

OSCAR RAU

and his Legacy



OSCAR RAU'S OF FRANKENMUTH

360 S. MAIN, FRANKENMUTH 48734
PH: 652-2675 IN FLINT: 232-4910

MEMBER
THE INTERIOR
DESIGN SOCIETY



MICHIGAN'S MOST UNIQUE FURNITURE STORE

Since 1945

RAU'S COUNTRY STORE, INC.

656 S. MAIN ST. PH. 517-652-8388
FRANKENMUTH, MICHIGAN 48734

Take A Step Back In Time



Since 1964

by William G. Rau • Raymond J. Rau • Stewart E. Lauterbach

Oscar Rau and his Legacy

By William G. Rau, Raymond J. Rau, and Stewart E. Lauterbach

Published by William G. Rau and Raymond J. Rau in cooperation with Frankenmuth Historical Association (Frankenmuth, Michigan), Copyright 1994.

[This book was published in 1994 in conjunction with Frankenmuth Historical Association's Annual Meeting and is now out of print. It has been converted to this format for educational and research purposes. Information obtained from this booklet should include a reference to: Frankenmuth Historical Assn. and the authors.]

"A tribute to the founders and our foundation."

With much love and admiration,

Bill and Ray



Evelyn and Oscar F. Rau

The first member of the Rau family who went into business in Frankenmuth was Gottlieb “Henry” Rau. He was born in the town of Duerlletel in Prussia (Germany) and traveled to America with his parents Elizabeth “Dorothy” Pirsch and Johann “Gottlieb” Rau as the oldest of seven children. He came to Frankenmuth sometime between 1850 and 1853, and opened the Commercial House Hotel in 1882. He was the great uncle of Oscar F. Rau.

Oscar’s father, William Fred Rau, was born in Ellington, Michigan on February 8, 1881, but grew up in Frankenmuth. On October 1, 1905 he married Maggie Schemm from Reese. They moved to Saginaw for some time and then to Reese, where William started the local electric utility company in December, 1916. He generated electricity for his customers by using two gas-powered engines, and provided power from 4 to 11 p.m. Sunday through Friday and 4 p.m. to midnight on Saturdays. During the winter, power was also supplied in the mornings from 5 a.m. until daylight. Later, when demand increased, power was furnished during the day on Mondays for washing clothes and Tuesdays for ironing. Oscar’s sister Doris remembers that her father had a big lever in the bedroom which turned the power on and off for the whole village.

William started the Reese electric utility company ... power was provided from 4 to 11 pm Sunday through Friday and 4 pm to midnight on Saturdays.

A family story tells of William’s remarkable good luck when he sold his business to Consumers Power shortly before the Wall Street crash of 1929. When he went to the bank to deposit the payment, the bank was closed for a holiday. Since William was unable to make the deposit in a timely manner, his funds were not seized when the bank failed, and he didn’t lose all his money as did so many others at that time.

William and Maggie had five children: Oscar born April 4, 1907; Harold born August 6, 1910; Arthur born January 14, 1912; Raymond E. born June 26, 1913; and Doris Rau McGee, born May 16, 1920. During World War II, Raymond E. survived the “Bataan Death March” and was a prisoner of war for 40 months in the Philippines and Manchuria. He worked as an electrician for Oscar between March, 1946 and May, 1958, and then for the Carling Brewery for 20 years. He retired in 1976.

Oscar married Evelyn Schian on September 15, 1927. They had five children. Peggy, born September 21, 1928, married George Hill of Reese, owner of Hill’s R.V. She is retired. Richard O. (“Dick”), born May 11, 1930, worked for his father as an electrician and opened an appliance and feed store in Clio. Later he worked for Chevrolet as an electrician. He retired in 1990 and now lives in Tennessee with his wife Doris. Jeannette, born September 30, 1931, married Edward “Bud” Adams. Bud worked for Oscar and sold New York Life Insurance, then eventually became a wholesale kitchen distributor, founding Frankenmuth Kitchens in the early 1970’s and buying out Radka’s Kitchens in Saginaw in 1981. Jeannette passed away September 20, 1980. William G., born May 17, 1941, and Raymond J., born August 16, 1945, both entered their father’s business.

