

THE Amish WAY OF LIFE

Immerse yourself in Lancaster's
unique religious community

Text and photographs by Cindy Ross

A BLONDE-HAIRED, AMISH FOUR-YEAR-OLD is waiting for us when our van pulls up at his farm. Piling out of the LoKal Experiences vehicle (which means “local” in Norwegian), our tour group is introduced to the boy, Marvin, and his father, Aaron Blank.

We have come to Lancaster County to rub shoulders with the Amish and briefly insert ourselves into their world in an effort to get to know this religious sect better. Marvin will be our constant companion for the next few hours. His mother, Barbie, has been cooking all morning to prepare a delicious lunch for us.

The Blanks' farm is the first stop for my husband, Todd, and I in a weekend trip to Lancaster County to immerse ourselves in the Amish way of life. My

friends at Discover Lancaster Tourism have arranged the two-day getaway to provide an authentic Amish experience.

Immersion Tour

MIKE SIMMONS, CO-OWNER OF LoKal Experiences, started the business in 2019 with the idea of offering a unique Amish immersion tour. He selects families who are friendly, hospitable and willing to open their doors to strangers. The Blanks, who have been working with LoKal for four years, fit the bill.

On our drive to their farm, Simmons shares information about the Lancaster County Amish so that we have a better understanding of the people we will be getting to know. Although the Amish have communities in 32 other states, the settlement in Lancaster is the oldest in the world and the largest in the nation.

The Amish first migrated to Pennsylvania in the 1730s where most settled in what is now Berks County although a few made their homes in Lancaster County. In the 1760s, most of the Berks County Amish relocated to Lancaster County.

Curiosity about their way of life

began after the Lancaster Amish were featured in a July 1938 *National Geographic* article. Some residents felt uncomfortable at first with the sudden influx of tourists, but over the years, many Amish have come to not only tolerate but embrace these inquisitive visitors as they are often important to their livelihood.

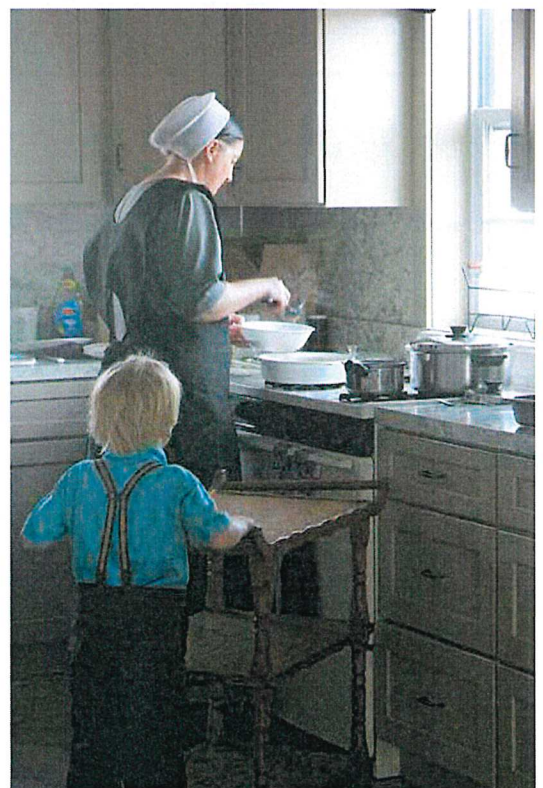
Barbie has prepared a hot lunch of roast chicken, mashed potatoes (that they grew), corn (from their garden), beets that they pickled and homemade noodles. She tells us it is a typical wedding menu. While making motor sounds with his mouth, Marvin pushes the food cart, loaded with serving dishes, to our table.

Aaron says grace, and as we dig in, conversation flows. We exchange information about where we are from and what kind of work we do. After everyone relaxes over the good food, Barbie says, “I love meeting all the people.”

In recent years, more Amish have been opening their doors to visitors, as there is only so much fertile farmland to support them. The Amish population doubles every 20 years with about 43,000 currently living in the Lan-

The Blank family has been welcoming strangers onto their farm for four years. During the visit, they serve a lunch showcasing a typical wedding menu, including many vegetables from their own garden, pickled beets and homemade noodles.







