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Amish scholars are joined by family and friends for a day of fellowship during "Family Day" at Swan Meadow School. Gortner Amish students attend Swan Meadow through Grade 8.

The Amish of Gortner Maryland

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Photography by: Lance C. Bell

German immigrants established the Amish community at Gortner, Maryland, over 150 years ago. Gortner has remained a viable community since its founding because it has been able to maintain respect for traditional values while meeting the challenges of an increasingly complex contemporary world.

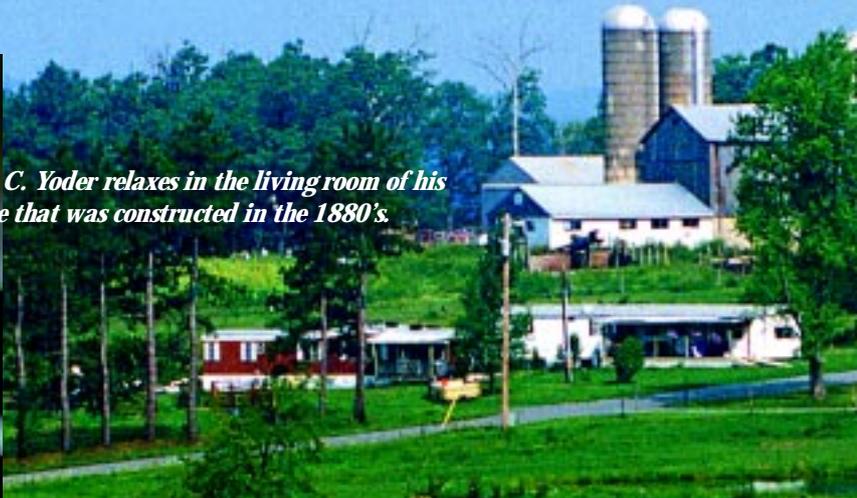
Devotion to Christian principles, establishing an agrarian lifestyle, and emphasis on family togetherness are qualities that remain evident among the Gortner Amish today. The past is never far from the present among residents, and it is history that provides guidance and inspiration for those who follow the traditional Amish lifestyle.

The Amish are descendants of European Anabaptists who organized during the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century. The Anabaptists thought that only believing adults should be baptized which placed them in direct conflict with the Roman Catholic Church that practiced infant baptism. The Church of Rome regulated not only religious matters, but it also became closely connected to state politics. Church reformers, lead by Martin Luther in 1517, began a series of reforms that caused the Roman Catholic Church to lose much of its political power. The reformers began to make a clear distinction between church and state, a concept endorsed by the Anabaptists; such a stand made the reformers in general, and the Anabaptists in particular, a threat to the social, religious, and political order of the day. Consequently, a large number of Anabaptists, under the

direction of Menno Simmons, fled to remote areas of Europe to escape persecution. During the late 1600's, a challenge to Anabaptist leadership occurred when Mennonites advocated reforms not acceptable to Jacob Amann. Followers of Amann formed a new religious division, and subsequently, became known as the "Amish." The division within the Anabaptist movement, combined with persecution from state authorities, caused the Amish to move about Europe and later immigrate to Pennsylvania where other religious groups had fled, seeking religious freedom. Many Amish settled in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and later migrated westward to other parts of Pennsylvania and Maryland. Later Amish immigration from Germany in the 1800's, had more to do with avoiding military conscription than physical persecution.



John C. Yoder relaxes in the living room of his house that was constructed in the 1880's.



Swan Meadow scholars enjoy the company of a future student during "Family Day."

Editors Note: This story and photos were prepared with the help, cooperation and approval of the Amish Community of Gortner in Garrett County, Maryland. We would like to thank them for allowing us to document their story and history.



Gortner's founding can be traced to the westward migration from Germany to America when immigrant, Peter Gortner, purchased property four miles south of Oakland and established a farm in an area that is today known as Pleasant Valley. Amish church services were held in Gortner's house in the 1850's-1860's, and Peter Gortner is identified as the first minister of the church located there. Peter Gortner Jr. later enhanced the original farm by constructing grist and saw mills, a store, and a post office that was officially designated "Gortner."



Lifetime resident, Sam Yoder, relaxes from daily chores.

