

“From Horseshoes ... to Horsepower”

Schaefer & Bierlein / Rummel & Schaefer / Rummel Blacksmithing / Schaefer Blacksmithing 145 years of service – January 23, 1997”

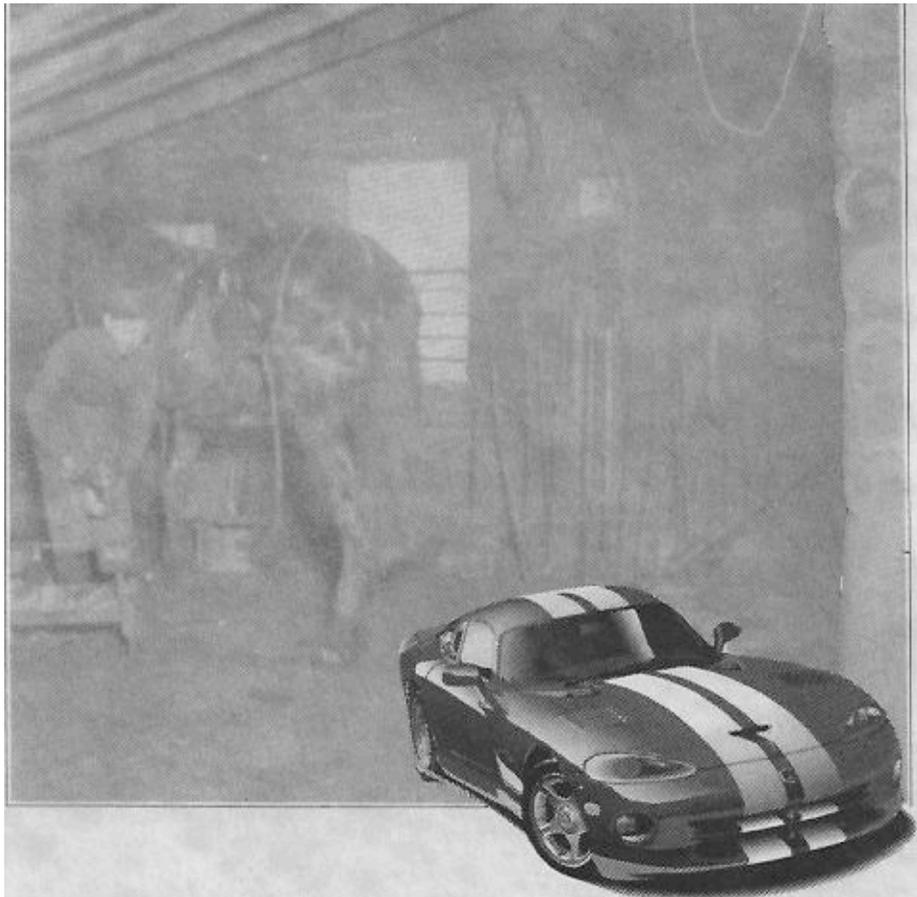
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Images are courtesy of the Schaefer and Bierlein families.

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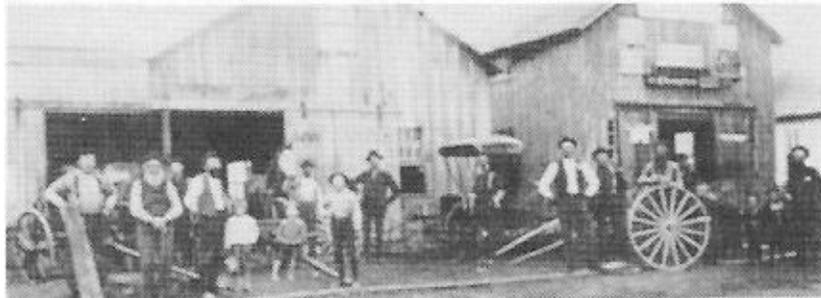




From Horseshoes to Horsepower

- When George M. Schaefer opened a blacksmith shop in Frankenmuth in 1852, he helped get the small German community rolling. He shoed horses and repaired wagon wheels.
- When George Rummel and Bernhard G. Schaefer ran the business in 1914, they added a line of completely different wheels – Willys-Overland cars.
- In 1923, the businessmen put area farmers in the driver’s seat. They began selling and servicing motorized John Deere farm machinery.
- Now Bernhard Schaefer’s son-in-law, Duane Bierlein, and Bierlein’s son, Randy, sell about 475 new Chryslers, Plymouths, Dodges, Jeeps, and Eagles a year, making them major suppliers of automobiles and expert service in the Saginaw Valley.

