

Buy That Stamp! Letter Writing and Amish Research: A Personal Reflection on a Research Technique

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Abstract: Letter writing is one method researchers can use to build on their in-person fieldwork experience. Through letters, a researcher can approach the Amish in a way that equalizes the exchange, allowing the correspondent the time and space to consider their responses. Moreover, while a visit from a non-Amish researcher interrupts daily activity, reading and writing letters remains a daily activity in the Amish world, especially among Amish women. Researchers may find that correspondence opens new areas of inquiry as Amish writers make connections to topics and subjects the researcher had not considered. By revealing deeper aspects of daily life, correspondence can force researchers to rethink their stereotypes and assumptions. Finally, the author reflects on some of the challenges of correspondence as a research method.

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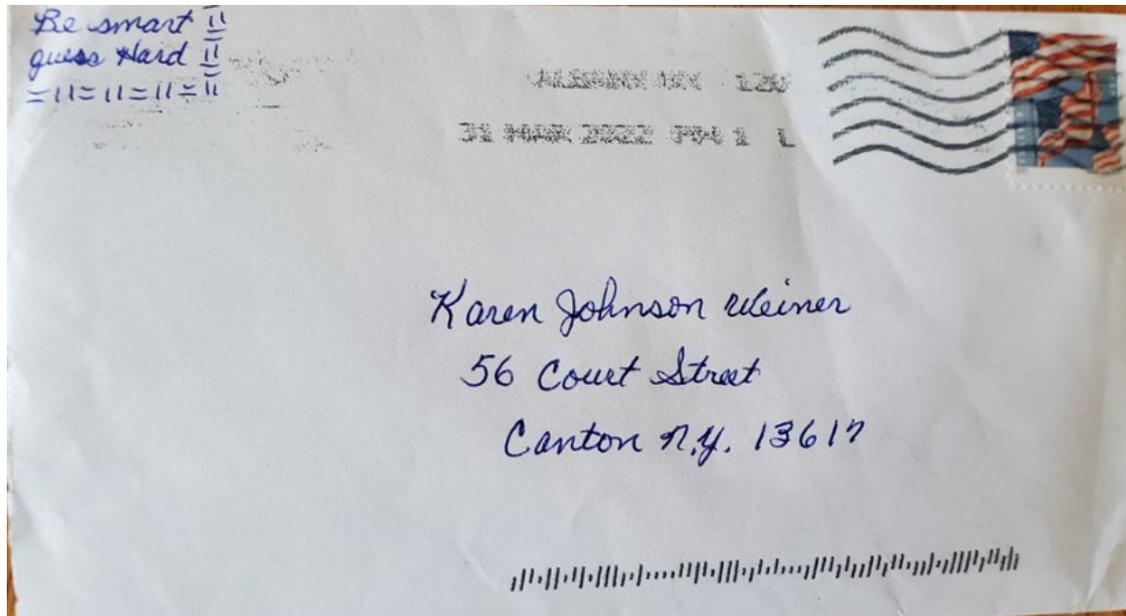
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Introduction

Unsurprisingly, much scholarship about the Amish focuses on communities within close proximity to centers of academic research. After all, it takes time to build the trust necessary for in-depth qualitative research about diverse topics. One does not just go to the nearest farm or business, take out pad and pen or tape recorder, and begin asking searching questions about what goes on during family get-togethers or at school board meetings. Sadly, research grants to spend the time needed in Amish communities distant from one's home in order to do in-depth fieldwork over long periods of time are few and far between.

One technique researchers have at their disposal is to take that pad and pen and build on fieldwork connections with letters. Through letters, a researcher can approach the Amish in a way that equalizes the exchange. The Amish informant is no longer "put on the spot" by a questioning researcher, nor is the researcher rushed to "get everything" during a short visit. More conservative Amish will refuse to be questioned on tape, and the researcher is forced to rely on memory and notes when joining in the activity might be the better way to get involved in, and learn about, the community. Finally, while a visit from a non-Amish researcher interrupts daily activity, reading and writing letters remains a daily activity in the Amish world.





This letter set to the author jokingly hides the sender's name.

Letters substitute for visiting when geography makes in-person catching up difficult, particularly when the community resists telephones. In the Amish world, circle letters create diverse communities within communities, uniting groups of cousins, sisters, single women, childless women, or parents with twins into communities that cross state, settlement, and affiliation borders.¹

For those Amish more resistant to change, a scribbled note carried by a schoolchild is a means of ordering dry goods from the local shop or inviting neighbors to a frolic.

