

Sudbury

## Horse and buggy travel a way of life for some Mennonites. Recent tragedies have led to safe road use efforts

At least 4 horse and buggy accidents reported last year in northeastern Ontario

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A horse and buggy ride on Highway 17

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Mennonites from Desbarats take CBC on a horse and buggy ride on Highway 17.

*NOTE: To respect the core value of humility held by members of the Old Order Mennonite community in Desbarats, Ont., CBC has agreed not to use the full name of the people interviewed for this story.*

Oct. 29 started off as an ordinary day for Edwin, a member of the Old Order Mennonite community near Desbarats in northeastern Ontario.

He was heading to a farm about a kilometre from his home to help fellow Mennonites build a barn, a trip he makes every other week by horse and buggy on Highway 17. That morning, he used four-year-old Sparky, a "gentle, willing and quiet-natured" horse raised by Edwin and his family.

Horse-buggy travel is typically done on the shoulder of the highway, but sometimes gets pushed into part of a paved lane due to snow, guardrails and wet soil.

That's what happened to Edwin that October day, when he used part of one of the two eastbound paved lanes to "make it easier on his horse."

He said he was constantly looking in his rearview mirror to determine when he could swerve back onto the shoulder if a vehicle came up behind him. Still, he ended up on the side of the ditch, with blood running down his face.

"I must not have been keeping a sharp eye," he said. "I have no memory of seeing a car coming behind me."

He remembers seeing pieces of his buggy scattered everywhere and his horse lying injured further down in the ditch.

## **Emotional, financial losses of horse-buggy crashes**

There are about 175,000 Mennonites in Canada and 59,000 in Ontario, according to Statistics Canada.

There is a great diversity of culture and beliefs among Mennonite groups. Those who have settled around Ontario's northeast because of relatively affordable and available farmland tend to believe technologies developed in the post-industrial era aren't conducive to a peaceful and quiet life of faith.

Due to accidents like the one involving Edwin, the Mennonite leadership in Desbarats is ramping up efforts to increase road safety.

In Edwin's case, community members near the crash remembered hearing it and rushing to the scene.

Edwin suffered serious injuries but survived the accident, which occurred on the same stretch of highway where Eli, a 29-year-old from a neighbouring Amish community, died a year ago while using a horse and buggy.

A community member said he felt sick to his stomach seeing pieces of Edwin's buggy scattered around and the shock drained his energy for days.

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Friends and family feared the worst, but while Edwin says he's OK, he received stitches in his head and had bruises, a broken clavicle, a fractured left fibula and an elevated heart rate.

Sparky's injuries, however, were so serious that the Mennonites had to put him down.

It was an emotional and financial loss for the family, one that ultimately won't be compensated for. The Desbarats Mennonites don't have traditional insurance and don't turn to the courts to seek reparations, as these systems don't align with the way the community practises their faith.

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A police investigation later blamed the "inattentive" pickup truck driver for causing the collision, but Edwin insists the accident was his fault.

"We belong on the shoulders. I don't blame him for anything. I shouldn't have been on the paved road."

## Community members grateful despite losses

Throughout the interview with CBC, Edwin and his fellow community members spoke of their gratitude for being allowed to use the highway.

"We know it's an inconvenience for others. We're thankful for their patience," Edwin said.

“This is a value inherited from previous generations that we treasure. They believed modern technology is not conducive to a quiet and peaceful life of faith.”

*- Mennonite community leader in Desbarats, Ont., on horse and buggy travel*

Like everyone else in Ontario, the Amish and Mennonites pay taxes, which are in part used toward creating and maintaining highways. But those who spoke to CBC said they considered it a privilege to use the road and not a right.

Overall, they feel grateful, but many also related experiences of loss.

For Jesse, one of the community leaders, horse and buggy accidents resulted in him losing his son 12 years ago and his son-in-law in 2021, making Jesse's daughter a widow who's now raising four young children.



Mennonites travelling by horse and buggy use the backroads as much as they can, but sometimes have to use the highway. (Submitted by Sheri Minardi)

The Desbarats Mennonites don't have life insurance, so when there is a sudden tragedy, it's up to the community to step up and offer support.

"When our son was killed, the OPP [Ontario Provincial Police] brought the person responsible to our community. We sat around the table, and he broke down and cried," said Jesse.

"How could you ever take someone like that to court? It is not our way."

## **Buggy use 'a value inherited from previous generations'**

The community members who spoke to CBC said they've all experienced moments of fear on the highway, but the horse and buggy remains their preferred method of travel.

Trying to explain this to someone outside the community is difficult, said a community leader.

"This is a value inherited from previous generations that we treasure," he said. "They believed modern technology is not conducive to a quiet and peaceful life of faith."

He added that motorized vehicles are useful, especially when there is an emergency or a need to travel long distances. However, these engines also take people far away from their communities and families.

For everyday activities, the Desbarats Mennonites and some Anabaptist communities throughout Ontario prefer the horse and buggy.

"It brings a totally different lifestyle than being involved in this fast-paced world," said Jesse.

## **Efforts underway to promote road safety**

While horses hold a special place in the community — especially for youth who develop a strong bond with them during training — the animals can sometimes be unpredictable.

Abraham, another community member, said his horse can panic at the sight of a floating plastic bag or a tree stump, but won't bat an eye at an 18-wheel commercial transport truck.



The Mennonite community in Desbarats, Ont., produces goods at this building. It is also where the community welcomed CBC for a recent interview. (Aya Dufour/CBC)

Some horses get more "fussy" at the sight of a lone car on a back road than they do in traffic on the highway, explained Abraham.

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It can be hard to assess how a horse will react in an unexpected situation, said Abraham.

In the wake of the recent horse and buggy accidents, community leaders and East Algoma OPP have worked together, exploring how battery-powered lights installed on buggies could improve visibility on Highway 17.

While Mennonites are more inclined to consider the use of the battery-powered lights, the Amish prefer to use lanterns.

The community also hopes to start conversations with local snowplow operators about whether they can work to keep the highway shoulder clearer for horse and buggy travel.

## Truck driver calls for warning signs

Horse and buggy travel also is common in the Temiskaming area close to the Quebec border, where there have been at least two collisions involving Amish since September.

In one accident, a young girl travelling in the buggy sustained severe injuries after being hit by a transport truck and was sent to the hospital.

Lenny Farrow is a commercial truck driver who regularly travels the 80-kilometre Ontario stretch between Englehart and Elk Lake.

He said he has witnessed several close calls between trucks and buggies over the years, and is concerned for the safety of the local Amish community.

"It's not them — it's the careless drivers out there," he said, adding he regularly communicates with other drivers to warn them to be cautious of horses on the roads.

Farrow would like to see more large warning signs installed and mandatory lights on buggies.

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