

## Book Review

**Joseph Stoll. *Amish and Old Order Mennonite Schools: A Concise History*. Aylmer, ON: Pathway Publishers, 2020. 232 pp.**

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The tone of this narrative is set in the foreword. Referring to “these sunset years,” the author feels compelled to share this history before his time runs out, since “no other living person was as closely involved as I was during those early years...” And indeed, few would be more qualified to give an insider’s perspective than the author. Joseph Stoll taught at the very first Amish school in Ontario and also launched *Blackboard Bulletin*, a monthly magazine covering Amish and Mennonite school matters, serving as editor for its first 16 years. This is no random collection of personal anecdotes, but a recording of legal and cultural precedents that shaped the Amish and Old Order Mennonite school system.

The first chapter, “From Abraham to Apple Grove,” explains the Anabaptist view of education as a means to grow in godly wisdom and biblical knowledge. Cited are biblical exhortations to teach, admonish, and nurture children, along with quotes from the writings of Menno Simons and *Martyrs Mirror*. The story of influential frontier schoolmaster Christopher Dock is included. The chapter concludes with the coming of state-run public schools and their contrasting secular values, a foreshadowing of the conflict to come.

For many years, rural, one-room public schools were considered less than ideal for the Amish, but workable. As expansionist ideas about education prevailed, various states moved to consolidate their schools and to raise the age of compulsory attendance. Nationalistic activities and modern curricula were introduced. Conflict was inevitable. The author explains these events in the context of religious convictions and ideals.

Chapter 2, “Apple Grove School, First of Its Kind,” details the beginnings of the first Amish school, which opened near Dover, Delaware, in 1925. This school came about with an “aura of [public] goodwill” unlike some schools that subsequently emerged from situations of conflict. In fact, controversy had already erupted in Ohio. In chapters 3 and 4, “Dark Clouds in Pennsylvania” and “Rumblings in Ohio,” we read time and again of Amish parents arrested for failure to comply with the new regulations. But with time and effort—even compromise—private schools were established during the 1930s and ’40s.

Chapter 5, “A Need to Communicate,” describes a teachers’ circle letter formed in 1950 with a dozen or so Amish participants. The friendships and connections fostered through those letters led to a summer “teachers meeting” in 1954 and the founding of *Blackboard Bulletin* in 1957. That



informal summer meeting has evolved into approximately twenty regional teachers' meetings with hundreds attending each one. And today the periodical provides inspiration and guidance for thousands of teachers, parents, and school board members in the Plain communities.

Chapters 6 through 8 detail more state-level legal conflicts: "Issues in Indiana," "Momentum in Michigan," and "Deadlock in Iowa." Chapter 9, "Public Support," tells of qualified individuals who came to the aid of the Amish by gathering data and providing testimony and pro bono legal aid in court cases. Most notably, public opinion was influential in recognizing the Amish school conflict as a matter of religious freedom.

In Chapter 10, "Openings in Ontario," Stoll discusses the opening of the early Amish and Mennonite schools of Canada, which occurred with relatively little conflict. Then, in chapter 11 comes the famous *Wisconsin v. Yoder* case, culminating in the landmark 1972 ruling by the United States Supreme Court. After the "Whirlwind in Wisconsin," Amish and Mennonites could at last establish their own schools without legal challenges. This ends the historical narrative portion of the book.

At first, older textbooks from the public school sufficed, but soon the need for conservative material suitable for multigrade classrooms became evident. Ten different Plain publishers are listed in chapter 12. Chapter 13 informs readers of the tremendous growth and expansion of this school movement. A 2020 listing includes more than 2,500 schools. Amish influence even extends to Mexico, where Old Colony Mennonite Support has been assisting Russian Mennonite schools since 2000. Chapter 14, "Let Not the Vision Perish," is a collection of letters and essays from the early years of the movement—a fitting way to end the story.

As a doctrinal treatise, this book makes an articulate case for the importance of having our own schools. Readers can appreciate the relentless efforts of key figures early on. The author exhorts, "We have lessons yet to learn. The vision for our parochial schools must be kept alive." As a history, the book is strong on documentation with sources, statistical charts and exhibits, and biographical sidebars. The narrative is cohesive and presents both cause and effect of watershed events. The author himself appears frequently, but always in the third person; names of his family members appear but are not identified as such.

A weak point of this history is its limited scope. With the exception of Apple Grove School, each case described involves either (a) legal conflict or (b) the author's personal experience. Some readers may erroneously conclude that all early Amish schools in the United States faced legal challenges. But in approximately 30 states and provinces, little or no legal conflict arose as the Plain people parted ways with the public school system or simply never joined it in the first place. For example, Amish schools were established in Missouri and New York in 1948 and 1949, respectively. In recent decades, Amish settled anywhere from Maine to Idaho and promptly founded their own schools without any ripples.

By extension, the book also omits the educational contributions made in these states. Our home community of Arthur, Illinois, for example, built its first parochial school in 1966 in a cooperative legal environment much like that of Ontario. Today, the local school culture is highly structured and has been a forerunner in teacher mentoring and special education. But since there was no legal

conflict, our and similar stories are not presented. Neither is there mention of today's hybrid schools found in certain communities: Amish-only classrooms within the public school system, often with academic input from Amish teachers.

Having known Joseph Stoll for some years, we greatly enjoyed reading this book. It is especially relevant to us as we help develop a German series for Amish and Mennonite schools. We grew up in different states (Lynn in Arthur, Illinois; Gracia in Holmes County, Ohio) but had similar school experiences: starting in an Amish-only classroom in a public school, then switching to an Amish parochial school later on. Thus, we experienced, to some degree, the contrast between the public and parochial schools. The worldviews presented in this book resemble those of our own teachers, parents, board members, and ministers during our school years. Even the book's homespun appearance with basic typesetting and a hand-painted cover is typical of Amish school material: not glitzy, but highly functional.

"This will surely be my last book," says the author in his foreword. We are surely grateful to have it.