In short, letter writing allows researchers to approach Amish acquaintances through a medium dominant in their society and provides an opportunity to explore the Amish world through Amish eyes.

Building on Fieldwork

I discovered the value of letters when I was researching Amish schools. Traveling with Amish friends, we would stop for a couple of hours to visit each school and observe what was going on in the classroom. The work was fascinating, but I always had too many questions. Further, I found that I had even more questions after I had left the classroom, and by then it was too late to ask the teacher. Early on, I promised to send every teacher I talked to copies of the pictures I had taken (with permission), and I asked if I could write and ask follow-up questions. The response was invariably

¹ Circle letters are really packets of letters. When receiving the packet, each correspondent writes his or her news, adds it to the packet, and then sends the packet on to the next correspondent on the list. When the circle letter comes back to the first correspondent, that person reads all the other letters, takes out his or her original letter, adds a new letter, and then sends it on to the next person.

positive, and I began correspondence with Amish teachers in schools in diverse communities across several states.

The correspondence gave me the opportunity to question my observations and impressions from those short field visits. More importantly, the teachers who wrote me back generally gave me far more detailed answers to questions than I could ever have hoped for in short, face-to-face interviews. Asked about the textbooks and curriculum, for example, one Ohio teacher not only gave reasons for preferring one text over another, but also talked about teaching religion in schools. He noted that his school community was “like minded in the matter,” which was interesting because, as he also noted, his school welcomed children from three different church fellowships.

You wondered about our textbooks. We started teaching health last year and are using Schoolaid's texts. For the upper grades we switch health and social studies every term. This year the 8th graders are doing Pathway's Glimpses of the Eastern Hemisphere. New for us this term are Rod and Staff's social studies. We have 6th and 7th grade doing Homelands of North America, 5th grade is doing Homelands Around the World, and 3rd and 4th are doing Our Father's World. We are teaching health in grades three and four, too.

The reason I am in favor of Climbing to Good English over Helping with English is mostly because the latter does not have enough composition (in my opinion), and that book has a lot of mistakes in it, too. For the lower grades Climbing to Good English eliminates the need for a phonics only workbook. Grade one gets a good foundation if Schoolaid's Correlated Language Arts Guide for Grade One is followed.

I do try to teach "Hoch Deutsch" twice a week but don't always get it done. I conduct the classes either in High German (to the best of my ability) or in Pennsylvania Dutch. Third grade starts in German by learning the A-B-C's (usually we use Let's Learn German), then we use Schoolaid's books.

Religion in the Old Order schools is subject that causes much controversy among the different groups in some areas. But in our school community we are like-minded in the matter. Simply stated; we do not teach Sunday School, but we do teach good morals and Biblical principles. We have devotions every morning: singing, reading and discussing a Bible story, and reciting the Lord's Prayer. The school is an important part of the home and church. If children are taught about God at home and attend a school that continues that teaching; they will be ready for the next step which is being part of a church. The home, no doubt, is a vital part of a child's life, and church is also, but school can blend right in being part of the home and church. In our school we also have weekly memory verses that the pupils memorize. These are Bible verses or passages, or worthwhile poems.

We have children here from three different church fellowships (7 different church districts). This does not cause a problem. We all work together. Sure, there are minor differences, but our main goal is same: providing a Christian atmosphere for the children to be in and learn.

This letter from a teacher does much more than answer the author's questions about curriculum.

In a seven-page letter, another Indiana teacher talked about, among other things, the subjects he taught, German language instruction, and deciding which grades to teach.

Textbook author Elizabeth Wengerd responded to my questions about her work as an author with a typewritten letter in which she talked about writing for the different Pathway magazines. Her response not only revealed her own sources of inspiration (observation, memories, suggestions), but also shed light on the ways in which editors and writers work together to create the magazine content so influential in Amish communities.

Where did I get the ideas for the articles and stories I contributed to the magazines? Mostly by observing, by remembering incidents that happened to me, and by suggestion from others. We might be visiting with fellow editors, and someone will say, "Write a story about that." Or sometimes in a meeting I would get an assignment. The lower-grade readers were done by assignment, as was "Let's Read German."

