



Taking a stroll through a garden maintained by Fr. Frank Brickl are Edith Alt (Fr. Brickl's housekeeper) and two members of a group in Plain that hosted Bavarian visitors, Joe and Lucille Wankerl. Photo by Doris Litscher Gasser

Trip here a dream for Bavarians

by Doris Litscher Gasser

Edith Alt made it possible for the community of Plain to have a real "people to people" visit with a group from Bavaria, their heritage country.

It all came about after Father Brickl and Alt had taken copies of Hilda Thering's "History of Plain" on their trip to the Waldmuenchen, Bavaria community several years ago. Because of this communication, a group of 37 Waldmuenchen residents (to the tune of thirty eight hundred and ninety eight marks (\$2,800) set out to tour the USA with a high-light being Plain, a peaceful little Catholic town where their relatives and descendants reside.

Joe and Lucille Wankerl, Edith Alt and Father Frank Brickl spent an evening around the Brickl dining room table reviewing happy memories to share with you.

Along with heritage, religion is one of the basic ties between the two groups and Father Brickl, whose heritage in Bavaria is traced back to 1639, gave a little introductory explanation. "The civil and ecclesiastical situation is totally different in Bavaria than in America. After all is said and done Bavaria is highly socialistic. There

is a union of church and state. The German government pays the ministers, priests and rabbis. They pay a professional salary to all recognized religions, Christians and Jews. They get the same salary as a civil servant. Ten percent of the income is 'kirchensteuer.' That means a church tax and you have to go through a lot of red tape to be exempt from that. The Catholic priests I have met there get well paid. I have met others who are teachers in school and they are also well paid. I would say they get double what teachers in America get. Forty-eight percent of the people's income goes to taxes. But, they get medical benefits. They don't have to worry about caring for their teeth, hospitalization, paying doctors. That all gets paid by the government. yes, if they pay church taxes and don't go to church they are losers."

Joe and Lucille Wankerl, also had spent time in Bavaria. Their opening comments were on farming, also an integral part of life around Plain and in Bavaria.

Joe explained: "The farm homes in Bavaria were mostly in villages. The barn and house were in one building. A large granary was separate as well as a machine shed. The towns usually had a brewery,

stores, bakeries, meat markets, craftsmen, masons and brick layers. My mother's home place was not modern and was built outside of the village. The government started to subsidize farmers in the 1960's promoting bigger and more modern farms. A few of their farms are just as updated as ours."

Edith added: "We visited one of my relatives in Bavaria who had five cows and two milking machines."

Lucille mentioned: "My father,

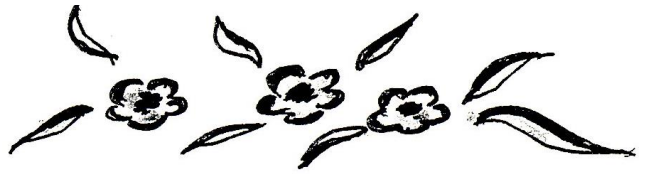
Joseph Lechner came from Bavaria in 1923."

"And," Joe added, "My father, John Wankerl immigrated from Germany 1917. My dad knew Father Brickl's dad, Simon, when they were in Germany. Simon Brickl built our garage in 1937. He farmed to make a living but he was a carpenter by hobby."

Edith worked long months in advance finding homes in the Plain area for the Bavarian guests. She worked through a representative from the Ikker Agency in Bavaria.

Then, the big day came when 37 tired travellers from Waldmuenchen arrived at 6 p.m. June 6 in a bus, just a year ago, at St. Patrick's Church in Plain. Prior to their Plain visit, USA travels had taken the Bavarian group to San Francisco, Yosemite Park, the Grand Canyon and Las Vegas.

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Edith had tried to pair off people from Bavaria and Plain according to their ages and interests.

Joe recalled, "We were the first ones to call and offer our home so we had the pick of the group." Lucille added: "The couple who stayed with us, Willibald and Hildegard Bruckner were the exact ages as we were."

Edith continued, "An exception was Father's cousin, Clara Blau, who was 83 and ended up with two young ladies ages 24 and 27. They got along so well. Father's cousin could speak some German. She has a good sense of humor."

Father added: "If things would go awry she would make a humorous remark. They were happy and when the young ladies were gone Clara missed them."

Some of the guests chose to stay at a bed and breakfast and according to Gwen Kraemer her Bavarian guests wouldn't even allow her to treat them to a beer. "But," Edith said, "The couple who stayed with us, the tour directors, Thomas and Veronika Gruber, didn't complain when we gave them a brandy."

The new arrivals were taken to the home of their hosts and enjoyed their welcome, a good supper and a restful night of sleep.

Father Brickl explained, "We made no attempt to fix German food. They don't care about American casseroles. They don't like their food mixed together." Edith added! "But I made a casserole of chicken, peas, and carrots inside of crescent rolls for Thomas and Veronika and he ate five of those. So, I wasn't disturbed at all when they didn't have room for dessert. They really aren't used to having sweets at a meal. They have coffee and their desserts separate in the afternoon."

The next morning I hired a bus from Jensen's Bus Service to take the group to the Suemnicht Cheese Company and a plastic factory in Reedsburg."

