

# 50 Years of Sister City History...1962-2012

Frankenmuth, Michigan USA & Gunzenhausen, Mittelfranken, Bavaria GERMANY

For immediate release in the Frankenmuth News

## The Founding of "People to People"

In 1956 President Dwight Eisenhower, realizing that "peaceful relations between countries of the world required understanding between individuals," founded the "President's People to People" program.

## Frankenmuth Invites Gunzenhausen

Recognizing that Frankenmuth shared common ancestral and Christian heritage with Franconia in northern Bavaria, Frankenmuth extended an invitation to the community of Gunzenhausen, Germany to become sister cities in January of 1962. Frankenmuth's "People to People" chapter leadership included Marv Engel, President; Jerry Nuechterlein, VP/Secretary; Hans Schmidt, Treasurer, along with Carl Creger, Oscar Huber, Rev. Philip Janz and Trudy Nuechterlein.

Why Gunzenhausen? In his remarks on the occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the partnership in 1987, Gunzenhausen's "Erster Bürgermeister" (First Mayor) Willi Hilpert explained: "How did this partnership with Frankenmuth come about? Strictly speaking, it began with the wedding of an American soldier and a young Gunzenhausen woman. The young man had been born in Schlungenhof [a village near Gunzenhausen]. His name was Franz Gross. In 1937, his family moved to Regensburg and in 1950 he emigrated to Birmingham, MI (about 150 km from Frankenmuth) together with his family." Later, young 'Franzl' returned to Germany as an American soldier. "By chance," Hilpert explained, "he was invited to a celebration by Adam Völker and his family. There Franzl Gross got acquainted with Sonja Völker, whom he married in 1958. He took her to the 'new world' to Frankenmuth, and served as a manager at Zehnder's Hotel." There the young couple met Dr. Marv Engel. From December of 1960 to May of 1961, Sonja's mother Frieda Völker lived with her daughter and son-in-law in Frankenmuth and also met Dr. Engel and his wife Margie. A plan for a stronger relationship between the two cities emerged. Sonja Gross wrote the first letter to Erster Bürgermeister Friedrich Wust on January 11<sup>th</sup>, 1962 suggesting the idea of sister cities. The next day, Dr. Engel wrote a letter to the city of Gunzenhausen promoting the same.

On March 7th, 1962 the Frankenmuth News reported that the City of Frankenmuth received official word from 1st Mayor Friedrich Wust that Gunzenhausen "would be most happy to join with Frankenmuth in a 'People to People' program to promote long lasting friendly relations between his city in Germany and the city of Frankenmuth with its rich Bavarian heritage." According to Wust's letter to Dr. Marv Engel, the Gunzenhausen council unanimously accepted Frankenmuth's invitation with "great enthusiasm" at their Feb. 15th meeting. Mayor Wust

referenced the many correlations between the cities including "good cooking and good beer." Additionally, because the bond between the communities "comes from our hearts" Wust mentioned the formalities could be kept to a minimum. He added, "...we want to foster the People to People program to our utmost ability." Since then, the Frankenmuth-Gunzenhausen partnership has grown to become one of the longest continuous and most active "People to People" sister city relationships in the world.

### "Pilgrims Travel 'Home'"

Plans began almost immediately to visit Gunzenhausen later in 1962 to consummate the newly formed bond on a 'people to people' level. According to a March 17<sup>th</sup> account in the Detroit News, of the more than 80 individuals scheduled to fly to Germany in Sept. 1962, 95% were leaving Michigan for the 1st time and "going home" (their ancestors having made the original trip some 117 years earlier in the opposite direction). Many of the travelers would be staying with relatives they had never met, according to the News.

On Tuesday, September 18th, 1962, Frankenmuth's St. Lorenz church congregants and the travel group of 82 individuals convened at the church for a special communion service. The Frankenmuth News reported "many Frankenmuth citizens paused in their labors to attend these church services and wished their pilgrimage group Godspeed on their flight to Germany." Later that day, their Detroit flight departed for Munich and landed safely there on the afternoon of Sept 19th. The group spent the first 2 days in Munich, then traveled north to Gunzenhausen on Friday morning to meet their host families in Frankenmuth's sister city. On Sunday, the group departed for Neuendettelsau – home of Wilhelm Löhe, Lutheran Pastor and organizer of the Franconian mission colonies including Frankenmuth. On Monday, Sept. 24<sup>th</sup>, the travel group dispersed. Some returned to Gunzenhausen. Others took private trips to friends and sites in Germany. Roughly half of the group departed on a 12-day guided tour through Germany, Switzerland, Austria and Paris, France.

