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## Illinois' biggest Amish community sets out the welcome mat



The Amish wear plain clothes using century-old patterns. Clothing is laundered in a wringer-washer and hung on a clothesline to dry. (Katherine Rodeghier)

By **Katherine Rodeghier**  
 SPECIAL TO THE POST-DISPATCH  
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**ARTHUR, ILL.** — "I always get in the last word," Ben Graber says, grinning at his wife, Betty. "I say, 'Yes, dear.'"

Like many couples who have spent years together, the Grabers finish each other's sentences and chuckle at inside jokes. But their way of life is quite different from that of the visitors crowding into the living room of their comfortable farmhouse.

The Grabers are among the 4,500 Amish who live in and around Arthur, Ill., the largest Amish community in Illinois and the fourth-largest in the United States. They shun automobiles, electricity and other modern conveniences, but they don't shun those who don't share their faith. In fact, the Grabers and many of their Amish neighbors frequently open their homes to tourists and welcome them at their businesses.

For a closer look at Amish life, visitors can sign up for a tour at the Amish Interpretive Center in nearby Arcola, Ill. The center also arranges for tourists to eat a midday meal in an Amish home, tour a dairy farm or a woodworking shop, take a wagon ride through an orchard and past an Amish cemetery or visit an Amish home.

### IF YOU GO

**Getting there** • Arthur, Ill., is about 150 miles from downtown St. Louis. Take Interstate 70 east to Interstate 57 north. Take exit 203 and go west on Illinois Route 133 through Arcola and Chesterville to Arthur.

**Illinois Amish Interpretive Center** • 111 South Locust Street, Arcola, about 1 1/2 blocks north of Route 133. Arrange tours, get maps, watch an 18-minute film and see exhibits. \$5 adults, \$4 ages 62 and up, \$3 ages 6-11. Call 1-888-452-6474 to book tours. More information: [amishcenter.com](#).

**Dining** • A meal in an Amish home costs \$15.95 per person and can be booked at the Interpretive Center. Yoder's Kitchen restaurant, 1195 East Columbia Street in Arthur, serves a lunch and dinner buffet and Saturday breakfast buffet.

**Lodging** • The five-room Flower Patch bed-and-breakfast in Arcola dates from 1864 and is noted for its elaborate gardens and seven-course breakfast served on fine china. 225 East Jefferson Street, Arcola, 1-217-268-4876, [arcolaflowerpatch.com](#). Room rates begin at \$95 per night. The Diamond House bed-and-breakfast next door is operated by the same family and can be booked through the Flower Patch; rates begin at \$119.

**Timing** • Visit on Saturday or during the week. All Amish businesses are closed on Sundays and religious holidays.

**Events** • Find listings and details at [amishcountryillinois.com](#) [arcolachamber.com](#).

- Arthur's Farmers Market: Saturdays spring through fall.
- Downtown Arthur Market: third Saturday of the month.
- Arthur Mennonite Relief Sale: Aug. 28-29
- Arthur Cheese Festival: Sept. 5-7
- Arcola Broom Corn Festival: Sept. 11-13
- Fall Community Garage Sales: Sept. 17-19
- Amish Country Bike Tour : Sept. 19
- Central Illinois Bragging Rights KCBC BBQ: Oct. 9-10

During the Grabers home tour, Betty shows off the air-powered Singer sewing machine she uses to make the family's clothing. Ben demonstrates their home's gas lights and explains how he uses a diesel engine to run his greenhouse business next door.

Visitors are free to wander around their five-bedroom home with its gleaming wood floors (carpeting is not the Amish way) and examine the friendship quilt covering their bed.

In the basement, Ben proudly shows off Betty's supply of home-canned goods.

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The spacious basement also doubles as a church when it's the Grabers' turn to host services. The Central Illinois Amish community is divided into 28 church districts of 30 to 35 families each. They worship in their homes, sitting on 14-foot-long wooden benches carried in from the church wagons that make the rounds within each district.

All religious rituals are conducted in a German dialect called Pennsylvania Dutch. Betty and one of her daughters sing a hymn about Christian love, teaching visitors the refrain.

"That's what binds us together: love," says Ben, referring to both Amish and "English," the Amish term for those who don't share their religion.

The Amish faith dates back to 1525, when a group of Protestants began rebaptizing one another, believing that baptism should be reserved for adults. These Anabaptists were tortured and murdered for their beliefs and began separating themselves from what the Scriptures call the "evil world." Mennonites, Anabaptist followers of Menno Simons and Amish, followers of Jakob Ammann, spread across Europe as they fled religious persecution. They migrated to Pennsylvania in the 1700s.

In 1865, three Amish families moved to central Illinois to take advantage of its rich farmland. As the Amish population grew and available farmland decreased, the Illinois Amish created cottage industries. Tourism became an important source of business.

The Amish still shun modern technology. If a telephone becomes necessary for business, it is kept in a booth or building outside the home. They take literally the passage from Exodus forbidding "any graven image" and do not pose for photographs. Visitors are asked to respect their belief by not photographing their faces.

In an Amish home, meals always begin with a group prayer. Carolyn Miller opens her home to tourists for midday meals and invites them to join the prayer, pray silently or simply observe a moment of silence.

Heaping platters of food are passed family style around a long table set up on the sun porch. Carolyn and her helpers keep the food coming: fried chicken, another meat dish, mashed potatoes, dressing, vegetables, salad and homemade bread. Just when you think you've had enough, the platters come around again for second helpings. And then there are homemade pies for dessert.

More than 225 Amish cottage businesses operate in the area. They include Miller's Dry Goods, Melrose Quilts & Sisters Country Shoppe and Shady Crest Orchard, with produce, fruit butters and a deli with more than 20 kinds of cheese.

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**Nearby attractions** • Rockhome Gardens, Arcola, has 15 acres of gardens, buggy rides, festivals and entertainment; rockhome.com. Raggedy Ann and Andy Museum, Arcola, is devoted to the rag dolls and their creator, an Arcola native; raggedyann-museum.org.

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Several woodworking shops produce furniture and custom-made cabinets, a big business in Illinois Amish country. Food stores and bakeries sell homemade pies, bread, cured meats, jams, jellies and fudge.

Visitors can stop by an auction if one happens to be in progress at the Arthur Auction Center. Look for the buggies tied up outside.

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**jinx1966** July 20, 2009 12:07PM CST

Can't believe there are no comments on this article. I grew up around Arthur, nice place to visit. The folks are very friendly. Rockhome gardens is a very enjoyable place to go. Another place that is an absolutely excellent place to eat is in Arthur, it is called Yoders Kitchen. Amish won't USUALLY allow photographs, there are occasions, especially with the younger ones that a photo is allowed. I always tell people to ask before doing it. One other tip, if you visit, have patience when driving. Many will be on horse and buggy, but some have a horse and cart, walk and some ride bicycles. I see many visitors to the area get impatient and fly around the buggies.

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