In 1928 the Oscar Rau family moved to Frankenmuth where Oscar worked for Fred Nuechterlein and Consumers Power. His responsibilities included wiring homes and climbing poles during electrical storms to repair downed wires. Oscar continued to work for Fred until World War II, at which time he moved to the S. & E. Machine Shop as a maintenance supervisor.

Oscar started his own business, Oscar Rau Electric, in 1945, working out of his garage at 155 Franklin Street. One day while he was doing electrical work at the McNiven Hotel, Rollie McNiven introduced Oscar to some Westinghouse representatives who were staying there. As a result of this meeting, Oscar obtained the Westinghouse franchise for Frankenmuth, but since no merchandise could be purchased at that time because of the war, it didn't do him much good. After the war, however, he was gradually able to acquire a small inventory, and he built an addition onto his garage to serve as a showroom.



The start of Oscar Rau's

In November, 1950 Oscar decided to move Oscar Rau Electric to Main Street, and he purchased the building located at the corner of Main Street and Tuscola. This building had originally been built by Alex List as a saloon and hotel in 1880. In November, 1912, List sold the building to Naegele and Schellhaas, who owned it jointly until 1914 when Schellhaas sold his interest to Naegele. On April 20, 1918 Naegele sold the building to Richard and Carl Ortner who remodeled the first floor as a general store. A barber shop was located in the back of the building, and during the 1920's the second floor was rented out as apartments and doctors' offices.

Bill Rau remembers the move into the Ortner building. After the Ortners sold it, they stored all the valuable items from their inventory in the basement of the adjacent post office building. Everything else was sold to the Mill End Store in Bay City as a package deal. When Oscar moved in, he found that the Mill End Store had taken only the merchandise they were interested in, leaving behind many obsolete items like celluloid collars. Disposing of these white elephants was quite a job.



Grand Opening of Oscar Rau Electric in 1951

Oscar continued his electrical contracting and appliance business at the Tuscola and Main Street location. At about that time an eight cubic foot refrigerator cost \$179, kitchen ranges \$160, and freezers \$159. In 1950 Oscar had the first TV for sale in Frankenmuth. Connected to a tall antenna on a tower, the set just barely picked up Channel 6 out of Lansing. The reception wasn't very good and the picture looked mostly like snow. Bill remembers being allowed to stay home from school with friends to watch President Eisenhower's inauguration.



Grand Opening of Oscar Rau Electric in 1951

In the early days, the family members pitched in to help run the business. Evelyn worked with Oscar, keeping books, managing the store, serving as a sales person and later as an interior designer. (Bill jokingly claims that every house that his mother decorated had some green in it.)

Bill and Ray both grew up in the business, cleaning appliances, sweeping floors, “parting out” used appliances for salvage, and doing anything else that was needed. They both vividly remember the terrible odor of sulfur and ammonia associated with tearing apart used refrigerators. Sometimes, as a joke, they would tell their friends to open the door of one. The reactions to the awful stink that had accumulated since the refrigerator had been turned off were a source of great amusement to the boys.

Among Ray's early memories of working for his father are the long hours required to inventory the contracting and repair supplies. When Ray realized that actually counting each individual nail, washer and staple cut further and further into his play time, he quickly developed the ability to estimate "accurately" the number of items left in a parts bin by just glancing at it.



The First TV brought to Frankenmuth by Oscar Rau's

Bill especially remembers his chagrin at mistakenly stripping the parts from a used refrigerator which his father had already resold. Although his father had indicated which appliances to part out, Bill got confused, and by the time Oscar arrived home the refrigerator was beyond repair. Bill was teased about this incident for the next twenty years. Both Rau brothers remember that their Dad was hard to work for, but also that he loved them and taught them well.