Most surprising to the travel contingent and their Bavarian hosts alike was the dialect of German spoken by the Frankenmuth visitors. Germans responded with delighted laughter at the command of the old Franconian dialect held by their American guests. Irene Zeilinger, Frankenmuth News editor, noted in her travel journal at how impressed the Germans were that Americans could speak so eloquently a language often with words not heard for more than a half century. Irene wrote "Time and time again we were asked, 'When did you migrate from Germany?' We explained that we didn't, that we are citizens of Frankenmuth, Michigan, a German-speaking community in America. "Yes, we know," they would agree, "but how old were you when you left Germany"? Irene stated "we explained that we didn't 'leave' Germany, we were born in America." "Well, then when did your father and mother leave Germany?" We again patiently explained that they too were born in America. Irene added "It was beyond [the Germans'] comprehension...impossible to them that a dialect could be retained so perfectly in a foreign country." Today, that dialect survives among many older Frankenmuth natives. In Germany, the "old Fränkisch" dialect exists faintly among Franconian farming communities.

## A Spiritual Journey

While the group was in Germany, Frankenmuth Pastor Rev. Philip Janz gave sermons in Neuendettelsau, Roßtal & Gunzenhausen on "I am not ashamed of my God, my faith, my religion." The theme for 'Gottesdienst' (church service) on Sept. 23<sup>rd</sup> 1962 in Neuendettelsau was "Wie Schön und Gut es bei Jesus ist" (How beautiful and good it is with Jesus); The German pastor's sermon text was based on Gal. 5, 16-25. Among the hymns sung by congregants and Frankenmuth visitors were Martin Luther's 'Lord, Keep Us Steadfast in Your Word' and "Dein Wort, O Herr, Bringt Uns Zusammen" (Your Word, O Lord, Brings us together).

Reassembling in Roßtal, Bavaria (also an ancestral home for many Frankenmuthers) on Oct 5th, many among the "pilgrims" identified the experience at the Roßtal 'home' church as the pinnacle of their trip. On October 9<sup>th</sup>, the group departed Germany to return stateside; however, unlike the arriving travel group that numbered 82, the departing contingent numbered 83! Through the cooperation of the fledgling twin cities, Dr. and Mrs. Marv Engel, "Father of the Partnership" on the Frankenmuth side, brought home a new daughter through legal adoption—a 3-year-old named Heidi. To this day, Heidi and her husband Ken Knieling and their family are the sole residents on Frankenmuth's Gunzenhausen Street in the home formerly owned by her father, Marv.

## Germans Visit America

Two years later, in June of 1964, 25 Germans traveled to Frankenmuth from Gunzenhausen and surrounding communities, marking the first reciprocal visit from the Europeans. Mayor James Wickson welcomed the friends from Bavaria: "As Mayor of Frankenmuth it gives me great pleasure to welcome you to our city. It is always an honor to be host to people from other countries. We are particularly honored to have you as our guests as you represent the area from which the founding fathers of Frankenmuth left some 120 years ago." Under the direction of Frankenmuth's city council, Wickson appointed Erster Bürgermeister Friedrich Wust as honorary mayor of Frankenmuth for the duration of their stay and presented him a desk plate inscribing such designation. Among the highlights of the visit was a plant tour of the Carling's Brewing Co. led by manager Lester Freidinger who at the conclusion of the tour commented to the group "If you have not had enough to eat and drink, I believe it is your own fault." Later that Saturday, a tree was planted near Zehnder's Restaurant—a Linden that still grows in that spot today—commemorating the partnership. That evening, a "tremendous banquet" was held with more than 350 people attending. Zehnder's manager Eddie Zehnder remarked that people who failed to get their tickets were disappointed, and offered as much as \$10 for the \$5 face-value tickets. It was the first time in his career he'd ever heard of "scalping" tickets for banquet festivities! The Germans' trip did not conclude in Frankenmuth, rather the delegation headed to the east coast where Bürgermeister Wust met the first lady, President Lyndon B. Johnson's wife Lady Bird Johnson, during a visit to our nation's capital. In acknowledging the Sister City program, President Johnson said "Sister Cities work outside government in a field vital to the promotion of friendship among all citizens of every land so they will understand each other and want peace. I know of no other task more important for the people of every country."

