

Bleke Family



he religious education in Frankenmuth has always been a significant part of the community's heritage. Originally, St. Lorenz Lutheran congregation established one room schools within walking distance of the pupils' homes.

At one time there were eight one-room schools. Each school had one teacher who had the responsibility of not only teaching eight grades (one building had 83 pupils one year), but starting a fire in the wood stove each morning and doing the daily cleaning.

St. Lorenz congregation did not support the schools directly out of the congregational treasury. Instead "church school districts" were formed. Members of the church living within that district voluntarily contributed funds to run the school. Each district set their own salary scale for the teacher who was called by the voting body of the entire congregation. Residents of the district frequently supplemented the low salary with produce and farm products, especially at butchering time when "metzel suppen" (Bratwurst-blutwurst-leberwurst-meat etc.) were brought to the "teacherage". It was not unusual for the teacher to receive live chickens as gifts. Teachers were required to teach both English and German. English was considered the second language, because very few children could understand much less speak English, when they entered school at the age of six.

In 1927, some of the district schools were consolidated and an eight classroom brick school was built on Main Street. This building was expanded by 5 classrooms and a gymnasium in 1951. When the birth rate indicated future increases in enrollment the congregation decided to build a new structure at the present Churchgrove Road site. Up to this time the congregation had always had a teaching principal. In 1956, a full-time principal was employed in the person of Walter F. Bleke.

Walter, the son of Martin C. Bleke and Emilie nee Hollmann had some interesting "ties" to Frankenmuth. His grandmother, Marie nee Frosch Bleke, had lived in Frankenmuth from the ages of two to four. At Walter's birth, he was delivered by a Dr. Schick, who also had previously lived in Frankenmuth.

Walter was born and raised on a farm in the Ft. Wayne, Indiana area and originally anticipated a business career. The depression of the 30's directed his continued education towards Concordia Teachers College of River Forest, Illinois, to prepare for teaching in the Lutheran schools of the Missouri Synod. While at Concordia the faculty awarded him the Concordia Teachers College Service Award (the only one ever awarded) for being the first to ever serve as student body president for two years.

After graduation in 1936, he served St. Stephens Lutheran Church and School (up to 66 students at one time) in Chicago for ten years, and Peace Lutheran Church and School in Antigo, Wisconsin for ten years.

While at St. Stephens in Chicago, Walter married Dorothy E. Fedder. Their marriage was blessed with three children: Corinne, Bert, and Dwight; also, seven grandchildren.

During his tenure at St. Lorenz Lutheran School (1956-1979) the entire school program was moved to the Churchgrove Road site through building programs in 1966 and 1969. The school's enrollment ranged between 500 and 712 students earning the distinction of being the largest Lutheran school in the United States for many years.

Walter Bleke died February 5, 2002 and is buried in the St. Lorenz Cemetery.

