

A Reunion in Heilbronn Williston 1964-1966 and Theodor-Heuss-Gymnasium 1966-67

by William Anthony

On the evening of Saturday, September 17, 2016, eleven former exchange students from Williston Academy and Theodor-Heuss-Gymnasium, ten men and one woman, four Americans and seven Germans, in a villa tucked in the midst of vineyards overlooking Heilbronn, Germany, stood up and proudly sang, "Arise Sons of Williston!" It was a capstone moment near the end of a magical reunion of "*Ehemalige*" (former) exchange students—now more advanced in years—participants in a school-to-school exchange program that started in 1956 and ceased some twenty years later. Altogether, the exchange included 32 participants: 17 from the Theodor-Heuss-Gymnasium and 15 from Williston Academy and the Williston-Northampton School—29 men and 3 women. That nearly 40% of those *Ehemalige* still living were present for the reunion made that evening even more special. (Several others still living indicated that they would have attended had circumstances permitted.)

The impetus for the reunion started in 2011 when two former exchange partners: Bill Anthony, Williston '66 (THG 1966-67), and Konrad Roth (Williston 1966), met in Munich for lunch--their first conversation in 44 years—and didn't stop talking until after dinner that evening. The men agreed that it was as though no time had passed. Therefore, they started thinking about a possible reunion with other former exchangers. Naturally, the first step was to find out who these exchangers were, where they were and then to try to reach them. With the help of Williston's Archivist, Rick Teller; a student researcher, Caleb Stern (Williston '19), who collected a cache of *Willistonian* articles about the exchange and old yearbook photos; and some Google detective work, Anthony and Roth gradually filled in some of the gaps, made contact with everyone living, and in the fall of 2015 began planning in earnest for a reunion. By January 2016, the group had decided on a September weekend in Heilbronn that, as luck would have it, just happened to be the same weekend as the *Heilbronner Weindorf*, or Wine Village, that city's annual wine festival!

During the months preceding the reunion these former exchange students began swapping stories and old photos, the highlights of which were lively email (and letter) exchanges with the first two German and American exchangers, Franz Schmitt von Muehlenfels and Corby Finney.

Although neither Franz nor Corby could attend the reunion, they were very much "present" with their remarkable recollections of Phil Stevens and Karl Weiss and their vivid memories of school life not long after the war. Franz shared a photo someone had

taken of him running the high hurdles on a wooden track that winter—next to the headmaster's Homestead! In one letter, Franz recalls Coach Laurent bellowing "Franz, watch your language!" on his megaphone after Franz shouted, "Shit!" when he overstepped the foul line for his broad jump. You might say that language learning for an exchange student at a boys' school takes on a new meaning and gaining a more varied vocabulary than found in schoolbooks... In yet another letter, Franz vividly recalled the "I like IKE!" buttons from that very different election 60 years ago.

In a way, these stories "seeded" the stories that were later told with great gusto all that weekend in Heilbronn last September, beginning with the opening welcome dinner on Thursday, September 16, so generously hosted by Ulrich Schneider (Williston 1959-60) and his partner, Petra Rothfuss. As the exchangers around the table introduced themselves and their partners, any concerns they might have harbored about spending an awkward weekend with complete strangers were quickly dispelled as they recognized kindred spirits in their shared memories and their reflections on the exchange experience and the profound impact it had on everyone, personally and professionally. Although the Williston—Theodor-Heuss-Gymnasium exchange eventually spanned some twenty years, from the mid-1950's into the mid-1970's, those present at the reunion, regardless of their age or profession, discovered that they share a bond as unique as it is deep: each former exchanger present had proudly represented his or her school on *terra incognita*, and had mastered linguistic and cultural challenges, not to mention the personal challenges that a year-long exchange presents. Each participant in this exchange, in this writer's view, resembled an astronaut on a new planet and learned enduring and important lessons about independence and self-reliance. Each returned home changed in ways they could not have anticipated.

The exchange was founded by Williston's Headmaster, Phillips Stevens, and the Director of the Theodor-Heuss-Gymnasium, Karl Weiss, following a visit by Weiss to Easthampton in the winter of 1956, when Weiss found a warm welcome—and, according to Phil Stevens, the only standing ovation that Willistonians had ever given a guest speaker! (Franz Schmitt, who was eyewitness to that speech, recalled that Weiss' talk about God and Nature was a lively counterpart to the sober Congregationalist backdrop, something he says the boys particularly appreciated.) Stevens had spent two summers in Germany in 1937 and '38, while a teacher at the South Kent School, earning his Master's in German at Middlebury. Later, as Williston's headmaster, he and Weiss, both dedicated educators, doubtless shared a common interest in re-establishing post-war US and German relations by means of a simple, school-to-school, family-to-family, 1:1 exchange. The origin of this exchange is all the more remarkable, given the fact that Phil Stevens' younger brother, David, a US infantryman, was killed in Germany near the end of the war and Karl Weiss had been a prisoner of war. Thus, the founding of this exchange, quite literally on the rubble of war, barely a decade after war's end, was truly an act of practical idealism carried out by two consummate educators who shared deep mutual respect for each other's culture and who sought to ensure that the next

generation of students knew a more peaceful world. Their exchange functioned with quiet regularity from its start in 1956 until its final year, 1975, around the time when Williston, now the Williston-Northampton School, closed its German language program. In its final years, after Williston-Northampton became co-ed, the once all-male exchange included several young women from both schools.

