

Harness Shop Meets Needs Of Amish Community

GAIL STROCK
Mifflin Co. Correspondent
BELLVILLE (Mifflin Co.) —

It used to be, long ago, that every-
one worked directly with what the
good earth offered in order to pro-

vide for themselves. Hands churned
milk into butter, readied the
garden soil for the seeds they'd
saved from the previous year, and
wove straw from the fields into
hats. Before machines, electricity,
tractors, cars, and Walmarts, fami-
lies literally lived off the land. It
used to be a way of life.

Some would say 'used to be' is
dead now, but the private lives of
the Old Order Amish of Mifflin
County attest to it differently. We
always called them "white-top-
pers," in reference to the color of
buggy they drive, and they live as
close to the good earth's gifts as
anyone.

One member of the Old Order
Amish called my father his child-
hood friend, so the three of us
talked. He said he didn't mind
visitors to his harness shop as long
as they obeyed the rules of decen-
cy — don't take advantage, don't
steal, and don't come back to har-
ass or vandalize.

Their privacy is important, but
my father's friend fields visitor's
questions with some of his own —
do you go to church? He said I
could write an article about his
work if his name wasn't used or
his address revealed.

Wasted space is one thing not to
be found between the wood floor
and low ceiling of the one-room
harness shop. Walls are lined with
shoes of all sizes, long work
benches, and foot-powered sew-
ing machines for stitching leather.
And in between hang hooks, clips,
chains, leather straps, bridles, and
shelves of ointments and medi-
cines for man or beast. The wood
stove takes up the center of the
room.

My father's friend makes horse
bridles and straps. He said he or-
ders the hides from Ohio, picking
up examples to show us. Steer
hides are more uniform in thick-
ness throughout. Bull hides thicken
at the neck of the hide and are

harder to work with and sew.

Beside the bench he starts to un-
harness a cutting machine. He
literally muzzled the crank-hand-
led machine for safety's sake.
With a turn of the handle crank, he
slips a tough 3/8th-inch leather
scrap through the razor-like disk
blades, cutting it like, as the say-
ing goes, a hot knife through but-
ter, leaving clean edges. Under-
standably, he re-muzzels the ma-
chine before showing us his
stitching machines.

Leading us to one of two ma-
chines by a window, our friend
shows us up close, like introduc-
ing one old friend to another, how
this Champion Shoe Machine
works. He says he bought it some
30 years ago and it wasn't new
then.

Reaching for an already cut
strap, he bends it in two and be-
gins to sew sturdy white thread
onto rich, brown leather. As he

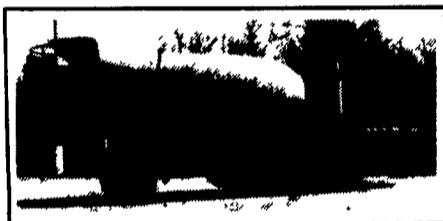
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Clear-cut edges and neat stitches are trademarks of bridles, harnesses and straps made in this harness shop.

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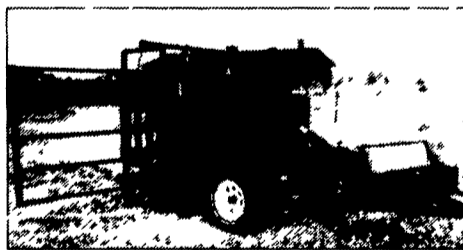


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