How did I get started with "Chats for Children"? I'm not sure I remember. (It's been a while ago!) I think it was my idea, copied from another magazine, perhaps "Words of Cheer" where a Grandma Lois wrote to children. While I don't remember clearly how the feature got started, I do remember we hashed around quite a bit before we had the pen name, "Cousin Carrie." I've quit using it long ago, simply because I did not like the publicity I got. I didn't like children peeking around the corner to get a look at "Cousin Carrie." By nature I am "publicity shy".

Yes, there has been an explosion of Amish publications, with cookbooks being one of the leading ones. While Harvey worked at Carlisle Printers, he was allowed to bring home a slightly inferior copy of each cookbook he helped to gather and produce and in one year he brought me 33 different cookbooks! Many of them went into their second printing within a few months. (Five thousand copies per printing, usually) I often wondered who buys all those cookbooks?

In her letter, author Elizabeth Wengerd provides an insider's look at Old Order publishing.

Letters build on fieldwork interviews, extending them into conversations across time and space. And, like good conversations, they often move from one topic to another, taking the researcher in unexpected directions. For example, in one letter, a teacher from a short-lived settlement in Perry County, Ohio, commented that she hadn't "changed anything much" since I'd visited her classroom, noting only that there were more charts and more rules about "orderliness." Such feedback reinforced what I had noted during visits: that even as teachers changed, Amish schools maintained consistency, and the emphasis was often as much on behavior as on subject matter.

But this teacher didn't just write about schools. Instead, she went on to fill several pages about other events, including a birthday party at Liz's house, a mystery supper at Caroline's, and a finger food supper at Lovina's.

In fact, her letter was less about schools than it was about Amish social life and about Amish connections. She noted the "comfort notting [sic] at Jerry's" and pointed out that they'd made seven comforters for the homeless in Columbus, as well as knitted scarves and hats out of scrap yarn, all taken to be distributed by "a lady that comes around."

Did I write to you about the little Birthday party we had at Liz's house for Liz and Rebecca last summer? I think I did. Anyhow we didn't get together all that much this winter, it being so cold and all. Well, we did have a mystery dinner at Rebecca's house, a daffy dinner at Caroline's house and a present exchange and a finger food supper at Lorina's house. And yesterday there was a comfort nooting at group. I think there were 7 comforts nooted altogether. We're making them for the homeless in Columbus etc. There were scarves and caps made too, out of scrap yarn. There's a lodge that comes around and

This young Ohio teacher writes more about community activities than she does about curriculum.

In addition to such community service, the writer also noted the midwife gathering at her Aunt Lydiann's and commented that her mother was going "with [the] midwife we use, and Sis." I had asked questions about schools, and I learned about young folk mystery suppers and a midwife gathering.

Eventually, the correspondence I began after visiting this teacher's classroom led to friendship. In a letter written much later, this same correspondent began by telling me about her new daughter, and then moved on to say that she liked the new settlement in Kentucky to which they had moved, adding that it "seems like Ohio with lots of hills!" She went from there to describe how women in her new community dressed differently than she was used to, noting that "women wear black caps too, and we have pleats in our dresses and tie our aprons in the front instead of the back." She wasn't sure that I could picture it.

I began by asking about schools and ended up learning about daily life, social change, and Amish identity.

