

Believers in the 'American Dream'

Herald Citizen Newspaper, Sunday, March 13, 2005

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Photo/ Shaw Sidwell: Martina and Josef Gabriel



In 1945 a 10-year-old Swiss farm boy was taken by his aunt to a little community stage play. The show changed his life.

It was called *Crazy Martin* and it was the story of an outcast in a Swiss village who traveled to America and there earned his fortune.

The 10-year-old audience member was named Josef Gabriel. And that day he began to dream how he would come to America and start a new life when he grew up.

Sixty years later, Josef and his wife, Martina, have lived the American dream. Starting with \$6 in his pocket and the promise of a job, Josef worked for years in Connecticut and then in 1979 moved with Martina to Cookeville to buy the first Howard Johnson's motel in the region.

"It's the perfect location," he said recently.

He and Martina searched for nine months to find just the right spot to open a motel. They wanted an area where they could start a family and bring up their children safely and run their own business at the same time. And the great weather and beautiful views were the deciding factors when they moved away from the blustery North.

Twenty-six years after settling in Cookeville, the Gabriels have made a couple of additions to the motel, built their own home and rent out two others.

And instead of retiring to their home with a view, Joseph and Martina are thinking of adding a three-story tower to the motel. They try to get back to Europe once or twice a year to visit family members and they regularly play host to relatives visiting here.



Their boys grew up in Cookeville with 23-year-old Tony helping to run the motel and 21-year-old PJ just assigned to Iraq in the Marine Reserves.

Peter (P.J.) Gabriel Serving in Iraq pictured left.

If the 'American Dream' means building something from nothing, then the Gabriels are living proof that the dream can become real.

But it didn't come easily.

Both Martina and Josef grew up on farms in post-World War II Europe, he in Switzerland, she in Austria.

As the oldest of seven children, Josef had to drop out of school in the sixth grade to help support the family. He worked in the local grocery store, did odd jobs and helped on the farm.

"We were never hungry, but there was never any money," he said.

An uncle loaned Josef's father the money to apprentice the youngster to a baker. By the time he was the age many people graduate from high school, Josef had become a pastry chef.

But it was still many years before he could consider going to America. Instead, 80 percent of his earnings went back to his family to help pay the mortgage on the family farm and help pay his father's debts.

When Joseph was 29, the debts had been paid and he was free to go West.

"You couldn't just 'go' to America at that time," he said. "You had to have a job offer before they would let you in."

When he saw an ad in the newspaper for a pastry chef to do wedding cakes for a baker in Norwalk, Conn., Joseph didn't hesitate.

He arrived in America with \$6 in his pocket but a work ethic that was tireless.

Two and half years later, by working 60 hours a week at the bakery, painting houses on weekends and cleaning restaurants in his spare time, he had saved enough for a down payment on a house.

"I had been living in a rooming house where I had to pay \$12 a week for a room. That drove me crazy," he said.

After he bought the house, he, in turn, rented out the spare bedrooms and began to see firsthand how much a motel could bring in.

He was able to pay off the mortgage on his house with the rent money and within five years had saved up enough to buy out the bakery owner. When that deal fell through, he bought a 20-unit motel in Old Saybrook, Conn., a well-to-do area on Long Island Sound.

In the meantime, Martina Steiner, one of eight children on a farm in Austria, had been breaking from farm tradition, working in restaurants and trying to perfect her English.

The two met when Josef returned to Switzerland at the death of his father and met Martina in one of the restaurants.

He offered her a job at his motel.

"Now that I think about it, I'm surprised my mom and dad let me go," Martina said. "In my family everybody was expected to stay home to work the farm."

Martina took the job offer because she trusted Josef and because she wanted to learn English.

"I didn't know what a 'motel' was," she said laughing. "I thought it probably had something to do with restaurants."

The two worked well together and soon married.

In the next 10 years the couple was able to buy another motel and a couple of houses on the waterfront.

"We had some famous people renting the one house on the (Long Island) Sound," Josef said.

"The actress with the legs ... Betty Grable, stayed there. And the actor with the knife ... Anthony Perkins! And Patty Duke Astin."

But by the late 1970s, vacation tastes had changed and it was getting harder and harder to successfully rent out the houses and run the motels.

