



Part One

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CHAPTER ONE

The Nickel Mines Amish

We believe in letting our light shine, but not shining
it in the eyes of other people.

—AMISH FATHER

The earliest streaks of light were barely breaking the eastern sky as we turned east in Strasburg, Pennsylvania.* Reading our MapQuest printout with a flashlight, we drove two miles and then turned south onto Wolf Rock Road. Ahead of us, two blinking red lights punctured the darkness, signaling the unhurried pace of a horse-drawn buggy. We slowed the car and followed the rhythmic *clip-clop, clip-clop* of the horse's hooves toward the top of a ridge.

We were searching for a place that one hopes never to be looking for. A shooting had occurred the day before at a one-room Amish school in a small community called Nickel Mines. As scholars of Amish life, we

*The authors use the first-person plural (*we*) as their collective voice. Although each author received many media queries in the days following the shooting, the on-site observations at Nickel Mines on Tuesday, October 3, 2006, are those of Donald B. Kraybill.

had spent that day responding to a flood of phone calls from reporters eager for information. Now we were headed to the scene of the tragedy, to answer more questions from the journalists gathered there.

We continued climbing “the ridge,” as the Amish call it, a low east-west range that slices the Lancaster Amish settlement in half. The older section of the settlement, on the north side, was formed about 1760, when Amish moved near what would later become the village of Intercourse. In 1940, Amish pioneers pushed south of the ridge toward Georgetown in search of cheaper land. With the Old Order population doubling every twenty years, Georgetown soon became the hub of a thriving community. Today some eight hundred Amish families live within a four-mile radius of the small town. The “southern end,” as this section of the settlement is called, is hillier and also on the “slower, more conservative side,” according to the Amish who live in the older area to the north.

The flashing lights on the back of the buggy we were trailing reminded us that the Amish do not shun all technology. Although they spurn television, the Internet, car ownership, and other things they fear could harm their community, the Amish selectively use some innovations and adapt others in ways that help rather than hinder their way of life. Their struggle to tame technology—through the ingenuity of Amish “engineers”—has resulted in a fascinating blend of old and new: LED lights on buggies, steel wheels on modern tractors, cash registers run by batteries, shop saws powered by compressed air, and telephones kept in shanties outside of homes so they don’t disrupt family life. Some Amish businesses use the newly developed Classic Word Processor. Advertised as “nothing fancy, just a word horse for your business,” this electronic device has an eight-inch screen, a Windows operating system, and standard spreadsheet and word processing software. Unlike most computers, however, this “Old Order computer” has no connections for phone, Internet, or video games.

Even though we had spoken with reporters about the West Nickel Mines School for hours the day before, we were not sure of its location. We knew it was a dozen miles southeast of Lancaster City, tucked away from Route 30, the busy tourist strip overflowing with restaurants and outlet stores. We also knew that the old nickel mines had folded in 1890 when the business fell prey to cheaper imported metals. Now the area was simply a rural region, mostly farms, small businesses, and bungalows scattered along curving country roads.

As we topped the ridge and approached Mine Road, a stop sign appeared in the gray dawn. Police cars blocked Mine Road to the right. An officer with a large flashlight came to our window and asked where we were headed. After seeing our identification, he waved us to the right and told us to park behind the TV trucks that lined Mine Road for as far as we could see.

Mine Road is a narrow, backcountry road with a few scattered houses on the left side and farmland overlooking a small valley on the right. The West Nickel Mines Amish School lay near the bottom of the valley. Dozens of media trucks were parked along the berm of the road, their satellite dishes pointing skyward. A white board fence enclosed the schoolyard, the school building, two outhouses, and a ball field. Horses grazed in the pasture adjacent to the school, the site of another ball field. The one-room, nineteenth-century-style school with its rooftop bell made a lovely backdrop for the morning news. A peaceful and idyllic view, it could have been the vestibule of Paradise. In fact, a small village by that name lies just five miles over the ridge to the north.