## The Partnership Matures

In September 1965, a second tour group from Frankenmuth with 40 people, including its new mayor Elmer Simon, went to Gunzenhausen. It was Simon's first trip to Gunzenhausen. In addition to Gunzenhausen, the travel group also visited Rome, Florence, and Munich.

In early February, 1968, Frankenmuth icon Wally Bronner made a surprise visit to Gunzenhausen. His comments affirming the bond established 6 years hence: "In Gunzenhausen, wo mer sprechen ko wie an der Schnobl wachsen is, bin I ganz sicher daham" (In Gunzenhausen, where one can speak as he did as a kid, I'm right at home)!

In the summer of '68, a young woodcarver named Georg Keilhofer—originally from Berchtesgaden Germany who later made Frankenmuth his home—presented Marv Engel two hand-carved wooden crests of Frankenmuth's city shield as gifts for Gunzenhausen and Roßtal. The shields were made of rosewood, black walnut, ash, pear, teak wood, and maple. In 1968 a group of 25 Frankenmuth area residents traveled to Germany, arriving in the sister city on Oct. 8th. In addition to the wood inlaid crest, Frankenmuth presented gifts of Indian head coins, and a display of arrowheads. On Oct. 10th, the group visited Roßtal and presented the second of Keilhofer's hand-crafted plaques. Mayor Simon presided over the visit and spoke at the banquet, also having helped place the new "Frankenmuther-Str." (street) sign at the formal dedication of the new street. In June of 1969, 45 German guests came to Frankenmuth including Bürgermeister Friedrich Wust. The Germans toured Frankenmuth Mutual Insurance Co, Universal Engineering, the Schnitzelbank (woodcarvers) Shop, Rupprechts Sausages, Bronner Display & Sign, Frankenmuth State Bank, Geyer Brothers' and Carlings Brewing companies, Zehnders and Bavarian Inn restaurants. During their visit to Frankenmuth, the Memorial Park's Rose Garden was dedicated to the sister city of Gunzenhausen. In an account of the 1969 visit, the Saginaw News column *Ed Miller Writes* said "Gay Days Again in Frankenmuth," referring to the atmosphere at Bavarian festival upon the arrival of our sister city friends!

In 1971, the Americans traveled to Gunzenhausen again and visited Löhe's grave in Neuendettelsau. The group was part of a larger People to People delegation that numbered 173. Among the travelers was News' editor, Irene Zeilinger, who presented a hand-sketched rendering of the Frankenmuth News building done by famed Frankenmuth artist Harold Eckert. Pastor Herman Zehnder, brother of Bavarian Inn founder William "Tiny" Zehnder and Zehnder's Restaurant owner Edwin Zehnder, also accompanied the group. In 1970, Herman Zehnder authored the book 'Teach My People the Truth,' an account of Frankenmuth's founding and its ministry to the native Chippewa Indians.

By 1971, the People to People organization boasted 350 American cities with affiliations with 450 cities in 60 different countries.

In 1976, Frankenmuth High School German teacher Jim Weber, along with his family, led a group of 24 students and parents on a trip to Germany, including a visit to Gunzenhausen. Current Frankenmuth sister city chairman Dan Haubenstricker participated in that visit. Terrorist activity in Germany during 1985 prompted Jim Weber and other organizers to cancel a similar trip much to the dismay of the students.

Throughout the 70's, Frankenmuth and Gunzenhausen continued visiting on formal and informal occasions. From the partnership's founding in 1962 up to the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1987, there were 9 formal visits between the two cities: '62, '64, '65, '68, '69, '71, '76, '79 & '80. When 110 Frankenmuth area residents visited Gunzenhausen in August of 1980, former Frankenmuth mayor Elmer "Pete" Simon appealed to the two cities to uphold the friendship's pioneering spirit ("Pioniergeist der Freundschaft erhalten!"). Other visits during the first 25 years included Marv Herzog—Frankenmuth's Polka King—for numerous travel tours with his 'Bavarian' polka band.