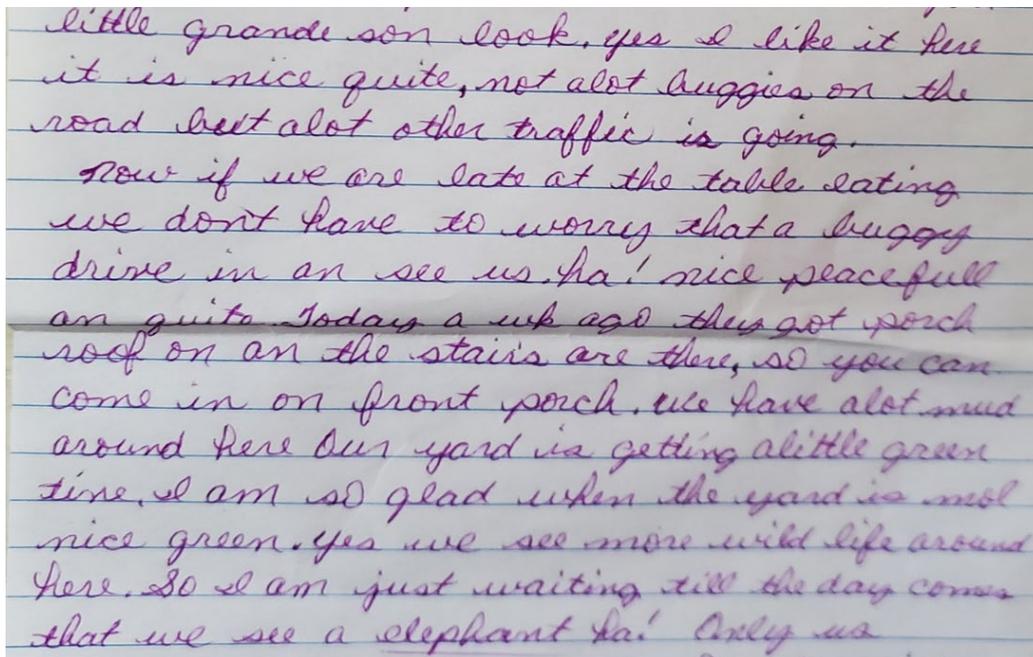
Nurturing Friendships through Letters

As this suggests, nurturing a correspondence with those encountered through fieldwork enables researchers to gather a wealth of data that might otherwise be unavailable. Through letters, I have been able to learn about activities in settlements I have never visited. For example, one young woman wrote about her home in the new Andy Weaver Swartzentruber settlement in Cambridge, New York.

“Our house is now up and also laundry room and wood shed. But still a lot of work to be done on it. We probly [sic] won’t move in till Feb.”

She and her family were making Christmas wreathes to sell. She noted 13 families were currently living there, and her description of several of the young married couples settling in the area makes it clear that the new settlement is largely, at this point, one extended family.

Letters do more than just chart the movement of young families, however. The matriarch of a family who had surprised everyone by moving to a settlement an hour away wrote how she appreciated the peace and quiet of her new home, which was far more isolated than the one she’d lived in for nearly 30 years. More practically, she noted, “Now if we are late at the table eating, we don’t have to worry that a buggy drive in and see us.”



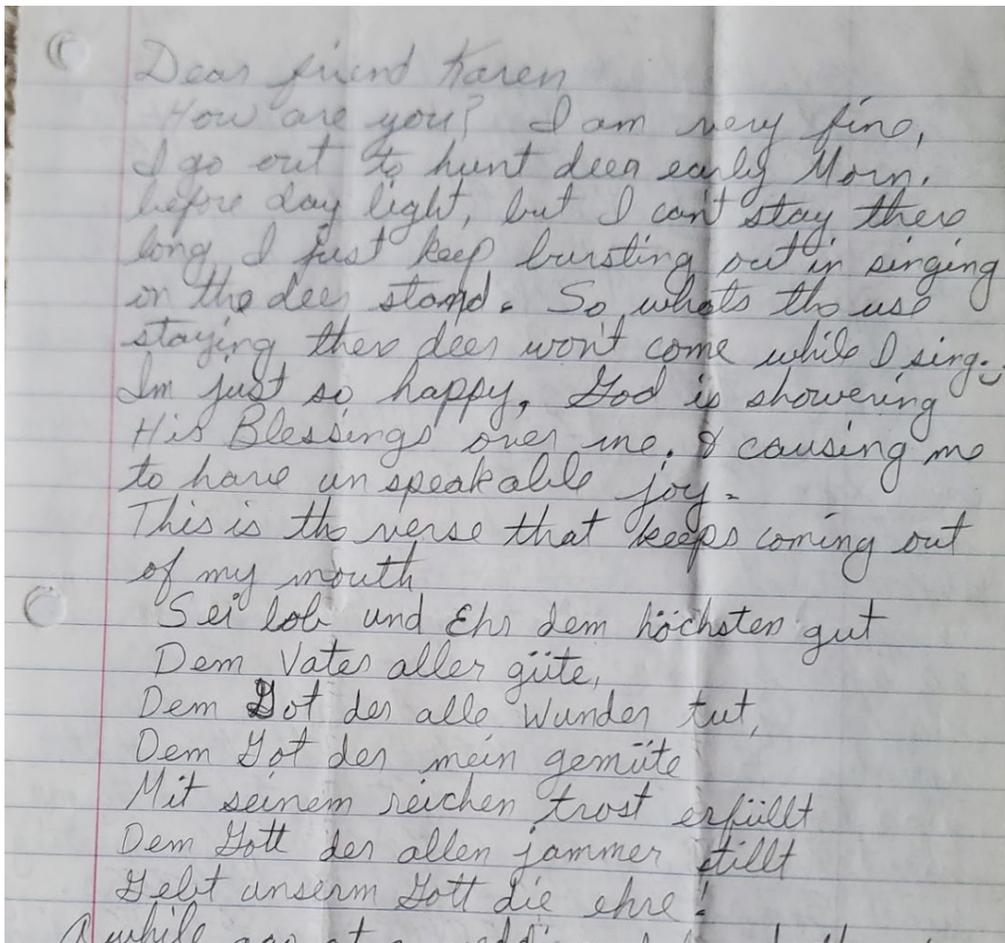
A newly relocated Amish matriarch writes about the advantages of her new home.

