

A History of Bronner Screen Printing, Frankenmuth, Michigan 48734

By Doris A. Paul (for Bronner's CHRISTmas Wonderland)

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Foreword

Bronner Screen Printing is located at 1400 Weiss, Frankenmuth, Michigan, on a V-shaped acreage on the city's southern edge, adjacent to Bronner's CHRISTmas Decorations. One might say the two were built "in tandem." When the roofs had been completed (in 1976) traditional "tree topping" parties were held for the construction workers and building material suppliers.

Both businesses flourish with special underlying philosophies. For Bronner's CHRISTmas Decorations, it is to provide gifts and decorations for Christ the Saviour's birthday, and to promote the spirit of CHRISTmas throughout the year. For Bronner Screen Printing, diverse services are provided "to help you communicate." According to one observer, Bronner Screen Printing can put your name and message on a "balloon, button or billboard." The company is capable of communicating ideas by way of interior and exterior signs, tool organization programs, product markings, fleet markings, governmental markings (such as police car decals), and point of purchase signs.

The structure in which it is housed has the same unique features as those of the Christmas building nearby: crushed red tile roof and the general characteristics of Alpine architecture.

The plant features modern equipment, and is both air-conditioned and humidity-controlled. A bay large enough to accommodate a high truck or trailer provides space for the application of fleet and governmental markings under controlled conditions.

Bronner Screen Printing has filled orders for signs of various kinds of sizes for customers in various parts of the world. Recently signs for Wickes Building Materials Trading Company, bearing the name in both English and Arabic, were shipped to Saudi Arabia.

Origin of Business

The origin of this “going concern” dates back to 1942 when, at the age of fifteen, Wallace Bronner (better known as “Wally”) painted his first outdoor sign identifying St. Lorenz Tuscola District School (now displayed in the Screen Printing show room). The sign was painted gratis as a church service talent festival project of the Walther League, the youth organization of The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. (In later years, Wally served as president of the local, zone, district and international Walther League organizations.)



Wally continued to paint, doing posters and stage set-ups for church, school and community activities. In the case of stage setups, he laid out 10’ x 36’ rolls of stage background paper on which he sketched scenes, and then supervised his classmates in painting them. Children in action positions were used as silhouettes for tracing the desired positions required for particular scenes.

From the time he was eight until he reached the age of twenty-seven, Wally worked part-time as clerk in the Hubinger Grocery Store – a store established by his grandparents, Gottfried and Maria Hubinger, and continued by Wally’s Aunt Hattie Hubinger and his mother, Ella Hubinger Bronner, who helped on a part-time basis.

His sign painting business was officially started in the basement of the home of his parents, Herman and Ella Bronner, at 290 Haas Street, the northwest corner of Haas and Tuscola Streets. (The stately brick home was built by Wally’s father who, along with his brothers and father, Johannes, was a stone and brick mason.)

From the beginning the business established by the young sign painter was officially named “Bronner Display and Sign Advertising.” The date (1945) marked also the centennial year for Frankenmuth (settled one hundred years previously by German missionaries to the Indians). It was a happy coincidence because Wally was assigned many jobs to decorate store windows and parade floats, and to paint signs relating to the centennial.

The following year business expanded at a rapid rate. Among special projects were lettering trucks and decorating booths at the Saginaw County Fair. The first booth he decorated was one featuring Fred and Grace Schreiber's King-Row Corn Seed; the first truck he lettered was owned by Zuellig and Son of Birch Run; and the first wall decorations were designed and painted for Lydia Schmitzer's tavern.

The free-lance window display business increased as did the decorating of fair booths. In order to fulfill his contracts he called on his brother Arnold, and sister, Helen Bronner Rupprecht, to assist him. During this busy year (1947) he also hired part-time help other than family members. Roland Gugel assisted in painting sign panels.

Wally's first major account for window decorating on a monthly basis was with Jennison Hardware Company in Bay City. The account came about as the result of a fortunate set of circumstances. His sweetheart, Irene Ruth Pretzer of Hemlock, attending Bay City Junior College, boarded at the home of G.W. Cook, president of the hardware company; and it was through her that the initial contact was made.

