

# **Tribal Rites of Passage: The Amish and Rumspringa**

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Rascals Rogues and RapsCALLIONS

Mass Challenge

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## **The Amish**

They were part of the early Anabaptist movement in Europe at the time of the Reformation. Their core belief is that you need to be an adult before being baptized so that it is an informed decision and a choice that you make once you reach the age of reason. Not just something that is inherited or passed on from your parents. They also believed that they should live separate from non-believers so as better to live a life that emulates and serves Jesus.

Menno Simons united several Anabaptist groups in 1536. He was a Catholic priest from Holland. This group was called Mennonites after him. Many of this group were put to death as heretics by their fellow Catholic and Protestant Christians. As a result, they fled to the mountains of Switzerland and southern Germany for safety.

About 150 years later in 1693 there was an internal dispute mainly over how rigorously to follow some of the rules and in particular how often to invoke “shunning” which was their most serious form of punishment. “Shunning” is breaking all contact with a member of the congregation if they continue not to follow the rules, or “Ordnung”. This is also called “meidung” or excommunication. It is based on Matthew 18:15-17; Romans 16:17; and 1 Corinthians 5:11 in the bible. A member is given two warnings, but after the third strike you are out. When you are “shunned” no member of the congregation will have any contact with you, even immediate family members. When you live in a segregated and isolated community this can be a severe punishment. A Swiss bishop, Jacob Amman led the more conservative group and after they split that group was called the Amish after him. They two groups have split again several times but the Mennonites and Amish still share the same core beliefs.

In the 1720s William Penn invited both groups to come and settle in Pennsylvania as part of his “holy Experiment” of religious tolerance. They went to Lancaster County and in 1824 they declared themselves separated from the home church in Europe. Today there are about 200,000 Amish in the U.S., and they have communities from throughout the Midwest, including Montana, Michigan and Indiana.

## **Customs**

The Amish are conservative. They keep the old ways of dress and avoid many modern technology conveniences. The rules for dress are elaborate and detailed. They believe this helps them avoid being proud or better than others, which is considered a major sin. They also do not take pictures of people’s faces. Women do not cut their hair. It is parted in the middle then they wind it up and fasten it into a bun. Men wear beards after they are baptized, but not moustaches. Moustaches are associated with the military and they are pacifists to an extreme degree.

They do not use electricity from a common grid. They also do not own cars or other means of transportation and work that are not human or animal powered. They can however ride in cars owned by others. They avoid most forms of entertainment such as movies, TV, radio, and sporting events. They believe this interferes with living a life that is Christ-like. They also do not use alcohol or smoke.

Most marry at around age 22 and immediately start a family. The families are large averaging 7 children and several generations live together or next to each other. German is spoken at home. They call all outsiders “English”.

They worship in groups of about 30 families every other Sunday at a member’s home. The leader of the service is decided by the group. The service lasts about 3 hours and there is no music at the service. Afterwards there is a large communal meal. The food is prepared the day before because it is not allowed to cook on Sunday.

As mentioned before, they are pacifists. They also will not judge another, leaving that up to God. Education stops at eighth grade. Any more will make you proud. They are self-reliant as a community and reject government help. They do not take Social Security but are willing to pay into it and pay taxes.

Contrary to popular conception, most are not farmers. Only 20 percent make a living from farming. Typical jobs are working in a furniture factory or an RV factory. They do well in these jobs because they are very hardworking and strive for excellence. Many also work in restaurants. Children and young adults turn over most or all of their pay to the family.

### **Rumspringa**

Rumspringa is from German words that loosely translate in “running around”. “Rum” means “around” and “schpringe” means to run or to skip.” This starts at age 16 and continues for a few years or possibly never ends. Since the core belief of the Amish is that baptism must be an informed choice, they feel that young people must know what they are choosing to leave behind. During this period young adults enter the “English” world. How far into this world they go varies quite a bit. Their parents are surprisingly open to let them go as far as they want. Of course, the parents have also gone through the same experience. This is preparation for the most important decision of their life. It will determine their entire future. It marks their passage into adulthood and their choice to be Amish. Once they are baptized there is no going back or second thoughts. Although there may be exceptions, once the decision is made the Amish do not leave the community. There is no divorce either.

The first steps are dressing in the English fashion, adding chrome to their buggies or driving cars. Most young people get cell phones, radios and TVs. Many move away from home and live together in apartments or trailers. Although this is completely accepted by their families, they usually keep it somewhat separate, changing clothes after leaving the house if they are living at home.

Usually they binge on beer or alcohol and try pot. Even if they don’t like it they feel compelled to experience it. Many try hard drugs including Methamphetamine cocaine and heroin. Weekends usually mean big parties. These are typically held in the backfields of a large family farm around a bonfire. In the morning passed out bodies are all over the field. The parties can draw several hundred people and some travel to neighboring states to attend parties. Most teenagers start engaging in sex either with

other Amish or with the English. Males are more experimental than the females since abortion is not an option. For girls who still live at home, they will open the back door and let boys sneak into their bedroom to spend the night. Supposedly this is without their parent's knowledge, but the parents are fully aware. Marriage partners are usually chosen during this time, and many babies are born in the first nine months of marriage.

It is amazing that such a strict and morally conservative group would condone such behavior, but they feel it is essential to making a choice that you can live with for the rest of your life. If you decide to accept baptism, you will return to the community and abide by their rules. If not, you will move out and enter the English world. So the big question is, "How many return after experiencing the freedom and pleasures of the Rumspringa?" The answer is that about 80 percent decide to return and accept the Amish way of life.

**More information**

*Rumspringa-to be or not to be Amish* by Tom Shachtman

The Devil's Playground