Both Rau brothers remember that their Dad was hard to work for, but also that he loved them and taught them well.

Bill graduated from Frankenmuth High School in 1959 and married Lillie Abraham on May 11, 1963. He graduated from Ferris State College in 1971. Their daughter, Lisa, born September 25, 1965, married Patrick Reece on June 5, 1993. Lillie Rau started the doll house miniature department at Rau's Country Store in 1974 and continues to manage it.

Ray graduated from Frankenmuth High School in 1963. While attending Western Michigan University, he worked from 1965 through 1967 as a salesman for several furniture stores in Saginaw and Battle Creek. He graduated from Western Michigan in 1967 then was a factory representative for an upholstery manufacturer, the Schnadig Corporation of Chicago, from 1968 to 1972.

Ray married Louise Dolfi of Birch Run on May 2, 1970. With a B.A. in education from Concordia and an M.A. in remedial reading from the University of Michigan, Louise taught elementary school for seven years. Later she studied interior design at Baker College in Flint and is now a professional member of the Interior Design Society. Louise joined the Oscar Rau Furniture Center as an interior designer full time in 1991 and enjoys working with people in their homes and coordinating the Master Plan interior design service. Ray and Louise have two daughters, Allie, born March 16, 1976 and Katy born February 1, 1979.

Over the years Oscar Rau Electric sold a varied inventory including oil and gas space heaters, large and small appliances, radios, TVs, air conditioners, electric blankets, power mowers, deep freezes, Hi-Fi's, Pittsburgh Paints, Scott Attwater motors and boats, lamps, furniture, sewing machines, and records. Oscar always tried to stay abreast of the times, and stocked Frankenmuth's first color TV as well as its first microwave.

Oscar added furniture to his inventory in 1953. He found it so popular that within a year he needed more room and purchased the former Post Office building, which adjoined his store, from the Ortner's. In 1957 Oscar enclosed the open porches which surrounded the store with showroom windows. Creating extra floor space, as well as the opportunity for displays, the new-found space afforded the store the added benefit of high visibility to the traffic on Main Street.

Oscar always tried to stay abreast of the times and stocked Frankenmuth's first color TV as well as its first microwave.

Oscar and Evelyn held many special events each year to promote their merchandise. One of them, Farm Family Night, was initially held in Fischer Hall and later in the Bavarian Inn.

DON'T MISS IT!

FRANKENMUTH DAYS OSCAR RAU ELECTRIC Appliance close-out sale

This is the sale that attracts thrifty and wise buyers every year - DON'T MISS IT
MANY ITEMS IN LIMITED QUANTITY - SO HURRY

WESTINGHOUSE
Deluxe 30" RANGE
REG. \$349.95
NOW ONLY
\$198.88 EXCH.



FEATURES...
Flame Broiler
Moisture Proofed for 100% Automatic Lock and Error Proof Controls
(3 ONLY)
Westinghouse 30" Range as Low as \$198.88

WESTINGHOUSE 21"
12 Channel Deluxe T. V.
REG. \$349.95
NOW ONLY
\$209.88 EXCH.



FEATURES...
12 CHANNEL COLOR
QUICKSEEK TUNE
CONTRAST ADJUSTER
Other Sets As Low As \$129.88

WESTINGHOUSE DELUXE
11.4 Cu. Ft. Refrigerator
Reg. \$48.95
NOW ONLY
\$358.88 EXCH.



FEATURES...
Moisture Proofed Door
Fast Defrosting
Automatic 4-Door On-Defrosting
Cool to Select
Other Refrigerators
As Low as \$188.88

Westinghouse
Deluxe Washer and Dryer
REG. \$559.90 Value
Both For ONLY
\$398.88 EXCH.