One day as he was trimming windows for the hardware company, a group of visiting merchants from Clare contracted him regarding suggestions for city street Christmas decorations. This was a very fruitful encounter for, as a result, the lamp posts in Clare were decorated that year (1951) with hardboard panels Wally painted for them. The merchants of Clare were so pleased that they placed a duplicate order the following year.

He hired his first part-time salesman, Waldo Vanek, in 1948. Mr. Vanek's main assignment was to call on area farmers to solicit name signs for their barns.

After Irene, Wally's girl-friend, became a teacher in Frankenmuth School System, she assisted him in centerpiece projects for Christmas season decorating jobs that included contracts with the Durand Hotel in Flint, the Bancroft in Saginaw and Wenona Hotel in Bay City, as well as the Zehnder and Fischer restaurants in Frankenmuth.

In 1948, Eddie Beyerlein was hired as the first full-time employee for Bronner Display and Sign Advertising. A building, originally known as the Roth Carpentry Shop (behind Hubinger's Grocery), served as a sign painting shop during the warm weather. Display props and decorations were stored in the second story of the grocery.

Author's Note – For further information about the development of the Christmas decoration division, see the pamphlet, THE HISTORY OF BRONNER CHRISTMAS DECORATION [also books by Wally Bronner].

The industrious Bender brothers, Henry, Edmar, Reuben, Lester and Eugene, helped part-time on many projects that required special carpentry. Wally depended on Louie Priem, a sign artist in Bay City, on numerous occasions for help in lettering and screen printing.

In 1950, encouraged by his success in Clare, he and Fred Bernthal visited a number of cities in Ohio, Indiana and Michigan to survey the need for municipal Christmas decorations. Sure of a potential market, he ordered appropriate merchandise from the General Plastic Corporation, located in Marion, Indiana, and Mold-Craft Corporation of Post Washington, Wisconsin.

He reserved the township hall for a special showing of these street decorations for Christmas, and mailed invitations to cities he and Mr. Bernthal had visited, as well as to cities in Ontario. The exhibit, held in the spring, was so successful that another showing was scheduled for fall of the same year to be held in a larger facility - - the gymnasium of St. Lorenz School.

Painting of informative signs as well as decorative panels went hand in hand with the Christmas decoration division, which flourished after the initial showing in Frankenmuth.

The First Permanent Location

In 1954 the first permanent building for the Display and Sign business was constructed at 121 East Tuscola Street with 3600 square feet of floor space, one half of which was allocated to sign painting, while the other half served as a display area for Christmas trims.

During the first three months of the year, the part devoted to Christmas displays was closed off to conserve heat. When the warm weather returned, it was opened for the few curious people who wandered through.

Michigan Bell Telephone Company became an important account in the fifties. Many seasonal displays were produced and shipped to various public offices of the company throughout Michigan, and later to other states served by the Bell system

During the mid-fifties Wally made sketches for the front of additions to the Rupprecht Brothers sausage establishment, introducing Bavarian design. During this period, the Fischer Hotel was purchased by the Zehnder family, and they converted the building into what is now known as the Bavarian Inn. With Wally's assistance in sketching designs, Fred Zehnder became the pace-setter for the "Alpine look" which later became the accepted theme of the community.

A small amount of screen printing was done on banners, real estate signs and point of sales displays, with the use of hand-cut lacquer film to make the screens, as early as 1954.

In 1956, the official Frankenmuth crest was produced from a design agreed upon by a committee consisting of Rudy LaRiviere, Carl Geyer, Doris Voorheis and Wally Bronner.

Bronner's first co-op student from Frankenmuth High School was Larry Huber, who is still with the company.

In 1957, Donald Fischer, hired as a part-time employee, was so deeply interested in the work that he stayed on the job sixty hours during his first week. His creative, artistic and technical abilities were the key to his advancement in the business over a period of years - - from the position of part-time employee to the top job of general manager of the Display and Sign division.

As the business expanded, a second story was added to the building (in 1963). Two years later, Bronner's rented a building formerly known as the Ken Theatre Building for additional storage purposes. A spray painting booth was added during this year to expedite production of signs for accounts such as Wickes Lumber Company.

A major step taken during the years was the purchase of the vacated Frankenmuth Bank Building across the street, where Bronner's moved their stock of artificial trees, garlands, wreaths and ornaments for tree-trimming. The building was renamed "Bronner's Tannenbaum Shop."