The Old Windmill Farm in Ronks, which Jesse Lapp's great-grandfather started in the late 1700s, features a functioning windmill that pumps water out of the ground for use on the farm and by the family.

caster settlement, which stretches to Chester, Berks and Dauphin counties and down to Cecil County in Maryland. Simmons had told us that about 10-12% of children born to Amish parents decide not to join the church although most will remain in the Lancaster area. Approximately one-quarter of Amish households in Lancaster County are full-time farmers. In other settlements across the United States, anywhere from 5-65% of the Amish community still farms.

For a sect of people who have spent hundreds of years separating themselves from the modern world, something had to change. Many have learned to embrace the tourists who are so curious about their way of life. Today, a number of families, like the Blanks, will share meals with visitors on their farms. A few Amish families also

provide overnight accommodations on their farms, including Beacon Hollow Farm in Gordonville, where we will be staying the night.

Barbie cooks for visitors three to four times a week. Since she and her husband began hosting, they have upped their harvest of sweet corn to 1,500 ears. Barbie also serves a local specialty, a peanut butter sauce (made from peanut butter, corn syrup and marshmallow fluff) that is lathered on homemade white rolls. Dessert includes homemade local Lapp Valley ice cream.

After lunch, Marvin takes us outside to show us his miniature pony, which he catches, halters and bridles himself. His father brings over a pony cart, and Marvin asks me to hop in next to him as we set off on a ride. Aaron tells me that when he works the field, Marvin and his pony will follow him back and forth.

Although Amish children only go as far as an eighth-grade education, they are highly skilled around the farm, learning

at a young age. The children are taught English in their school, and although Marvin hasn't yet started school, he is already practicing with visitors.

On our return trip to Discover Lancaster Visitors Center where the LoKal van had picked us up that morning, Simmons shares more information about the Amish and their close neighbors, the Mennonites.

"Amish values are simpler," he says, "They live off grid. Most Mennonites are reformed and look like the 'English.'"

Because the Amish must compete in the workforce with only eight years of schooling, many start their own businesses or work in the trades, he tells us. Some will use computers and cell phones at their business but never in their homes.

"Most have solar and charging stations and LED lights on their buggies," he says.

Buggy Ride and A Farm Stay

OUR AMISH WEEKEND would not be complete without a buggy ride. Hans of Aaron

& Jessica's Buggy Rides in Bird-in-Hand is taking us on a one-hour tour, and he seems to know every family on each farm that we trot by. The farms are multigenerational with three or four generations living together and working the land.

He explains that many Amish also work jobs as electricians (crafting lights using tool batteries), shed builders, furniture makers and even race horse trainers. He points to a young man on a sulky who is running around a race track that he built on his farm.

To illustrate how valuable prime Lancaster farmland is, Hans tells us of a farmer he knows who sold four acres to a developer for \$250,000 an acre, the highest amount he has ever heard. The fact that the Amish are preserving the land as best they can is a benefit to us all.

Hans pulls up to our destination, a workshop where his son designs and builds sheds, barns, cabins, guest houses, studios and carports that he sells throughout the Mid-Atlantic region, delivering them intact. The craftsmanship is superb, something the Amish are famous for.

As we travel around the backroads of the Amish settlements, we see folks riding push scooter bikes and teams of six horses plowing in the fields. We observe long lines of laundry pulled high in the sky and flapping in the breeze, and we can't help but notice that there are no electric wires or power poles to obstruct our view.

We drive by cauliflower fields and signs that read, "Celery for sale" (where else do you see this?). Many of the families here live quite modernly with appliances powered by propane, diesel generators (old truck engines) and, more recently, LED lights and solar. Their homes have bathrooms with indoor plumbing, including hot water showers, flush toilets and propane-powered washing machines. Since clothes dryers are not allowed, they hang out wash 12 months of the year.

Late that afternoon, we pull into Beacon Hollow Farm Bed and Breakfast in Gordonville where Ben and Anna Riehl welcome us to their 70-acre farm. Our accommodations for the night are in a repurposed chicken house that has been converted to a guest cottage. To pamper guests, the cottage is equipped with electricity and air conditioning, along with



a refrigerator, a range and enough beds to sleep six.