FEATURES...
Automatic Dry Heat
8 lbs. Capacity
2 Speeds P.E.
Other Westinghouse Deluxe Dryers
As Low As \$188.88
SEE... WESTINGHOUSE RANGES
DEMONSTRATED BY MISS EVELYN FICK

OSCAR RAU

IT'S NO MISTAKE

These Are The Actual Prices You Pay For This
NAME BRAND MERCHANDISE

QUANTITIES LIMITED SO HURRY

EXQUISITE LAMPS
By Leading Manufacturers
Reg. \$11.95 to \$14.95 Value
Only **\$5.88**



Come Early For Best Selection

WESTINGHOUSE Clothes Dryers
REG. \$199.95 Now Only **\$128.88**

WESTINGHOUSE Automatic Washers
REG. \$258.95 Now Only **\$158.88**

WESTINGHOUSE
NEW DELUXE
ICE-SLICE TRAY
REG. \$1.18



WESTINGHOUSE TANK SWEEPER
Reg. \$89.95 NOW \$49.88
CAVALIER CEDAR CHEST
ONLY \$49.88
PITTSBURGH HOUSE PAINT
\$1.90 Per Qt.

SMALL APPLIANCE RIOT
WESTINGHOUSE 90 SHAVE SHAVERS
Reg. \$19.95 Now \$11.88
WESTINGHOUSE 85 SHAVERS
Reg. \$24.95 Now \$24.95
DORSEY'S 4 CUPS
Reg. \$19.95 Now \$14.95
SAMSON CARD TABLES - \$3.95
*WESTINGHOUSE LAWN MOWERS
Reg. \$69.95 Now \$6.88

SCHICK SHAVERS
REG. \$29.50
Now Only **\$15.88**



Schick Colonel \$11.88

Two Three 4-5 Room
HEATERS ONLY
\$59.88

Westinghouse
32 Gall. Deluxe
WATER HEATER
Only **\$99.88**

WESTINGHOUSE LIGHT BULBS
8 for \$1.00
DUO TRIM ROTARY POWER LAWN MOWERS
Reg. \$129.95 NOW \$69.95

5 Pc CHROME DINETTE SETS 6888
HURRY - QUANTITIES LIMITED REG. 129.95 NOW 68

ELECTRIC

Frankenmuth
Open Fri. & Sat. 'Till 9

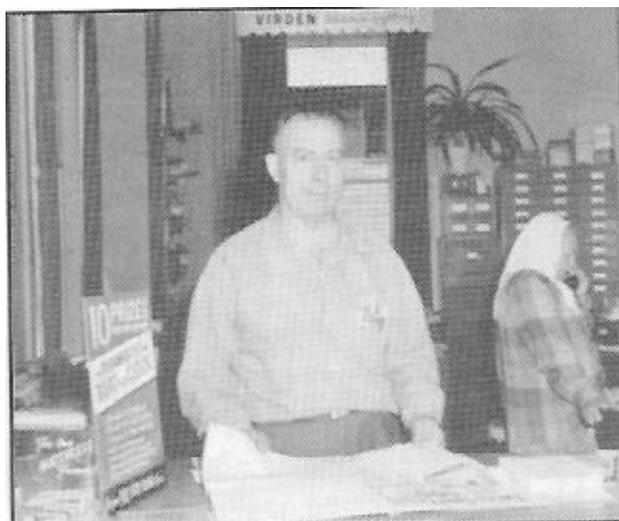
PHONE
OL 2-8161

Special items of stock - - often new models with advanced features - - were moved to the site for demonstration and display. Manufacturers' representatives would come to demonstrate company products such as automatic washers and dryers and electric ranges. Everyone in the community was invited and a light lunch of hot dogs and sauerkraut was served. These promotions were successful and always well attended. Both Hi-Fi and stereo record systems, as well as color televisions, were introduced to the Frankenmuth community in this manner. Bill remembers that the first microwave oven, demonstrated in the mid-1950s, was the size of a refrigerator and cost well over \$1,000. Naturally items such as this were not stocked in the store, but arrived in a crate, were unpacked and demonstrated, then packed back up and sent on to the next dealer. The value of such technologically advanced appliances lay in their ability to attract larger audiences. As the furniture trade became more and more the focus of the Rau business, Farm Family Night was gradually phased out.



