

MAX KADE INSTITUTE COMMUNITY PRESENTATIONS

The Amish of Wisconsin: A New Wave of Immigrants to the Badger State

In August, the *Washington Post* published a map that shows counties across the country where at least 10 percent of the population speaks a language other than English at home. Six such counties are in Wisconsin. In four of the six (Dane, Kenosha, Milwaukee, and Walworth) the language in question is Spanish, in the other two (Clark and Vernon) it is German or an “other West Germanic language.” These two counties are among the 21 counties across the nation where “German/other West Germanic language” is the dominant non-English home language. In all cases the German(ic) variety is actually Pennsylvania Dutch, a language closely related to German that is the vital vernacular language of Old Order Amish and Old Order Mennonites. In Wisconsin, Pennsylvania Dutch is spoken by 15,000-20,000 people.

Pennsylvania Dutch is America’s oldest thriving heritage language. It is spoken by more than 300,000 people, a number that is doubling every twenty years because of the group’s high birth rate. Among the states of our nation, Wisconsin has the fourth largest Amish population. In some areas, they make up a sizable percentage of the population and have a significant impact on the local economy and the communities around them. Wearing plain clothing and traveling with horse and buggy, the Amish stand out in the rural landscape. Yet their neighbors often know little about them. Local and national media outlets tend to mention them only when something dramatic has happened, such as a traffic accident, or they portray them in sensationalizing programs such as “Amish Mafia.”

Sincere interest and curiosity about this unique minority runs deep among Wisconsinites. Therefore, the MKI developed a series of outreach presentations and public discussions which strive to share our knowledge of Amish culture and language with the general public and to engage our audiences in discussions about immigration and heritage in the context of global migration past and present.

The programs are led by Mark Loudon, MKI Co-Director and Professor of German Linguistics, a fluent speaker of Pennsylvania Dutch and an expert on Amish culture. He is also the founder of the MKI’s newly established Pennsylvania Dutch Documentation Project, which aims to document the past and present of this growing community and its language for the benefit of both scholars and the general public.

The presentations will be based on research conducted as part of the MKI’s Pennsylvania Dutch Documentation Project and will showcase documents and audio samples from the MKI archives. Each program will be 90 minutes long. The first half will be a multi-media presentation; the second half will be devoted to Q&A and an open discussion.

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