Then there is the housewife who wrote from Exeter, Maine, where hers was still one of only three families in the new settlement. Her letter talked about life in the small church-community and about family activities. I learned how much her twins liked the cheese curls I had brought them regularly, and that, if for nothing else, I was missed for the snacks I used to bring on Saturdays.

Challenging Stereotypes by Looking Deeper at Daily Life

Such correspondence can force researchers to rethink Amish stereotypes. For example, one unmarried Swiss Amish woman wrote of going out to hunt deer but not staying long because she just kept “bursting out in singing.” So, as she put it, “What’s the use in staying there. The deer won’t come when I sing.”

In her letter she told me that she had met the man she would marry and not only described her fiancé but also detailed the new courtship rules for her community, which had ceased to identify as Amish and now defined itself as part of a much more conservative Mennonite group.



This young woman shatters stereotypes in her letter about deer hunting and courtship.

As this suggests, letters offer researchers a glimpse into Amish life, an insider’s look at hobbies, gatherings, child-rearing. Over the years, Amish women have passed on information not likely to be shared in front of children, including requests for rides to the midwife. Others have written of new babies and death. In one letter, for example, an Amish woman went easily from announcing the birth of her daughter to remembering the death of her brother.

She then went on to ask if I could bring her three cases of Tang. Similarly, a Swartzentruber mother wrote to let me know that little Andy had been born, but she was also eager to get laundry

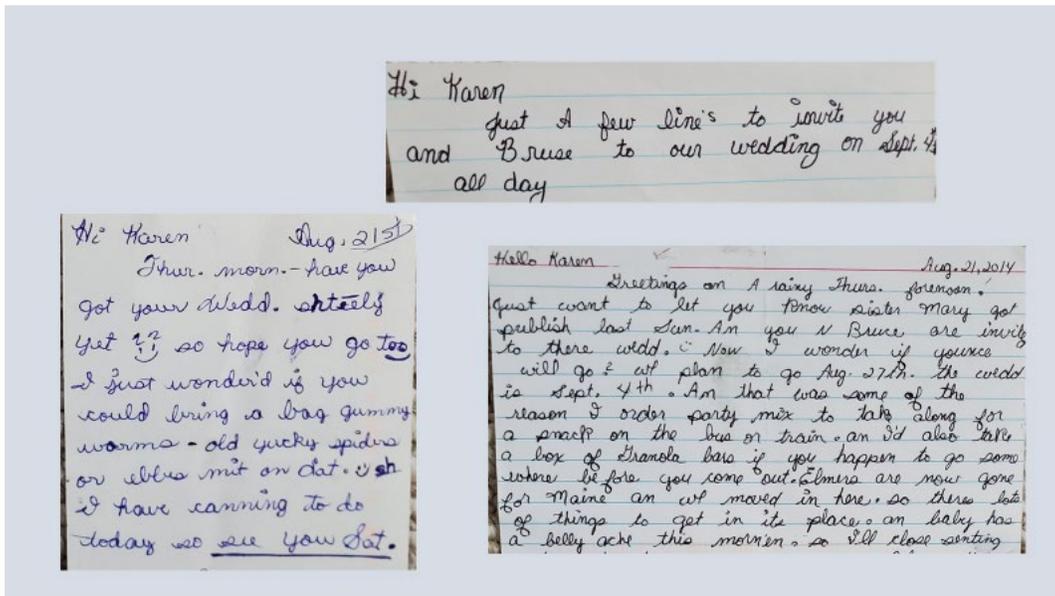
soap and Nestles Quik, further demonstration of how, in the Amish world, even the most important life events occur in the context of life itself.

For the researcher distant from the church-community, letters provide entry into daily life. In a particularly newsy letter, for example, one woman wrote about the birth of her stepdaughter's first child, a son born in January who now "smiles easily." She went on to note the death of her cousin and the circumstances of her cousin's passing and described her happiness at seeing so many of her siblings at the funeral. Finally, she added, "The boys are doing sap cooking, and I've got plants in the greenhouse."