Oscar Rau during Sidewalk Sales

Sidewalk sales were another promotional event of which the Raus took full advantage. Over the years several unique approaches were used, such as dressing factory representatives as hillbillies or chickens. Another well-remembered stunt was the demonstration of the vacuum cleaner that “actually walked” on air. Oscar also promoted furniture by putting it in newly-constructed homes. Since a number of new subdivisions were being added to Frankenmuth during the early 1960s, Oscar could work with local developers by providing furnishings to enhance model homes. In this way, many new residents were successfully introduced to Oscar Rau Furniture and Appliances. Oscar also put appliances into the schools for the use of home economics classes then sold them at a reduced rate when the school year was over.



Oscar Rau Planning another sales promotion

Along with the sale of new goods, Oscar did a brisk business with trade-ins and repair work. It was a family joke that Evelyn never really had an appliance to call her own. When a customer came in to buy a new refrigerator, but found the price beyond his means, Oscar would often tell him, “I think I know where I can find you a good used refrigerator.” Or Evelyn would sometimes arrive home to find there was no longer a stove in the house. The next day she would have a replacement - - but often something quite different. Although Evelyn eventually became accustomed to revolving appliances, she will never forget coming into the house one night to find the living room suite completely gone.



Rau's Country Store

On May 28, 1964 Rau's Country store opened at 656 S. Main Street in the former McNiven Hotel. The Zehnder family had purchased the building in the previous year with the intention of keeping it as a restaurant, but after running it for about five months they discovered that the building would need extensive remodeling. They sent for a junk dealer to haul out all the equipment (with the exception of one stainless steel table which remains in the basement) and decided instead to use the site for a "country store" patterned after one owned by Dearborn furniture dealer Tom Eurich. The store was intended to become a Frankenmuth attraction in its own right. Agreeing that a country store would be a profitable venture, the Raus leased the building from the Zehnder family, and started the business. Under Evelyn and Bill's management, Rau's Country Store offered its customers a wide variety of traditional goods, including penny candy, pickles, old-fashioned gifts, packaged foods, glassware and colonial furniture.



“Oscar & Bill at the checkerboard”

When Oscar first leased the building from the Zehnder family, it was in poor condition. The stairs leading to the basement were so bad that Fred Zehnder wouldn't go down them for fear of falling through. Once they were replaced, Bill Rau remembers, he inspected the basement with Fred. As they looked at large piles of coal on the floor amidst the accumulated effects of Frankenmuth's annual floods, Fred said, "If you can do anything with this space, that's fine, but we aren't going to consider it part of your business." Over the next two years the Raus reclaimed the basement, cleaning up one small area at a time and utilizing it for storage, then cleaning up another. In 1981, as the business prospered, the store was expanded with an addition in back and an excavation to enlarge the basement.

In 1966 Oscar purchased the jewelry store attached to the rear of Oscar Rau Furniture and Appliances. He used it initially for storage, but later tore it down to create part of a parking lot owned jointly by several area merchants.

Oscar Rau retired June 30, 1972, at which time Ray bought the furniture store and Bill bought the country store. Later that year, Ray “Bavarianized” the exterior and added 9,000 square feet to the rear of the store, which doubled the furniture store’s space to 18,000 square feet. Both the interior and the exterior were completely remodeled, and the store was renamed the Oscar Rau Furniture Center. (Ray had continued for a time with electrical work and appliances, but as business in home furnishings and carpets increased, the appliance business was phased out and was totally discontinued in 1976.)

