Still Called by Faith To the Phone Booth
As Companies Cut Back, Amish and Mennonites Are Building Their Own

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Off the side of a dirt road in Southern Maryland stands an odd answer to the swiftly changing telecommunications industry.

It's a rusted metal chamber, nearly eight feet tall. The door is padlocked. Trees surround it, with no houses in sight. It looks like an old bomb shelter.

Inside is a telephone. Built by several nearby Mennonite families, the oil tank-turned-phone booth connects them to the rest of the world -- sort of. And sort of -- when it comes to the estimated 1,600 Old Order Mennonite and Amish residents who still ride horse-drawn buggies down the roads of St. Mary's County -- is the point.

In the past several years, they have quietly erected at least 12 similarly hidden, private phone booths, posting them behind barns, in the woods and, in one case, inside a former chicken coop.

The phones allow them to conduct business -- crucial to surviving amid the region's development pressures -- while holding on to prohibitions against home phone lines and cellphones. Called "community phones," they are the latest example of how the groups in Maryland and elsewhere have been cutting deals with technology for the past century.

It used to be that Old Order Mennonite and Amish families in St. Mary's relied on public, coin-operated pay phones. But as people migrated to cellphones, telecommunications companies took notice. On average, they remove more than 1,000 pay phones a year in Maryland, according to state records. Verizon, for example, plans to take out two pay phones along heavily-Amish Thompson Corner and Budds Creek roads in St. Mary's.

So the Amish and Mennonites are adapting.

"Business is business," said Elmer Brubacher, a Mennonite standing over a pallet of tomatoes at the Loveville Produce Auction that he helps run. "If they have to pull them out, I understand that."

The new phones hold advantages. The Amish and Mennonites don't have to carry around fistfuls of quarters or buy costly calling cards. Families divide monthly bills. Because the phones are hidden, locked and -- in the case of a metal chamber booth, which was fashioned out of a tank salvaged from a junkyard -- reinforced, the phones are less likely to attract vandals and drug dealers.
There are rules. Families can't post phones too close to homes, and they can't outfit them with amplified ringers that effectively would make them house phones. Some Amish don't cotton to voice mail, but Old Order Mennonites seem more accepting of the feature. For both groups, the idea is to limit forces they think will distract them from faith and family.

"The telephone, and the use of the telephone, is not something we're opposed to. We just don't want it to be the main part of our lives," said Ethan Brubacher, 31, a nephew of Elmer, who owns Quiet Valley Structures, a shed-building business in Loveville. He and 11 neighbors share a community phone booth that is screened off by a row of 20 evergreen hedges.

Community phone calls can be sad: A 39-year-old Amish bishop walks a half-mile through the woods to call to check on his mother, who is in a Washington hospital with cancer. The calls can be scary: A Mennonite races to the metal-chambered phone after a relative was bitten by a black widow. And the calls can be funny: An Amish man, having accidentally locked himself inside his phone shanty, cannot call any brethren because they aren't near phones. So he calls his veterinarian.

"I had to make an emergency farm visit," veterinarian Chris Runde recalled.

Since arriving in St. Mary's in the 1940s, the Old Order Amish and Mennonite families have held true to conservative ways, eschewing automobiles, electrical utility power, radios and televisions. (The Old Order Mennonites in St. Mary's are Old Order Stauffer Mennonites. A third group -- members of the car-driving Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonites -- also resides in St. Mary's.)

As their businesses grew, Old Order Amish and Mennonites needed better ways to reach customers and suppliers. By the 1970s, they increasingly turned to Ben Burroughs, who is neither Amish nor Mennonite but has deep roots in the county. The former sheriff owns many ventures, including a bail bonds business, farmers market, motel, construction company and laundromat.

In an interview at his office -- as he simultaneously fielded a half-dozen calls from recently locked-up inmates -- Burroughs, 73, recalled how, at the request of Amish and Mennonite families, he asked the phone company to erect public pay phones in the area. Because the phones were in his name, he was eligible for commissions. But Burroughs rarely made much money, he said -- a fact confirmed by phone records he provided for the month of July 2003. His total haul from phones in heavily traveled Old Order areas: $1.52.

This year, Burroughs heard from Verizon Communications, which told him he would have to subsidize two of the phones himself, for up to $75 a month, along Thompson Corner and Budds Creek roads, or Verizon would remove them. He refused.

Verizon spokeswoman Sandy Arnette confirmed that the company plans to remove the two phones. In general, she said, Verizon removes pay phones that can't pay for themselves, unless someone is willing to pay a monthly fee. She stressed that the company has plenty of pay phones, particularly in such high-volume areas as airports and outside convenience stores. Arnette declined to say how many pay phones Verizon has in St. Mary's, saying the company doesn't regularly track the phones by county. Even if it did, she said, the company probably would not release the totals because it doesn't want competitors to know.

In Loveville, after a nearby public pay phone was taken away, Ethan Brubacher and other Mennonites wanted something to replace it. The shed-builder offered to build a shanty, outfitting it with vinyl siding, two windows and a shingled roof.
On a recent 95-degree afternoon, a young Mennonite farmer rode his bicycle up to the shanty. He declined to give his name, citing Old Order concerns about appearing boastful. He unlocked the door, went inside, took a seat, picked up the black Radio Shack phone and called a farm-supply dealer. "That Manex fungicide, do you have that?" he asked, ticking off an order for delivery.

In the shanty, callers had pinned up a buggy-shop calendar, a business card for a taxi company, random doodles and phone numbers, including one for Floyd's Weather Station, a local forecasting service.

Later, Irvin Gehman rode up on a red 10-speed bike, wearing a straw hat, wire-rimmed glasses, a shirt, suspenders, jeans and solid black leather sneakers. He owns the buggy shop and lives nearby with his mother, wife, 10 children and a son-in-law. Gehman used the phone a lot recently to check on medications for his mom. "Nobody actually has a phone," he said of the compromise he and his neighbors struck. "But everyone has the convenience of having one they can use."

Donald Kraybill, a leading scholar of Mennonites and Amish, said the groups have long seen phones in their homes as a way for the outside world to come in too strongly. His book, "The Riddle of Amish Culture," devotes eight pages to telephones. "There's a lot of symbolism with the shanty," he said.

At Samuel Stoltzfus's dairy operation, the negotiations the Amish make with technology become clear. A diesel engine powers vacuum-operated pumps he attaches to 37 cows. After collecting the milk, he pours it into a refrigerated tank.

Still, Stoltzfus, his wife and their 10 children travel by horse and buggy. Unlike Mennonites, they don't even ride bikes. They receive no electricity from utility lines and use kerosene lanterns for light. To make a phone call, Stoltzfus walks about 1,000 feet, past his mother's house, to a private phone shanty.

Taking a break from an evening of milking, with three of his children nearby, Stoltzfus pondered the question of bringing a phone into his home. It could lead to television and radio, he said, or endless yakking by his teenagers.

"If you keep them at a distance," he said of telephones, "they're not misused."