The Gabriels sold their properties there and began looking for something different.

Their quest brought them to Cookeville where their lives slowed down and the two were finally able to start a family.

But even after selling the Connecticut property, the couple watched their pennies, first living in one of the motel rooms instead of buying or renting a house. Later they built an apartment over the lobby. And now have built their own home on land adjacent to the motel and overlooking the mountains to the east.

They have decided to construct a couple of apartments for their sons should the boys decide to settle down and take over the business.

In 1998 Josef and Martina decided not to renew their franchise with Howard Johnson and the motel was renamed 'The Alpine Lodge and Suites.'

Was the name a salute to their home countries?

Martina laughed.

"We tried to think of a name that would come first in the Yellow Pages," she said.

And do Martina and Josef think that the American Dream is still possible?

"Absolutely --100 percent yes," Josef said.

"If you want to work," he added.

"Once children come, it's hard to have the same ethic and savings.

"And now things are quite different economically. No one from European countries comes here to earn money anymore," he said. "When I first came, I earned twice as much here as I would have in Switzerland. Today, it's the opposite.

"And, there, it's better if you work for someone because the benefits are so great there. Here, it's better if you work for yourself."

Martina agreed.

"The social programs in Europe are much better. You have health care and insurance and even college is free.

"Of course, we have to pay for all that. The taxes are terrific," she said.

And do their sons have the same work ethic as the parents?

For a minute, no one said anything.

"The school system here can be a problem, I think," Martina said.

"So many kids hate school and it goes on for so long that some kids have nothing they want to do. They get bored and waste a lot of time. And that can become a habit," she said.

Josef talked about his brother in Switzerland who was a poor student in school. "He had terrible grades, but when he was apprenticed to a bricklayer, everything changed. He did very well and got great grades.

"I think you should have something to learn that you're interested in. Then you'll work hard," Josef said.

Might Josef want to open a bakery now that the boys are helping with the business?

He thought about it for a minute.

"I don't think there's enough clientele here in Cookeville for a real bakery. We were located in one of the busiest areas in the North where people were willing to pay \$1.50 for a dessert in the 1960s," he said.

So do Martina and Josef plan to retire soon?

"We'll hold on until the boys decide whether they want to take over the motel," Martina said.

In the meantime, Josef is admiring some development properties going up in Hanging Limb.

"The land is so cheap there. It could be a great buy."

And maybe it's time for a new motel in Monterey.

Published March 14, 2005 7:45 AM CST



From Family Album: The Gabriels with sons, P.J., at left in both photos, and Tony.

Alpine Lodge & Suites

<http://www.alpinelodge.org/>

Located at the foot of the Cumberland Mountains in Cookeville, Tennessee, we offer a quiet, scenic retreat for all our guests. At Alpine Lodge & Suites, we believe that we are able to offer our business travelers a "home away from home". Situated halfway between Nashville and Knoxville, and with easy access from Interstate 40 (exit 290), it's the perfect place to stop on those long business trips. Alpine Lodge is a quiet, peaceful, motel with easy access to I-40 and the Cookeville region, including Tennessee Tech University.

Not traveling on business? Even better. We offer a quiet, comfortable room in a peaceful setting for all our customers. For recreation, we have an outdoor pool, shuffleboard courts, BBQ grills, and a covered picnic area.

Masked gunman robs motel

Mary Jo Denton: Herald Citizen Staff

A masked man with a gun pulled off another robbery here last night, stealing \$233 from a motel located just outside Cookeville. It happened about 10:15 p.m. at the Alpine Lodge on Highway 70 just east of Cookeville. It is the fifth armed robbery here since October 1 and the sixth if the robbery of a bank in the nearby Rickman community in Overton County on Oct. 22 is counted. Three stores, two motels, and one bank have been hit.

Investigators believe the same man has committed most of the robberies, though the description of last night's bandit varies considerably from the descriptions given in other cases, possibly indicating a copycat robber.

In last night's case, the robber walked in and pointed a gun at the Alpine Lodge desk clerk, a 34-year-old man.

The clerk told Putnam Sheriff's Deputy Chuck Ledbetter that he had been on the phone talking to his brother and had his back to the door when he heard someone come in.