We parked and walked down the road through a throng of television crews and journalists. Some of the reporters, disheveled and yawning, had apparently spent the night in their trucks. Several New York journalists, probably wishing for a Starbucks, had just returned from a convenience store five miles away with cups of a generic brew. Ahead of us a small crossroads overflowed with even more media trucks. Dozens

of journalists carrying notepads, microphones, and cameras milled around the area. “Where is Nickel Mines?” we asked one reporter as we approached. “This is it!” was his simple reply.

This was it? Only a few houses and a crossroads? An auction building squats on one corner of the intersection. There are no stores, gas stations, or coffee shops. The closest store, bank, and firehouse are located in Georgetown, about a mile and a half to the south. Overnight the parking lot of the auction house had turned into a media bazaar with satellite dishes, bright lights, the hum of diesel generators, and inquisitive reporters everywhere. This humble crossroads, barely a hamlet, had captured the world’s attention for a long day that would stretch into a week.

We stood at a soda machine beside the auction building, trying to get our bearings. Only seventeen hours earlier Charles Carl Roberts IV had bought a soda at this very spot, just four hundred yards from the West Nickel Mines School. He had waited while the twenty-six children played softball during their morning recess. An Amish member of the school board had seen him here but thought nothing of it because Roberts often hung out around the auction house. “Charlie could have done the shooting at the Georgetown School closer to his home,” said an Amish man, “but he probably thought it was too close to some houses.”



The Lancaster Amish settlement has more than 160 local congregations called church districts, each led by a team of ordained men—a bishop, a deacon, and two or three ministers. The men, selected from within their district, serve as religious leaders in addition to their regular employment. They serve for life, without compensation or formal theological training.

Streams and roads mark the borders of each district, which serves as the social and religious home for twenty-five to forty families.

Each Amish family worships with the other families who live within the boundaries of their district. When a district's membership grows too large for families to accommodate worship services at their homes, the district is divided. Because the families live so close and engage in many activities together outside church services, they know each other very well.

The Nickel Mines crossroads divides three districts: West Nickel Mines, East Nickel Mines, and Northeast Georgetown. Children from all three districts attended the West Nickel Mines School. "It was fortunate that the children came from three different districts," said an Amish man in retrospect, "so the grief and funeral preparations didn't fall on the members of just one district."

This is dense Amish country, where Amish farms and businesses nestle alongside those of their English neighbors. Bart Township, the municipal home of the Nickel Mines area, boasts a population of three thousand Amish and English who live in some eight hundred houses within sixteen square miles. As in many other Amish communities in North America, the Amish here have many friends among their English neighbors, and a lot of neighborly activity occurs across the cultural fences. About 75 percent of the firefighters in the Bart Township Fire Company are Amish, and some hold leadership positions. They do not drive the trucks, but they help to fight fires and organize fund-raisers for the company.

The willingness of Amish men to *ride* in the fire trucks they refuse to *drive* mirrors the Amish relationship to motor vehicles in general. In the early twentieth century, Amish leaders forbade car ownership for fear the car would unravel their communities, making it easier for members to drive off to cities and blend in with the larger world. Horse-and-buggy transportation helps to tether members to their local church district and ties them closely to their neighbors. Amish people do hire English "taxi drivers" who use their own vehicles to transport their Amish patrons for business, special events, and long-distance

travel. Moreover, some Amish business owners have English employees who provide a truck or car for daily business-related travel. On the day of the shooting, parents of the injured children rode to hospitals in police cruisers and the vehicles of non-Amish drivers. Because flying is off-limits, they declined offers to go by helicopter to the hospitals, although many of the injured were transported that way.

As the sun erased the overnight darkness, the school came into clearer focus. It was a typical one-room Amish school sporting a cast-iron bell in a small cupola on the roof. Built in 1976, the yellow stucco building sat in a former pasture about fifty yards from White Oak Road and about a quarter mile from the nearest Amish homes. There are more than fourteen hundred similar Amish-operated schools across the country. Most, but not all, Amish youth in North America attend private Amish schools like this one. After completing eighth grade, the “scholars,” as the Amish call their pupils, begin vocational apprenticeships at their homes, farms, or home-based shops, or with a nearby neighbor or relative.

