

In Ohio, the Amish Take On the Coronavirus

A famously traditional community has mobilized to help hospitals with medical supplies, even as it struggles with reconciling its communal way of life with the dictates of social distancing.



By Elizabeth Williamson

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SUGARCREEK, Ohio — On April 1, John Miller, a manufacturer here with deep connections to the close-knit Amish community of Central Ohio, got a call from Cleveland Clinic. The hospital system was struggling to find protective face masks for its 55,000 employees, plus visitors. Could his team sew 12,000 masks in two days?

He appealed to Abe Troyer with Keim, a local lumber mill and home goods business and a leader in the Amish community: “Abe, make a sewing frolic.” A frolic, Mr. Miller explained, “is a colloquial term here that means, ‘Get a bunch of people. Throw a bunch of people at this.’”

A day later, Mr. Troyer had signed up 60 Amish home seamstresses, and the Cleveland Clinic sewing frolic was on.

For centuries, the Amish community has been famously isolated from the hustle of the outside world. Homes still lack telephones or computers. Travel is by horse and buggy. Home-sewn clothing remains the norm. And even now, as the coronavirus rages in the country at large, there is resistance from people sustained by communal life to the dictates of social distancing that have brought the economy to a halt — in Amish country as everywhere else.

But as the virus creeps ever closer, the Amish community is joining the fight.

“If there is a need, people just show up,” said Mr. Troyer, a man in his 40s with a gray-streaked beard and a mild German accent.



Holmes County, where a large Amish community resides, had only three confirmed coronavirus cases as of Thursday. Erin Schaff/The New York Times



Amish leaders are aware that the coronavirus poses threats to their deeply communal way of life. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

The Amish are not immune from the coronavirus's rampage. As of Thursday, Holmes County, where the nation's largest Amish community resides, had only three confirmed coronavirus cases, but the pandemic has idled hundreds of Amish seamstresses, craftsmen and artisans, and Amish people do not apply for federal unemployment benefits.

"It conflicts with our faith and our commitment to the government," said Atlee Raber, who founded Berlin Gardens, an area garden furniture maker that now makes protective face shields.

Almost overnight, a group of local industry, community and church leaders has mobilized to sustain Amish households by pivoting to work crafting thousands of face masks and shields, surgical gowns and protective garments from medical-grade materials. When those run scarce, they switch to using gaily printed quilting fabric and waterproof Tyvek house wrap.

"We consider this a privilege that we can come in here and do something for somebody else who's in need and do it right at home here, and do it safely," Mr. Raber said, instead of "taking handouts."

Mr. Miller, who is president of both Superb Industries, a manufacturer in Sugarcreek with medical, automotive and commercial clients, and Stitches USA, a commercial sewing operation, calls March 16 "Black Monday." That's when social distancing guidelines laid waste to Holmes County's economy. It's also the day he convened a conference call with Developing Excellence, an area business group, to discuss the damage. Member businesses employ about 6,000 people, the majority of them Amish. Three days later, Mr. Miller created "Operation Stop Covid-19."



A woman sanitizing the handrails at Keim, a lumber mill and home goods business. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

“I thought if we could pool resources and leverage the much needed technical skill of sewing that is literally lying latent in this community, we could do a lot,” Mr. Miller said.

With area businesses, he set up a website and enlisted emergency workers from Sugarcreek Fire & Rescue to model prototypes of N95 mask covers, fluid-resistant gowns sewn of tarp material from Zinck’s Fabric Outlet in Sugarcreek, and boot covers made of Tyvek from Keim, in nearby Charm, Ohio.

Keim’s Amish millworkers built hardwood dividers for field hospitals in New York, the meticulous workmanship belying their temporary purpose. Berlin Gardens, which normally makes garden furniture from recycled plastic milk jugs, completed their first order of 20,000 plastic face shields for Yale New Haven Hospital last month.

“We’re close to 100,000 a day,” Sam Yoder, the current owner of Berlin Gardens, said last Friday. “It almost covers our payroll. Not quite.”

While they work, the Amish employees are largely observing social distancing guidelines, but face masks are less popular.

The Cleveland Clinic order in particular holds special significance. The medical system’s Union Hospital is just 11 miles from Sugarcreek.

“Cleveland Clinic has been here for us,” Mr. Miller said. “They saved my mom’s life many times.”

When the request from Cleveland came on April 1, Keim pledged its help, including with order and delivery logistics. The next morning, Mike Spence, who leads Superb’s marketing operation, met Sarah Stamp, the general manager for innovations at Cleveland Clinic, on the side of Interstate 77, halfway between Cleveland and Sugarcreek. He brought a prototype mask with him.