He turned around and saw "a gunman standing there," the deputy's report says.

Holding a blue steel revolver in his left hand, the ski-masked man told the clerk several times to "give me the money" and even came around the counter as he demanded the money, the clerk told the deputy.

After getting the money, the robber then demanded "the deposit bag," and the clerk had to convince him there was no such bag, Deputy Ledbetter's report says.

The robber then ordered the clerk to get down on the floor. He did that, and the masked man left with the \$233.

The robber was believed to be a white man and appeared "relatively calm but firm," the report says.

He was about 5 ft. 9 inches tall and had a "thin" build, weighing about 160 pounds, the victim said.

He wore a black, open-faced ski mask with a black "shiny" nylon material pulled over that. He was wearing a blue and white checkered flannel hooded jacket and had on brown jersey gloves.

The gun he was carrying may have been a .22 caliber pistol.

While the method of last night's robber closely resembles that in other recent robberies here, the robber described by victims in the other cases seems to be a larger man.

Detective Donald Pierce and others are working the case this morning, and detectives working on the other robberies are also studying the case.

A total of six armed robberies have occurred in this area since Oct. 1, and arrests have been made in only one case.

That was the Friday, Oct. 1, robbery of the Lakeside Deli near Monterey. In that case, two black men came into the store and waited till others left, then pulled a gun and took \$1,000.

A few days later, a Cannon County man and three juveniles were arrested in that case.

The juveniles were runaways from a youth home in DeKalb County, and the father of one works at a plant near the Lakeside Deli, officials said.

The other robberies and the descriptions of the robber are as follows:

* On Wednesday, Oct. 6, about 7:18 p.m., the Go Mart BP store on N. Willow Ave. in Cookeville was robbed by a ski-masked man who demanded money and then demanded "the money bag."

He was described as a white male a little over six feet tall, weighing between 220 and 230 pounds, wearing a brown ski mask, a checkered shirt, and blue jeans.

* On Saturday, Oct. 16, about 9:30 p.m., the Colonial Market on Burgess Falls Road just outside Cookeville was robbed. The masked robber put a gun to the woman clerk's head, demanded the money out of the cash register, took it, then demanded "the bag under the counter." He made off with \$2,900.

The robber was described as a white male about six feet tall, weighing around 240 pounds. He was wearing a navy blue ski mask and blue jeans. He had dark eyes and red facial hair.

* On Tuesday, Oct. 19, about 9:25 p.m., the Knights Inn motel on Salem Road was robbed by a masked man who came into the motel office and point a revolver at two clerks.

The victims said the robber was a white male wearing a dark colored ski mask, a gray sweat shirt and blue jeans. He was about six feet to six feet three inches tall and had a medium build.

* The Rickman bank robbery happened on Friday, Oct. 22, around 10 a.m.

And while no information on that case has been available from official sources, the Herald-Citizen has learned that the robber was wearing a dark colored ski mask and was described as a white male about six feet tall.

He hurried into the bank that morning, pointed a gun at the clerks, and made off with an undisclosed sum of money. Overton County Sheriff's deputies found a truck believed to be the getaway vehicle a short time after the robbery and found some of the money in or around the truck.

The truck had been stolen out of a factory parking lot in Livingston.

Like the other robbery cases in Putnam County, the Rickman bank robbery remains unsolved.

Cookeville Police Detective Sgt. James Lane, who is also director of Crime Stoppers, said today that some tips on the cases have been phoned in to Crime Stoppers and are being "checked out."

But more information is needed, Detective Lane said.

"Anyone out there who knows anything about any of these cases is asked to contact police or call Crime Stoppers," he said.

Those who give tips to Crime Stoppers do not ever have to give their names, and they could earn up to \$1,000 in cash. Call Crime Stoppers at (931) 520-STOP or (931)-260-STOP.

Published November 03, 1999 12:07 PM CST: Herald Citizen Newspaper, Cookeville, TN

Victim struggles with gunman in armed robbery

Mary Jo Denton: Herald Citizen Staff

COOKEVILLE -- Two more armed robberies occurred here over the weekend, this time at motels, and in one case, a victim struggled with the gunman, police said.