The West Nickel Mines School is one of thirty Amish schools within a four-mile radius of Georgetown. These one-room schools, like the Amish church districts they serve, are named for nearby towns and locally known sites—Cedar Hill, Wolf Rock, Georgetown, Valley Road, Bartville, Mt. Pleasant View, Peach Lane, Green Tree, and so on. More than 190 Amish schools are sprinkled across the Lancaster County Amish settlement, which spills eastward into Chester County. A school board composed of three to five men supervises one or two schools—hiring the teachers, caring for maintenance, and managing the finances.

Private Amish schools like this one in Nickel Mines are relatively new. In fact, Amish children attended rural public schools until the advent of large, consolidated schools in the mid-twentieth century. Consolidation meant that Amish pupils could no longer walk to school;

it also meant that their parents had less control over the schools their children attended. Increasingly the teachers in the big schools came from faraway places and had little knowledge of Amish life. To their dismay, Amish parents found their high-school-age children exposed to topics and classes they disapproved of, such as evolution and physical education.

The Amish objected to this revolutionary change in public schools. In their view, a good eighth-grade education in the basics of reading, writing, spelling, and arithmetic was all that was needed for success in Amish life. In fact, in Lancaster County dozens of Amish parents were jailed in the early 1950s because they refused to send their children to consolidated schools beyond the eighth grade. Eventually the U.S. Supreme Court, in a 1972 case known as *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, allowed Amish children to end their formal education when they turned fourteen. Both the threat of consolidated schools and the court decision spurred the growth of Amish private schools.

Compared to homes, barns, and shops, schools contain the least amount of technology in Amish society. Typically this technology includes only a battery-run wall clock, a propane gas light, and a kerosene, coal, or wood stove. There are no calculators, microscopes, computers, electrical outlets, security cameras, or televisions. One Amish teacher, often with the help of an aide, teaches all eight grades in the same classroom. The curriculum, taught in English, focuses on the basics: spelling, reading, penmanship, grammar, arithmetic, and some geography. A quiet but orderly hum hovers over the room as children whisper and help one another while the teacher works with one or two grades at a time. A student's raised hand, asking for permission to get a library book or use the outhouse, usually receives a subtle nod from the teacher. At the end of the day, the scholars turn into janitors—sweeping the floor, replacing books on the library shelves, and tidying up the bats and balls in the foyer.

Many people are surprised to learn that religion is not taught as a separate subject in Amish schools. Instead, it is imparted through Bible reading, prayer, hymns and songs, and the exemplary behavior of the teacher. The Amish believe that formal religious instruction belongs in the family and church, not in the school. Of course, values permeate the school “all day long in our curriculum and in the playgrounds,” according to one Amish school manual. This occurs, the manual explains, “by not cheating in arithmetic, by teaching cleanliness and thrift in health . . . by learning to make an honest living . . . and by teaching honesty, respect, sincerity, humbleness, and the golden rule on the playground.”



As we peered across the road at the West Nickel Mines School, journalists gathered around us in search of information. Their questions were sensible and to the point: What do the Amish think about . . . ? How do the Amish react to . . . ? What do the Amish teach in their schools?

As straightforward as their questions were, the reporters often began with the wrong assumption: that all Amish people in North America are shaped by the same cultural cookie cutter. In fact, there are many different subgroups of Amish, each with their own unique practices. For example, some, such as the Lancaster Amish, drive gray-topped carriages, but others drive carriages with black, yellow, or white tops. Occupations, dress patterns, wedding and funeral practices, and accepted technology vary across the many Amish subgroups. In a few subgroups, business owners are permitted to own cell phones; most Amish homes have indoor toilets but some do not; certain groups permit the use of in-line roller skates but others do not; and so on. With sixteen hundred church districts across the country, with religious authority anchored in local districts, and without an Amish “pope,” there are many different ways of being Amish in North America.