## Frankenmuth-Gunzenhausen – the Next Generation

In July of 1987, new mayor Gary Rupprecht and his wife Barbara were among 44 Frankenmuthers who visited Gunzenhausen to celebrate 25 years of partnership. 1987's official gift to Gunzenhausen was created by Nancy Goyings, a 36" x 42" stained glass picture depicting the log cabin and cross at Cross Park at the south entrance to the city of Frankenmuth. Mayor Rupprecht presented the gift along with former mayor Elmer P. Simon on July 3<sup>rd</sup> at the Gunzenhausen Stadthalle. Later that year in September, 72 Germans came to Frankenmuth. Mayor Gary Rupprecht designated September 25th as Gunzenhausen Day in 'Muth, and during the 25th anniversary celebrations, dedicated Gunzenhausen Street along with Gunzenhausen First Mayor Willi Hilpert and his wife Gertrud. Guests were also treated to a tour of Frankenmuth city hall, a bus tour of the city, a local children's folk dancing performance, as well as a formal banquet featuring Gunzenhausen native Karl Kugler on the *zither*, and Marv Herzog's Bavarian Polka Band.

The 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the partnership in 1987 began a new era. Recognizing that the original generation of sister city founders was aging, Frankenmuth City Councilwoman, Judy Zehnder Keller led the creation in 1988 of a formal Sister City Committee under the oversight of the City of Frankenmuth. The committee encouraged stronger youth involvement in the partnership by supporting German language instruction at St. Lorenz Elementary School, Frankenmuth High School and the community at large. Of the 13 members who began the Sister City Committee in 1988, four are still active as of 2012: Judy Zehnder Keller (Chair 1988-2005), Dan Haubenstricker (Chair 2005-present), Judy Simmerman, and Hans Schmidt. In fact, Schmidt's involvement has spanned the partnership's entire 50 years, including positions as treasurer, CEC representative, interpreter and official translator.

On the 7th of October, 1987, Frankenmuth's St. Lorenz Lutheran School announced it would commence German language lessons for children in K, 1 & 2 classes under the tutelage of Karen Rummel. Since that time, German language lessons have expanded to encompass K-8 grades, with hundreds of Frankenmuth children learning foundation lessons in German language, history, art and song.

In 1995, Judy Zehnder Keller helped organize a children's German church service honoring Frankenmuth's heritage. To this day, the services are held annually at St. Lorenz church and feature students from local schools assisting with readings and singing in German. From 1993 to 2007, the Bavarian Inn Lodge hosted annual German luncheons for St. Lorenz and Frankenmuth High School German students along with other sister city supporters. The Frankenmuth

Bavarian Festival (Civic Events Council) and other donors awarded youth exchange trips to Gunzenhausen to Frankenmuth High School students. Since 1993, 51 students have participated with gifts of airfare to Gunzenhausen compliments of the CEC and other donors. For 10 years beginning in 1996, Judy Zehnder Keller along with her husband Don Keller, accompanied more than 700 people on trips to Germany. The travel groups consisted of Frankenmuth High School German students, Venner Performing Arts students, parents, relatives and friends. Marwood and Joann Frank accompanied the groups for several years. The Frankenmuth High School German students now exchange school visits under the German American Partnership Program.

In 2011, Judy Zehnder Keller received the Wilhelm Löhe Medallion—an award recognizing her achievements in the perpetuation of the Franconian and Christian heritage through her business and cultural endeavors from Frankenmuth to Franconia. It was the first time the prestigious award was given to a non-German.

