

Program: Amish of Shipshewana: Keeping Identity and Boundaries

Speaker: Dorothy Pratt, PhD, Professor of History, Emerita, University of Notre Dame **Introduced by:** Marty Meisenheimer

Attendance: 132

Guests: Sue Ann Dashiell, Julie Ferguson, Midge Decker, Jo Davis, Jackie King

Scribe: Glenn Bingle

Editor: Bonnie Carter

The presentation and handout depicted several pictures of typical Amish farms and presented a high level historical and ethnic overview of the Amish of Indiana up until the close of World War I. The speaker became interested in the subject while living in Amish territory in Indiana. She was fascinated with the culture and structure of the Amish community and sought answers to the question of how they survived, relatively unchanged, into a modern world which had strongly embraced materialism.

The Amish belief system is Christian, bible literalists, with limited formal education usually terminating by 8th grade. They strongly believe they are a people *apart* from the world but with very strong emphasis on supporting each other. They are very family centered with a church structure that is congregationally arranged in districts with one bishop serving two districts. We would describe them as pacifists whereas they prefer the term non-resistors. They believe baptism should occur at the age of reason; baptism means they are full members of the church and willing to practice in their belief system. They strongly practice plain living and clothing without evidence of materialism. They refrain from connections to the outside world like electricity, telephones and modern transportation. One of the strengths throughout their history is the ability to draw boundaries of who is a member of their community and who is outside. They practice shunning for those members who have stepped outside these boundaries.

The Amish migrated from Europe to Pennsylvania, the part we refer to as Pennsylvania Dutch, in the 1800s as part of the Anabaptist movement. Many of their neighbors at the time had similar belief systems and worked in farming also. They later moved to LaGrange County, Indiana where they became the leading producers in the world of mint.

World War I presented them with several challenges. Since they did not wish to engage and help finance the war effort through war bonds, they were viewed negatively by those who saw this is unpatriotic and they were labeled *slackers* and identified by yellow cards on their front doors. The US government put forth an elaborate system specifically set up to investigate war resisters which evolved into the FBI. The Amish became the focus of several of these investigations.

Another challenge was the draft as it was required of Amish men. They complied with registration, but when they resisted acting like soldiers in basic training, they were subjected to all forms of humiliation, including frank torture by totally unsympathetic and brutal military commanders. The Amish had to organize and regroup in order to head off similar threats for the future once the World War I ended. They formed the Amish Steering Committee which could strategize and speak politically on their behalf. Their success in being able to practice their beliefs and live the simple life has been traced to their ability to draw new boundaries of inclusion and exclusion and allowing their youth to explore the outside world before joining the church. Eighty five percent of young Amish, who are baptized in the church, stay within the community.



Dr. Dorothy Pratt