Transition from Highway Signs to Screen Printing

The year 1968 was one of decision for the display and sign division of the Bronner business. At the time, production of highway signs was about equal to that of point of sale displays and exhibits. After attending hearings on the controversial federal highway beautification legislation, Bronner's decided to allow the larger bulletin companies to pursue the fight, and to turn their full attention to the expansion of the display and sign business. Automatic screen printing was added to the line of services, making possible mass production of signs (versus the one-at-a-time procedure). This part of the business was moved to a building located directly behind the Edelweiss Restaurant owned by Ray and Roberta Weiss.

In 1969 additional equipment was purchased to set up a process camera and darkroom for processing films required for making the printing screens. In order to use this new equipment, it was necessary to add screen-making and cleaning equipment, which included a quartz light unit that exposed the image onto the printing screen, and a power washing unit to reclaim screens for subsequent use. A 24" x 32" semi-automatic screen printing press was then added to the sophisticated equipment, enabling Bronner's to create signs from artwork to finished product for their growing list of customers.

In 1970, Don Fischer accompanied Wally on one of his buying trips to Europe where he was able to observe graphics and building designs, as well as to become acquainted with artists and glass-blowers in cottage industries with whom Wally was doing business for the Christmas Decorations division.

During this year Bronner Display and Sign Advertising became a member of the Screen Printing Association International, and an intensive effort was made by Don to obtain full information as to the technology required for this area of expertise. Bronner Display has continued its membership in the international association through the years. At least one representative attends each annual convention as well as other seminars to stay abreast of the latest technological and marketing facets of the rapidly growing industry. (In 1978 Don was elected to the board of the international association.)



In 1972, with high hopes for growth, and faith in the free enterprise system, Don, Larry Huber and Wally attended a screen printing exhibition in Cleveland and purchased a fully automatic screen printing press and drying system. The equipment was too large to place in the existing facility and so was housed in a rented building on the southwest corner of Walnut and Weiss. The unit, 60 feet in length, was able to print sheets of cardboard, paper or plastic up to 36" x 48" at speeds of 1000 impressions an hour. Decals and display posters comprised the bulk of the work on the press. A prestigious account was added when the State of Michigan contracted for emblems on state police cars.

By 1974 Bronner's Screen Printing, with ten employees, hired their first full-time salesman, Al Kosche, who spread the word that Bronner Display had screen printing capabilities found no closer than Detroit. Although the nation was experiencing an economic recession, the year 1975 saw definite growth in the business. Orders for 250,000 snowmobile and boat registration decals for the State of Michigan bolstered production.

By this year the business had completely outgrown its two locations which totaled approximately only 7000 feet. Bronner's Christmas Decorations was also bulging at the seams and needed more space, even though a third building (the former Hubinger grocery), which they called "Bronner's Bavarian Corner," had been added in 1971.

A Complete Move to Present Headquarters

Following years of planning, two adjacent buildings were constructed which today house the two divisions of Bronner's Display and Sign Advertising, Inc. Construction of the Bronner Screen Printing building, which covers 18,000 square feet, was started in 1975 with William Bronner and son Ron as contractors, Schmidt and Thiel, architects, and Manyam and Associates, mechanical engineers. The building was opened in October of 1976 - - the bicentennial year of the United States, the land of free enterprise.

The building is of course large enough to house the big printing machine and other production equipment, an art department, show room and offices. In addition to normal screen printing facilities, Bronner Screen Printing has a complete color mixing system and paint spraying facility, a complete woodworking shop, a sign lettering department, a regional sign and display installation service, and a sheet metal cutting and punching department.

The plant has numerous divisions beginning with the Art and Camera Department where artists design displays, product markings, fleet markings, and signs and then produce positives used in making the printing screens. They use a process camera, photo enlarger, photographic typesetters, register and line-up equipment and sign painting easels to assist them.

In the Screen Making Department, fabric is stretched on frames to form the printing screen. The fabric is then coated with photographic emulsion and exposed to a bright light while in contact with the film positive. To accomplish this, air operated screen tensioners, a 68" x 15" vacuum screen exposing unit, 2500 KW printing lamps and special screen reclaiming equipment are used.



Larry Huber operates automatic screen printing press at 1400 Weiss St. location.

