

Amish Names

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A RURAL MAILMAN IN THE AMISH COUNTRY of southeastern Pennsylvania has been described as "holding one of the most frustrating jobs in the United States postal system,"¹ and it is understandable, for, believe it or not, his rural delivery route serves 437 persons who have the surname Stoltzfus!

In this region, where the first Amish settlements were established in America, family genealogies are now almost inextricably intertwined after more than two and a half centuries of intermarriage among sect members.

Two Amish practices have had a major impact on the nomenclature of this society: first is the rule of endogamy, which restricts an Amish person to selecting a mate only from within the sect. This has resulted in a close degree of intermarriage and has limited the number of different surnames. Second is the lack of any evangelical or missionary activities which would bring converts into the group. Since few outsiders have ever joined the sect, it is perpetuated almost exclusively through the offspring produced by its members.

Surnames

In one of the first major studies of the Amish, Walter Kollmorgen noted,

There are only about 30 family names in the community and the great majority of the Amish families today have one of only about a dozen family names.²

Unlike most statements about the Amish, this observation was an understatement, for the great majority of Amish in that region have only seven different surnames, and 20 surnames constituted 96.7 per cent of the total Amish population in that region.

¹ Associated Press, July 19, 1963.

² Walter M. Kollmorgen, *Culture of a Contemporary Rural Community: The Old Order Amish of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania*. (Washington: U.S. Department of Agriculture, 1942), p. 76.

An analysis of 2,611 Amish marriages since 1890³ revealed the existence of only 42 different Amish surnames, and three of these constituted 49.9 per cent of the total. (These names were Stoltzfus 27.2 per cent; King 12.2 per cent; and Beiler 10.5 per cent.) Fourteen surnames made up over 90 per cent of the Amish names.

A study using different criteria, which was restricted to 500 consecutive Amish marriages in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania from 1939 to 1954,⁴ indicated that the seven most common Amish names represented 76.9 per cent of all the names. These seven, in order of their frequency, were Stoltzfus, King, Beiler, Fisher, Lapp, Zook, and Esh.

Other Amish surnames, in order of their frequency are Glick, Riehl, Smucker, Petersheim, Smoker, Blank, Kauffman, Lantz, Ebersole, Huyard, Allgyer, Dienner, Yoder, Miller, Swarey, Hertzler, Bontrager, Renno, Speicher, Schrock, Peachy and Flaud.

In the western settlements of the Amish, who are spread in colonies in 21 states, the surnames Graber, Schwartzendruber, Troyer, Hershberger, Coblentz, Schwartz, Mast and Burkholder are found. Although they are quite common in these settlements, they are unique to the Amish areas of first settlement.

Because the Amish place great meaning in agrarian life, believing it to be an occupation close to God, the vast majority of Amish sons perpetuate the farming occupation of their fathers and remain tillers of the soil. By way of encouraging their sons to remain farmers, fathers have divided and subdivided land holdings that generations ago were quite sizeable, in order to help establish their youth on the soil. It is not uncommon to find farms that have been in the same family for 200 and more years, but with various family members on adjoining properties now established as separate farms. Such neighborhoods have become residences of extended families, and because fathers have handed down land to male offspring, a neighborhood tends to be dominated by a single family surname.

One such section is in eastern Lancaster county, where, in the public one-room school, the vast majority of pupils have the same surname. One feature writer noted,

³ Elmer L. Smith, *Studies in Amish Demography* (Harrisonburg, Va.: Mennonite Research Council, 1960).

⁴ Elmer L. Smith, *A Study of Acculturation in an Amish Community* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms no. 16,633, 1957), p. 159.

In Maxwell Hill school at Morgantown, 39 of 48 pupils are Stoltzfuses (first, second, or third cousins); so is the teacher.

In another school all but one bears that name.⁵

During one session all the pupils in one elementary school had the same surname.

Given Names

Compounding the nomenclature problem of the Amish is the limited number of given names for both males and females.

A study of 1,337 Amish males revealed only 72 different given names, and 80 per cent of the males had one of 20 Biblical names, the most common being John, Amos, Jacob, David, Samuel, Christian, Daniel, Benjamin, Levi, Aaron, Jonas, Elam, Stephen, Isaac, Henry, Jonathan, Eli, Gideon, Moses and Joseph.

Other given names for males may reflect the important place the martyred forefathers hold in the minds of the sect members. The given name Menno is frequently found; this honors Menno Simmons an early leader of the plain sects. Ammon is also quite common, and is traced to Jacob Amman for whom the Amish sect is named; otherwise given names are from the Bible.

The number of different female names is smaller than that available to the Amish male. An examination of 1,356 feminine names reveals only 55 different, and ten of these constituted two-thirds of all those studied.

The 20 most common female given names are Biblical: Mary, Sarah, Annie, Katie, Lizzie, Rebecca, Fannie, Barbara, Rachel, Lydia, Emma, Malinda, Susie, Sadie, Leah, Hannah, Naomi, Mattie, Lavina and Arie. These 20 names make up 88.3 per cent of the total.