We tried to respond to the reporters with specifics about the Amish in the Nickel Mines area, but even here there are different personalities and practices. The diversity found in other ethnic and religious groups is also rife among the Amish. How could we squeeze all of this cultural complexity into short sound bites for the evening news?

Part of the reason we were in such demand the day of the shooting was the Amish aversion to publicity. No lawyers or family spokespersons represented the grieving Amish parents or provided statements to the media. With a few exceptions, the Amish did not want to talk with the media or appear on camera. This reticence came not from the sudden shock of the shooting but from a deep aversion to publicity that is grounded in their religious beliefs and cultural traditions.

Taking their cues from the Bible, the Amish have long declined the media spotlight, preferring to live quietly and privately. They take seriously Jesus' words, "Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them . . . do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do . . . let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth. . . . And when thou prayest, thou shalt not be as the hypocrites are: for they love to pray . . . in the corners of the streets, that they may be *seen of men*" (emphasis added). These verses from Chapter Six of Matthew's Gospel appear right before the Lord's Prayer, the model prayer that Jesus taught his disciples. The instruction is clear: do not practice your religion in public to show off your piety. Practice your faith privately, and your Father in heaven will reward you.

The Amish also refrain from publicity because, as a collective society, they believe that the community should come first, not the individual. Having one's name in a newspaper story manifests pride by calling attention to one's opinions; therefore, some Amish people will talk to the press but only if they can remain anonymous. Faith must at times be practiced in public but should not, in the Amish view, be showcased.

“We believe in letting our light shine,” said one Amish father, “but not shining it in the eyes of other people.”

Posing for photographs is also discouraged. The Amish cite the second of the Ten Commandments, “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing” (Exodus 20:4), as a reason for not posing for photographs. To pose for a picture is considered an act of pride that places the individual on a pedestal. Such self-promotion not only calls excessive attention to the individual, but it also borders on self-worship.

So the reporters covering the West Nickel Mines School shooting faced a quandary. How could they cover a people who didn’t want to be covered, let alone at a time of deep grief and shock? The shooting was relatively easy to cover: police reports and public records were readily available within a day of the tragedy. Reporting about the Amish community was a different matter altogether.



As we retraced our steps on Mine Road to prepare for an interview, we yielded to an Amish farmer approaching with a bench wagon pulled by two mules. Sitting on an elevated seat at the front of the enclosed wagon, he looked like a stagecoach driver. As we waited for the mule-drawn wagon to pass a string of mobile TV studios beaming their news around the world, it felt for a moment as if we were in a time warp.

The large gray wagon held benches, songbooks, and eating utensils. Because the Amish have no church buildings, enclosed wagons transport supplies from home to home as families take turns hosting the biweekly church service. The three-hour Sunday morning service, called *Gmay* (a dialect shortcut for the word *church*), is followed by

a fellowship meal and may be attended by as many as two hundred people. The church service is held in large first-floor rooms or the basement of a home, in the upper level of a barn, or in a shop.

The wagons also bring benches to the homes of grieving families after a death. Hundreds of friends and family members come to the home for viewing and visitation after a body returns from an English mortuary. The visitation period typically stretches over several days and evenings before the funeral. Sixteen hours after the school shooting, the bench wagons were converging on the homes of families who would soon bury their children. The benches carried by the wagons would be used for seating in the barns where the funerals were slated for Thursday and Friday.

The bench wagon illustrated a point we repeated over and over again to reporters who asked, "Are the Amish prepared to deal with a tragedy like this?" Our answer was a paradox, perhaps a little unexpected. Of course, the Amish were not prepared, we said—except, of course, they were.