In the Printing Department, the developed printing screen is registered to the stock in the press best suited for the size and type of printing required. Special inks formulated for specific printing surfaces are matched to customer specifications and duplicated on either a 36" x 48" fully automatic flat bed screen printer with 60-foot jet drying oven, 14" x 20" cylinder screen printing press, 23" x 32" semi-automatic flat bed press, 8½" x 11" flat bed press with micro registry or a 44" x 84" vacuum base one-arm squeegee printing table.

In the Finishing Department, printed decals and displays are die-cut, back-slit or face-slit to facilitate application, over laminated for protection against weather or solvents and trimmed to size. A 16" x 20" platen die cutter, 14" x 20" cylinder die cutter, slitter, laminator, 50" power paper cutter and related equipment are used to accomplish this.

In the Wood-Working Department, signs and point-of-purchase displays are cut out, assembled and finished on an assortment of power saws sanders, drills and routers.

In the Painting and Finishing Department, paints and clear coats such as enamels and lacquers are applied with spray and roller to a large variety of signs and displays.

And finally in the Shipping and Receiving Department, displays, signs and decals are packaged for shipment to Bronner customers. Palletizing and loading dock facilitate the handling of both large and small shipments.

During 1979 the staff was increased by eleven employees. Contracting for fabrication and installation of complete super-store interior sign programs were added as a service of Bronner's. Meijer's chain of stores is one of the company's major accounts in this part of the business.

After many years of working with Bronner's CHRISTmas Decorations as a single unit of business, on January 1st, 1980, Bronner Screen Printing incorporated as a subsidiary of Bronner Display and Sign Advertising, Inc., and now operates independently.

Officers are:

Chairman of the Board
President
Vice-President
Secretary

Wallace J. Bronner
Donald W. Fischer
Robert A. Reindel
Irene R. Bronner

Sales during 1980 have averaged 33% over sales of the previous year - - in spite of an economic recession during which many businesses and industries have found it necessary to lay off large numbers of workers.

Printing of touch switches with pure silver ink for low resistance in the circuitry, a variety of modern tool graphic control panels and special face plates for electronic instruments have been added to the list of products during the year.

The company now has salesmen in two major cities: Grand Rapids and Detroit. Some time ago one salesman unintentionally advertised Bronner's diverse methods of production when he pulled out a business card bearing his name and address printed on plastic! An innovation!

Sampling Bronner's products, among types of displays Bronner's can furnish for point of purchase uses are: counter cards, literature racks and holders, product displays, window banners, knockdown displays, permanent sales aids and posters. General Motors, Wickes Lumber, Genova, McGraw-Edison, Meijer's, Robinair Manufacturing, Lau industries and Gibson are a few of the companies that rely on Bronner Screen Printing for point of purchase displays.

Bronner's tool board, which is marked with the shape of each specific tool, has been popular with a number of manufacturers. From specialty tools to minor instruments, hand tools, gaskets, fittings, gears, pulleys and bushings, Bronner's tool organization program can facilitate the storage of both large and small tools efficiently and effectively. Among industries making good use of the Bronner tool board are Buick, Oldsmobile, Chevrolet, Fiat and Datsun.

As was stated previously, Bronner Screen Printing's business is based on the principle of "helping you to communicate." Statements reflecting this philosophy, lifted from a company brochure, are eloquent:

"At Bronner's, we think exterior signs communicate a silent yet complete story."

"Signs have virtually become the public's own system of street communication as they are the only form of mass communication, directly available to everyone They inform your clientele what you are, where you are, as well as what you do ... Signs create a mood. A feeling. An image of both you and your business."

"Bronner Screen Printing has many ways to help you communicate your message whether it need be a marking design from scratch, or made to match a specific government code, emblem or design."

(As for fleet marking), "Day in ... day out, trucks, buses, trailers and cars move the products that move America. And with the right decals and design signatures your fleet vehicles can also serve to move potential customers close to your product."

Bronner Screen Printing's efforts are best described as "Communication Graphics."

Through the talent, ambition, imagination and foresight of a young man painting cardboard signs in the basement of his parents' home in Frankenmuth, the business has grown from a one-man operation to a company with 35 employees, serving the needs of American businesses, industries and governmental organizations, as well as reaching across the world - - to communicate a message!



