

# The Artist's Almanac

May 2007

*'Tis the gift to be simple,  
'tis the gift to be free,  
'tis the gift to come down  
where you ought to be*

Shaker work song

We prefer interesting to simple. Our weeks zip by as spent medicine cases. Enthralled by media, demands of duties, ads, emails and complex protocols, our lives are meted out to us by our handheld Blackberrys. Yet, who of us, at times, is not tempted by the idea of a simpler life?

An hour north in Kentucky live a folk dedicated to a simple life. They call themselves Amish, and their lives are meted out to them by God and nature. Their blackberries are blooming now, and they are glad of that, as nature dealt them a blow this year. Hot March drew from the bare trees buds and blooms, then wintry April killed them with a freeze. For us, that means unsightly treetops and late roses; for them it means the loss of an entire year's fruit crop.



I went there this week with three old friends to buy home-canned fruits not available elsewhere – pulpy, sweet tomato juice, jams from tart cherries and strawberries, spicy apple and pumpkin butter, and huge loaves of fresh-baked bread.

The Amish live apart from us, in order to protect their simple way of life. They avoid all jewelry, ornament, cameras, paintings, crafts, and every thing that might tempt them to vanity. Their speech is quiet and measured. They are protective of their privacy. The produce of their family farms, which they sell through their cooperative markets, horse-powered gristmills, and farm stands, is their sole cash income. They will only travel to a nearby town by buggy to buy necessities. .



Living simple involves sacrifice. Only recall your feelings during your last power outage. Then disconnect your telephone and plumbing, and throw away your car keys. Restrict your children from visiting their friends who have these conveniences and accept these limitations as permanent.

Like all who live off the land, theirs is a life of steady toil. The beautiful children appear even more so for their old-fashioned dress. These disappeared into the house the moment the camera appeared, as they had been well trained by their elders to avoid graven images leading to vanity. Their pictures are intentionally blurred here out of respect for their privacy.



Formal schooling ends with the Eighth Grade, but practical education for farm life begins at an early preschool level. Here a tiny lad learns from his father how to handle a team.



Their farms are impeccably maintained, in harmony with nature. Horses and humans provide the power, and they raise the food they eat. Their homes are built for practicality, yet everywhere there is beauty, as form follows function. The sweep of tilled fields, interspersed with pastures and woods, free of power lines and telephone poles, gives a view as like to Eden as we are like to see here.



The freedom the Amish have has been hard won over four centuries of misunderstanding. The reluctance to conform their education system has been a source of continuing tension with their host states. They do not pay or participate in our Social Security system, nor do they serve in armies in time of war. Persecution by the military in Europe led to their flight here and an abiding abhorrence of ornamental buttons such as military officers wear. They prefer suspenders and pins.



Have the Amish recreated Eden here? Who can say? We only see the barest exterior details of their life, and we are not invited in.

Yet, their sparsely authentic life is a challenge to ours, as we whirl along, and holds a certain attraction. We remain curious about them, and we wonder - are they tempted by life outside their closed world? And are their children, their natural curiosity still alive, curious about us, curious strangers, who we are, how we live?

At one place we struck up a conversation with the bearded young farmer who came out to sell us several cases of goods. Once he found we were four farm boys from the next county and knew the same weathers, fruits and vegetables as he, he opened up a bit. Then his shy young son came to his side and, when asked, gave us his name.

As we were leaving, I glanced up. There, at the upstairs window was the face of a young girl. I waved to her, and she shyly returned my wave. In that instant, as we looked at each other from two distant worlds, I knew that my wonder about her world was no greater than hers about mine. No camera was needed, for I will never forget her face and hand pressed to the window, looking out at strangers about whom she may ever wonder, yet never know.