“They said ‘roll,’” Mr. Miller recalled, and the sewing frolic began.



Sam Yoder, the owner of Berlin Gardens, said the company is close to producing 100,000 face shields a day. Erin Schaff/The New York Times



A worker sews fluid-resistant gowns at Stitches USA. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

Abe Troyer went home that night carrying three heavy spools of wire. After dinner, he gave the wire, scissors and a yardstick to four of his five daughters — Suetta, Mabel, Joanne, and Linda — and told them to cut seven-inch lengths for the masks' nose clips. Then Mr. Troyer, Keim's sales director, used his work cell — a flip phone whose ringtone plays “Amazing Grace” — to relay to others in the community that the hospital in Cleveland needed thousands of masks immediately.

By evening's end, Mr. Troyer's daughters had slid the three wire spools onto a broomstick wedged between two ladderback chairs and cut 20,000 nose clips.

Mr. Miller arrived around 9 p.m. at the Troyers' home with more supplies. Entering their tidy kitchen with its beadboard wainscoting and a painting of a solitary tree on one wall, Mr. Miller was perplexed. “Abe had told me he's got six people in his home that can sew. And I said, ‘Have you sewn any?’”

Rosie Troyer, Mr. Troyer's wife, told Mr. Miller, “We're not going to sew any, because my husband still works. We're giving these to people who don't have a job.” Mr. Troyer, who does not drive, jumped into Mr. Miller's car. The pandemic had financially wounded Amish families to such an extent that, within one two-mile stretch, they dropped off mask-making kits at eight homes.



On March 16, Ohio public health officials advised against gatherings of 10 people or more. Four days later, the state's Amish steering committee advised all church districts to pay heed. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

Each kit contains materials for 500 masks “and a warning that says ‘The Surgeon General of the United States has said that you have to wear a mask when you’re making these,’” Mr. Miller said. “So the first thing you do is sew one to wear.”

Simrit Sandhu, the chief supply chain officer for the Cleveland Clinic, said the traditional channels for health care supplies had dried up amid the pandemic.

“The need to find local solutions has become more important than ever before,” she said. “This was timing and relationships coming together as our need went up exponentially.”

With raw materials difficult to secure, Amish seamstresses came up with a more efficient mask design. Mr. Miller met a clinic manager at the nearby Akron-Canton Airport, laying samples of the new mask on the hood of her Mazda for approval.

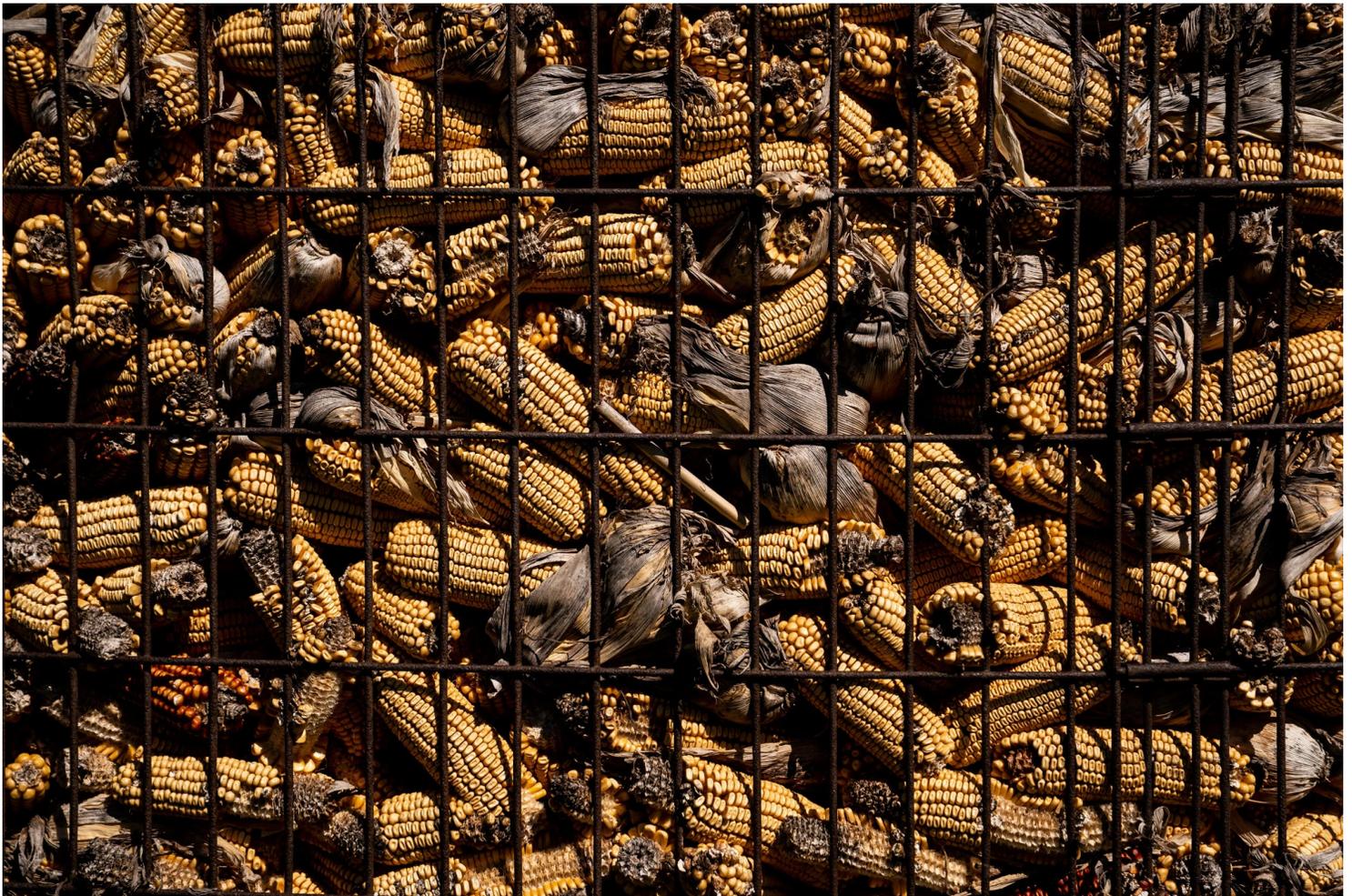
Cleveland Clinic has since increased its order to 10,000 masks a day, Ms. Sandhu said, and has also ordered protective gowns.