Baby goats romp in front of our cottage, shaded under massive elm trees. We hear roosters crow and the clip-clop of horse-drawn buggies going by. The sweet smell of silage mixed with manure fills the air.

Guests are given a tour of the property where the Riehls' son milks 55 cows and Ben works as a "battery-operated" electrician. We are invited to bottle feed the calves.

The farm draws visitors from all over the world, but the Riehls particularly love when people come from Austria, Germany and Switzerland. Ben and Anna serve dinner to guests, and you don't need to stay overnight to partake of it. Anna tells me how much she enjoys visiting with the various people who come to their farm.

"We are all different, but we are all still much alike," Ben says.

Visiting Museums and Eating Smorgasbords

THE NEXT DAY, WE decide to visit two museums in the area so that we can better educate ourselves about the unique groups of people who fled Europe in the 1600s to escape religious persecution. The entrance to the 15-acre Amish Farm & House is located next to a Target retail store on the Lincoln Highway East. Its location illustrates perfectly how the Amish have had to figure out a way to live in juxtaposition to modern society.

Of the various Amish interpretive attractions offered in the region, this is

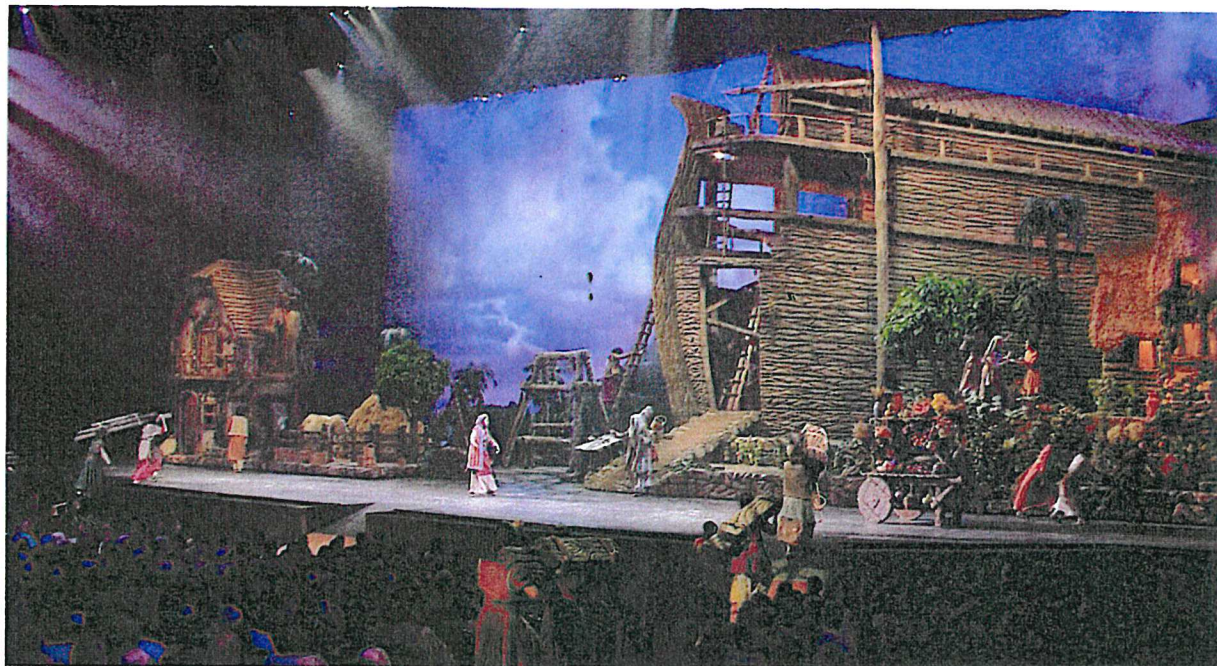
A buggy ride with Hans at the reins provides a new perspective in understanding how the Amish live out their faith in Lancaster County.

the oldest. Upon entering the historic stone house, you soon forget the hustle and bustle outside the door. Docents start the tour by conducting a lesson in Amish history to visitors who sit on wooden benches around a coal stove as if they are at a worship service. The tour then continues through the farmhouse kitchen and a summer kitchen before we head upstairs to learn more about the clothing that the Amish wear.