An Amish church, located in nearby German Settlement, Virginia, complimented the fledgling settlement at Gortner. The community where the Amish settled later became known as Aurora, West Virginia. Daniel and Elizabeth Beachy's family figured prominently in populating the settlement, as fourteen children were born to them while residing in Aurora. Other early settlers were Samuel Gnagey, John Slaubaugh, Peter Schrock, C. J. Petersheim, Peter Miller, Felty Selders, and E.C. Yoder. The Amish worshipped in Aurora several years prior to Peter Gortner's purchase of property near Oakland, and therefore, receive credit as having the first such congregation in the immediate area. Due to the proximity of the two settlements, a decision was later made to worship under the direction of one church; this arrangement continued until the demise of the Aurora Amish community. The last Amish residents, Leah and Fannie Beachy,

Background photo: Springtime brings forth the annual renewal of life to the rural landscape.



Traditional buggy rides to Sunday church services remain an integral part of Gortner Amish tradition.

moved to Gortner in 1944. Long time Gortner resident, Henry Swartzentruber, recalls that church services would sometimes be held at the Beachy's house in Aurora, giving rise to the term, "house Amish." Amish traditionally worshipped in houses and rotated locations among church members. The horse and buggy rides to Aurora services were especially popular with children. According to Saloma Swartzentruber, "the children really looked forward when it was announced the meeting was at the Beachy's next time. They always liked that trip." Several buildings and a cemetery are all that remain of the Amish presence in Aurora.

The Amish population of Gortner continued to grow when several Aurora families later moved there. Among the Aurora group was Jonas C. Petersheim who moved in 1900. Descendants of Jonas Petersheim remain in the immediate area.

Joseph Slaughbaugh had a significant influence on Gortner when he purchased 723 acres in approximately 1857, referred to as Ashby's Discovery Tract at a tax sale in Cumberland, Maryland.

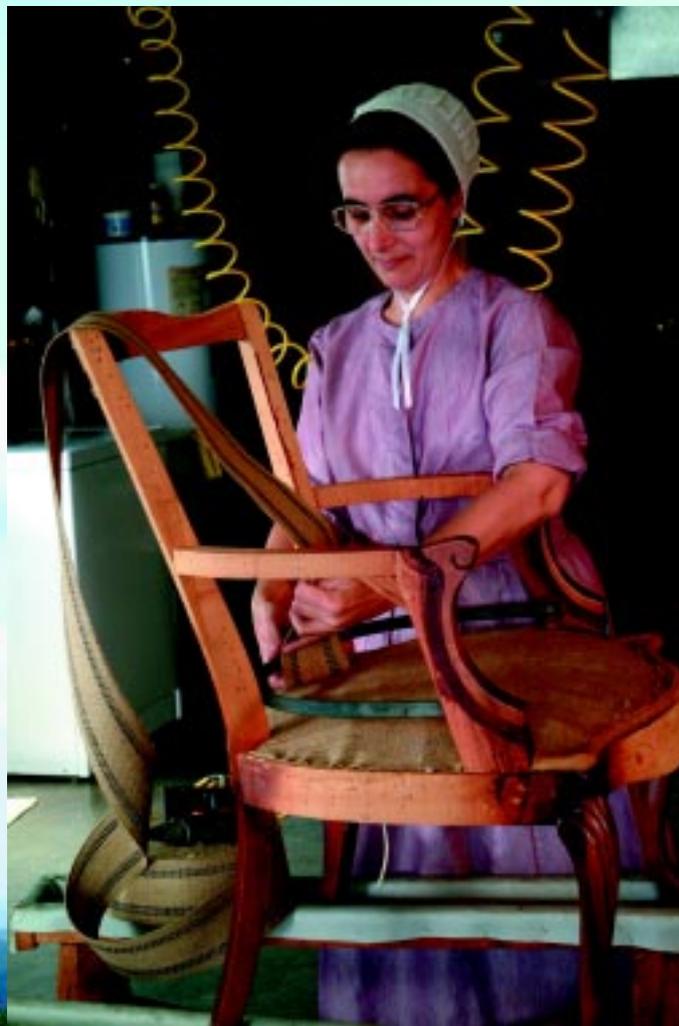
Slaughbaugh's siblings moved to the area and developed farms on the expanse of land. Church services were held there in the 1860's, with Joseph Slaughbaugh's house serving as the worship center. The Slaughbaugh family also donated land for construction of Union Church in Gortner, aptly named as it combined Mennonite and Brethren congregations. David Slaughbaugh's portion of the Ashby's Discovery Tract was sold to Dan Swartzentruber in 1901, and it has retained a Swartzentruber family connection to date.

