

Bickel Family



The Bickel family was among the early settlers of Frankenmuth. Descendants of George Michael Bickel Sr. had an impact on progressive farming in the area and also played a significant role in the community's famous restaurant business. George Michael's great-granddaughter, Emilie Bickel Zehnder was the matriarch of the Zehnder Restaurant families that now operate Zehnder's of Frankenmuth, the Bavarian Inn Restaurant and the Bavarian Inn Lodge.

George Michael was born December 24, 1820 in Germany. At 26 years old, he joined a group of 90 immigrants whose destination was Frankenmuth, Michigan in the Saginaw Valley. He was among the men, women and children who were to reinforce the German Lutheran settlement founded here by 15 colonists in 1845. This group was to provide much needed manpower, moral support and enthusiasm.

They assembled at Nuernberg March 6, 1846 and made their way to Bremenhafen. There George Michael took Anna Margaretha Haltear for his bride in a ceremony that united nine other immigrant couples March 18, 1846. Four days later they sailed on a converted tobacco freighter. The voyage took seven weeks. The hardships of the passage and the young settlement apparently took their toll on young Mrs. Bickel. She died September 23, a mere six months after she left her homeland. George Michael married Anna Maria Veitengruber the following April 18. He purchased \$50 worth of land and they began farming.

The couple eventually had five children – Georg Michael, born July 18, 1848; John Jakob Jr. born October 7, 1855; Johann Leonhard born October 6, 1858; Maria Barbara Beiser born April 19, 1862; and Anna Maria born November 23, 1867. The second child, John Jakob Jr., married Maria Sophia Schmuck May 17, 1880.

He was a well-known farmer and businessman who lived on a 40 acre farm on Stern Road, northwest of the village of Frankenmuth. He purchased the first threshing machine rig in the Frankenmuth area and eventually owned seven or eight of them. He hired crews to thresh grains, beans and clover for three cents a bushel and made a good living for his family.

The couple had three children – Emilie Katharine born September 22, 1883; Georg Christian Bernhard born October 6, 1885; and Hulda Maria born April 10, 1889. Emilie learned to cook and bake from her mother, who was marvelous at both. When she was 24 she married Johann Matthias William Zehnder Thanksgiving Day November 29, 1907. The wedding was the “social event of the year”.

William and Emilie had 10 children and lived in the Zehnder homestead south of Jefferson and east of Main Street. When William's farming, butchering, and political careers were no longer enough to support the Zehnder clan, the couple purchased the Old Exchange Hotel. It opened for business on Mother's Day, May 12, 1929 with Emilie in the kitchen and the rest of the family at various jobs. There were some lean years in the beginning and Emilie suffered a stroke in 1931. She recovered and kept the business going strong. Frankenmuth family-style chicken dinners were her specialty. Customers came from miles around and waited in long lines to enjoy her delicious meals.

Emilie died December 30, 1941 at the age of 58, following a second stroke. Her children continued the business and purchased a second restaurant in 1950.

Later, her son Edwin and his family owned and operated the original Zehnder's Restaurant. Another son, William Jr. and his family own and operate the Bavarian Inn Restaurant and the Bavarian Inn Lodge.



Researched & Compiled by Bavarian Inn Lodge
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