

For a change of pace with a holiday twist, we are featuring the city of Bethlehem PA, or as older generations of PA Germans referred to it: "Bethlum" or "Betlum." Bethlehem has reinvented itself several times in the past, and in its most recent reincarnation bills itself as the "Christmas City." The city also has many historical links with our family's past.

The community that would become Bethlehem was started in the early 1740s by members of the religious sect, the Moravians. The Moravians were a group who were followers of the Bohemian cleric John Huss, whose dissatisfaction with a variety of theological and political practices that had developed in the Catholic Church over the centuries strongly influenced Martin Luther. Unfortunately for Huss, he was ahead of his time. While Luther started a revolution in the early 1500s, only 100 years earlier Huss was convicted of heresy and burned at the stake. In spite of his grim fate, his followers persisted in Europe, and like the other religious sects such as the Amish and the Mennonites, the Moravians practiced their religion in secret and experienced extreme persecution throughout Europe. When the Colony of Pennsylvania offered religious tolerance for all, waves of religiously inspired immigrants flocked to the area seeking a place where they could live and worship in peace. Of the three original Moravian settlements, Nazareth, Bethlehem, and Emmaus, Bethlehem became the largest and the most successful. Like most of the other sects, the Moravians were pacifists and utilized their conscientious objector status to make Bethlehem a noted center of medical treatment during the Revolutionary War. They of course treated the wounded from both sides, which earned them a certain amount of enmity from some of their more aggressive secular neighbors. The Sun Inn, the oldest Bethlehem tavern, was the site of "seditious" meetings by disgruntled German-Americans after the Revolution. They felt that they had contributed to the War of Independence by shedding their blood, providing financial support, and even gleaning "intelligence" by infiltrating the Hessian mercenary camps (these were German soldiers working for the British) and gaining critical troop movement information. The post war feeling in the German communities was that in spite of all this, the Anglos still considered the Germans to be 2nd class citizens and tried to pass legislation limiting their ability to continue the "pursuit of happiness" in their own way. Rebellions were planned, and some of these men were arrested and charged with serious crimes. Eventually President John Adams decided that the potential public outcry was more of a challenge to the government than the plotters, and the tempest gradually abated. **These "rabble rousers" included Philip Jarrett, the brother of Elizabeth Jarrett Eisenhart, and Catharine Jarrett Eisenhart, who were the wives of two sons of Andreas Eisenhart, the Lehigh Immigrant,**

Unlike the Amish and the Mennonites, the Moravians considered themselves to be missionaries and "converting" the Native Americans in the area was a recognized goal. Because they offered educational opportunities and medical care to the local

Indian population, the Moravians enjoyed relatively good relations with the Native Americans. For this reason, **when Indian unrest led to more and more violent confrontations with the settlers, a number of immigrants joined the various Moravian communities seeking safety for their families. Since Macungie was one of the more remote areas at that time, Andreas Eisenhart and his family joined the Emmaus Moravian community for this reason.**

The Moravians also differed from most of the other sects in that they promoted education and fostered cultural pursuits—the first concert performance of a Bach major musical work in the Western Hemisphere took place in Bethlehem. The Moravian Book Shop in Bethlehem is the oldest continuously operating bookstore in the U.S., although at present it is more of a gift shop (and a very nice one!) than a purveyor of scholarly works.

The sect did however have many rules and restrictions, and the community had many features of a commune. **Marriage partners were selected by the elders, which was one of the factors that drove the 2nd generation Eisenharts out of the Emmaus Moravian community as soon as their father died. Andreas the Immigrant's sons were rebaptized in the Moravian faith when the family joined the sect, but their patience with the highly regulated lifestyle made them anxious to break away, even though the Emmaus community allowed private ownership of land and was somewhat more flexible in their practices and restrictions than the Bethlehem group.** In Bethlehem, land was "leased" to community members, but the church retained the ownership. By the early 1800s the influence of the church was waning, and eventually private property was recognized in Bethlehem. This coincided with the discovery of iron ore deposits throughout the region, and development and "business" soon eclipsed the religious character of Bethlehem. **Benjamin Eisenhart, the patriarch of the Spring Valley Eisenhart family, was a participant in the process. He sold a portion of his farmland on which iron ore had been discovered to the Thomas Iron Co., which eventually became part of Bethlehem Steel.** By 1900 Bethlehem Steel had become a Goliath. Mile after mile of "The Works" sprawled across Bethlehem, with huge blast furnaces, casting facilities, and transportation hubs totally changing the character of the town. Steel also brought jobs, and immigrants from Eastern Europe and the Mediterranean poured into the area seeking prosperity that had eluded them in their native lands. Ethnic neighborhoods sprang up and languages besides German and English were heard for the first time. Area men were also drawn away from the farms, and the censuses in the early 1900s show entire neighborhoods in which the households were supported by Bethlehem Steel employees. **Working in the mill was often dangerous in the days before OSHA and worker's rights legislation, and deaths related to blast furnace accidents were not uncommon—one of Benjamin Eisenhart's grandsons, Edwin Eisenhart, was killed in such an accident in 1896, but the lure of steady employment and good wages without**

the uncertainties of farming was irresistible. The company also branched out into other towns—Amber Eisenhart worked in an off site Bethlehem Steel munitions factory in 1918, probably to get a deferment, as if having 3 children in the four previous years wasn't enough!

Unfortunately the gravy train did not last forever. Foreign steel imports using cheaper labor began to flood the U.S. market in the 1950s. The upper echelons of management continued to believe that their financial empire was limitless. They had purchased large areas in the northern part of Spring Valley from the Gangewere family and built an enclave of palatial private estates. Ignoring the fact that they were developing enormous pension liabilities at a time when profits were falling, they continued to provide most of the support for Lehigh University, which they considered to be a conduit for attracting talented metallurgy engineers to their staff. Yet their infrastructure was growing old and had become outdated, and they had failed to embrace new production methods that might have allowed them to remain competitive. The behemoth had become a dinosaur. The company struggled and finally closed down, leaving several generations of retirees without promised pensions or healthcare options, but with a healthy sense of resentment and betrayal. Bethlehem became a city in crisis. The Works became a rusted out blight on the landscape that stretched as far as the eye could see. City services struggled, and the neighborhoods began to decay.

Eventually the realization came that Bethlehem was a historical jewel, but in order for it to regain its luster it had to be buffed. The Old Town refurbishment was initiated with the restoration of some of the historic houses and other sites like the Sun Inn. **Curators, like our family's Bruce Gill (son of Thelma Eisenhard Gill of the Allentown/Macungie family), were recruited to research historical sites and architecture.** Using old drawings and documents, the earliest village buildings are currently being rebuilt from the foundation up. Shops and craft stores that emphasized the city's history and culture were opened, events were planned to attract visitors with an interest in the past, and the use of the Moravian Star, the Star of Bethlehem, as a symbol of the "Christmas City" made it a destination for the celebration of the season. So that which is old is new again.













MORAVIAN
BOOK SHOP





