this paper, **The Challenges of a Cultural Right of Passage: Law Enforcement and Amish Youth** as part of his Master Instructor requirement. Tom's paper has been edited for length and is presented in two parts. Part one is this article and describes the problems of handling Amish youth. Part two will be published next month and will address the problem of dealing with Amish adults, particularly parents.*

by Tom Fitch, Shipshewana Police Department - 11/1/07

Police officers must be proactive in their communities. Most officers receive extensive police training in how and when to enforce state statute. Officers are taught criminal law, traffic law, accident investigation, and many other aspects of law enforcement, and though some cultural diversity training is given, the Amish culture is so unique and isolated that it is not often addressed in formal police training.

LaGrange County has a population of 37,000 citizens, of which one third is Amish. LaGrange County is part of the LaGrange-Elkhart Amish settlement, which is the third largest in the United States. Shipshewana is a small community whose population is comprised mainly of Amish and Mennonite citizens.

The Shipshewana Police Department is responsible for the Midwest's largest flea market and a tourist population of over one million people a year who come to observe the Amish way of life. The perception of Amish culture by visiting tourists is quite different than that of local law enforcement.

To better understand why the Amish community provides such a unique challenge for law enforcement, it is imperative to understand its history. Believing in separation of church and state and freedom of choice in choosing when you become baptized, a small group of individuals started the Anabaptist Movement.

The beliefs that [originally] separated the Anabaptists from other religious organizations of their time were adult baptism (Anabaptism - twice baptized), use of the New Testament, separation of church and state, separation from the world, pacifism, nonresistance, and a disciplined community.

From the Anabaptist Movement splintered four groups. The Hutterites and Mennonites splintered from the movement in 1525. The Mennonites got their start from a Dutch Anabaptist by the name of Menno Simons. The Mennonites believed that baptism is a conscious choice of an individual and should only be considered as an adult.

In 1563, the Amish splintered from the Mennonites. The Amish took their name from an individual named Jakob Ammann. Those who followed Ammann were called Amish.

In 1770, the Mennonites and Amish both began looking for land in North America. Approximately 300 individuals settled in the Quaker Colonies of Pennsylvania. In 1840, the Amish began looking for land further west. Four Amish men traveled as far west as Iowa looking for land. Originally hoping to settle in Iowa, these individuals traveled back across northern Indiana, coming across the Goshen, Indiana, area, where they decided to settle. During the middle 1800's the second wave of Amish from Europe settled directly in Allen and Adams Counties in Indiana.

Since this time, the Amish have continued to grow and migrate at an astounding pace. The Amish are one of the fastest growing groups of individuals in the United State, doubling their population every 20 years. Currently, there are approximately 222,000 Amish and 1,674 congregations throughout the United States. In Indiana alone, there are 37, 900 Amish and 285 congregations.

Cities and towns will face complex tasks as Amish communities grow in size, due to larger families and high retention rate in the Amish religion. Additionally, there are several differences between the Amish community and mainstream America. This creates several conflicts. First and foremost is that of how to effectively enforce the laws against the Amish without interfering with their religious beliefs. Secondly, is how to properly train our officers to investigate crimes against the Amish.

One of the major issues faced by law enforcement is rumspringa. Rumspringa is a period of time between the age of sixteen and when individuals decide if they are going to join the Amish church and become baptized. It is during this time that young adults are allowed to "test the waters" of mainstream society.

Many juveniles during this period do not attend church. It is also during this time that juveniles begin working outside the home. They purchase vehicles, dress in the most modern fashions, and begin dating and socializing. This socializing often involves large parties that include drugs and alcohol. Often, this is when local law enforcement has its most negative dealing with the Amish community. One might say this is no different than what juveniles in mainstream society encounter at that age, but there are several factors not accounted for.

Due to religious affiliation, Amish juveniles end their formal education at 8th grade, as opposed to the "English" who are required to attend school through age sixteen.

After 8th grade, many Amish youth join the work force. In the Elkhart-LaGrange Amish Settlement this means working in the recreational vehicle and mobile home industry. This industry requires a lot of exertion but is also very lucrative. At a very early age, Amish youth are making between fifty and seventy thousand dollars a year. It should also be mentioned that drugs and alcohol flourish in these factory settings. This creates a very bad combination for a young adult.

Weekends in the Amish juvenile community involve socializing with other Amish youth. Much of the socializing that takes place occurs at large group gatherings or parties or while cruising around on the dirt back roads drinking, also called graveling. It is not uncommon for Amish to

gather in groups of five or six juveniles and cruise the back roads drinking, smoking, and possibly doing drugs.

When not graveling, many Amish youth attend very large parties, usually involving several hundred juveniles and young adults. The participants in these parties come from several different states and are not always Amish. These parties are either in fields off the road or, during inclement weather, in barns or tool sheds.

Cruising around the rural back roads and going to or coming from the parties is when law enforcement most often encounter the Amish juveniles. It is during these contacts with law enforcement when it becomes critical to understand the cultural beliefs of the Amish. Without this knowledge, an officer will find himself uninformed and dealing with difficult situations.

At first glance, rumspringa appears as a stain on Amish culture. The Amish, however, feel as though this fling with worldliness gives them the strength to come back to the Amish religion and be strong standing members. It is believed that ninety percent of the Amish youth will return to the Amish Church.

The history of this practice dates back to very early Amish culture. In the Amish culture, it is accepted and even is expected of the young Amish people.

It is for this reason that when police officers stop Amish youth on the road, they will encounter very different attitudes than that of English society. Often times, the young Amish males will not show any remorse or attempt to hide the fact they have been partaking in the illegal activity. When stopped, many Amish juveniles will not [volunteer to take a] test for alcohol on a preliminary breath test but will be more than willing to share with the officer the fact that they had consumed alcohol. The juveniles are often times jovial and sarcastic when talking with officers. Occasionally, the young Amish youth will resist law enforcement. Amish youth view law enforcement differently than mainstream youth. To many Amish youth, running from police is a game which they learn from friends and family.

An example of this attitude is demonstrated in a recent situation in Millersburg, Ohio, at a nearby Amish settlement with close ties to Shipshewana. A group of more than 100 Amish juveniles at a party threw rocks at police cars, causing police to enter the party, at which time juveniles attempted to take the handgun of an Ohio Deputy. There were juveniles from several different Amish settlements throughout the United States at the party. Twelve of the Amish juveniles arrested were from LaGrange County in the Shipshewana area. While on probation one of the juveniles explained a plan by local Amish youth to ambush a Shipshewana deputy and flip over his squad car.

Many of the above-mentioned issues stem from the cultural belief that church is the supreme authority. Amish live their lives by a guideline called an "ordnung", which is enforced, by the church.

This has been the case since the Anabaptist Movement in the early 1500s. These juveniles have grown up all their lives watching their parents and their neighbors living by the ordnung.

The Amish culture is very close and most often solves problems within its community, who find law enforcement to be very intrusive and unnecessary. Many problems handled in mainstream society are often times handled by parents, bishops, or deacons of the Amish church. This engrained belief will create a problem for a road officer who has just stopped an Amish juvenile or a group of juveniles. Many will not accept the authority of law enforcement due to their strong belief in church as being the supreme authority. There are no real consequences, except for man-made laws, for their actions. They are expected to experience what real life has to offer, and part of this is experimentation with drugs and alcohol.

Part two of this article will be published next month. Our thanks to Tom Fitch for allowing us to post it here.