

Curiosity, criticism follow Amish in Midwest migration

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SCHUYLER COUNTY, Mo. (RNS) The grumbling surfaced not long after the first Amish families moved to this sparsely populated farm region in the northeast corner of the state about a decade ago.

Word spread that these Pennsylvania Dutch-speaking newcomers hated the government, didn't pay taxes, and wouldn't fight in a war.

And then there were the whispers about intermarriage and suspicions of incest.

"People didn't think too much of them the first few years," said Robert Aldridge, the county's presiding commissioner.

Missouri is home to one of the fastest growing Amish populations in the United States. While the majority of the nation's 250,000 Amish still live in Ohio, Pennsylvania and Indiana, a westward migration has pushed settlements into 28 states.

About 10,000 Amish now call Missouri home. Among states with more than 1,000 Amish, Missouri trailed only New York and Minnesota in the rate of population growth in the last year, according to a study by the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Elizabethtown College in Pennsylvania.

Many new arrivals settled near decades-old Amish communities, but others were the first to put down roots in places like Schuyler, a county of about 4,100 residents along the Iowa border.

Many longtime residents say they enjoy cordial relations with their Amish neighbors. For others, acceptance came slowly. For some, it never arrived.

"There's still people that don't like them," Aldridge said.

For Amish moving into new areas, conflict with locals is not unusual, said Karen Johnson-Weiner, professor of anthropology at State University of New York at Potsdam, who has studied Amish migration.

The Amish practice a Christian faith and are known for a reluctance to adopt many modern conveniences. Community rules vary on the use of technology, but typically, Amish groups forbid owning automobiles, tapping electricity from public utility lines, using self-propelled farm machinery or owning a television, computer or radio.

Many who move to new areas are among the most conservative, anxious to preserve their agrarian way of life rather than be forced to interact with an encroaching outside world, Johnson-Weiner said.

Once settled in a new location, Amish tend to remain isolated, focused on their own church community rather than building relations with neighbors.

"So right away they're not meeting the cultural expectation of, 'If they move in next door, they ought to get to know us,'" Johnson-Weiner said. "So it's hard to get off on the right foot."

Henry Miller was one of the first Amish to move to Schuyler County 11 years ago.

He and his wife and their nine children live on 17 acres outside the small town of Downing. About 10 Amish families now live in the immediate area, he said.

Miller, 43, said he moved to escape Wisconsin's winters and never felt animosity from locals. "There's not really any problems," he said.

But neighbor Jack Oliver, 76, making one of his frequent visits to the Miller farm, knows the animosity exists. Some of it resides in

Oliver's own home.

His wife, Maudie Oliver, 74, earns thousands of dollars each year driving Amish to weddings, funerals, shopping and elsewhere, and has gotten to know many members of the community well.

She expressed concern about Amish children being left alone when their parents leave town, the burden placed on Amish wives, and a difficult way of life with no electricity or hot running water.

She also took exception to the Amish being pacifists.

"They do not honor the flag or go to the military," she said, echoing criticisms by several county residents. "We're protecting them and all their kids, and that's not fair."

It's a complaint that Johnson-Weiner dismisses.

"That's the problem when you enshrine religious freedom in the Constitution: Some people take you up on it," she said.

Lifelong county resident Gerald Robinson, who considers the Amish "swell people," said he has heard much of the "trash talk" about the Amish.

"You're just going to have that," Robinson said. "Some people are less receptive to me because I'm a Christian. That's just the way it goes. Their belief is their belief. That's what our freedom is."

At another Amish farm near Queen City, an elder stroked his long beard as he listened to a list of concerns expressed by locals. The man, who like many Amish asked that his name not be used, said he got along well with his "English" (non-Amish) neighbors, but acknowledged that many still had misunderstandings about the Amish faith.

"I can actually see how they feel if they know no different," he said.

His family moved from the Fort Wayne, Ind., area five years ago to escape the city and strict zoning laws, and find a good community to

raise their children.

"Living around a whole lot of wealth is not good for Christians," he said.

The family sold their 80-acre farm and used the money to buy 300 acres in Schuyler County, on which they raise calves and operate a sawmill. Now, they share a 900-acre tract with 16 or 17 other Amish families, he said.

"We don't want them to feel we're coming in to crowd them out," he said of the locals. "The land was for sale."