

A POCKET GUIDE TO

*Amish  
Life*

MINDY STARNS CLARK



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## **A POCKET GUIDE TO AMISH LIFE**

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# CONTENTS

Foreword .....	7
<b>Part One: Foundation</b>	
1. What <i>Amish</i> Means .....	13
2. Beliefs .....	18
3. Community .....	22
4. Separation .....	27
5. Nonresistance .....	32
6. Organization .....	35
7. Leadership .....	39
8. Worship .....	43
9. Rules .....	47
10. Discipline .....	50
11. History .....	55
12. Expansion .....	60
<b>Part Two: Lifestyle</b>	
13. Clothing and Grooming .....	67
14. Language .....	74
15. Technology .....	78
16. Transportation .....	86
17. Occupations .....	90
<b>Part Three: Passages</b>	
18. Childhood, Family, and Old Age .....	95
19. School .....	100
20. <i>Rumspringa</i> .....	105
21. Baptism .....	109
22. Courtship and Marriage .....	112
23. Death .....	117
<b>Part Four: Outside World</b>	
24. Tourism and Media .....	123
25. Myths Versus Facts .....	130
26. Why Are They Amish? .....	138
Topical Index .....	142

## WHAT AMISH MEANS

What does the word *Amish* mean? Here's what *Webster's New World College Dictionary* says:

**Am·ish** (äm'is/h, am'-, äm'-)

*plural noun*

the members of a Christian sect that separated from the Mennonites in the 17th cent.: in the U.S. since the 18th cent., the Amish favor plain dress and plain living, with little reliance on modern conveniences, in a chiefly agrarian society

Etymology: after Jacob *Ammann* (or *Amen*), the founder

*adjective*

designating or of this sect

Of course, this definition doesn't even hint at the challenge of classifying this particular people group. Thanks to several centuries of church growth, expansion, and division, more than 25 different Amish affiliations exist in North America. These affiliations are

further divided into approximately 1700 church districts. Amish settlements are located in 27 states and in Canada.

With no central religious authority, each Amish district must make decisions about what is and isn't allowed for its members on matters both large and small. Consequently, what may be perfectly permissible in one Amish district can be utterly forbidden in another. Outsiders might consider all Amish to be conservative, but that conservatism covers a wide range.

### In Their Own Words

“For the Amish, culture and religion are intertwined to the point where it is hard to separate the two. Indeed, it is a faith culture.”

Sweeping generalizations about the Amish are usually not helpful because of the myriad of differences between the various groups and subgroups. Every definitive statement seems to have an exception. We can begin to make sense of all of these variations by looking at the most obvious similarities and differences between the many groups who call themselves Amish.

Most Amish groups share these similarities:

- They adhere to a statement of faith known as the Eighteen Articles.

- They wear some form of distinctive “plain” clothing.
- They worship in each others’ homes rather than in church buildings.
- They do not connect their houses with public utilities.
- They use horses and buggies as their primary means of transportation.
- They limit formal education to the eighth grade.
- They live in rural areas.
- They emphasize an agrarian lifestyle.
- They are pacifists.
- They choose their religious leaders through divine appointment by drawing lots.
- They speak a German dialect as their primary language.
- They value the history of their people and their martyrs’ heritage.

On the other hand, Amish groups interpret and practice some of these distinctives in various ways. They also differ on many other items, including these:

technology  
clothing  
carriage styles  
church discipline  
plumbing  
government assistance  
facial hair  
lawnmowers  
transportation  
assurance of salvation

### **The Focus of This Pocket Guide**

To keep this book a manageable size, I have chosen to focus primarily on the largest and most well-known affiliation, the Old Order Amish. To avoid definitive statements that do not hold true for all Amish affiliations, or even for all Old Order districts, I use words like *usually* and *most* and *many* whenever describing Amish life and regulations. If you are seeking more extensive information, particularly on one of the less conservative groups, such as the Beachy Amish, or more conservative groups, such as the Swartzentruber, be sure to visit [www.morefrommindy.com](http://www.morefrommindy.com), which provides helpful resources for further study.

Finally, though the Amish have terms to describe those who are not Amish—such as *English* or *fancy*—I will most often use *non-Amish* and *outsider*. These seem appropriate because this guide is looking in on Amish life from the outside.

### Fascinating Fact

The Amish call the non-Amish *English* because we speak English as our primary language instead of the German dialect they use.

### The Word *Amish*

The word *Amish* originally referred to a group of conservative Christians who followed the teachings of a man named Jakob Ammann. Over the years, of course, *Amish* has grown to mean much more—including a faith culture, a way of life, a set of values, a style of clothing, and a collection of technological adaptations—becoming both a proper noun and an adjective.

These days, *Amish* is also a marketing buzzword and can be seen on everything from jars of jam to space heaters to backyard sheds and swing sets. Some outsiders use the Amish moniker to cash in on a reputation for quality, value, and integrity. Exploitative or not, those implications provide high praise to the ones who bear its title and live out its principles day after hardworking day.