

Amish Life in Focus: The Dennis L Hughes Photographs of the Amish

Dennis L. Hughes is a photographer whose work focuses on the Amish, mainly in Lancaster County, from the 1980s to early 2000s. He grew up in both the Lancaster and Belleville (Mifflin County) areas, where he interacted with the Amish from a young age. Hughes currently resides in East Petersburg, Pennsylvania.

Amish culture typically does not permit posing for photographs, with many groups feeling that it promotes vanity and individualism. In the case of these photographs, Hughes made certain that the people shown were comfortable with the way they were photographed. He used a telephoto lens for most of his photographs, allowing them to be taken from far away without intruding. In a 2021 oral history interview conducted at Elizabethtown College, Hughes shared that “Almost all images that I took that I knew were going to be published, I would share that with them first and I would ask them how they felt about that. Most of them felt they didn't want their face shown if it was sort of a posing type situation.” His entire catalog of photographs, over 18,000 color slides in total, is physically housed in the Hess Archives in Elizabethtown College’s High Library, with several hundred currently available for viewing online. Subjects include buggy styles, agricultural work, mud sales, Amish schools, Amish children, and more.



Amish children in brown top buggy , 1995



Making soft pretzels for sale, undated



Amish boy crawls on monkey bars, undated

This exhibition pairs images from the Dennis L. Hughes Photographs of the Amish with quotes taken from the oral history interview with Mr. Hughes. The interview was conducted by Emily Erdlen '23, Eric Schubert '23, and Archivist Rachel Grove Rohrbaugh. The full interview is available online and as part of this exhibition. *Amish Life in Focus* was curated by Erdlen and Grove Rohrbaugh. Special thanks to Erin Moore '23 for her assistance. Funding was provided by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to support the study of humanities at Elizabethtown College.



Boy looks towards camera, undated

“Some of [the children] were very inquisitive and asked me [about my camera and what I was doing]. Some of the parents just stand back and allow them to ask questions about it. And we’d chat a little bit about it. Some seemed to... almost have a fear.”



Amish women on bench, 1989

“I did not intrude. I was invited in. If I wasn’t invited in, I didn’t go there.”



Amish girls walk in distance, undated

**“Hopefully [my photos] can be enjoyed by people.
They can tell a story about the Amish”**

“When I was doing a photograph, they brought this container out and had pizza in it for the gentlemen doing the farm work, and the little girl kept sticking her hand in the box eating the pizza. And it was so cute because her brother continued to hold the lid down and she kept sneaking her fingers in and eating the pizza. So it was just kind of something from a distance, I took this photo from real far away. And it was just so interesting, as a parent to see the actions of the children. I just enjoyed what I was seeing so much.”



Amish children
looking into
camera,
undated



Children sitting
on concrete,
undated



Boy with baby goat, undated

“As I remember, there were adults in the area. But these little guys seem to be able to handle the goat. I mean, they were used to it, whether he was a pet, or whether he was just part of being on the farm... they knew what they were doing. It wasn't their first time and I just got to enjoy their interaction with an animal as we would even with our pets at home.”



Elderly Amish couple with children, 1990

“They respected what I did, because I did not overstep any boundaries.”

“You know, they usually say everybody thinks of the homemaker, but some [Amish women] are businesspeople... So you can see as they move through our society, they are always carrying something, whether they're taking it to a function, taking it for dinner, even to their own home, or is it part of their business process.”



Young Amish woman, 1989



Selling produce at mud sale, undated



Amish woman rollerblading, 1989

Young Amish woman at
produce auction, undated



“If there's any images of mine that are a little bit close up on a face, they were usually taken from a very far away distance.”

“The use of the phone [for the Amish], of course, was always in the phone booth... out in the barn, you know. And then the businessman, he was allowed to have the cell phone because of his business. And then the kids have the cell phones...it really changed, changed dramatically in a short period of time, the use of the cell phone.”



Phone shanty, 1990



Amish man on cell phone, undated

“In some of these photos, you see some from the old, you may see some of the new. I know with different projects with Don [Kraybill], in particular, Don would be looking for the change. And I as a photographer wanted to see the old. So there was always that battle that I was working with myself to see what was progressing. So I hope in the future, they can show hopefully the respect that I did give the Amish and hopefully they'll be able to be enjoyed by people that are coming here to the College to do research. So that would be my goal.”



Amish man tends to spring, undated



Aerial view of mud sale, 1994