

One person's view of our Amish neighbors

It was with sadness and shock that I read the account of the meeting of the Palatine Town board held on January 19. I believe our elected officials do their best to fairly run our town. They have no control over who or what comes before a board meeting. I do not know if anything of a positive nature came before the January 19 meeting. However it was evident by the report in your paper that much was said about our Amish neighbors, some of which may well have been libelous. There is little doubt that the number of inferences to the Amish instead of to individual citizens would have been far differently perceived if these references had been toward any other minority. No one can say that all of the points brought up were totally invalid. However that meeting appeared to be an all out attack on a society who have survived 300 years on American soil. To say nothing of the persecution beyond belief that they endured in Germany, Holland and Switzerland before they came to our shores

The Amish have remained steadfast to a way of life which was once not that different from the rest of American society. We know they are Amish partly because they retain a style of dress different from the rest of us. They have had the courage to tell us by that, that they belong to the Amish church. One wonders what would be the result if each of our other religious denominations made it clear by their appearance what church they belonged to. Would we also be criticized as a whole by the name of our chosen church? I doubt that most of our religious groups would have that courage or take that chance. We have been able to retain our right to worship as we please. If we feel we have the right to judge let us do it on an individual basis not collectively and after accurate information is presented and with both sides represented.

Yes the Amish do have problems some of them create by our society not theirs. All of us have problems. No the Amish are not perfect nor do I believe they perceive themselves as such. Nor are any of us perfect.

Let's look for a moment on the positive side regarding our Amish neighbors. I came to a Town of Palatine farm 52 years ago with somewhat of a knowledge of its agricultural history. Our Palatine ancestors came here in the 1720s in search of a better place to bring their families. They too had been a persecuted people much the same as the Amish. My forbearers were along with them as is the case for many of the readers. In the 280 some years since the Palatine settled here, terrible things have happened on Stone Arabian soil. The American Revolution brought destruction and bloodshed. Much of it came about because of differing ideologies and unfortunately it involved members of the same families or those who shortly before had been neighbors.

It would seem that we in our time could work our problems out and use at least some consideration of our neighbors.

In the 50 years I have lived in Stone Arabia there have been so many changes. In later times many of the farms and other property were rapidly deteriorating. It has been like a miracle to see all new homes and farmsteads spring up. Who but the Amish would have done this?

I say to those who make this remark: "the Amish do not pay taxes," go look at the tax roles. Then you will know the truth. The total Amish assessment figures for Palatine are considerable. They help to pay for our schools and other services even if they use them very little.

I recently came across an extract from a Supreme Court ruling from 1972 regarding Amish schools. We all could learn much from it. It is as follows: "We must not forget that in the Middle Ages important values of the civilizations of the western world were preserved by members of religious orders who isolated themselves from all worldly influences against great obstacles. There can be no assumption that today's majority is right and the Amish and others like them are wrong. A way of life that is odd or even erratic but interferes with no rights or interests of other is not to be condemned because it is different."

I am not saying that there should not be uniform rules for all. However each complaint should be assessed on its own merits. We sometimes can find underlying reasons when one of us lashes out against another. They can sometimes be founded on very personal differences even though they are masked as efforts to protect us. Often we sit quietly by and see an ever expanding government, often in an effort to justify their own existence, while away at the freedoms our forefathers thought they had guaranteed to us for all times. Prejudice and personal vendettas further whittle away at those rights.

I once told an Amish friend that when they came to be our neighbors they did not know what to expect from us but we did not know what to expect from them either. Many area people and those who travel to our area to meet the Amish now know what to expect. In return for an extended hand of friendship we received a full measure in return. To have a friend you have to be one. That is not to say that we all must agree nor that there will never be a problem. However with some give and take on both sides of an issue an amicable solution can be reached far better than an outright attack and a sprinkling of distorted accusations.

The losses in any matter must be measured against the gains. The Amish have brought much to our area in increased assessed valuation, by bringing many people to our area as visitors, and by being just plain nice neighbors. In my opinion this far outbalances a little horse manure on our roads.

Willis Barshied Jr

Stone Arabia, NY