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CHRISTMAS DREAM: Newly-married Gary and Barbara Heidinger stand inside the former Franken Eck German Restaurant Friday afternoon following their recent purchase of the building and accompanying property. The couple plans to open Grossmutter's Christmas Attic later this year. (News photo)

Grossmutter's Christmas Attic to open in former Franken Eck

A love of the Christmas holiday has spurred love and the reopening of a long-shuttered Frankenmuth Main Street building.

Gary and Barbara Heidinger recently closed a real estate deal to open a Christmas variety store at the former Franken Eck German Restaurant, 100 South Main Street, on the southwest corner of Main and West Genesee streets.

The store will be named "Grossmutter's Christmas Attic," with renovation work to begin as early as March and an anticipated opening in November of 2011.

The couple, who were married Thursday afternoon (February 17), plans to live above the former Eck (also known as the former Corner Tavern) in the spacious loft.

The home located immediately to the west will be razed this year. The Heidingers are unsure of what they will do with the property; it may be more parking or even a garden center. They will seek permission to demolish the home from the Frankenmuth Historic District Commission.

Gary is from the West Coast, calling the State of Washington home at this time. Barbara is from Switzerland, near Zurich.

Barbara's introduction to Frankenmuth came from her daughter, Sarah, who at age 16 was a foreign exchange student. She was in Indiana when her host family brought her to town, where they visited the world's largest Christmas store, Bronner's CHRISTmas Wonderland.

"The host family knew our family really enjoyed Christmas, so they took Sarah there," Barbara recalled, as she looked out the top window of the second floor of the old Eck.

Prior to that visit, Gary and Barbara had been sharing their long-distance love of the Yuletide season via the internet. Since 2002, the couple has operated an internet business together, <http://www.christmas.li/>. They also have a web site entitled <http://www.weihnacht.li/>. Please visit them for more information about their items and services.

"We were looking for a location to open a Christmas place, with Christmas antiques, baked goods, ornaments and all items related to Christmas. We looked in Washington and Florida, but it was Sarah who suggested we go to Frankenmuth," Barbara said.

Barbara also liked the German ethnic look of town, that little German touch that would remind them of home.

In February 2010, the couple visited Frankenmuth. They found the Eck, inquired about the property but found out it was up for contract by another party.

Both returned to their homes, rather sad and thinking maybe their dream of business in America was done. They looked at other locations, but nothing felt right.

During Christmas 2010, Gary traveled to Switzerland and he and Barb renewed their idea of opening a business. Shortly after Christmas, a Century 21 realtor sent them an email, stating the buildings and property were available once again.

The twosome put in an offer, negotiated a bit and by mid-January, a deal was struck.

Gary and Barbara arrived here February 12, signed the real estate papers and on February 17, signed marriage papers at the Saginaw County Courthouse.

"We've been welcomed with open arms by all the townspeople. This is a really big step for me to leave my home country," Barbara said.

They have already toured the Frankenmuth Public Schools. Barbara hopes to have her two sons enrolled at FHS by September.

"We were very impressed with the school," Gary said.

Inside the former Eck, the Heidingers are planning few interior changes. They plan to use the bar area as they will display their vast antique Christmas collection and bake German cakes from recipes gleaned from Barbara's grandmother.

They also plan a future museum, which will face West Genesee Street.

The couple's first contact came in 1999 when Gary lived in California. Gary was selling bulbs and related items on the internet and Barbara was buying at the time.

In 2003, they met face-to-face for the first time at the annual antique Christmas item convention in Minneapolis. Barbara was asked to speak on fraudulent Christmas pieces, and fraud prevention.

Knowing her English was not that good, she convinced Gary to attend to lend his support. The rest led to this new venture for them.

“We are very passionate collectors and members of the Golden Glow of Christmas Past Club. Now we look forward to opening our own store in Frankenmuth,” Barbara concluded.