

Intercourse articles from Amish Country News

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Intercourse - More Than a Name

Probably no other town in Amish Country can claim its fame is owed largely to one simple thing --- its name. For years people have come to this town to send letters home with the name stamped boldly on the envelope... Intercourse, PA. Some visitors even ask where the university is located in town (there is none) because they see so many T-shirts emblazoned with "Intercourse University." Local businesses have received phone calls from people chastising them for using "that word" in their marketing. (They did not believe there was a town with that name.)

Perhaps it says more about us these days, that we can find so much to get worked up about in one word. Those of us who live here simply take all the fuss in stride. After all, we live in a county that has other interesting town names, including Bird-in-Hand, Blue Ball, and Paradise. There are several explanations on how the town got its name, and they are woven into the brief history that follows.

In the beginning, of course, there was very little here, just settlers arriving in the New World from Europe. Back around 1730, the Old Provincial Highway (or Old Philadelphia Pike, Route 340) was laid out. It was to connect Philadelphia with the inland town of Lancaster and to serve as the main transportation route west for settlers. Conestoga wagons, pulled by six to eight horses, hauled supplies and freight back and forth between the two towns. Taverns sprouted along the way, providing rest for travelers and horses. As is the case with turnpike exits today, towns and businesses often grow up around such "stops." In the old days, the taverns were centers for news, gossip, and business transactions.

And that is how the town got started when the first building, a log tavern, was constructed in 1754. The Newport Road, a former Indian trail, came from Newport, Delaware to the south and went to Mount Hope, near the Cornwall ore mines. It is believed that because this north-south road intersected here with the east-west highway, the tavern took "Cross Keys" as its name. That was true at least until 1814, when it was named Intercourse in a real estate scheme to establish a more sizable town. George Brungard had acquired 48 acres of land north of the roads in 1813. He attempted to lay out a town site and divide it into sections for sale by a lottery, advertising "151 handsome building lots of \$250 each to be drawn for by number."

As to why Brungard chose the name Intercourse, if he did, perhaps an explanation is in the wording of the newspaper advertisement, which noted "the great importance of so many turnpikes and great leading roads intersecting at and near this place." As one writer has noted, "in the written annals of early days, 'intercourse' had a common usage referring to the pleasant mutual fellowship and frequent intermingling which was so much more common in the informal atmosphere of the quiet country village of that day."

And this brings us to yet another theory on the town's name. From the east end of town, on a mile long straightaway, horse races were conducted. Since the races began at that end of town, this was the "Enter Course," and this name eventually became Intercourse. Indeed, a postal historian, Arthur B. Gregg claims that the town's name was actually changed from "Entercourse" to "Intercourse," and notes that "there was no hesitancy on the part of the United States Post office Department to accept the name 'Intercourse' since it meant a commercial or trading site."

But back to our story and Brungard's scheme. Although lotteries had been used for many years to sell various things, his real estate lottery failed, and most of the land was combined into one tract. More recently, in 1971, another person tried to take advantage of the town's name and sell one-inch square plots of property to visitors. This plan proved to be a flop as well.

In the old days, there were only five houses, counting the inn, and the town grew slowly. Another tavern, the Travelers Rest Inn, was built in 1827, on land that was part of the original William

Penn land grant. (One story associated with this inn is that when the building was purchased in the 1930's, Amish church leaders requested the deed state alcoholic beverages would never be served there again due to problems that had arisen in the past.)

Two other taverns were just outside of town, the Hat Tavern to the east and the Duke of Wellington to the west. A store was built in 1833, and more houses were constructed on the north and south sides of the road. In 1857, a brick schoolhouse was built at a cost of \$699. The Intercourse School, a one-room school built in 1882, is today the area library, but over the years was used for public meetings, spelling bees, and even for Mennonite Sunday School classes. Getting the aforementioned post office up and running was another matter. The main problem was finding a building and someone willing to perform the duties of a postmaster. The first postmaster, Benjamin Fraim, performed his duties from the Cross Keys Tavern, and may have had a job working there, since "his income, based on a percentage of the postal transactions for the year ending 1829 was only \$8.21." And so it was that over the years, the post office moved to stores or restaurants whose owners hoped visits by local residents would increase their business as well. (After a great deal of work on the part of many citizens, Intercourse was designated a first class post office in 1990.)

