

## Frank X. Zimmerman

Francois Xavier Zimmerman's name reflects the mixed heritage of his birthplace in Alsace, which had been fought over by France and Germany for centuries. At his birth in 1858, Alsatians were French citizens, but Germany took Alsace in the wake of the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. All young German men were required to join the Army for three years of what was essentially slave labor with no pay when they turned 17. Three months before he hit that milestone, young Frank stowed away on a steamer leaving the country. After reaching the open ocean, Frank surrendered to the captain and was assigned to work for the ship's cook. Once they had arrived in the US, he jumped ship and headed to Ohio to join cousins.

After working on their farm for a year, Frank had saved up enough to make his way to his brother Joe, stationed with a Cavalry regiment at Fort Keogh near Miles City. After staying with his brother a while, he found a job cutting ties for the Northern Pacific railroad, before working on the construction train. There he cooked for the crews, ensured the food supplies, and supervised other workers on the train until completion of the line in 1883.

Frank then moved to Michigan, where he rented a farm. There he met and married his wife, Elizabeth, an immigrant from Luxembourg. They moved near her sister in Indiana, where Frank had a series of short-time positions before he landed a good job as a restaurant chef. Early in 1890, his brother Joe, who now had a farm, a clothing store and an interest in a bank in Billings, asked him to come manage his farm. The Zimmermans and their three children moved to Montana that year, where Frank managed the farm, and Elizabeth cooked for the hired men. A year later, Frank purchased 160 acres of his own.

In 1890, Joe was running sheep on a summer pasture on his property atop the Rims. At the time, it required a trip eight miles east to get up on the rim and another eight miles west to get back to the property, resulting in a 32-mile round trip that needed to be done every few days to resupply their sheepherder, and a long trip to move sheep to and from that pasture. That summer Frank, Joe and a miner named Thompson went to work building a new route up the Rims. Thompson blasted rock away, and then the men hauled away rubble and graded the road with a hand-held scraper. It took the three men and two mules two summers to complete the trail. When all was done, they had a steep road, but one that could be used by a wagon and team of horses. The resupply trip could now be made in five hours, rather than two days. The Zimmerman Trail was purchased by a group of service clubs in 1938 and donated to Yellowstone County. It was regraded in the summer of 1939 by 150 men of the WPA to make it suitable for automobile traffic. The road was paved for the first time in the 1940s, and it's been heavily used ever since.

By 1893, there were a few families with children west of town that were of school age. Frank Zimmerman and several others created a school district and built the Shiloh school, named for the Civil



War battle. It was located just west of what is now Shiloh Road and Central Avenue. The Zimmerman children, which eventually numbered six, were among its first students.

The Zimmerman home was a center of social activity, with social notes in the news recording many a hayride, sleighing party and automobile convoy ending there for dancing and a fine supper. These parties included those of their children's friends as well as their own.

In 1911, the Zimmerman's 16-year-old son Emil died of typhoid. Their son Albert was drafted into the Army during World War I, and served in the army in France and in the occupation in Germany. He lost an eye there, and later contracted tuberculosis after his return from Europe and passed away in 1923.

Frank had been involved in many service organizations, including the Sons of Hermann, and the Knights of Columbus. This last took him on a pilgrimage to Rome in 1920, where he was received by Pope Benedict XV. While in Europe, he also took the chance to revisit his home town in Alsace, now French again in the wake of World War I. It had been the scene of battles and was left in ruins, but was being reconstructed. Frank was able to reconnect with a few people he knew.

Frank X. Zimmerman died in September 1943, several years after his wife had passed. His son Charles took over the family farm. At the time of his death, he was survived by his son and three daughters, sixteen grandchildren and nine great-grandchildren.

Sources:

- "Along the Zimmerman Trail" Historical Marker, from <https://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=169996> retrieved November 16, 2021
- *Billings Gazette*, "Death Claims Trail Builder", September 12, 1943
- *Billings Gazette*, "Frank Zimmerman, Who Built Trail West of City, Nearing 85<sup>th</sup> Birthday", February 28, 1943
- *Billings Gazette*, "Tales of the Town", May 3, 1939
- "Biographical Facts of Francois 'Frank' Xavier Zimmerman", undated, collection of Billings Public Library
- Zimmerman, Charles, *Along the Zimmerman Trail*, Self-published 1977, Billings, MT

Photo Credit: Billings Public Library collection