The day after their opening dinner, on a sunny fall Friday morning, September 16, this group of new friends left their hotel on the Neckar River to walk over to the city hall for a welcome ceremony hosted by Agnes Christner, the vice-mayor of Heilbronn and a short tribute to Karl Weiss and Phillips Stevens. Following an exchange of gifts and a champagne toast with the vice-mayor and a photo on the city hall steps, the exchangers strolled nostalgic through the pedestrian zone over to Theodor-Heuss-Gymnasium—still sharing old memories and remarking at the many changes in this vibrant multi-cultural city in route.

At Theodor-Heuss-Gymnasium, the group was warmly welcomed by Frank Martin Beck, the director and Angelika Schreiber-Balle, department head, who proudly pointed out the colorful mosaic with a red Trojan horse (THG is a humanistic gymnasium, after all!) which Corby Finney, the first Willistonian at THG, had helped install with his fellow students in 1957-58. Herr Beck brought the group up-to-date on the school's activities and introduced a group of THG students, whom the exchangers regaled with stories of days past: long before emails and texting, when letters home took at least a week to arrive and rare phone calls were laboriously carried out in the post-office.

For lunch, the group visited Ulrich Schneider's family company, BRUNNEN Baier & Schneider, where Ulrich and his son Jan hosted us in the *Kantine* for a splendid Swabian lunch and the group had a chance to thank Jan's assistant, Carmen Mallory, who organized many local arrangements for the reunion. After a bus tour of the city, which concluded in the historic Kilianskirche (cathedral), the group gathered early that evening at tables that Ulrich and Petra generously reserved for the group at the *Weindorf* festival a few blocks from the hotel in the center of the city. This reporter assures the reader that the wines were abundant and splendid and the food, whether *Zwiebelkuchen* or *Wurst*, was the perfect accompaniment to more conversations and laughter. Around midnight, the group retired and the next day boarded a train for the short trip to nearby Schwaebisch Hall to visit to the *Museum Wuerth* art museum and, after another Swabian lunch, undaunted by a warm drizzle, the exchangers took a guided walking tour of that beautiful and historic city, which, unlike Heilbronn, had been spared the war's bombs.

Early that last evening, this hearty and happy group was driven to the outskirts of a cool and rainy Heilbronn to Ulrich's family vineyard on one of the hillsides that ring the city of Heilbronn, where they sipped Ulrich's wine as darkness fell and toasted their host and hostess for helping to make the reunion possible. From the vineyard the group drove

a short peg over to Ulrich's home with its splendid views of the city, for a *Grillfest* with Swabian fare and grilled *Bratwuerste*—and, naturally, more wine. As the evening grew long, music sheets were handed out and the group sang a rousing version of “Arise Sons (and Daughters) of Williston”—and then viewed some old slides from the 1960s and an amazing 8mm film that Lutz Wegner had made of his travels through the US during his year at Williston in 1967-68.

The next day, Sunday morning, as if not wishing the weekend to end, the former exchangers gathered one last time: for breakfast at the hotel and to say their final good-byes. No longer strangers, they were saying farewell to friends, old and new, whose shared experiences in their formative years had shaped each of them for years to come. They found that though they were men and women in education, in medicine, in law, in the arts and in business, they shared a common bond and lamented that an exchange such as theirs was no longer possible.

In the end, the amusing and often touching stories that were told that weekend--whether of the challenges of cultural adjustment, linguistic nuances, overcoming national stereotyping, dating in a new culture, adjusting to a new school and different teaching styles, engaging in family life abroad, or independent traveling--these stories of academic adventures are the legacy of two educators, Phillips Stevens and Karl Weiss, who shared a simple but bold idea: linking two schools, without fuss and fanfare.