The limited number of surnames and given names frequently creates identification problems for the non-Amish and Amish alike. Ammon Aurand noted this situation in his dealings in the area around Churchtown, Penna., observing, "In the locality one must know exactly which Henry Stoltzfus he wants to see, for there are about forty such 'Henry's' in the neighborhood."⁶

⁵ "The Clan Stoltzfus," *Newsweek*, November 20, 1932, p. 20.

⁶ Ammon Aurand, *The Amish* (Harrisburg, Penna.: 1938), p. 25.

The point was well taken, for more than a quarter of all Amish males had the given names of John, Amos or Jacob, and half of all the Amishmen had one of only seven given names.

This writer once asked an Amishman how he could communicate with him and was told, "Just write me R. D. #2, Elverson, Pennsylvania, but put three X's on the corner of the envelope." He explained that several others on that route had the same name and the postman knew his letters by the special markings.

Middle Names

The use of a middle name may be quite functional in situations where several people have the same given and surnames, and it is of some meaningful assistance in identification among the Amish, but to a much lesser degree than one might imagine.

A large proportion of sect members are given middle names which identify their mothers. About three-fourths of the Amish males are given their mother's maiden name as a middle name; thus, if a boy's mother was Mary Esh before her marriage, the son will be given the middle name Esh.

The limited number of surnames obviously restricts the number of different middle names, and it is not uncommon to find a person with the same middle and last name, such as John Beiler Beiler or Amos Lapp Lapp. Some marriage announcements are interesting because they reveal the surprising limitation of family separation, one particularly noted was the marriage of Jacob Stoltzfus Stoltzfus to Sarah Stoltzfus Stoltzfus. Obviously any offspring given a middle name will also carry the double Stoltzfus identification.

Sometimes a son is given the first and middle names of a beloved paternal grandfather, and this would most likely occur with first sons. On occasion, a son may be given the same first and middle names as his father, but the Amish do not append such designations as Junior, II or III. Nevertheless, the most common practice is to give the child his mother's maiden name, and ordinarily an Amish full name identifies two family lines.

Quite often the middle initial is used for identification purposes, and in ordinary conversations it is common to hear someone referred to as "Jacob L" rather than by his full name. After all, every-

one who knows the persons knows "L" means "Lapp," so the conversation is simplified. If there were several Jacob Zooks, it is quite likely that the middle name initial would be used to identify one, such as "Jacob L" and the person would become known by that name.

More females are given their mother's maiden surname for a middle name than males. Over four-fifths (81.6 per cent) of the females have their mothers maiden name for a middle name, whereas 72.0 per cent of the males do.

Other Identification Techniques

The Amish system of nomenclature, with its limited number of surnames, Biblical given names and family middle names, creates considerable confusion in the everyday world. Grace Steinmetz mentioned one practice in identification when she referred to the situation at the East Earl Township elementary school, which had 42 pupils, all with Beiler or Fisher surnames. She noted, "About a dozen Sarah's and as many Benny's make it expedient to call them Elam's Benny or Johnny's Benny, using the first name of the father."⁷ This practice is quite common; it ignores surnames by assumption that they are known, and emphasizes the given names of the heads of the households from which the children come. Thus, Benjamin Lapp Beiler at school becomes "Johnny's Benny," that is, Benny, the son of John S. Beiler.

An entire Amish primary family may be referred to locally as "The Sammy's," using the head of the household's first name rather than last.

Nicknames

Nicknames are also used for identification and it is here that the Amish have a wide and unrestricted assortment. Nicknames, therefore, could provide the most adequate means for Amish identification. They can be classified into several types: those originating from a residential location, such as the name of a village; a geographic position, based on a place near a stream, hill or other such condition; an occupational characteristic, such as "Smith"

⁷ Grace Steinmetz, "All About the Amish," *Family Circle*, July, 1950, p. 80.

Beiler who was a blacksmith; by a physical trait, such as color of the hair, or size of the body, or condition, such as "Red" Zook, "Tiny" Beiler, or "Big" Aaron Esh and "Blind" Amos.

A Millersburg, Ohio, Amish bishop is locally referred to as Pom Dan." Although his name is Daniel J. Yoder, the "Pom" identifies where he lives, on a farm once known as the Pomerene farm. The scribe from that community notes in the newspaper, "an identification being necessary because there are more Dan Yoders in Holmes" (county).⁸

Finally, some nicknames reflect a local understanding of a humorous situation, event or personality characteristic: names such as "Popcorn" Johnny and "Hickory Stick" Jake. It is in the origin of this type that some unique and interesting local stories no doubt could be told.

The Amish have been an ingenious people, constantly called upon to seek new ways to maintain their unique characteristics in a rapidly changing and conformist world. So far they have been able to meet these challenges, often by simple methods, and they have done the same in adjusting to a confusing nomenclature system.

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⁸ *The Budget*, Sugarcreek, Ohio, June 23, 1966.