By 1880, Intercourse had 54 homes and a population of 280, and transportation continued to play an important part in town history. The local stagecoach service apparently started around 1898. It was "a single horse conveyance similar to a market wagon, with a roll-up curtain and double set of seats." The stagecoach brought items from Lancaster City for local Intercourse businesses, and even picked up milk, butter, and eggs for delivery to Lancaster restaurants and industries, including an ice cream plant. One history of Intercourse notes that when it snowed, a bobsled was used instead. "When the driver knew of passengers beforehand, their comfort was added to by many a hot brick heated the night before in the oven, and wrapped in newspaper to preserve its warmth."

By 1910, the road through town improved with a stone bottom until it was paved by 1920. As the days of the dirt road drew to a close, so too did the stagecoach days with the Rowe Motor Truck service started by Coleman Diller in 1910. In 1923 the Penn Highway Transit Company was organized and initiated bus service to Lancaster. It is noted that "many of the Amish residents of the area were anxious to see the line started, but did not care to subscribe to stock. Instead they liberally bought books of tickets which were really prepaid bus fares." By 1924 enough money was raised to buy a Mack Auto Bus for \$6,800. It held 25 passengers and even had solid rubber tires! The business was soon purchased by John Burkey, and a bus with pneumatic tires was purchased. He named it "Miss Lancaster," notwithstanding objections from the Lancaster Chamber of Commerce.

Perhaps the biggest date in Intercourse town history was November Election Day, 1892. Folks arrived at the Cross Keys Tavern, still the social center of town and the place to cast ballots. The exciting political events were soon overshadowed by a cry of "Fire!" A barn fire, possibly started by children playing with matches, soon went out of control. Bells rang and volunteers with buckets came running, but the wind blew sparks to other buildings and the fire spread. Barns, warehouses, homes, and the town store were soon in flames. One story claims that the store's watchdog refused to leave its post and died in the fire. People tried to salvage what they could, piling things along the side of the road. One family cut off the legs of their Grand Piano to remove it from the house.

Nearly twenty years later, in 1911, the residents finally formed the Intercourse Fire Company. This was no small project for the town, as it meant constructing a building and buying fire apparatus, two 45-gallon fire engines costing \$500, a considerable sum for a small town in those days. Unfortunately, before the equipment arrived a barn was destroyed by fire. Still, it was difficult work, as the engines had to be pulled by manpower through the streets. Later motorized vehicles and an electric siren improved the company's response time. (The old bell, however, is still a fixture in front of the fire hall today.) Continuous improvements and upgrades followed,

including the purchase of a tank truck so that sufficient supplies of water to fight fires would be on hand. The volunteer fire company remains a fine example of small-town community spirit and cooperation, and is currently building a much larger firewall on the east side of town.

There have been some interesting organizations in the town's history. One of these was the Horse Thief Association of 1870. Annual membership cost 25 cents and rewards were offered. The members were organized into classes, which oversaw "routes." Members met when a horse was stolen, and there was great secrecy so that the offender might be apprehended. With the arrival of the State Police, the group disbanded.

We cannot forget the Intercourse Glider Club, formed in 1931. They bought a glider, and self-taught themselves to fly after being launched via shock-cord or pulled by a car. In one national competition, two-hour flights were achieved. It is said that in exchange for storing the glider in the firehouse, they polished the fire engine brass.

Community banks were another feature of town life. The First National Bank was opened in 1908. The building with its Colonial Revival architecture, is on the National Historic Register and is now the home of one of the town's unique attractions, the American Edged Weaponry Museum. A new community-based bank opened recently to serve the needs of area residents. The Hometowne Heritage Bank is located in the new series of shops opposite Kitchen Kettle. The Intercourse Post Office has relocated to this area as well.

Communications improved with the formation of the Intercourse Telephone and Telegraph Company in 1909, and operators worked the exchange, often out of their homes, until the dial system came along in 1951.