In 1992, Frankenmuth and Gunzenhausen celebrated their 30 year anniversary. A younger generation of ‘People to People’ advocates from Gunzenhausen and Frankenmuth answered the call to build on the foundation strongly laid by leaders on both sides. Frankenmuth resident Angie (Ringlein) Kern participated in a 3-month professional and cultural exchange trip with Gunzenhausen that year. Two years later, Mark Schutte and Greg Rummel participated as Frankenmuth representatives and Andreas Volek as the exchange participant from Gunzenhausen. Since then, 46 other individuals have visited their respective sister city on cultural and professional exchanges. In addition to Kern, Schutte and Rummel, Frankenmuth participants include Charlie Graham, Vicky Hayden, David Bergdolt, Abby McClellan, Mary Dietrich & Robin Mueller (former St. Lorenz German teachers), Rachel Frahm, Stephanie Sparschu, Paula Zehnder, Stephen Hargash, Ed Kuck and Ryan Buchinger.

In August 1995, hundreds of Germans visited Frankenmuth for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration of the founding of Frankenmuth and for the filming of the Bavarian TV musical show ‘Die Lustigen Musikanten.’ In the years 1997, 1998 and 2004, Frankenmuth High School’s acclaimed vocal group “Venner,” led by director Keith Spaulding, made concert tours in Germany and Austria. Their 1998 tour included the 700<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration for Neuendettelsau. To reciprocate, Gunzenhausen’s youth band (Jugendkapelle) gave concerts in Frankenmuth in 1998 and 2005. Also, the enthusiastic Gunzenhausen traditional music group “Gunzenhäuser Blous’n” performed at Frankenmuth’s Oktoberfest from 2002 to 2007. Since 2010, Frankenmuth High School German teacher Jennifer Freundt has taken students to Germany in even years with the German American Partnership Program. In August 2010, twenty-four scouts from Gunzenhausen visited Frankenmuth and also took part in the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Scouting National Jamboree in Virginia.

## The 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary: June 7-11, 2012

*A separate press release was issued to detail the visit to Frankenmuth of 111 German guests from Gunzenhausen and surrounding communities. In summary:*

- Thursday, June 7<sup>th</sup>: 8 pm anticipated arrival of 3 buses, followed by a welcome and dedication of the new fountain at Gunzenhausen Platz (intersection of Main St. & Covered Bridge Lane)
- Friday, June 8<sup>th</sup>: Evening spent at Frankenmuth Bavarian Festival
- Sunday, June 10<sup>th</sup>: 11 am German worship service at St. Lorenz Lutheran Church; 1 pm Bavarian Festival Parade (some German guests in the parade); 5 pm anniversary banquet at the Bavarian Inn Lodge. \$30 tickets available by calling Frankenmuth City Hall at 989-652-9901 or Frankenmuth Credit Union at 580 N. Main St. Advance sale only.
- Monday, June 11<sup>th</sup>: 7:45 am farewell at the Bavarian Inn Lodge

The Frankenmuth Sister City Committee has 21 members to plan for events, exchanges and anniversaries. Its current officers are Dan Haubenstricker, chair; Mark Schutte, vice chair; Charlie Graham, secretary; Cheryl Mossner, treasurer. Gunzenhausen's Sister City Committee "Freundeskreis" has been led by Renate Herrmann since 2003; she succeeded Siegfried Rein after his many years of service. In September 2012, Gunzenhausen will host about 100 visitors from Frankenmuth to conclude the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary year.

### Zum Schluß (In Closing)

As these stories account, the friendships made within the partnership are a testimony to a small progressive group of leaders that first forged a cross-Atlantic relationship 50 years ago. The first Frankenmuth pilgrimage trip to Gunzenhausen, cited by many accounts as both a civic and religious visit and on a "People to People" basis, was "absolutely fabulous" according to Irene Zeilinger's writings in 1962. During their first visit to Frankenmuth in 1964, Bürgermeister Wust commented in his dedication of the Linden tree in Gunzenhausen Platz that he hoped the tree "will bloom and grow like the friendship between Gunzenhausen and Frankenmuth, between the people of these sister cities." Ultimately, both Zeilinger's & Wust's comments affirm what the sister cities' relationship really is: Gunzenhausen, in Mittelfranken, Bavaria and Frankenmuth, in Mid-Michigan, are as much places in our hearts as they are places on a map. Mayor Rupprecht stated recently that "in the end, we may forget the speeches and the formalities, but we will never forget the memories with the people."

Greg Rummel, Sister City Committee Member