

The History of the Rhinebeck-Rheinbach Exchange

The Beginnings. Many years ago when our Rhinebeck Town Historian, Dewitt Gurnell, was working with the youth of the Reformed Church, he tried to instill in them a sense of history of their town. It was in this context that they learned about the 35 German families from the Pallatine Region who had settled in Rhinebeck in the early 1700s. In trying to get these youths to connect with their town's history, he attempted to locate and establish a communication with the community from which these people had come. Alas, this never came about.

Among the youth in this group was Jack Shackleton. The lessons taught by "Uncle Dewitt" (as he was affectionately known to the townspeople) remained with him. Many years later, in 1977, with these thoughts still lingering, he decided to make another attempt at establishing a link with our "ancestors" in Germany. By this time he was Director of Music at Rhinebeck High School, and so his inclination was to think of a musical exchange; as music is the common language of all the world..

He addressed his proposal to the Mayor of the Town of Rhinebeck, West Germany. Now there are at least two "Rhinebecks" in Germany. Fate would have it that Jack's letter arrived in Rheinbach, whose Burgemeister could not read English. So he enlisted the help of the teachers at the Pallotti-Kolleg to translate this curious piece of correspondence. Certainly he went to the right place, for the Kolleg was known in the area for its boys choir, orchestra and band. The other schools in the community likewise have excellent music programs. They were delighted with the proposal that Mr. Shackleton had put before them. Eventually, their response came... Yes, they were interested.

From that point on, both communities moved into a frenzy of activities. Here, the band's rehearsals went into an overtime schedule, while an organizing group, "The Friends of Music," set out to raise \$24,000. In Rheinbach, the search was on for families to host the 71 Americans who would be staying with them for 7 days, set up tours for them, raise funds for these tours, and also to prepare themselves for a joint concert with our students. In the meantime, letters began to cross the Atlantic, letters of introduction to host families, sharing information and pictures of one another. Those, who a few months before had told Jack Shackleton his idea was "crazy" looked on now in disbelief.

Finally, on April 16, 1978, when the entourage of 58 students and 13 adults boarded the buses for Kennedy Airport, the Rhinebeck-Rheinbach Exchange was born; the new friendship between the two communities was about to be confirmed. The idea that "Uncle DeWitt" nineteen years before had placed before a group of young people was to become a reality!

The people of Rheinbach opened their homes, their hearts and their country to the visitors. Our students learned much about the German way of life by residing with host families, touring cities such as Bonn & Cologne (Koln), visit-

ing castles, hiking in the mountains, and walking in the woods. The weary group soon became aware of the Germans' love of walking.

The following year the people of Rhinebeck opened their homes, hearts and country to 144 people from Rheinbach for a 10-day visit. They traveled to New York City, Albany, Mystic, and to many local historic sites. Their concerts once again proved that music is an international language and a wonderful means of communication.

The Exchange was repeated again in 1983-84. The motto for those years was "Hands Across the Water'." At the Auf Wiedersehen Party held just prior to their departure on April 15, 1984, one of the Rheinbach faculty addressed the people of Rhinebeck. He expressed their deep feelings of gratitude, love and appreciation for the warm welcome, for the many interesting and joyful encounters they shared with us; he ended with the words: "*This has been for all of us an experience not only of 'Hands Across the Water', but Hands and Hearts Across the Water.*" Thus, for the third Exchange in 1988-89, the theme was changed to "Hearts Across the Water," which became our permanent logo; Handel's "The Brotherhood of Man" became our theme song. And, for the first time, the Exchange occurred in the summer. On this occasion the order was reversed whereby the people of Rheinbach came to us first so that they could participate in our town's 300th birthday celebration. They were the main musical performance at the grand finale on July 23, 1988. They also presented concerts at the Vanderbilt Mansion, Bard College, as well as at the German Alps Festival at Hunter Mountain.

The fourth and fifth exchanges took place in 1993-94 and 1998-99; and now, we are in our fifth program and preparing for our sixth exchange. The relationships between our towns continues to grow. The Rhinebeck-Rheinbach Exchange has been able to continue only because there are many dedicated people on both sides of the Atlantic, who are willing to give of themselves; to give time and expend much energy, and overcome many hurdles that sometimes get in the way. We believe it is our communities' own humble effort toward brotherhood and world peace!

A Little Bit about Rheinbach... Our sister town, with its satellite villages, has a population of about 25,000. It is situated about 25 miles south of Cologne (Koln) and about 15 miles southwest of Bonn. The Burgermeister is Stephan Raetz. Unlike Rhinebeck, there are many schools within the community; at one of them—a *Glasfachschule*, students learn the art of glass-making. There is also a glass museum in the village.

The documented history of Rheinbach goes back to the year 762. In the year 1298, it acquired the rights of a town. In 1998 they celebrated their 700th Anniversary of *official* township. It became a town of glass handicraft after 1945 when refugees arrived from Czecho-slovakia. Rheinbach also has exchange relationships with a town in Belgium, with Villeneuve-les-Avignon in France and Sevenoaks, Kent, Great Britain.