In one sense, no community is ever prepared for such a calamity. There have been few murders in Amish history, and never before had there been a school massacre. Certainly adults and children had died in tragic accidents, but there were no parallels to the Nickel Mines shooting. Amish schools, with no history of violence, are not designed with such incidents in mind. There are no metal detectors at the doors, no daily body searches for concealed weapons, no police officers patrolling the hallways, no policies for emergencies, and no drills to prepare for hostage situations. The children who attend a one-room Amish school come from ten or so nearby families. Doors are unlocked and sometimes stand open when school is in session. Amish schools offer children a deep sense of security: their peers are neighbors and their teachers are frequent visitors to their homes. Some of

the younger children would likely not recognize a pistol if they saw one. Almost without exception, young Amish children have not seen violent movies, video games, or television; they can hardly imagine violence, apart from a fistfight. So were the Amish prepared for the outburst of violence that hit them that Monday in October? Of course not.

At the same time, the Amish are better prepared than most Americans to deal with a tragedy like this. The Amish are a close-knit community woven together by strong ties of family, faith, and culture. Members in distress can tap this rich reservoir of communal care during horrific events. The typical Amish person has seventy-five or more first cousins, many living nearby. Members of a thirty-family church district typically live within a mile or so of each other's homes. When tragedy strikes—fire, flood, illness, or death—dozens of people surround the distressed family with care. They take over their chores, bring them food, set up benches for visitation, and offer quiet words of comfort. The Amish call this thick web of support *mutual aid*. They literally follow the New Testament commandment to “bear ye one another’s burdens and so fulfil the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). So while no one is ever ready to deal with a tragedy like this, historic practices had prepared the Amish well.

As the bench wagon came closer, we were surprised that the mules were not spooked by the TV crews and their noisy generators. What did frighten them, however, was a yellow plastic strip, two inches high and six inches wide, stretching across the road. The plastic cover protected electric cords running from an English residence to some of the media trucks. The mules stopped and refused to cross the yellow strip. After trying to persuade them from his seat on the wagon, the driver finally got off, walked in front of them, and tugged on their bridles. They still refused. After several more minutes of their owner’s persuasion and gentle tugs, the animals gingerly stepped across the yellow line. Despite the sudden appearance of electric cords and satellite

dishes, the viewings in the grieving community at Nickel Mines would proceed on schedule.



Word of trouble in a school had begun spreading at 10:30 A.M. on Monday, October 2, 2006. A distraught, sobbing teacher ran to a nearby Amish farmhouse with an alarming report: a man with a gun was in the school. The farmer called 911 from his telephone shanty to say that children had been taken hostage in a school. The news traveled quickly via word of mouth. “The Amish grapevine is faster than the Internet,” said one Amish man, who has never sent an e-mail. Some neighbors began gathering at the farmhouse; others went to the school to see if they could help. By 11:26 A.M. local television stations were reporting a multiple shooting in an Amish school. Word of the horror soon appeared on Fox News and CNN.

Amish people ran to their phone shanties to pass the word. “Something bad happened at the West Nickel Mines School. Children were shot. A neighbor man went crazy. Helicopters are taking them to hospitals.” Voice-mail messages were left on Amish phones in Ohio, Indiana, Wisconsin, and many of the other 370 Amish communities in twenty-seven states and the Canadian province of Ontario. An Amish contractor in Indiana received a call about the shooting on his cell phone from his financial advisor in Chicago. A Pakistani customer in New York called his Amish harness supplier in Lancaster to report the shooting. The news—of a shooting, of dying children, of very bad things south of Paradise—spread fast in Amish communities in North America despite the absence of phones inside their homes.

The horror of school shootings at places like Columbine had reached Lancaster County. For many Americans living in fear of guns, violence, and terror it had been comforting to imagine a safe place

somewhere—a place where children could giggle and learn their ABCs without worrying about guns, knives, and bullies. If something like this could happen in a small Amish school nestled in a peaceful rural community, it could happen anywhere. In many respects, the last safe place in America's collective imagination had suddenly disappeared.