

# MEDIA-AMISH-WSJ-1194-T

## **Amish Newspapers Thrive in Digital Age**

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SUGARCREEK, Ohio—The corn stands 5 feet tall, the temperatures are in the 90s and Johnny Byler got hooked on his head while fishing with a friend, reported Mrs. Jerry Ray Byler in a recent front-page article of the Budget. Mrs. Byler is one of about 860 correspondents for the Budget, a 123-year-old weekly newspaper, which carries the news of Amish and Mennonite communities, from Diagonal, Iowa to the three Minnesota outposts of Bertha, Clarissa and Lenora. They write about who got married, who went to church, who received dentures—and how 11 chickens went missing when Toby Schrocks of Cisne, Ill., forgot to close the chicken-house door.

While many newspapers are struggling and competing with the Internet, the Budget isn't. Its 18,000 subscribers for the most part don't text, email, have computers or smartphones. They use the Budget, which is mailed to their homes, to keep them informed, post notices or exchange helpful hints. One woman had 400 pounds of beets, which she washed in her wringer washer. "It worked very well," she reported.

The Budget runs about 500 letters a week on 44 to 46 pages that contain no photos. It costs \$45 a year; newlyweds pay \$42. It does have competition. Die Botschaft—German for the Message—costs \$44 a year, has a circulation of about 12,000 and also consists of letters and reports from contributors. It's a more conservative alternative to the Budget, which some Amish readers thought was too liberal, say Amish scholars.

Advertising rules are more strict at Die Botschaft, for example. Photos of people aren't allowed in ads. Shovel photos are permitted. The ad for Smuckers Horse Dentistry shows a drawing of two horses. The more lenient Budget, meanwhile, ran an ad with a photo of an 87-year-old grandmother providing a testimonial for a pill that helped stop her itching within three days. It also featured a picture of an Amish couple who lost weight

with the help of a health coach. We don't have TV or radio or things like that," says Elam Lapp, who publishes *Die Botschaft* in Millersburg, Pa., and has a phone, albeit largely for business. His contributors drive horse and buggies, and mail in their letters, nearly all of which are handwritten. Some *Budget* correspondents, by contrast, drive cars and have electricity in their homes. At least one *Budget* scribe has an automatic dishwasher and wrote that it became clogged and he had to unplug it.

The two Amish newspapers, which their publishers say are profitable, have advantages other newspapers don't—notably a growing and captive readership, says Steve Nolt, a Mennonite history professor at Goshen College in Goshen, Ind. While the use of modern conveniences varies among Amish and Mennonite groups, the most conservative Amish group, whose members limit access to technology, stands at 280,000 in the U.S. and doubles about every 20 years, he says. Families are large—averaging seven children—although one woman who recently died had 19 children and 1,140 living direct descendants, her son-in-law reported in the *Budget*.

Another advantage: Content is essentially free. Correspondents aren't paid, but receive a free subscription, a tablet of paper and stamped envelopes.

Budget scribes receive a calendar, too. They both have similar guidelines. Letters shouldn't be unreasonably long and uninteresting. Crime stories aren't allowed, although suspected crime is—as in the report about an Amish woman who was boiling sap when police acted on a tip that she was cooking drugs.

The Budget's national editor, Fannie Erb-Miller, who is Mennonite, cuts stories from the bottom if they are too long. For safety reasons, she removes references to elderly women who live alone. Also trimmed are mentions of any folks who might have had to shoot a cow twice, to avoid protests from animal-rights groups. If she can't read a name, she puts a "?" in its place. Otherwise editing is light.

Longtime Budget correspondent Mary Ellen Miller, 78, of Pleasantville, Tenn., often starts her letters with an update on the weather and the hummingbirds in her yard. If anyone was in an accident, she tends to include that, but doesn't write about disagreements. "You don't want to have too much conflict," says Mrs. Miller, who occasionally writes about her own experiences, including a recent trip to a cave.

Both papers like variety—and letters about interesting, if benign, events. Included on Die Botschaft's recent Worth

Mentioning list: "Mineral deficiency causes a dead cow" referring readers to a letter from a man in Plains, Montana, who found his only milk cow dead one Saturday morning. One woman wrote about her cousin who stuck something up her nose and didn't tell anyone. Sometime later, her mother noticed a sprout growing out of her nostril, pulled on it and out came a corn kernel.