A Glimpse into Private Life

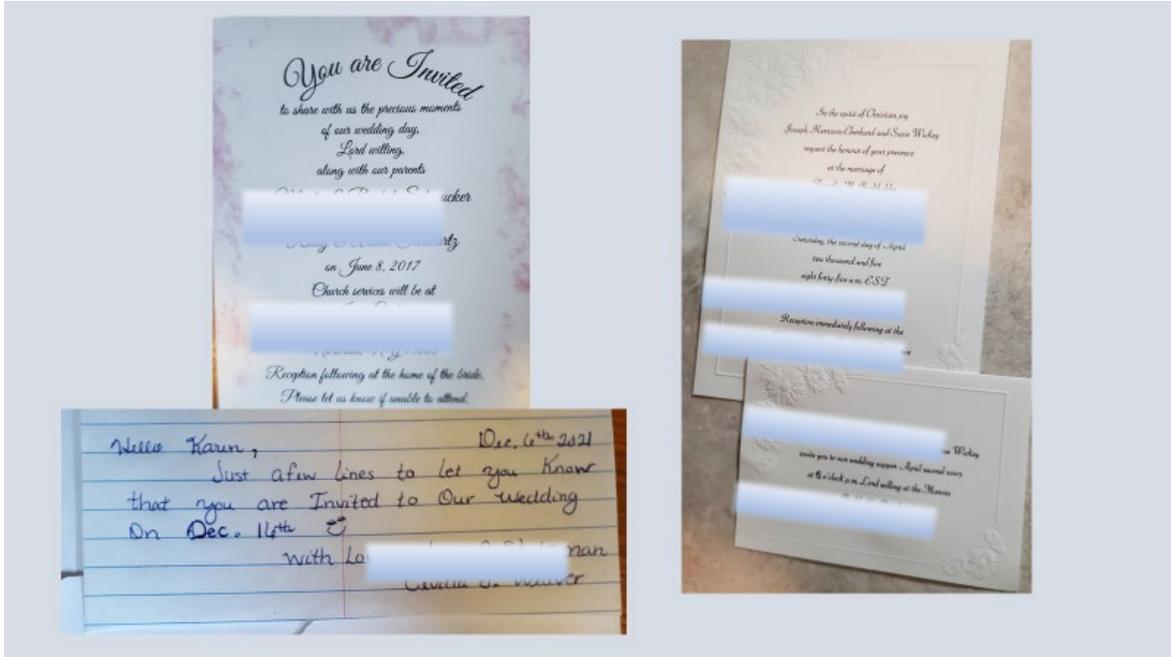
Sometimes letters tell of travels and doctoring, activities to which researchers are seldom privy. One letter writer, for example, gave details of a trip to the Radon Health Mine in Montana, commented on their daily routine in the mines, and noted the cleanliness of the hotel. Noting that they'd leave Montana on the 17th and arrive home on the 19th, she added "I can't wait to go home."

Letters also reveal the network of family and community connections. When I received a wedding invitation from Menno and Mary, I also heard from two of Mary's sisters, who were eager to tell me of plans for the upcoming wedding. Since one of them would be traveling some distance to attend, she also took the opportunity to ask me to bring her some snacks.



A wedding invitation and follow-up notes from the bride-to-be's sister show the network of family and community interactions.

Wedding invitations also reveal the diversity of the Amish world. Over the years, I've been invited to weddings with handwritten notes on half sheets of paper, handmade cards, and engraved invitations.



Wedding invitations show the diversity of the Amish world.

Letters, Faith, and Amish Change

Letters can enrich one's understanding of Amish faith. It is one thing to read an academic article on *Gelassenheit*, the giving up that is so important in Amish life; it is another to find a demonstration of it in a letter. For example, one woman wrote that her nephew, Harvey, who had died over two decades earlier, was "lucky." Her letter hints at the grief and acceptance that still mark this woman's reaction to Harvey's death and illustrates the Amish understanding of life as a journey. Harvey did not have to endure the struggle of growing up.