Then, we are set free to explore the expansive grounds with its 12 different buildings. We poke our head inside a tall grain silo, visit a smokehouse where meats are cured, tour a blacksmith shop, step into a schoolhouse and browse inside a barn. We can even take a spin on a scooter to experience what it is like for the Amish to travel "fast." This interpretive attraction is a good place to visit, especially if you know little about the Amish.

The second museum we visit that weekend is the Mennonite Life Center. We start our tour by watching a film that explains how the Mennonite people came to this part of America. Next door in the museum building, we explore beautiful examples of Mennonite art as well as interesting artifacts. The museum, which covers the early 17th & 18th centuries, documents the Mennonites upon their arrival in Lancaster. We learn more about the simplicity and beauty of their domestic life.

This year, Sight and Sound has brought back its *Noah* production, which was the first show performed in the new theater after the former was destroyed by a fire in 1997. Note that a good portion of the tickets for this show have been already sold as of press time, but some are still available for later in the year.



COURTESY OF SIGHT AND SOUND

Experiencing Sight & Sound Theatre

The Sight & Sound Theatre in Lancaster looks like it would be at home on the Las Vegas strip. The performances inside this event venue have been described as Broadway shows.

What may seem out of place on a Lancaster County road, halfway between factory outlets and the popular tourist destination of the Strasburg Railroad, makes sense, however, when you realize the theater is dedicated to bringing Bible stories to life on stage. It's "Christian Broadway" at its best in this Anabaptist-rich area.

Still, you don't have to be a Bible-reading devotee to be impressed by the extraordinary productions staged here. While almost everyone knows the story of Noah and his animal-filled ark, Sight and Sound's rendition, which is playing this year on its 30th anniversary, is unlike any other. The 2,000-member audience is seated inside the boat before a massive 300-foot panoramic stage.

Each production uses 50 to 60 actors, plus live trained animals. Special effects, including smoke, lightning and a monstrous background electronic screen, make it look as if things are moving in real time, like a boat going down a river.

Each show takes four years to produce. Once a Bible story is selected, writers and musicians write the play, score and lyrics. Then the sets,

up to four stories tall, are created out of foam and plywood and are hand painted. Wig, carpentry, metal fabricating and costume shops support the show. Because each production uses three actors for every major role, three separate sets of costumes must be made.

Sight & Sound Lancaster employs 600 people, with more than 100 working on each performance. The sets are moveable, and the larger pieces operate on an automated motion-control system.

"Our hope is that you don't see the workers behind the scene making it all happen," Stephanie Lefever, communications manager, says. "You won't if we are doing our jobs!"

Since Sight & Sound began in 1976, it has created 65 productions with the house full for nearly all shows. In 2024, some 5,000 tour buses brought visitors from all over to the *Daniel* production.

What has become the nation's largest organization of its kind and one of the top three theater destinations in the country started with a single slide projector and some transparent slides. Lancaster dairy farmer Glenn Eshelman, who loved to paint in his spare time, excelled in photography and created slide presentations, which he shared at local churches using a projector, a turntable for music and a microphone for narration.

By the mid-1970s, he and his wife, Shirley,

were taking their multimedia presentations on the road. She sold his paintings from the trunk of their car to help make ends meet. The slide shows became so popular that they sought a permanent venue for their productions.

The Living Waters Theatre in Lancaster opened its doors in 1976. In 1987, the first complete, full-length Biblical production *Behold the Lamb* debuted, but in a few short years, the productions had outgrown the space.

The Eshelmans purchased a large plot of land across from their cornfield, and in 1991, the entertainment center opened. In 1997, the theater was destroyed in a fire, but a year later, it was rebuilt and named the Millennium Theatre with *Noah* as its first show. Word of mouth spread quickly as the audience was treated to a stunning spectacle of a massive ark with many live animals on stage.

In 2008, a second Sight & Sound Theatre venue was opened in Branson, Mo., where the same shows are portrayed two years after they close at Lancaster's theater. The sets are broken down and tucked into tractor trailers for travel to Branson.

The family-owned business also offers an online streaming platform, a feature film studio and live broadcast events. Its mission remains the same: bring the gospel to life through live theater, digital outlets and film. 

