

Zehnder Family



he Zehnder family's involvement in the restaurant business in Frankenmuth goes back three generations. It was Johann Matthias Wilhelm Zehnder (William, Sr.) and his wife Emilie (Bickel) who took a gamble and bought the rundown,

boarded up Exchange Hotel on Main Street in 1928. They sold the Auernhammer farm on the south side of Frankenmuth and borrowed money to make the \$8000 payment. The Zehnders were farmers who lived on a parcel of land south of Jefferson on the east side of Main Street. William Sr. operated a slaughterhouse with his father and tried several other business ventures, as well, in the early 1920's, but the couple needed more income to support their 10 children.

After William's sister, Sophie Ardussi, was successful with her husband John in the restaurant business in Detroit, Frankenmuth, and Saginaw, she encouraged her brother to get into the business. The couple's daughters, Linda Zehnder Trinklein and Ermia Zehnder Nuechterlein, who worked as waitresses for their aunt and uncle, encouraged them as well.

Emilie Bickel Zehnder was an excellent cook who was use to preparing meals for her large family and the extra farm hands. The children could all help. Linda was 19, Ermia was 17, their oldest son Fred was 15, Albert was 12, Herman was 11, William, Jr. was 8, Edwin was 7, and Leonard 5. Two other Zehnder children had died in infancy.

Zehnder's Restaurant opened Mother's Day, May 12, 1929, and had a shaky financial beginning. The Depression discouraged families from eating out. Emilie suffered a stroke in 1931 and another in 1940. She died December 30, 1941. William Sr. took a job in the Saginaw County Courthouse as the Deputy Register of Probate and worked there for the next 30 years.

A steady paycheck and the outside money the children earned (Fred was Frankenmuth's postmaster) kept the struggling business afloat during the lean years. The children married and had their own families but stayed together to operate Zehnder's Restaurant. Business picked up, particularly after World War II. It became a common sight to see a long line of hungry guests waiting to taste Zehnder's famous "all you can eat chicken dinners". Herman Zehnder became a Lutheran minister while the others rotated management positions in the family corporation.

In 1947 William Sr. signed over the business to his children. Steady profits encouraged the family to buy out their competition across the street in 1950. Fischer's Hotel was soon expanded and converted into the Frankenmuth Bavarian Inn, specializing in German entrees as well as the famous chicken platters.

Edwin Zehnder and his wife Marion (Leidel) stayed at the original Zehnder's Hotel. Today they own and manage that operation with their children Linda Susan and her husband Samuel Baker, and their son Albert and his wife Dee (Trombley). Their two other daughters are Catherine and Martha.

William, Jr. and his wife Dorothy (Hecht) own and operate the Frankenmuth Bavarian Inn and this Frankenmuth Bavarian Inn Motor Lodge with their children and spouses. They are Judith Zehnder and her husband Don Keller, and William A. and his wife Karen (Zeilinger). Their other daughter Roxie is married to Gerald Westgate and lives in western Michigan.

The Bavarian Inn and Zehnder's restaurants serve a combined total of 1.5 million dinners annually, most of them Zehnder's famous family style chicken.



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