In answer to my letter asking about differences between her Old Order community in Panama, New York, and the neighboring Byler Amish settlement in Mayville, one Amish woman gave me a lesson in *Ordnung*, noting simply that her community is more lenient in their rules and regulations than the Mayville folks, who "are stricter and have less (modern facilities). Which, I know, that should not matter, but it seems to. And, yes, a lot of it is folks settle in dif[ferent] places and/or come from dif[ferent] places." Elaborating on this link between *Ordnung*, history, and geography, she added, "What scares me is how far we have drifted so far. I remember my Grandmother dressed like Mayville women. So we HAVE slowly drifted to a more liberal way of life."

"They" are stricter and have less (modern facilities), which, I know, that should not matter, but it seems to. And, yes, a lot of it is - folks settle in dif places - and/or come from dif places. What scares me - is how far we have drifted. ^{So} I remember my Grandmother dressed like Mayville women, so we HAVE slowly drifted to a more liberal way of life.

So I guess - the answer to that is - they have a stricter "ordnung" and stick to it better than we have. *sad to say.*

2 Yes, the Clymer, Panama, + Sherman is all one settlement.

3 No, we would ^{not} fellowship with New Order people.

Why? They ^{are} even less strict than we are - and have Sunday school, *some* have cars. Our leaders consider their ways more wordly, which is probably what the Conewango + Mayville people consider us.

4 about fences --- That is a figurative way of talking about our ordnung.



An Amish woman writes about Ordnung, change, and fellowship.

In another take on generational change, one feisty grandmother noted that she'd just done her white and light-colored wash. She then made a perhaps universal lament about the younger generation: "What do they do with their time?" At the same time, her references to washing diapers, having five or six children, and scrubbing clothes on a washboard all hint at demographic and social change within her Michigan community.

Interaction with the Mainstream World

As Amish church communities are established in regions unused to an Amish presence, first encounters can be puzzling. And as the Amish, guided by their faith, make choices different from those of their mainstream neighbors, there may be misunderstandings and even disagreements with secular authority. In letters to Amish contacts, I have posed questions about a variety of issues, including vaccination, building permits, and changes to educational standards. The responses I have received have helped me to better understand Amish attitudes towards the legal system with which they sometimes find themselves in conflict.

For example, writing about how difficult he found it to testify in court, a member of an Andy Weaver church lamented his inability to point to the defendant and say that he was “absolutely sure” that this was the man who had broken into his home and attempted to murder him. Even though he could identify his assailant, the Amish man was aware of “the consequence of that answer” for himself, given his faith and his belief that only God could be *absolutely* certain of a person’s guilt. The writer was also aware of the problems his failure to identify the defendant *absolutely* might pose for the Ashland County (Ohio) Sheriff Department, and he worried about it being sued.

In answer to a letter about potential changes in rules affecting private religious schools in New York State, this same man wrote that he hoped a compromise was possible but warned, “The same blood that caused our forefathers to accept prison time or a martyr’s death still courses thru [sic] our present-day veins. Does the state of New York really want to enter into an unsolvable conflict which will draw unfavorable national attention?”

The Difficulties of Correspondence

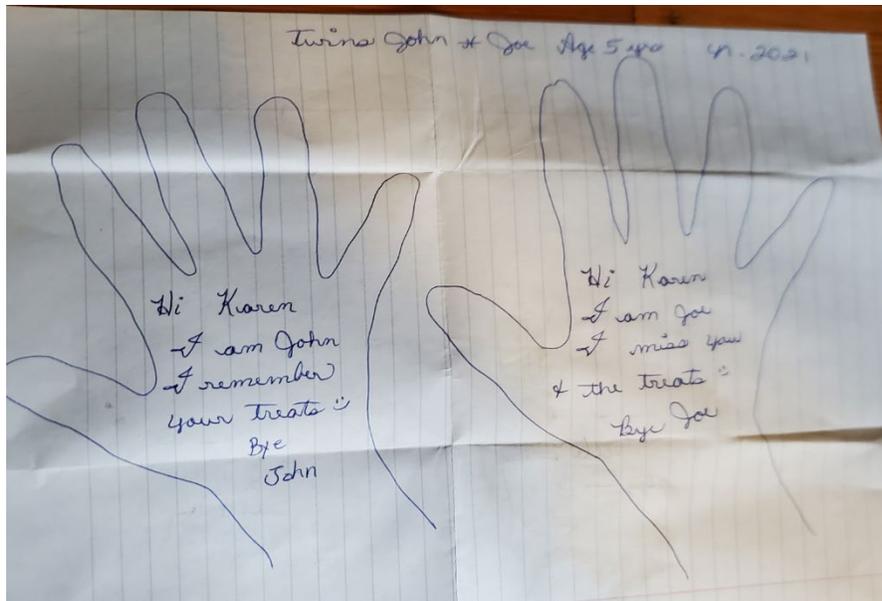
Sadly, correspondence sometimes lasts only as long as the research project. Certainly other researchers will find, as I admit I do, that it is hard to write letters and keeping up a correspondence with numerous folks in multiple states is difficult. My Amish correspondence has also waxed and waned with personal events. For example, the academic years 1997–1998 and 2007–2008 brought a marked increase in the number of letters from *local* Amish friends for the simple reason that I was overseas and no longer stopping by for coffee. Looking at aerograms from Heuvelton, New York, for example, shows I have a record of events that I missed while out of the country, including weddings, deaths, births, and barn raisings. Writing to Amish friends not only helped me remain up-to-date about what was going on in their lives, but also helped me think about the experiences I was having abroad.

