

A Trip to an Amish Country Store

Linda Egenes

From Amish wide-brim straw hats to fine china, the shelves at Dorothy Mast's Community Country Store burst with everything an Amish family doesn't make at home. Even though it's only a few weeks before Christmas, my companions, Kathryn and Sharon Kauffman, age 14 and 6, are not thinking about Christmas shopping. Nor are they thinking about the gifts they will receive. In their Amish home, the birth of Christ is celebrated as a day for spiritual renewal, and presents are not emphasized. "Usually, if we get a gift from our parents for our birthday, we won't get one for Christmas," says Kathryn.

And gifts are often homemade. One year for her mother's birthday, the whole family of ten children drew a mural on a large piece of paper. "The picture had a house with a garden, and Dad drew a dog digging in it," says Kathryn with a laugh. "That was to tease her, because she doesn't like it when our dog digs up her flowers."

Today Kathryn and Sharon are dressed in matching light blue dresses. Kathryn wears a black woven shawl to protect herself from the December wind, Sharon wears a black jacket. Both wear black Amish bonnets, black stockings, and sturdy black shoes, polished clean. This is the way they usually dress when they go to town or to church.

As she walks down the aisles of the store slowly with her hands folded under her shawl, Kathryn's clear brown eyes reflect serenity and intelligence. Although she seems content to be silent, she speaks with

confidence and usually ends her sentences with a pleasant smile or a laugh.

Kathryn says she seldom goes to town, nor does she shop at Amish country stores like this one. Once a year, if she's outgrown her shoes (and if her older sister's hand-me-downs aren't in good shape), she comes to this store with her parents and brothers and sisters for the annual shoe and boot sale. When her parents leave their farm to shop a few times a month, they usually take one or two of the younger children in their horse and buggy. The older children like Kathryn stay home to take care of the others.

The girls show me a few of the things their parents might purchase for the family: black stockings for the girls, suspenders for the boys, towels, sewing supplies, shoes, and boots. Kathryn points out pink and blue knitted booties and bibs that her cousin makes for sale in the store, and knitted caps that her grandmother makes.

As we pass the aisles of boots, shoes, and slippers, Kathryn laughs when she describes her own slippers, which she crocheted. "I have to admit, they were pretty outlandish. They were all different colors—I wanted to use up all our scraps of yarn."

In the toy department, Kathryn says, "This would be an ideal gift for a small Amish boy." She's pointing to shiny miniature plows. For girls, the store stocks dolls and baby bottles. I ask Sharon if she has a doll at home, and she smiles and nods. Kathryn says that her mother makes her younger sisters' dolls.

Do the children ever spend money of their own in town? "It's not likely," says Kathryn. "If we have any money of our own, our parents encourage us to save it and not waste it on small things."

The prices are good, 89 cents for a ceramic mug that would cost \$3.00 elsewhere. The kitchenware section includes large stainless steel mixing bowls, rolling pins, potato mashers, glassware—everything you'd need to set up a kitchen.

"Girls my age sometimes exchange presents like this for our birthdays," says Kathryn, showing me some stationery with flowers on it. She usually likes to make her own gifts, such as a crocheted doily. "I like my presents to be useful and I like to make them myself," she says.

Kathryn gets her love of making things from her mother, who makes drawings for Christian coloring books and art teaching materials (See page 29). Kathryn points to some colorful picture books of forest animals and says, "These are the kinds of books my mother would like, because she uses ideas from them for drawings of her own."

In one corner are several Amish cookbooks, including one that the Kauffmans use at home. Another cookbook published locally, *Family Favorites* (Kalona, Iowa, 1994), includes a recipe by Kathryn's mother. "My mom put one in here that is her easy made-up cake," Kathryn says.

One shelf holds kerosene lamps and sturdy steel irons that are heated on the stove. The Amish have no electricity in their homes, so they use these instead of electric irons and electric lights.

Our next stop is Cedar Grove Fabric. Like Dorothy Mast's it's located on a country road beside a farm, but unlike Dorothy's, it doesn't have many non-Amish customers. The new building is filled with different shades of the one-color fabrics that Amish women use to make their clothes. Kathryn shows me the kind of fabric she would use to make a Sunday dress (a fine, light-weight polyester in dark purple), and the plainer double-knits that she'd use to make a school dress.

Kathryn likes green for her dresses. Does she

select her own fabrics? "Usually Mom does, unless she decides that we may have a choice," she says, smiling. "But it must suit her."

The store even has bolts of black woven wool, which Kathryn used to make the shawl she has on. I asked her how she made the fringe. "We just used scissors. Some people make different kinds of fringe, but we like this fast kind," she says with her wonderful laugh.

I wonder if they make their bonnets, too. Kathryn says, "Mom finds them too time consuming to make so she gets another Amish woman who has a talent to make ours." Some families make their own. Kathryn shows me an autograph book for sale in the store. "Most Amish girls have one," she says. "We have our friends sign it, and if we go out of state and meet new people we ask them to sign it."

"Do you know what this is?" she asks. It's a wooden folding clothes rack, which is like one her family uses to dry clothes when it rains outside. In winter, they put the clothes out until they freeze dry and then bring them inside to finish drying on the drying rack.

We're standing in front of a shelf holding dozens of wooden plaques with Bible verses painted on them. Kathryn says, "These are the kinds of mottoes you might find in Amish homes. But our family would not buy them, because we could make them ourselves. They'd be less expensive and serve just as good a purpose."

On the way home I ask Kathryn if she will sing a song. She sings a traditional Amish hymn, in German, that she learned in church. Her voice weaves through the air like a golden thread, pure and lilting. Almost like a Gregorian chant, Kathryn's voice stretches long and low and then up and down in many small notes. I feel a sense of peace, and a longing for divine perfection. A hawk floats above a field nearby, the rise and dip of his wings matching the rhythm of the song. The cows below become part of Kathryn's song, too, as we're all drawn into a circle of beauty.

Linda Egenes lives in Fairfield Iowa: population 9,768.

No Recipe Cake

1 part shortening
2 parts sugar
4 parts flour
1 tsp. baking powder to each cup flour
Eggs
Milk and flavoring

Variations: Use soda and sour milk combined. Add nuts, raisins, chocolate chips, or chocolate powder. A recipe to keep in your head.

*Contributed by Mrs. Norman Kauffman
From Family Favorites (1994)*