A trip to Lancaster must include a meal at one of the many family-owned diners and smorgasbords in the area. We decide to dine at Miller's Smorgasbord, which dates back to the 1920s to when Enos Miller operated a truck repair and gas station on Route 30. His wife, Anna, began serving home-cooked meals to customers, and soon people came from far and wide to enjoy her Pennsylvania Dutch dishes, such as chicken and waffles.

The repair shop was soon eclipsed by the need for more restaurant space. Today, the smorgasbord in Ronks continues to be a delicious destination for anyone who wants to try traditional Pennsylvania Dutch cooking, including the "seven sweets and seven sour." We top our meal off with the Miller's famous chocolate pecan pie.

Animals Galore at an Authentic Amish Farm

TO WRAP UP OUR trip to Amish country, we travel to the Old Windmill Farm, which Jesse Lapp's great-grandfather started in the late 1700s. As the name suggests, a massive windmill greets us as we pull in the lane to the Ronks farm. The windmill still provides the family's primary source of water.

Lapp tells us that he became allergic to hay dust while farming and had to sell his cows. Not willing to leave the land and lifestyle that he loves, he figured out a new way to survive on his 200-year-old

Shopping in Amish Country

My sister Joann and I return to Lancaster County on a separate day trip to drive the backroads and visit Amish craftsmen and artists.

We begin our day in Ronks with a stop to see the beautiful furniture at Carriage House Furnishings, which has a large selection of pine, maple, cherry and hickory furniture handmade right here in the county. Down the road at Creative Rustic Furniture in Bird-in-Hand, we browse unique live-edge and reclaimed barn-wood furniture.

We next drive to Gordonville

to visit the Lantz Homestead Quilt Barn, where hundreds of handmade heirloom quilts are on display on motorized rotating racks. Hand-painted canvas signs of inspirational quotes, floral displays and beautiful lighting fixtures (all powered by batteries) showcase the skills and talents of the entire Lantz family.

Our next stop is Reihl's Quilts and Crafts in Leola, where we peruse quilted pillows, cloth books, Amish featureless dolls, aprons, purses, tablecloths, runners and anything you can think of made

of fabric. We can also purchase home-jarred foods, handmade noodles, shoofly pies and whoopie pies in every flavor.

Back in Lancaster, we enjoy a visit to Lapp's Toys, which sells handmade wooden red barns for children to play "farm" with, as well as scaled-down wooden kitchen sets complete with a refrigerator, sink, hutch and table and chairs. Other items for sale include marble rolls, various trucks, dollhouses, Noah's ark and wooden animals. All items are made in workshops behind the showroom/store. ■

farm: He created a program to introduce folks to an Amish farm.

The farm contains many baby animals, including piglets that you can cradle like an infant, peeps that you can hold in your hands and Angora bunnies that let you pet their soft fur.

"We always have bunnies to hold," Lapp says.

Pointing out the peeps hiding under their mother's wings, he says, "It touches my heart to see that."

Visitors are invited to bottle feed calves and learn how to milk a cow by squeezing and pulling down on her teats. They can

feed horses out of their hand and give grain to baby goats. On our way to collect eggs from chickens, we stop to watch some fun-loving potbelly pigs as they slide down a sliding board. All in all, Windmill Farm is home to about 120 animals, which translates into a fun visit for all.

The immersive farm experience continues in the garden where we can dig potatoes with a big fork and watch them emerge like presents from the soil. We can rub the hard kernels of an ear of popcorn and pop them in our mouth to eat. We learn to churn butter in a glass butter churn before enjoying a glass of apple cider and a slice of homemade bread slathered with the rich yellow butter that we just churned.

Our day concludes with a hayride. Lapp drives the draft horses with lines and lets us try our hand at steering them as well.

"If you grew up on a farm, you take all of this for granted," Lapp concludes.

As we head home after our weekend excursion in Amish country, we have come to better appreciate the simple lifestyle of these plain people who live so close to the earth. 🍷

—Cindy Ross of New Ringgold, Schuylkill County, is a regular contributor.



Hundreds of quilts are available for purchase at the Lantz Homestead Quilt Barn in Gordonville. Here, a couple have been put out on a line next to the barn to attract customers.