Amish leaders are aware that the coronavirus poses a threat to their deeply communal way of life. How to change those traditions is another matter.

“More people are becoming aware of it, seeing a risk, but maybe not as fast as the outside world,” said Leroy Yoder, an Amish bishop. “People think that compared to other people, it’s nothing to worry about. But if we have to add names to the numbers, then it’s going to become real, but then it’s going to be too late.”



A weekly Amish newspaper documented the struggle to reconcile social distancing with a way of life that survives through communal work and worship. Erin Schaff/The New York Times



Most of the Amish community is self-sufficient, producing their own food and textiles. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

On March 16, Ohio public health officials advised against gatherings of 10 people or more, and four days later, Ohio's Amish steering committee advised all church districts to pay heed. The committee recommended stopping church services and urged Amish Ohioans "to cancel or postpone weddings, youth and family gatherings until further notice."

But last Friday, black horse-drawn buggies clustered around a building in Holmes County. Inside, about 100 people gathered for a post-funeral meal. A church elder emerged and explained that he was spacing mourners four to an eight-foot table, and "normally, 400 or 500 people would attend an Amish funeral."

The Budget, a local weekly newspaper, has devoted more than 50 pages to dispatches from Amish communities across the country struggling to reconcile social distancing with a way of life that survives through communal work and worship, with services held in homes and barns.

"Coronavirus flu is probably the main talk worldwide. Let's remember to pray for the leaders of the world," read a missive from Mount Hope, Ohio, after describing a church service attended by more than a dozen families "and some young folks."

The Cleveland project is a constant reminder of the disease, but the Amish still grapple with its implications. David Kline, an author and Amish bishop who still lives on the farm in Holmes County where he was born, recalled one of his children telling him that someone invited a youth group of 200 to assemble the face masks — and then someone else remembered the guidelines.

"I think it's a time to pause and do some inventory on ourselves," he said. "Sometimes it's good to find out that we aren't in control of everything."



Gladys Beachy's sewing machine in her window. Erin Schaff/The New York Times

From her sunny sewing room outside Charm, Gladys Beachy will coordinate nine women, including her widowed mother, who will sew 500 masks each. She can't help thinking that holding "a quilting" would make the repetitive job more interesting for all of them.

Various upcoming events — Easter services, spring church communion service, her neighbor's wedding — are all canceled or delayed. "Even my family's cutting back," she said. "We're 16 right now and we can't all get together at once. So that'll be different — well, for the next couple of weeks, hopefully."

Anyone who gets sick cannot work on the project. Jim Smucker, president of Keim, said the company has tucked warnings about Covid-19 into the paycheck envelopes of his 500 employees, including a New York Times story about a funeral that spread the disease in Albany, Ga.

"We're a very individualistic society and the Amish have a lot to teach us about community," said Mr. Smucker, who was raised in a Mennonite household. Amid a pandemic, "I think the shift has got to go from 'I,' to 'we.'"