The robber in the latest two cases fits the description of one man involved in other recent robberies in the area, he is still at large, and police are advising merchants and other business owners to be "extra vigilant."

The Alpine Lodge on E. Spring St. was robbed Friday night, and a man believed to be the same person attempted a robbery at the Hampton Inn on Interstate Drive on Saturday night but fled after the clerk there fought him, according to Cookeville Police Detective Sgt. Carl Sells.

The robbery on Friday night happened between 10 and 11 p.m. at the Alpine Lodge on E. Spring Street when a male clerk was working the desk, Detective Sells said.

"A man came in, pulled a gun and ordered the clerk to open the register and give him the money," Sells said.

The clerk complied and then was ordered into a back room, where the robber threatened his life, the detective said.

The robber left the clerk in that back room and walked out, taking an undisclosed amount of money with him.

He was described as between 6 ft. 3 inches and 6 ft. 5 inches tall, weighing 220 to 245 pounds, and having brown hair that is starting to gray. He wore no mask and was dressed in a button-up shirt and blue jeans.

No car was seen in connection with the robbery, and a search of the area by police officers and trained dogs turned up no clues, Sells said.

As they continued to investigate that and other recent robberies here, officers were called out for another robbery incident the next night.

That was around 8 p.m. Saturday at the Hampton Inn, "right in downtown Cookeville at a time when the area and the whole town was packed with people," Detective Sells said.

The gunman entered the Hampton from the pool area on the back side of the business, passing through a lobby and by a dining area where some children were eating a meal, Sells said.

No one saw his gun until later.

"He walked on into the counter area and stood there, sort of hesitating. The clerk, a 22-year-old male, walked over and asked if he could help him, and that's when he produced a gun and pointed it at the clerk."

The clerk reacted quickly, grabbing the gun and "wrestling" the robber for control of the weapon, which at one point discharged, Detective Sells said.

"The gun went off and a bullet narrowly missed the clerk and went into the ceiling. The kids in the dining room jumped up and ran to the outside.

"The clerk kept on fighting the gunman for a couple of minutes, but finally released his hold on the gun and the robber took a step back and then took off running."

Again, officers and trained dogs searched the area and found no sign of the robber, Sells said.

"He was described the same as the robber of the Alpine, and we believe he is the same one and may also be involved in other recent robberies here," he said.

The robber is believed to be between the ages of 35 and late 40's. In both cases, a gun with a long barrel was described by victims.

The robber in the weekend cases may be the same man who, along with another man, robbed the Express Mart convenience store on E. 10th St. on the night of Aug. 1 and may have also been involved in recent store robberies in White County, Detective Sells said.

In the Express Mart robbery, two men came into the store and one engaged the clerk in a conversation, while the other stood back and then pulled a large gun and ordered the clerk to hand over cash out of the register.

In other recent robberies here:

* A masked man robbed the Citgo store on Highway 111 on July 31, striking at 5 a.m. on a Sunday.

* Two men robbed the Airport Chevron store in White County on July 30, one standing back at first while the other talked to a clerk. Officers investigating that case say they believe the weapon used was a double-barreled sawed-off shotgun.

* A man with a gun robbed Alcorn's Market in Sparta on the night of Aug. 2, entering the place with a gun and taking only about 11 seconds to point it at the clerk and take the cash from the cash register, police said.

A Cookeville man, Chris Henry, 28, has been charged in connection with the Airport Chevron robbery, and he remains in jail in White County.

The cases here are all still under investigation and have been placed on Crime Stoppers.

"We hope people out there who know something about these cases will call Crime Stoppers and trade information for cash," said Capt. Nathan Honeycutt.

He also cautioned area merchants to be "extra vigilant" and stressed standard police advice that victims should not attempt to fight with robbers.

"Generally, we do not encourage trying to fight back as happened in one of these cases," Honeycutt said. "It is too risky."

Call Crime Stoppers at 520-7867.

Those who call are assigned a number and never have to reveal identity. Those who give information that helps police solve crimes may earn up to \$1,000 cash.

Published August 08, 2005 11:40 AM CDT : Herald Citizen Newspaper, Cookeville, TN

<http://www.ajlambert.com>