

Reality TV Producers Exploiting Gentle Amish

They typically wear plain clothing with nothing as fancy as a button or a zipper, travel by horse-drawn buggy and shun modern conveniences such as electricity.

It's that Old World charm of the Amish that draws 8 million tourists—and \$1.9 billion—each year to Pennsylvania's Lancaster County, home of the nation's largest Amish community of 31,000.

What the Amish don't do, supporters say, is tote rifles as part of a violent protection racket—as depicted in the television show *Amish Mafia*—or regularly defy their religion, like in *Breaking Amish* and *Breaking Amish: Brave New World*. And, Amish horror stories are not the norm, despite the plot lines of the upcoming *Amish Haunting*.

"This is a false portrayal," said filmmaker Mary Haverstick, who is leading a push to eject the shows, airing on the Discovery Channel and related networks, from Lancaster County.

The movement is gathering support because of what some see as a demeaning, inaccurate portrayal of the gentle, devout group.

Hotels and restaurants are urged to turn away film crews, Haverstick said.

Last week, more than a dozen state officials, including Gov. Tom Corbett and Congressmen Joe Pitts and Patrick Meehan, issued a statement citing "bigoted" and "negative, inaccurate and potentially damaging portrayal of (the) Amish" and demanding an end to the shows.

The Lancaster Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Convention and Visitors Bureau, and a regional interfaith coalition of clergy

echoed those comments.

"I've lived here for 50 years and know many Amish folks," said Haverstick. "They are exceptionally vulnerable to this type of exploitation."

But some wonder if the hard-edged reality TV approach is that different from the soft exploitation of the Amish by the local tourism industry. In both, the Amish are unpaid, costumed "extras."

Pennsylvania Dutch Convention and Visitors Bureau television ads feature the Amish and seeing the religious sect is a top reason tourists give for visiting, said bureau spokesman Joel Cliff. Tourism dollars generate \$363 million in tax revenue and support 24,000 jobs.

Most tourism is respectful of the Amish, who sell their quilts, furniture and produce, Cliff said.

"They've learned to live with and benefit from [tourism]," he said.

Haverstick says there is no comparison between the two approaches, as one celebrates the Amish for who they are and the other depicts them falsely.

"One [Amish] man called me and said they are portrayed like garbage in the shows," she said. "There was pain in his voice."

Mockery of Amish

There is no immediate evidence the reality shows have caused harm, said Tom Baldrige, the Lancaster chamber president, but problems could surface down the road.

"Long term," Baldrige said, "it may hurt tourism. They make a mockery of the Amish."

Heading into its fourth season, *Amish Mafia* has drawn the fiercest criticism.

"There is no Amish Mafia," Donald Kraybill, a professor at Elizabethtown College and co-author of *The Amish*, told WITF radio in Harrisburg recently. "It is an utter fabrication."

Discovery Channel spokeswoman Laurie Goldberg declined to comment.

The lead producer of all four shows, Eric Evangelista, whose Hot Snake Media company creates content for the Discovery Channel, did not respond to Reuters requests for comment.

The area has drawn visitors for nearly 60 years, ever since the 1955 Broadway musical *Plain and Fancy*, about a sophisticated New York couple who inherit property in Amish Country. Americans soon found it an easy day trip from much of the East Coast.

The 1985 thriller *Witness*, starring Harrison Ford, was filmed mostly in Lancaster County, and attracted a new crop of visitors from Europe and Japan, Kraybill said.

"We still get people asking to see the *Witness* farm," said Cliff.

Old and new businesses capitalizing on the Amish sometimes collide.

The Amish Experience in the village of Bird-in-Hand, expanded its tours in 2013 to include *Amish Mafia* locations, said agency owner Brad Igou. Almost immediately, Discovery Channel lawyers sent a cease-and-desist letter, he said.

Tour guides still mention *Amish Mafia*, Igou said, but only to debunk what he calls the show's many inaccuracies. Their script has been approved by Amish religious elders, if not by the Discovery Channel, he said.

Editing by Barbara Goldberg and Gunna Dickson

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