



Harley Richardson, second from right, and Gerdi Diederichs, second from left, look over old photographs with Richardson's wife, Bonnie, and Diederichs' daughter Anja, far left. (Submitted Photo)

American soldier, German girl reunite after lengthy separation

By Mike Clark
Special Correspondent

On Christmas Eve 1945, a 7-year-old German girl invited a lonely young American soldier to her home for dinner. Nearly 59 years later, he's repaid the hospitality.

Harley Richardson, father of Mustang City Councilwoman Linda Hagan, was the American GI. The now-grownup girl recently came for a visit with him.

Gerdi Treffler brought her daughter Anja on the trip to America. As part of the trip, Richardson brought the two

women to Mustang to meet his daughter Linda and her family.

This international friendship began in 1945 in Oberstdorf, a small ski resort in the German Alps in Bavaria. Richardson was

a soldier with the 103rd Army Infantry Division.

World War II was over in Germany, but Richardson was

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spending his second Christmas Eve stationed far from home. The young soldier had been separated from his new bride for more than a year, and Christmas Eve was a very lonely time.

Richardson enjoyed talking with children and giving them small gifts such as chewing gum. On Christmas Eve, he and a friend met a little girl then named Gerdi Diederichs and began talking with her.

"She asked, 'Is it Christmas Eve. What are you doing this evening for Christmas?'" Richardson recalled.

The GI told Gerdi they'd be spending the evening at their hotel. She invited them to her home for a holiday dinner with her family.

Richardson was hesitant to accept the invitation. He wasn't sure the girl's family would be happy about feeding two foreign strangers on Christmas Eve.

When the men returned to their hotel they found bowls of hard candy set out for the soldiers. They filled their pockets with the candy and a few oranges, and decided to take

them to Gerdi.

The girl was waiting for them. She took them into the home to meet her parents and her 10-year-old sister.

The German family was living in small quarters and had little to share. But the mother fed the soldiers and made them feel welcome. Richardson especially remembers the apple strudel.

He had Gerdi bring him a large bowl, which he and his friend filled with the candy and oranges from their pocket. Gerdi and her sister had never seen oranges before. The mother had to demonstrate how to peel and eat them.

Gerdi ate some of the candy, and then told Richardson she wanted to give some of the treats to the children next door.

"Instead of going away a few pieces of candy, she gave half of it to the other children. I was impressed. That was remarkable to me," he said.

Dinner led to a visit lasting late into the evening. At midnight, the GI guests went to Mess with the family.

After that, Richardson went

back to Oberstorf on weekends whenever he could. The last time he saw Gerdi and her family was in January 1946.

In 1994, Richardson and his wife Bonnie were in France for a veterans reunion. They went to Oberstorf to look for Gerdi's family. A search of town hall records was fruitless.

Luckily, Gerdi's father had sent Richardson a picture of Gerdi with one of the neighbor boys she had shared her Christmas candy with. The mayor of Oberstorf found a man who recognized the boy in that decades-old picture.

"He took us to that man," Richardson recalled. "I showed him the picture and he said, 'oh, that's me. Where did you get this? I have one just like it.'"

By the next morning, the man had tracked down Gerdi, where she was vacationing in Norberg. Richardson called and talked with Gerdi for the first time in 48 years.

The two wrote letters back and forth after that. Last year, Richardson took his whole family to France for a veterans reunion and introduced them to Gerdi. That was when he invited her to visit him in the United States.

Gerdi and her daughter accepted the invitation this summer. They arrived in the U.S. in

"I think of Gerdi every Christmas...I always have."

Harley Richardson on the young girl who befriended him in 1945 in Oberstorf, Germany.

June and stayed for three weeks.

What moved a little German girl to invite two foreign strangers to her home so many years ago? Gerdi can only remember feeling that the men were a long way from home and shouldn't be alone on a special day.

Richardson has never forgotten the young girl who was so kind when he was 21 years old and far, far away from home on Christmas Eve.

"I think of Gerdi every Christmas," he said. "I always



U.S. soldier Harley Richardson in 1945 stands with Gerdi Diederichs and her older sister at Oberstorf, Germany. Gerdi befriended Richardson by inviting him over to dinner with her family. (Screened Photo) is the father of Mustang City Councilwoman Linda Hagen. (Screened Photo)

Prolonged exposure dangerous

Summer heat is no stranger to Mustang citizens, but that doesn't mean they should take the heat for granted. The Canadian County Health Department warns that prolonged exposure and physical activity in high temperatures can result in heat-related illnesses that may cause heat stroke or death.

Health experts say the ability to adapt to the heat varies individually. At particular heat risk are the elderly, who may not be able to adjust to the increases in air temperatures, or who take medications that decrease their ability to deal with the heat. Heat precautions are also advised for persons with heart, lung or kidney problems, infants and young children, and persons whose occupations require

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