The story of one of Frankenmuth’s oldest family businesses mirrors the history of transportation in the small German community in Saginaw County. From the horse and buggy days to the era of computerized cars, trucks and vans, descendants of George M. Schaefer have helped put Frankenmuthers on wheels.



Schaefer Blacksmithing in 1895: (left) John Zehnder, George M. Schaefer, Fred Zehnder, unknown children and adults, George Daenzer (dark suit), George Rummel, Mr. Dittmal [Dittmar?], Mr. Eischer, Mr. Schneider (behind wheel), Emma, Agnes, Barney, Walter Schaefer and their father George A. Schaefer (1982.31.3)



The business adapted with the times, from a blacksmith shop to a combination blacksmith and automobile garage to the current expansive complex which includes a sales showroom and lot, plus repair and body shops on a six acre parcel at the corner of Jefferson and Weiss. The number of employees also has grown along with the list of services. But amid the numerous updates and additions, one thing never changed. The business has remained a family enterprise for 145 years and five generations! Consequently, the history of Schaefer Bierlein Dodge dealership is a mile long.

It was only six years after Frankenmuth was founded in 1845 that George Michael Schaefer left his job as a blacksmith in Bavaria and arrived in the community with his wife, Anna, and children, Maria and Karl. The following year he purchased a parcel of land at 945 S. Main from John Hubinger (where the former Heileman Brewery now stands) and opened a blacksmith and carriage shop.

Unfortunately, just as he got the business started in 1852, his wife died that July. In November he married Maria Margarethe Hofmann. They had seven children, but two died in childhood.

It didn't take long for George M. to distinguish himself not only in business but also in local politics. He served as township supervisor from 1859 to 1860 and again from 1864 to 1866 and 1874 to 1878. In 1890, after 38 years in business, he turned over the operation to his oldest son George Adam, who married Pauline Ernestine Block four years earlier.

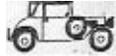


***George A. Schaefer Family: (Left) Agnes, Pauline.
(Back) Emma. (Front) Walter, George, Bernhard.***

But George Adam was not in the blacksmith business for long. He died in 1898, leaving his widow with four small children. One of George Adam's employees, George Rummel, married Pauline in 1900 and kept the business going.



George Rummel Family: (Back) Emma Schaefer Hubinger, Bernhard Schaefer, Walter Schaefer, Agnes Schaefer Belfie, Alma Rummel Engelhardt. (Front) Henry Rummel, Pauline Block Schaefer Rummel, Herbert Rummel, Fred Rummel, George Rummel, Irma Rummel Bickel.



In 1907 one of George Michael's grandsons, Bernhard G., brought the family name back into the business when he began working for his step-father. When he was 22, Bernhard became a full-fledged member of the company and the name was changed to Rummel and Schaefer. Bernhard married Hanna Gugel in 1915. They had three children – Elmer, Irma (Mrs. Harold List), and Dorothy (Mrs. Duane Bierlein).

Bernhard, or Barney as most people called him, shoed horses and set wagon wheel rims along with George Rummel. The job had its disadvantages. The men always had to work over a hot fire. Some of the horses were temperamental and bit the blacksmith or relieved themselves at the most inopportune times. So it wasn't surprising when Barney became interested in cars and received a certificate May 1, 1914 from the Michigan State Auto School in Detroit to repair cars. Barney hung a "Garage" sign in front of the blacksmith shop and a new business was born. That made Barney Frankenmuth's first car dealer.



Bernhard Schaefer, his step-father George Rummel, and partner August Block in the blacksmith shop in 1911.



The blacksmith business was expanded to include a garage for automobiles and a line of farm machinery.