*... the building was in poor condition ...
the stairs leading to the basement were
so bad that you might have fallen
through.*

Also in 1972, Ray expanded his marketing area, through advertising, to include Saginaw and other local communities within a fifteen mile radius. Experience had suggested that people were willing to drive some distance to find the right item if they were offered significant savings and a good selection. When his marketing plan proved correct, Ray expanded his market even further to include customers from Bay City and Flint. That same year Ray opened the Oscar Rau La-Z-Boy Showcase on Bay Road in Saginaw, which was the 43rd franchise granted nationally. In 1979 he built a 10,000 square foot building across the street and moved Oscar Rau La-Z-Boy Showcase to its current location at 3665 Bay Road.



***Grand Opening of Expanded Facilities in 1982
(left to right) Charles Graham, William Rau, Oscar
Rau, Raymond J. Rau, Richard Krafft, Louise Rau.***

A further expansion took place at the Frankenmuth store in 1981, when Ray purchased the former American State Bank building to the north, adding another 6,000 square feet to the Oscar Rau Furniture Center. At this same time, Ray replaced the mass-merchandising method with a more designer-enhanced approach to selling. He displayed merchandise in 100 individual room settings complete with furniture, wall coverings, draperies, carpeting, and accessories.

Oscar Rau passed away at the age of 84 on June 10, 1991, following a brief illness. In addition to his devotion to his family and business, Oscar was very active at St. John's Lutheran Church. He was President and on the Church Council there for a number of years, and he and Evelyn participated in many church activities. Oscar was also very involved in community service. He served as Chairman of the Community Christmas Decorations Committee from 1955 until he resigned in 1983. He was a member of the City Planning Commission for 25 years and of the City Board of Appeals for six years. He was president of the Frankenmuth Chamber of Commerce for six years and a member of the Lion's Club for 32 years.

In 1992 Ray acquired the old Ben Franklin building which is now used for Oscar Rau's carpet and drapery fashion center and leather gallery. With this addition, The Oscar Rau Furniture Center now measures 30,000 square feet.

“Our objective is to serve our local customers and also be a leader in quality residential and commercial interiors in the Flint, Saginaw, Bay City, and Midland market place.”

-Raymond J. Rau

When asked about plans for the future of his business, Ray Rau said, “Master Plan Interior Design Service is where Oscar Rau's of Frankenmuth sees its future. The customer of the 90's desires a functional and aesthetically pleasing living environment. We presently have a staff of seven interior designers who can help our customers fulfill their dreams, wants, and needs. By being able to offer a complete package of fashionable floor coverings, window treatments, wall coverings, and one of the largest selections of furniture in the Flint and Saginaw area, Oscar Rau's is a step ahead of its competition. Our objective is to serve our local customers and also be a leader in quality residential and commercial interiors in the Flint, Saginaw, Bay City, and Midland market place.”

Bill Rau comments on his business experience: “My philosophy in running a business came from several people whom I admire. My parents taught me well. My father taught me, at an early age, how to work hard and take good care of our customers. To satisfy their needs, we continuously come up with new merchandise and discontinue that which no longer sells.

“We have a niche market selling old-fashioned and Victorian merchandise and try to be the best in that market with the items we do carry.”

-William G. Rau

“We know that we cannot be all things to all people. We have a niche market selling old-fashioned and Victorian merchandise and try to be the best in that market with the items that we do carry. Our theme is **Take A Step Back In Time**. Over the past 29 years we have learned that the appeal of old-fashioned merchandise lasts for a long time. Unlike fad items, it is not in today and gone tomorrow.

“I have learned from other leaders in our city that giving back to the community is what makes Frankenmuth great. We are very fortunate to live and do business in Frankenmuth. We hope to be here for many years to come.”



**Bill Rau, Lisa Rau-Reece, Oscar Rau
Lillie Rau, Evelyn Rau**



**Oscar Rau, Allie Rau, Ray Rau
Evelyn Rau, Katy Rau, Louise Rau**