Father Brickl continued: "To finish that trip by bus- It was really a rainy Monday. Those people bought a lot- so much that Mr. Suemnicht gave us a box of crackers and cheese. From Reedsburg we went to Roxbury. St. Norbert's

have a painting from a well known artist given to the church by King Ludwig II of Germany approximately a 150 years ago."

The Bavarian group was seated respectfully in the church in awe as they viewed the painting of St. Jerome and the elegant, graceful statues that adorn the church. Father Brickl, who hadn't really spoken the language for 50 years, surprised himself when he explained the picture in its entirety in flawless German. It is basically a picture of St. Jerome with a Bible because he was the first to translate it into Latin. By his side is a calm lion because St. Jerome had kindly and empathetically pulled a thorn from his paw. The background includes robed Jesuit and Franciscan missionaries, a skull to remind St. Jerome of death and the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Father explained: "I gave no prayer or anything, but when I was finished they so appreciated my story in German that the entire group stood up in front of the church and started singing a Blessed Virgin hymn. They sang all six verses from memory. It was beautiful!"

After a pleasant time at St. Norberts the group went on for a brief visit at the Dorf Haus in Roxbury and then on back to Plain where they were on their own to find a place for lunch. Some of them went to Diehl's or Delmare's Bars. They enjoyed the hamburgers, which were different than the usual sauer brauten they had at home. Some people went to the Sunrise restaurant. Joe told: "We stopped at the bowling alley with the Bruckners and they had their fun about our beer because it wasn't as strong as their's. So, Willibald asked Sam Gruber at the Palace for 'Vaser beer,' which meant, 'Water beer!'"

Edith continued, "After lunch some of the group wanted to go shopping so Betty Jensen drove us to Spring Green in the bus. One lady wanted an American flag for her father. Another lady needed a battery for her video."

Joe added: "There was limited time and Bruckners wanted to buy jeans. We went to Hottmann's and they did buy jeans, black ones, washed out ones, blue ones.

Suddenly the place was full of Bavarian shoppers." Lucille explained: "The owner wasn't there so we were helping out. We went in the back and got shoes out for them." Joe went on, "They said shoes were half price. Our full retail is what they called half price. One lady could not get her size. Finally she found a pair that fit. I said, 'Those are men's shoes.' She replied, 'Machts nichts aus,' (It makes no difference) I'll take them.' They like shopping. Willibald had purchased a ten gallon hat in Salt Lake City and he was proud of that. Lucille and I bought things when we went to Germany, too. I like to collect beer steins."

Monday evening was a grand and glorious time at a warm gathering at the church hall in Plain. There was excitement and happiness. The people of the community brought food and drinks. Gisela Kraemer, 99 years old, got into it with the piano, enthusiastically playing German songs that rang throughout the hall. There was singing and talking, sharing and making new discoveries about family ties.

One of the guests was a patient of Lucille's cousin, a doctor Lechner in Bavaria. Joe recalled: "The Pfeiffers had more relatives here in Plain than anyone else. They were related to Ringlestetters, Hetzles and Lins' Those who didn't have relatives here knew our Plain relatives in Bavaria. Some of them knew our uncle who is with a cooperative milk company in Germany."

There was interest in Father Brickl's story of his grandfather coming from the old country. He explained: "My grandfather, Daniel Brickl, came with his family and brother and settled here in Plain. They bought a brewery and a guest house which was similar to a small hotel. The brewery was in the basement, the eating place on the first floor and the people were kept on the second floor. He had a vineyard and a bowling alley. He over extended himself and in the meantime he had a fire and had to rebuild. To enable a livelihood he became a smuggler in produce, grain and cattle to and from Bavaria. He got caught and sold out."

There were lots of feelings that went back and forth at our gathering. It is my assessment of the tour group that they were very well pleased."

Tuesday, the following day, the group chose what they would like to do for the day. Edith took a group to the spectacular House on Rocks in Spring Green. Which incidentally has since been referred to as 'Ein verruehtes (crazy) museum' in a Waldmuenchen Newspaper story of the trip to America. Another group went to the Baraboo University and had a tour.

Joe recalled: "The Bruckners wanted to see something related to his work. Willibald was an electrical engineer so we took them to the dam at Prairie du Sac. He said it was very similar to their power plant in Bavaria." Edith remarked: "I guess everyone went someplace but Hans Stautner. He wanted to see every farm in the country."

A trek to the Plain cemetery was a desired must for the travellers. There they found familiar names of relatives and descendants. Judy and Hank Ferstl took their guests for a walk in the woods.

Edith recalled: Tuesday evening, the night before their departure Peter and Rosemarie Schwarzfischer celebrated their 25th anniversary and were treated to prime rib steak and American Zinfandel California wine. They loved our red meat and thought prime rib was the best.

Then, it was early to bed and early to rise. Five o'clock the next morning as the group gathered at their bus there were expressions of gratitude, tears and goodbyes. The guests were homeward bound, through Milwaukee, on to New York and back to Waldmuenchen, Bavaria. Peter Schwarzfischer's goodbye was, 'This is the high light of our trip.' Another remarked, 'This was our dream trip.'

Joe expressed, "It was a good experience for all of us." And, Father Brickl concluded, "I think the best reaction I heard was from Hans Stautner. He had seen our farms so he had seen everything. He said, 'America is not San Francisco, nor the big parks, nor New York. This is America.'"