The Gortner Amish realized the need for a school and provided for a small wooden school structure, called Swan Meadow, to be built around the year 1880. The number of students, referred to as scholars, grew quickly causing overcrowded conditions. Scholars were divided into two groups and attended every other day. Later, the original structure was increased in size by one third. The original school, with old and new sections still visible, stands along Route 219.



Soybean fields are carefully cultivated near the Gortner Amish Church. Horses are tied to hitching posts adjacent to the church. Services are held every other week.

Crowded classrooms and an older facility were a cause for great concern among the Gortner Amish, in 1957. Garrett County officials considered closing Swan Meadow School and transporting students to nearby Oakland schools. The Gortner scholars, unlike their friends in Somerset County who attended schools that were operated by the Amish Church, were enrolled in a public school, subject to county and state authority. The Amish wanted to maintain Swan Meadow as a predominately Amish/Mennonite facility, so they organized to keep it in operation. PTA meetings and much prayer followed. Finally, it was agreed the Amish would provide volunteer work to build the new Swan Meadow School thus reducing the costs to local government. Work commenced in 1958 on the new school, located near the older facility. Scholars were welcomed there in the fall, amid rejoicing of volunteers.



The Gortner Amish have diversified their economy from a strictly agrarian one to a variety of commercial enterprises. Above: Esther Beachy, proprietor, reupholsters furniture. Left: Ruth Yoder, owner of Yoder's Fabrics on Mason School Road, offers specialized goods to the regional Amish and Mennonite communities. Also see "Hydroponic Tomatoes" on page 45.

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The most important institution within the Gortner Amish community is the church. The Bible is interpreted literally and directly which influences their values and lifestyle. Other unwritten but understood rules are followed. There is a difference of opinion whether the Amish are a church or an ethnic group, as they do not actively evangelize, and conversions to the group are not common. The Amish prefer to let their strong and silent lifestyle serve as an example of Christian living. The German dialect used in everyday discourse, and the more formal German or High German used in worship services, tend to make the group exclusive, although everyone is welcome to attend church or convert to the faith.

Gortner Amish display more diversity than Somerset County, Pennsylvania Amish. Differences among German Lutherans, Mennonites, Brethren, and Amish sects were never as great as they are today because an agricultural lifestyle, horse and buggy transportation, and conservative dress styles were common to those groups in the 1800's. Changes began to emerge following World War II and were accelerated in the 1960's, by state health and safety regulations governing the production and distribution of Grade A milk. Heating and cooling equipment, automatically timed, made the use of electricity a pressing issue among dairy farmers. The old method of gathering milk using two handled metal containers was regulated out of existence. Since virtually all Gortner Amish owned dairy cattle, the use of electricity was vigorously debated because acceptance of it would potentially change their traditional way of life. One long time valley resident remarked, "I told them if electricity came, it wouldn't stay in the barn for long." There was concern that electricity, while not inherently evil, would potentially make conveniences available,

and thus, create a situation where people's time would not be spent wisely. To deny electrical service, however, would reduce the dairy farmer's ability to earn income, and thus, cause them to possibly relocate their homes or necessitate a change in occupation. It prevailed, by church member vote, that electricity could be used in the valley. True to predictions of some church members, electricity was not restricted to the barn but was also directed into houses. Today, most Gortner Amish have electrical service, telephones, and rubber tire tractors. Automobiles, televisions, and other forms of entertainment remain forbidden.

The Gortner Amish Church continues to thrive in Pleasant Valley as they have over 200 members and a new facility. Today, the membership could best be described as a New Order division of the Amish Church, one of several different orders within the American Amish population. Other local Amish could be termed "Old Order" and "Beachy." Old Order Amish live in nearby Somerset County and practice a more conservative lifestyle, while the Beachy Amish are more progressive. The Beachy Amish movement began in Somerset County, during 1927-1928 as an effort to establish Sunday School and evangelize it. Later the Beachy Amish also proposed the relaxation of restrictions on the use of vehicles.

An orderly and carefully considered approach to change has enabled the Gortner Amish to remain true to their religious beliefs and cultural traditions while meeting the requirements of life in the 21st century. Steady growth, from a fledgling single farm settlement to a valley community, speaks for itself as does the economic strength of church members. Gortner's Amish community remains a viable part of Garrett County's rich cultural tradition.





Benjamin Duff and one of the many baby goats raised in the new barn on the Duff farm.