(Left to Right) Wally Bronner, Don Fischer, and Larry Huber in 1970 inspecting printed signs at plant located at 121 E. Tuscola St.

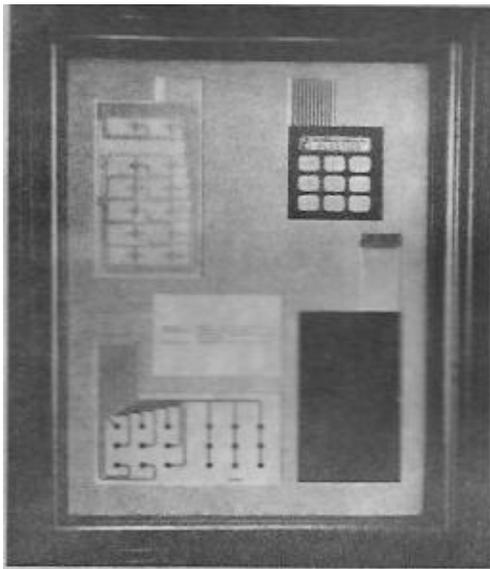
Chronology

- 1942 ... **Wallace Bronner painted his first outdoor sign identifying St. Lorenz Tuscola District School**
- 1943 ... **Wally painted posters and stage settings for church, school and community activities**
- 1945 ... **Bronner Display and Sign Advertising officially established in basement of Wally's parents' home**
- 1946 ... **Lettering of trucks and decorating booths at Saginaw County Fair initiated**
- 1947 ... **Free-lance window display business increased as did fair booth decorations and exhibits**
- Wally's brother, Arnold, and sister, Helen Bronner Rupprecht, assisted part-time, as did Roland Gugel**
- First major display account with Jennison Hardware in Bay City**
- 1948 ... **Business expanded to include interior seasonal decorations of hotels in Flint, Saginaw and Bay City, and the Zehnder and Fischer restaurants in Frankenmuth**
- Hired first part-time salesman, Waldo Vanek, to solicit name signs for barns**
- Eddie Beyerlein hired as full-time employee**
- 1951 ... **First city decoration project - - in Clare, Michigan**
- 1954 ... **Building once known as Roth Carpentry Shop used for sign painting area**
- First permanent building for Display and Sign business erected at 121 East Tuscola**
- 1956 ... **Larry Huber, first co-op student from Frankenmuth High School**
- 1957 ... **Donald Fischer hired as part-time employee**
- 1963 ... **Second story added to building**
- Spray painting booth purchased**

- 1968 ...** Bronner's withdrew from production of large highway signs devoting full attention to display and sign business
- Sign business moved to a building behind Edelweiss Restaurant (Weiss Street)**
- 1969 ...** Process camera and dark room set up for processing films for the printing screens; also purchased screen-making and cleaning equipment
- 1970 ...** Don Fischer accompanied Wally on trip to Europe
- Bronner Display became a member of Screen Printing Association International**
- 1972 ...** Purchase of fully automatic screen printing press and drying system
- New equipment placed in building, southwest corner of Walnut and Weiss**
- State of Michigan ordered emblems for state police cars**
- 1974 ...** Hired first full-time salesman, Al Kosche
- 1975 ...** Work began on new building on southern edge of Frankenmuth
- 1976 ...** Building opened in October
- 1978 ...** Don Fischer elected board member of International Screen Printing Association
- 1979 ...** Eleven people added to staff, making total of 35 employees
- Contracting for fabrication and installation of complete super-store interior sign programs added as a service of Bronner's**
- 1980 ...** Bronner Screen Printing was incorporated as a subsidiary of Bronner Display and Sign Advertising, Inc. with Don Fischer as Corporation President and General Manager
- Touch switches printing, modern tool graphic control panels and special face plates for electronic instruments added to list of products**



Wooden cut-outs of “space people” produced at 121 E. Tuscola St. location in early 1960’s



Membrane (Touch), 1980

Switch parts screen printed with pure silver ink for the electronic market at 1400 Weiss St.

Acknowledgments

CONTENT INFORMATION

Wallace & Irene Bronner and Donald Fischer

TYPESETTING and PRINTING

Frankenmuth News

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BRONNER
Screen Printing

- Signs
- Decals
- Product Markings
- Point of Sale Displays
- Close Tolerance Printing