When I returned to the United States and resumed weekly visits with women and families who had, by this time, become close friends, we no longer needed to write. Sadly, as folks have moved away, I have struggled to correspond, especially when I can still hear the news from those close by.

So, it was not really a surprise that, when I retired, decided to share one car with my husband, and ended my membership at BJ’s, a bulk food outlet much like Sam’s Club, I stopped getting as much mail. I still visit with the Glicks, who used to send letters asking me to pick up coffee for them. But the Swartzentruber proprietor of a local (for Amish only) bulk food store no longer writes me to ask for Tang or other items, and I seldom see him.

Conclusion

Over the years, a variety of letters have kept me up-to-date on activities and included me in family and community events in ways I never imagined when I first encountered the Amish. From outlines of children’s hands to show me how the little ones have grown, to invitations to make potato chips and participate in building frolics, I have received missives I could not have imagined when I wrote that first letter to ask a question.



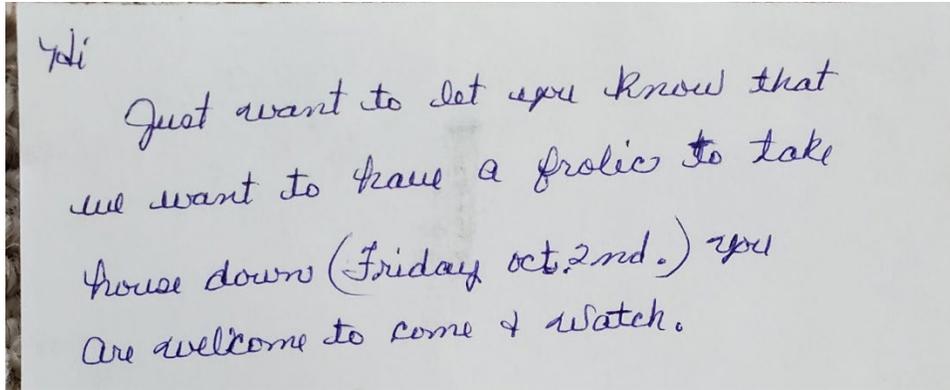
Charting growth by outlining children's "paddies."

DEAR Karen,

Monday Noon - Raining - Raining -
 Are You STILL dry OR Soaked WET? Ha
 Tell You - We are dry IF we STAY
 on Inside & That's what I try to
 do! Ha. OK. we decided to Plan
 on Making Chips on Thurs. Nov.
 2, So I Hope That fits you.
 we'll Prg Start in A.M. 9:00-9:30
 So you can come whenever you
 want. I expect it'll take us
 @ 2-3 Hrs. D.K. So that's that.

See ya Then Hopefully

An invitation to make potato chips.



Hi
Just want to let you know that
we want to have a frolic to take
house down (Friday Oct. 2nd.) you
are welcome to come & watch.

Before there can be a house raising, the old house has to come down.

These letters and many more have informed my research. Through the correspondence in my files, I have been able to let the Amish speak for themselves. In each of my books, letters from Amish correspondents augmented oral interviews, archival work, participant observation. In fact, the letters I have received over the past 30 plus years are primary source materials I never expected to have.

Although the majority of the correspondence in my files is from members of Swartzentruber communities, there are letters from folks across the spectrum of Amish life. I am pleased to say that all of this correspondence, including the letters illustrating this essay, is available in the Earl H. and Anita F. Hess Archives and Special Collections at Elizabethtown College, and I hope that it will be a useful resource.

In conclusion, I encourage everyone to buy stamps and write letters. And I hope that your correspondence, like mine, will become a record of friendships.