

# Abraham Family



The Abraham name has been associated with the woolen mill business in Frankenmuth for three generations. William John Abraham became a partner in the Frankenmuth wool knitting mills in 1910. His son Arnold "Abby" Abraham bought the operation and then sold it in 1977. In 1984, Arnold's daughter, Kathy, and her husband Gary Zeilinger, started the family business tradition again at their Zeilinger Wool Company on Weiss Street.

William John Abraham was born in Frankentrost August 30, 1882. He was one of 18 children of George and Barbara nee Kern. He came to Frankenmuth with his parents when he was eight years old. His father arrived in America at the age of six with his parents, Simon and Anna Margueta from Wattenbach, near Lichtenau Central Franconia, Germany. William worked as a cheese maker, having graduated from a cheese maker course at Michigan State College. He worked for a time as a bookkeeper at a local brewery. In 1908, he married Ada Veitengruber. Ada was the daughter of Leonard Veitengruber, who founded a lumber mill in Frankenmuth in the late 1800s. At age 28, William entered into a partnership with Franz Ranke and Ben Felgner to operate the Frankenmuth Woolen and Knitting Mills. He bought one-third of the business for \$2,650 and became the secretary/treasurer of the operation. Ranke was the president and Felgner the plant superintendent.

The business had been started in 1894 by Ranke and George Grueber, presumably because Grueber's son was interested in sheep. Grueber dropped out of the business after his son died at the age of 16. Ranke's operation grew and the mill produced blankets, socks, yarn, mittens and wool batting from local wool. In 1914, the woolen mill had about \$16,500 worth of business. Three years later, sales increased to \$41,000 and in 1918 to \$94,000.

The quick profits were based on the contracts for products during World War I. About 25 people were employed and a single worker could make 18 dozen socks on the machine in a day. Yarn production was also a big part of the Mill's business in the early 1900's. Area fire departments were steady customers of the mill's socks, mittens and gloves.

Ranke died in 1924 and his share of the mill was sold to the two remaining partners. By this time, both William's and Ben's families were involved in the business. William and Ada had three children: Brigetta nee Abraham Schluckebier, Arnold and Harold. Ada died in 1930 and William married Agnes Conzelmann October 14, 1933. Brigetta worked for 50 years at the Woolen Mill while also working 43 years at Zehnder's Restaurant. Harold served in the Army Air Force during WWII, worked at the mill and, with his wife, Ruth nee Satchell, owned the Frankenmuth Oil Company for 25 years, retiring because of ill health in 1975. Harold's children were Tim, Ruth, Mary and Christine. In 1947, Arnold "Abby" bought out Ben Felgner's partnership, and in 1950 he bought out his father William's share. William retired after 50 years in the woolen mill business. In 1948, the cider mill was torn down and the emphasis of the business changed from the production of mittens, gloves, stockings and yarn to wool comforters. "Abby" and his wife, Myra nee Gallagher, revitalized the business and started catering to the tourist trade. Their children, Martha, William, Thomas, and Kathy, came into the operation as teenagers and eventually Kathy became the manager.

The family sold the Mill to Gary McClellan of Sault Ste. Marie in 1977. Nearly 300,000 comforters had been made over the years. In 1984, Kathy nee Abraham Zeilinger and her husband, Gary Zeilinger, who was the production manager at the Frankenmuth Woolen Mill, opened their new Zeilinger Wool Company on Weiss Street.



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