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Becky Yoder, 19, is Mankato State University's first Amish student.

John Cross photo

# Mankato State's first Amish student defies the stereotype

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The Amish are a remote people. They do not communicate much with the modern world, nor is the modern world welcome in their tight communities. They write little about themselves and do not let themselves be counted by church or government census takers.

To many, the Amish are the people who wear black and ride in horse-drawn buggies. They are the ones without telephones and electricity who farm their land with big Belgian horses and hand-held plows. Most know the Amish as the people who have rejected the modern world in favor of a 19th century lifestyle.

But the Amish are actually a diverse group. Some groups are more liberal than others. While some Amish never venture beyond their farm or community, others are free to pursue individual careers.

Becky Yoder, 19, is the first Amish student ever to attend Mankato State University. She, for example, is studying to be a nurse — a profession she hopes to use in her own Amish community of Grove City.

She does not fit many of the stereotypes associated with the conservative, isolated Amish. She is outgoing, attractive and quite at ease in her new environment.

She dresses, not in black, but in conservative calf-length dresses and capes. Her hair is tucked up beneath a starched, white covering.

While she is not stereotype of the traditional Amish, however, neither is she a typical blue-jeaned and sweated co-ed.

"Sometimes people stare — they think I'm part of a cult or something. But most people are just curious about who I am and what my church is all about," she said. "Sometimes I feel I

should join a circus — but for the most part people have been friendly — much more friendly than I expected."

Yoder is a member of the Beachy Amish, a large sect of Amish people who split from the more traditional Amish religion in 1927. The "Beachy" followed Amish Bishop Moses Beachy who preached that it was all right to use conveniences such as the automobile, electricity and gasoline-powered farm equipment.

The Old Order Amish continued their centuries-old traditions — black garb and horse power — without the Beachy members.

"Our family was part of the Old Order Amish until I was nine," Yoder said. "I don't remember much about how it was back then except that we used to ride buggies.

"It was fun back then, but I don't think I'd enjoy it now. It was too isolated," she said. "Kids grow up without much contact with the outside world. They're not exposed to any new ideas or thinking."

Yoder's father was an Amish teacher who traveled and taught with his family in several Amish communities in Ohio and Iowa. He now farms a small parcel of acreage near Grove City, population 500, between Willmar and Litchfield.

He farms using modern equipment and chemicals, and he markets his grain as would any central Minnesota farmer.

"I'd say the Beachy Amish are probably more like the Baptists than like the Old Order," she said. "We believe that a person can not be baptized until they have accepted Christ as their savior. We have no TVs or radios and we don't play musical instruments or dance. But I attended a public school in Grove City and we're free to go to college if we wish."

Yoder said her sect of Amish

interprets the Bible literally — "that's why we dress modestly and, as it states in Corinthians, women cover their heads in public."

Many of the Beachy Amish customs are traditional and are not based on current rules of the church, she added.

The rules of the Amish community are established by meetings twice a year. Those who do not go along with those rules are shunned — or literally ignored by the community, friends and even family.

"We have meetings twice a year to review the rules of the church and we do practice shunning. But I've never experienced shunning before," she said.

Yoder's family left the Old Order because there was too much emphasis on dress and custom and not enough on spirituality, she said.

Becky's decision to study nursing in Mankato was well accepted by her family and community. There were no restrictions placed on her by the community — although it was quietly understood that she follow Amish rules and religious restrictions during her stay in Mankato.

"My first days here were quite a shock, but I'm getting used to it," she said. "I don't like it when people drink in the dorm — which they're not supposed to anyway — but for the most part, everyone's been very friendly."

The idea of "night life" in Mankato poses no temptation for her, she said. "People do what they want to do. I do what I want — there's no pressure," she said. "In fact, it's kind of a challenge to be the first Amish student on campus — it's even kind of fun."

In spite of the challenge, however, "it is still nice to go home."