

# THE DAILY RECORD

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## Do Amish use payphones?

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Wireless telecommunications technologies have changed most of our lives for the better. When was the last time you actually needed to use a pay phone because your wireless phone didn't show bars? However, if you were someone who didn't have access to a wireless phone, you wouldn't feel quite as ambivalent about the number of payphones that have been removed not just across New York State, but across the country as well.

In the pre-wireless world, not only did people who were mobile rely upon payphones, but those busy payphones kicked back a significant amount of pure unadulterated revenue to the facility where the phones were situated. This revenue stream often helped to defray operating costs (or, in fact, generate profit) at airports, bus stations and other public and private facilities where the payphone was as commonplace as the front door.

Interestingly — or perhaps desperately — in an effort to hang on to this dwindling revenue stream or to keep employees focused on the tasks at hand, “some high end hotels and conference facilities have been asked to install signal blocking technologies so that wireless devices can be made unworkable,” according to Dale Mullen, Senior Manager/Airport Consulting Services of Ross & Baruzzini. For whatever reason, implementation of such technologies can have the effect of forcing weary travelers back to the revenue-generating payphones. It's a short-term solution to the long-term issue of lost revenue, but the bottom line remains that there are far fewer payphones than there used to be. For most people this change in the landscape is a giant non-event, but for others it has made staying in touch with the rest of the world considerably more difficult.

In early September 2006, the *Washington Post* ran an article about the increasing number of private telephone booths in the Amish country of Maryland (“Still Called by Faith to the Phone Booth,” Sept. 3, 2006) corresponding to the ever-decreasing number of payphones in the same geographic area. Given the presence of Amish communities in New York, and given the general interest in the topic, I

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started thinking about the issue of bringing technology into the world of those who have chosen to forego it — in one form or another — for any number of reasons. As the number of payphones has dwindled, what recourse do the “anti-technorati” have to communicate, even in limited ways, with the outside world?

Within New York, there are several Amish communities — most notably in the Allegany-Cattaraugus-Chautauqua region in Western New York, and in St. Lawrence County in the northern part of the state. The Amish are often easily recognized by their mode of transportation and dress, although it is important to note that there are certainly some differences between Amish communities in terms of the permissibility — or impermissibility — of certain conduct.

Although the Amish tend to stick to their own communities for religious and social activities, Amish craftsmen and merchants are an essential element of a larger economic community in which the ability to communicate with their “English” (how the Amish refer to the non-Amish) counterparts is essential to their economic survival. The telephone is a critical component of this equation.

Professor Jamey Wetmore of Arizona State University has done extensive research in this area. Quoting from a paper that he's written, which will soon be published in the IEEE's journal *Technology & Society*, he said “the Amish are not fundamentally anti-technology; rather they believe that change does not necessarily result in desirable ends.” As such, it's not unusual to see Amish at pay phones (where they can find them) or even using wireless phones, so long as the use of these devices doesn't distract from essential elements of their “Amish-ness.”

Very generally, Wetmore suggests that the Amish believe that “technology and social order are constructed simultaneously and influence each other a great deal.” He said the Amish “regulate which technologies are to be used, when they are to be used, how they are to be used, and why they are to be used because they believe that one of the most

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important ways they can promote and reinforce their values is by actively embedding these values in their relationships with technology." As such, so long as the use of telephones, in whatever form, conforms with other more important community-based Amish values, including the "quest to remain humble," the use of such devices is not only permissible but essential for maintaining contact with the outside world.

While a representative from the Town of Randolph in Cattaraugus County indicated to me that many Amish in Randolph use the payphone across from the town hall, in the Maryland Amish communities highlighted by the *Post* article, the Amish have installed their own private phone booths in response to a decreasing availability of traditional payphones. These private payphones are not located in any one individual's home, but rather between and among such homes so that the facilities may be shared without drawing attention to any one individual family. They have been placed in small sheds or other protective structures, including, in at least one instance, a retired chicken coop.

By opting to install private telephone equipment, this group of Maryland Amish has been relieved of the burden of carrying quarters around or incurring hefty calling card

Disclaimer: I have neither the expertise nor the space to make this column a definitive source on any religious belief or lifestyle. My goal is simply to highlight the circumstances that govern the application and deployment of telephone technologies in some remote rural communities where religious or other cultural restrictions preclude the presence of those devices (i.e., telephone, television, and computer) which most of us rely upon to work, play and learn.

bills, while simultaneously providing themselves with at least a modicum of privacy when making calls. While Wetmore has indicated that "in order to sustain their values, the Amish have determined that technological change should not be accepted without reservation, it's important to understand that the Amish are not adverse to technology or change — it just has to be on Amish terms."

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