There have always been a lot of businesses in the town in relation to its size. The two well-known stores in town were Wenger's General Store and Zimmerman and Sons. Opened in 1833, Wenger's was the first store in town. It was later operated by the Eaby family and a hardware store annex was built featuring a hand-operated elevator, which remains to this day. Ultimately, it was owned by a family named Worst, resulting in jokes about "the Worst store in Intercourse." Today these buildings are the Old Country Store, housing the Quilt Museum on its second floor, and the Village Pottery.

Zimmerman's gained fame when Harrison Ford made a phone call from its porch in the movie WITNESS. The present store was built in 1892 after the famous town fire. In the old days, there was lots of trading, with farmers exchanging items like hides, butter, and even soap for store merchandise. April 1st was the yearly date when each party paid the other whatever the balance was in the exchanges of the year. On more than one occasion the store ended up with too much of an item, and sometimes excess soap and rags were sold to the Lancaster County Prison. Over the years, the store had the town's first mechanical refrigeration, first radio set, and first gasoline pump. Because of the many Amish customers, there is still a hitching rail out front, buggy parking in the rear, and a mix of foods on the first floor and other items upstairs.

Other businesses around town over the years included harness and buggy shops, a hosiery mill, blacksmiths, bakery, furniture, brick kiln, and farm equipment, with Smoker Elevator Company known nationally. For a while, a large pond near town provided ice to five area businesses. "The ice was stored in chopped straw and sawdust... Filling the ice houses in the cold winter events was quite an event and took on a holiday aspect."

To give you an idea of how the uses of a building changed, the current Family Creations shop was formerly an International Harvester dealership, barbershop, income tax business, and hardware store. The Old Woodshed, on the other hand, was originally a wagon maker's shop, then a hardware and implement business, followed by furniture making and repair, before it became the "Old Cabinet Shop Museum." Some of the old items from the cabinet trade are still on display in the store. Indeed, today there are two stores in town that are known nationally for their superb furniture reproductions, Martin's Chair and Old Road Furniture.

Just as stores changes, so did occupations. John Bearn, for example, was a village baker, restaurant owner, postmaster, justice of the peace, and electrical inspector!

Today, visitors flock to Kitchen Kettle, a name recognized in many parts of the world for its delicious jams, jellies, relishes and other products. Started nearly 50 years ago with some gas burners and kettles in the garage to cook and sell jelly, it has grown into a village of shops with a busy mail order and internet business for visitors who want some of those goodies after they get back home.

The Peoples' Place owns a complex of historic buildings on main street, offering visitors two museums, one on Amish culture and another with changing quilt exhibitions, as well as quilt, furniture, and art galleries. They also publish Good Books, with many highly respected titles focusing on various aspects of Amish and Mennonite culture.

Since the town never really got to be "too large," it has retained much of its sense of community, from the little public library in a former one-room school to the volunteer fire company. Over the years there have been an Improvement Association, Literary Society, Death Benefit Association, Debating Society, and Merchants Association. Surrounded by farms, the town has grown little and retains much of its former charm, even when thousands of visitors descend upon it during the tourist season.

Religion always played an important part in community life, as could be seen by the various nearby churches --- Episcopal, German Baptist, Mennonite, United Brethren, Presbyterian, Methodist and Reformed. The Amish, of course, comprise a large percentage of the area's residents, but they worship in each other's homes. Even today, most Intercourse businesses are closed on Sunday, and one can walk the streets as the Amish carriages go by.

Most of the information in this article came from the Intercourse 200th Anniversary Souvenir Book (1954) and the 1965 "History of the Village of Intercourse," by Miles Zimmerman and Barry Rathvon. There are some interesting comments here concerning living in a small town, a place where family, religion, and hard work are still important values. They write, "The sense of being close to the realities of nature, the sense of belonging to a group in which one is known and needed and appreciated, the sense of being an important part of a community or organization, these are the undergirdings that Society needs if it is to be free from tension and conflict." The village of Intercourse has certainly changed over the years, but it has changed slowly, and "sometimes the things that grow the slowest are the ones that endure the longest."

Amish Country News article by Brad Igou, 2000

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Intercourse - A Personal View

When I was a child and our family would be driving on Route 340 through the village of Intercourse, my mother would say, "This is where your grandmother was born." We never thought the name of the village was odd; it was just where grandmother was born. About ten years ago, I moved to the just east of the village and now, when my mother drives through Intercourse to visit me, she says "My mother wouldn't recognize this place anymore." The village saw its first traffic light go into operation on July 30th of this year. The end of September marked the grand opening of a carwash and laundromat. The outside world seems to be slowly catching up with our sleepy farm village, but we weren't really that quiet or backward in the earlier days of our history.