By 1918, a line of farm implements were added to the shop – which was divided into the blacksmith area on the north side, a set up area for farm tools and a garage to repair automobiles in the middle, and a woodworking shop run by Herman Reichle on the south side. The farm machinery was shipped in boxes and had to be totally assembled.

The early years of selling cars in Frankenmuth were filled with interesting experiences. George and Barney had to teach potential customers to drive in order to make a sale. In one case they used a wheat field for a practice area. The freshly harvested wheat shocks were much more forgiving than obstacles encountered on the roadways. Even Barney's wife, Hanna, needed a check-list for herself that simplified the instruction. I read: "Turn the switch; start the starter; shift gears, away you go."



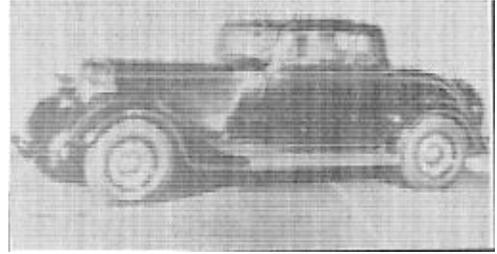
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At first the business sold Fords but after six months they switched to Willys-Overland. Cars were purchased from a distributor in Saginaw, brought to Frankenmuth and resold, netting the dealer a five percent profit. The Fords sold for \$560 while a fully equipped Willys-Overland ran approximately \$850. For a short period of time, Barney also sold Reos and Buicks.

Repairs in those days were an adventure. For the most part, the clutch had to be replaced, but once in a while the problem was more mysterious. When a Buick seemed unfixable, Tom Fischer, who was a mechanic at Garber, offered to take it to Saginaw for repairs. But on the way there, he rolled the car over in a ditch. Garber repaired the body of the car, but couldn't find any problem with the way it ran. After the rollover, the car worked fine!

Although Barney was a firm believer in the merits of the automobile, his faith had a couple of setbacks. On a few occasions, anything he tried to get a car going again did not help. A few times he could be seen towing a car to his garage using his "four-legged wrecker" – a team of horses pulling the car with Barney in the driver's seat holding the reins through the open windshield!

Another problem was car deliveries. The drivers had to travel to Detroit, Toledo, or Saginaw to pick up each car. The trip from Toledo was so long that a couple of detours to get some beer along the way were common. After one of these detours, Elmer Block got so far behind the rest of the line of cars being driven to Frankenmuth that he had to take desperate measures. In an effort to catch up to the rest of the group, he "floor boarded" the accelerator which led to burning up the new engine. That car never made it back to town.



A 1934 Dodge sold for about \$715.

Rummel and Schaefer received the Dodge and Plymouth franchises in 1933 and began selling their 1934 product line. The following year, Norman Meyer began working as a mechanic for the company at the age of 18, although he was no stranger to the shop. Norm had accompanied his father John to the blacksmith shop ever since he was six years old. John had his horses shoed there and their hoofs trimmed. Norm watched Bill Radeischak and Henry Rummel (George's son) work on cars and he was fascinated.



Meta and Henry Rummel

He remembers that on his first day on the job he thought he would grease and wash cars. Instead, Henry told him to put new rings, rods and bearings in a truck – a pretty sophisticated task. Norm never had any formal schooling in mechanics, but he was self-taught. He watched Henry and read every magazine from the shop that they had. He once took a Model T pickup totally apart and put it back together.



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Norm Morrison was the blacksmith at the time and he was a character right up to his noteworthy death. He was an Irishman; a bachelor who lived at Buck's Tavern and didn't speak a word of German. But he was reliable. So when he didn't come to work one day in 1936, everyone was suspicious. Oddly enough, Norm Meyer found him in the outhouse next to the shop, already stiff. He had suffered a heart attack the night before and never made it out of the outhouse. Herman Kraenzlein replaced Morrison as blacksmith – the last one in the history of the business. By then, buggies and wagons were going out of style and the blacksmith's work and space was phased out.