Footnotes:

- 1) Bill Anthony was reminded after reading one of the old *Willistonian* articles on the Heilbronn exchange that he had promised Phil Stevens in 1966 that he would submit regular letters from Heilbronn--and a final report on how the exchange might be improved. Anthony confesses that he never fulfilled either promise, probably because he was so fully immersed in the exchange experience. Bill hopes that by filling in the history of this exchange and in penning this report he has, belatedly, fulfilled a promise made 50 years ago and in so doing, honored the good men who made the exchange possible—and his German teacher at Williston, Frank Putnam, for encouraging a once-struggling German student, who later became a German professor. Moreover, as for "improving" the exchange, well, looking back, Bill writes that he might have suggested that a Swabian cook be hired for the Williston kitchen.
- 2) The reunion would not have been possible without the support of many people. In the US: Rick Teller and Caleb Stern at Williston; Corby Finney; Ruth, Peter and Phillips Stevens; and Bill Anthony. In Germany, huge kudos to Konrad Roth; Ulrich Schneider and Petra Rothfuss; Carmen Mallory at BRUNNEN; Franz Schmitt von Muehlenfels; Frank Beck and Angelika Schreiber-Balle at the Theodor-Heuss-Gymnasium; and to all of the German exchangers, who generously hosted their American counterparts for the trip to Schwaebisch Hall as well as the lunch and tour of the city. Their generosity is unmatched!

- 3) Without a doubt, part of the deep and lasting impact of the Williston-THG Exchange was due to its duration—a full academic year. Most students who study abroad during high school or college (whether in Heilbronn or Easthampton) aren't able to devote that much time away. Sadly, this makes the level of cultural immersion and language acquisition that's necessary for "survival" in a full year's exchange, virtually impossible today. Second, the exchangers all remarked at how the isolation they felt at times while abroad—due to the absence of emails and routine phone calls or skyping—while it was difficult, in retrospect each felt that this challenge contributed to their increased sense of self-reliance and independence. A third aspect of this exchange was the element of the host family, for a family is certainly a window to any culture, just as it is also a welcome refuge for an exchange student feeling a bit homesick. In the best of circumstances, the host family becomes a second family. And finally, there is the composite impact of the exchange experience in its totality, which is really impossible to gauge or assess immediately after one returns home, especially since that time is often marked by a sense of "reverse culture shock" as one adjusts to life back home after 10-11 months away. No, the full impact of the Williston-THG exchange was most evident in the lives we'd lived after our exchange, as we applied, often unconsciously, the lessons we'd learned outside the classroom, on our own, and apply those to our new interests and professions and family lives. As my host mother, Frau Roth, once told me, this year would change my life. I suspect that the same is true for all of us.
- 4) Although a full-year exchange such as ours is no longer a realistic option for Williston-Northampton students (or, as we learned, for THG students), the school can take genuine pride in its many international initiatives, whether it be students from around the world learning in Easthampton, or students and faculty on short-term study abroad excursions.
- 5) One of the interesting "discoveries" we made in filling in the names of the former exchangers was that of Fred Sandback, a Willistonian ('61) who attended THG in 1961-2. As reported in his *New York Times* obituary, Fred was a well-known minimalist artist, who had several major one-man exhibits some years later in Germany. He passed away in 2003. As with so many of the exchangers we contacted and met, Fred's year in Heilbronn very likely had a strong influence on his later professional work.
- 6) In reference to one of the photos in the large file (THG director and associate in front of red mosaic of Trojan Horse): Corby Finney writes: "Under the supervision of our wonderful, art teacher, my mentor and friend at THG, Rudolph Mutschler, we students designed and installed 1957/58 a large mosaic in the foyer of the new building. The title was, "Das Troianische Pferd." And yes, Corby, that mosaic is still

there.

- 7) Further, to the history of THG, Corby remembers meeting the first post-war president of the Federal Republic of Germany, the widely-admired and respected, Theodor Heuss, for the dedication of the new THG school building in his name: “The dedication took place in the school's courtyard. The date was I am guessing May or June 1958. I introduced myself to TH. He was quite surprised to know that an American was a member of the graduating 9th *Klasse*. I found him a genial gent, with mannerisms that reminded me of Winston Churchill... It was a big deal, lots of speeches, food, drink, music, dance and merriment. For students it meant a transition to a new, insulated, bright and clean building. The classes when I first arrived were in staged in badly damaged buildings which were dark, soggy and depressing.”

- 8) Corby also described what life was like in post-war Germany, even more than a decade after the war: “Rationing of food products took place on a monthly rotation. Meat and poultry were scarce. Other food products too, but I don't remember details. I do remember shopping for some veggies, cheese, eggs, and milk in the neighborhood of Schubartstrasse 2 where the Wurster family lived - the cost of food was I think higher than it was back home. My parents in Springfield MA sent biweekly air packages - each of them included coffee and chocolate, which were unavailable or scarce in local retail shop. *Butzkaffee* was all that was available in Heilbronn retail shops, and it was dreadful stuff... I also smuggled foodstuffs from the American base in the Heilbronner *Kaserne* (barracks) where I had friends. At Christmas 1957, friends from Springfield stationed in the *Kaserne* snagged a very large turkey in the *Kaserne* larder. I put it in my oversize backpack and peddled out the *Kaserne* on my rickety bike, turkey blood running out of the backpack and down my backside, to Schubartstrasse where the family was enthralled by the *Truthuhn*. The big bird was of course illegal contraband, and the folks on the inside who were my enablers... would have spent time in the *Kaserne* jail if they were found out, which they weren't.”