The Old Provincial Highway, now Route 340, was laid out in 1730. About eleven miles east of Lancaster, a tavern was erected from logs in 1754. The small community which grew up around this public house was known as Cross Keys, taking its name from the tavern sign. In 1814, an attempt was made to lay out a town site. An ambitious businessman wanted to sell town lots through a lottery drawing. It was at this time that the name of Intercourse was first given to the town site. The lottery project was not successful, and the development of the town was slow, but the name stuck.

In the early days, many Conestoga wagons carrying freight between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh passed through the village. By 1898, the first stagecoach line between Lancaster and Intercourse was established. Tons of milk and eggs were collected from farms along the way, much of it taken to a popular ice cream plant. On the return trip the finished ice cream, along with newspapers and many other manufactured products, were then delivered to the homes, farms, and businesses along the route.

Community spirit has flourished throughout the town's history. One of the first examples was the Literary Society, though little is known about its exact dates and organization. Programs were also held by the Lyceum and Debating Society, which was in existence as late as 1915. In the early part of the century, the Intercourse Improvement Association was organized. Two of its projects were the construction of concrete sidewalks and the oiling of dusty streets before they were paved. Apparently, concrete sidewalks were unusual at that time, and attracted much interest among visitors to the village.

Election Day, November, 1892, brought disaster to the village of Intercourse when fire destroyed many of the buildings. It took nineteen years but, on January 31, 1911, the citizens organized the Intercourse Fire Company. The volunteer company exists to this day, and is one of the few organizations to which the Old Order Amish belong, outside of their church community. In August, I heard the fire alarm sound and watched as one of my Amish neighbors went by on junior's scooter to answer the call for help.

In the summer of 1931, about ten young men interested in motorless flying formed the Intercourse Gliding Club. The glider was often stored in the firehouse. The boys from the Gliding Club kept the brass on the fire engine polished in exchange for the storage space. In 1936 the club disbanded, as most of its members left the area to pursue their interests in aviation.

In 1898, a visitor committed suicide in the town. When his belongings were investigated, they found a copy of the by-laws of a lodge in West Virginia. The townspeople communicated with this lodge, found out that his dues were paid, and that the lodge would pay for his body to be shipped back for burial. This incident caused much discussion in Intercourse and, on March 24, 1899, a local lodge was formed. My great grandfather, Philip Troop, was one of the original members of the Intercourse Council #650 Jr. United American Mechanics. In 1913, they became affiliated with the Order of Fraternal Patriotic Americans. In the early days they had a festival every summer to help raise finances. It grew to be the largest festival in Lancaster County. The highlight of the first festivals was a balloon ascension. The balloons were made of paper, about 15 to 20 feet in diameter, and a small fire under the balloon provided the heat to make it rise. The festivals was discontinued in the early 1930's.

The historical information for this article comes from a booklet titled THE HISTORY OF THE VILLAGE OF INTERCOURSE, PA., written for the bicentennial celebration in 1954. If you are visiting the area you may find a copy at the Intercourse Library Center, part of the Lancaster County Public Library System. The local library is housed in a former one-room schoolhouse on the eastern edge of the village. Our little library is staffed mainly by volunteers, and I usually spend several evenings a month working there.

Our village is growing and changing, but it still retains its small town flavor. Intercourse is an unincorporated township, so there are no town boundaries, no mayor or city hall. Your mailing address is "Intercourse" if you rent a post office box at the Intercourse Post Office. (I lived several miles outside of town, but had an Intercourse address.) If you live in "downtown Intercourse," but get your mail delivered, your address is "Gordonville."

Sewer lines were installed several years ago. Although a major upheaval for our village, our water still comes from our wells. Visitors fill our roads "in season," but evenings and winter months the local residents have their village back to themselves. Most of our businesses are still closed on Sundays, and most of the residents like it that way. Family and religious beliefs remain the most important parts of the lives of most Intercourse residents.

Amish Country News article by Judy Hurst, 1996