In 1942, Henry Rummel, George's son and Barney's half-brother, became partners with Barney in the dealership. Car prices had risen to a whopping \$1,000 for a 1940 Dodge. Also during that time Barney's son, Elmer, began working after school. The garage was modernized to include a grease rack with a hoist where the blacksmith shop was located. Repairs were mostly tune ups which Henry described as "cleaning the plugs and filing the points." Before the hoist was installed, the mechanics had to jack cars up to grease them. It was a dirty job. So was changing tires on the brewery trucks when the "malt juice" ran down the side of the truck and onto the mechanic's head, making an already unpleasant job just that much worse.

Practical jokes, including water fights, were common and a noise bomb even was passed around from car to car. Once Barney got fed up when the cigarette smoke became so thick in the garage that it was difficult to see. When the employees all started chewing and spitting instead, he changed his mind.

Julius Yoba worked at Rummel and Schaefer from 1937 to 1943. He was a farm machinery salesman and mechanic. When a farmer purchased a tractor and no longer needed his horse, often a four-legged trade-in was part of the sale process.

After World War II, a new era began in the business. Barney's son, Elmer, was back from the war and married Lorene Keller in October of 1946. Barney's daughter, Dorothy, was engaged to be married to Duane Bierlein, who also returned from the US Navy.



*Hanna & Barney Schaefer; their children:
Irma, Elmer & Dorothy.*

Dorothy had grown up in the business watching her father shoe horses. Since the family home was only two buildings south of the business, she and her sister Irma had fun sitting in the touring cars until Grandpa Rummel would drive them to Aunt Hattie's store for candy. It was Dorothy who "sold" Duane on the car business.

Duane began working as a mechanic and body man at the garage in June 1948 and the couple was married November 27, 1948. Elmer and Duane worked together doing body work and any other jobs the growing business required. When George Rummel died in 1954, his son Henry decided to get out of the ownership end of the business. Elmer Schaefer and Duane Bierlein purchased the Rummel half of the business and the company was renamed Schaefer and Bierlein. When Barney retired in 1957 after 50 years in the business, Elmer and Duane acquired his half of the dealership. Elmer became the sales manager and Duane, the service manager.



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With the next generation eager to go the distance, plans were rolling along to move the business and expand. In 1960, property was purchased at 1015 Weiss at the corner of Jefferson and a 70 by 150 foot building with a 30 by 50 foot showroom was erected. The Grand Opening took place in June 1961. Ads listed the price of a Dodge Lancer two-door model at \$1,874; a Dodge Lancer four-door at \$1,948 and Dodge Seneca 4-door at \$2,082.

The move and expansion also increased the workforce from 12 to 20. Although the dealership was selling about 60 new cars a year, there was still more profit in The John Deere farm machinery line. Duane and Elmer worked long hours building the business on its reputation for quality service.



Partners Duane Bierlein, Elmer and Barney Schaefer.



The dealership expanded and moved in 1961 to a six-acre parcel at 1015 Weiss at the corner of Jefferson.

Despite all the hard work, there was always time for a laugh. Once when a sparrow flew into the body shop, Duane put it in the desk drawer where Otto Block, the bookkeeper, worked. When Otto opened the drawer, it flew away and no one ever told him who hid it there. Once Dorothy put a dent in the family business, so to speak. In 1967, when the company was constructing a self-service car wash on Weiss Street, south of the dealership, Dorothy scraped the side of a new car on the low cement abutment. Duane never yelled, but it took him 50 hours of work to repair it.

When farmers were skeptical about paying the price for a John Deere beet harvester, Duane and Elmer contracted with the farmers to use the machinery to pull beets in their fields. It took six or seven years of contract work to convince the farmers that the machinery would indeed do what it was designed to do. Later, the dealership added a John Deere lawn and garden line and Ski-Doo snowmobiles.



Lorene and Elmer Schaefer

Meanwhile, the fifth generation was getting ready to drive into the picture. Duane's son Randy hung around the dealership as a young child, first cleaning the bathrooms at the old location for five cents an hour and then graduating to the wash rack. He worked after classes while in high school washing cars and helping to set up farm implements. He drove vehicles to the wash rack even though he didn't yet have a driver's license, and was always worried that his uncle Elmer would catch him. On those occasions when he did get caught, Uncle Elmer would emphatically remind him of a certain "creek we would be up" if a car was damaged. After high school, Randy went off to college and earned a bachelor's degree in business and economics in 1972. He had no intentions of coming home to work in the family business. Instead, Randy had hopes of entering the corporate end of the business with set hours and big city life. But the Chrysler representatives who held the jobs he aspired to convinced him that this family's dealership offered more opportunities.

In 1983 Elmer retired and the opportunity was there.



Duane and Randy purchased Elmer's half of the dealership making the five-generation business official. The John Deere farm machinery franchise was sold the following year to focus on a growing line of automobiles which now includes Chrysler, Plymouth, Dodge, Jeep, and Eagle. The business celebrated its 50th year as a Chrysler dealer in 1984. [In 1997] Schaefer and Bierlein had 42 employees including six salespersons.

Generations in the business mean generation of customers too. Schaefer and Bierlein has sold cars to long-time drivers, their children, their grandchildren, and now their great-grandchildren. One of Schaefer and Bierlein's loyal customers, Keith Birdsall of Frankenmuth, has purchased 30 new cars from the dealership since 1956.

Over the last ten years, sales of vans and trucks surpassed cars and became the "meat and potatoes" of the business. Whereas customers used to be satisfied with a car they could keep for 25,000 miles, they now want a product that will last for 150,000 miles. Shade-tree mechanics are extinct in light of the complex computerized systems in current models. Constant training is required to keep current with all the improvements in the products.

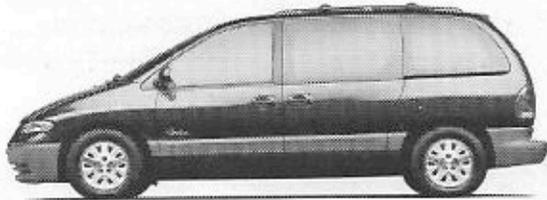
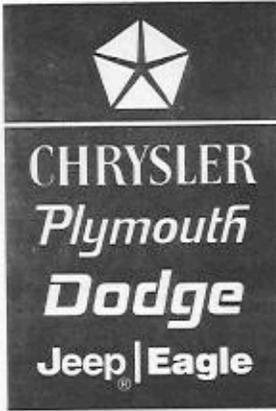
What's in the future for the Schaefer and Bierlein dealership? Only time will tell. Randy and his wife, Sue Anne, have two sons, Kyle and Craig. However, it's too early to predict if they will join their father and grandfather in business.

But one decision for the future has definitely been made. Randy said the name Schaefer and Bierlein will remain, even though it's been 13 years since a Schaefer has been associated with the business. He said he promised his grandfather, Barney, a long time ago that the name would not change. "As long as I'm involved, the business will be known as Schaefer and Bierlein," Randy said. "After all, I am a Schaefer and a Bierlein."



The Duane Bierlein Family: (front) Barbara Bierlein Harvey, Duane, Craig, Sue Anne; (back) Tom Harvey, Dorothy, Randy, Kyle.

1997 product line



Significant Dates

- [1997 Schaefer & Bierlein sponsors Frankenmuth Historical Association's annual meeting]
- 1983 Elmer Schaefer retired – **Duane Bierlein and son Randy Bierlein** purchased Elmer's half of dealership.
- 1957 Bernhard Schaefer retired. **Elmer Schaefer and Duane Bierlein** acquired Bernhard's half of dealership.
- 1954 George Rummel died – **Elmer Schaefer and Duane Bierlein** purchased the Rummel portion of business, renamed **Schaefer and Bierlein**.
- 1942 **Henry Rummel** (son of George – half brother to Bernhard Schaefer) became a partner.
- 1933 Dodge-Plymouth franchise acquired
- 1923 Acquired John Deere farm implement franchise.
- 1914 Started selling Fords, then Willys-Overland cars.
- 1907 **Bernhard G. Schaefer** started working as a blacksmith; business renamed **Rummel and Schaefer**.
- 1900 Employee **George Rummel** married George A. Schaefer's widow; took over business.
- 1898 George A. Schaefer died.
- 1890 **George A. Schaefer** succeeded his father (George M.) in business.
- 1852 **George M. Schaefer** purchased land and opened a blacksmith shop.
- 1845 Frankenmuth founded

