

Georg Carl and Elise Willrich Emigrate to Texas in 1846-1847

This account was narrated in German in 1945 by Anna Willrich Gross to her daughter, Minnie Gross Wilkens of San Antonio, Texas. This narration and the letters, which follow, were translated into English in 1952-53. Handwritten copies of the letters are in the Willrich Archives at Pattenzen, Germany, near Hanover, but it is believed that the original letters were destroyed in the Wilkens' house fire.

Mother narrated as follows:

My Grandfather, Georg Ludwig Kukuk, was an officer in the German army and fought many battles against Napoleon's soldiers, and after the battle of Waterloo was decorated with medals for bravery and valor. It was during these restless and stormy years of war and strife that my grandmother was driven from place to place with her young children, until the family came to settle in Lüneburg, where a home was founded.

Of the four children, my mother was the only daughter and eventually was the one to remain with her father to take care of him. Of the three brothers August, the oldest one, was sixteen years of age when he, too, took part in the battle of Waterloo, and for many years thereafter lived on his English halfpay. During his long life, for he became very old, he was never known to have done a stroke of work. He was considered odd and eccentric, and his father never forgave him for embracing the Catholic faith.

Mother's second brother, Otto, was an agriculturist and for many years lived on an estate in Mecklenburg, until he came to Texas to join his sister.

The youngest of the three brothers, Louis, became deaf and dumb while quite young, from the effects of measles, and after contracting galloping consumption died at the early age of twenty-one years in an institute for the deaf and dumb in Hildesheim. Mother had an uncle, General Kukuk, who was commandant of Hildesheim and the founder of this institute. My mother spent much time in her uncle's home so as to be near her afflicted brother, whom she adored and who died in her arms. Louis was very gifted and his paintings and pen and ink sketches showed great talent.

My mother loved to describe the life she led while visiting her uncle, General Kukuk. She described him as being a kind and generous old man, while her own father was very strict and inclined to be rather exacting. The old General

was afflicted with erysipelas on one of his legs and mother was often called to Hildesheim to help nurse him. His wife, Janette, was in the habit of taking advantage of mother's presence and would take to her bed during the latter's stay, feigning illness; however, not until she had provided herself with all kinds of sweetmeats and delicacies, which she kept carefully hidden in her bureau drawers.

Janette was of a very suspicious nature and mother recalled a very amusing incident, which happened during one, her visits in Hildesheim. The General had rewarded a faithful servant with a Louis d'or for loyal services, which caused Aunt Janette to exclaim excitedly: "It's positively uncanny how that Louis d'or looks just exactly and accurately like the one I once possessed!"

Their daughter, Hannchen, at the time when mother visited her relatives, was already married to August von Goeben, who much later, after his wife's death, became a very famous General and was made a Field Marshal. His bust was placed among those of other notable soldiers in the Royal Armory in Berlin.

Upon her mother's insistence, my mother had to spend a whole year on the country estate of one of her mother's close friends, to learn how to run a home out in the country, with its varied and difficult chores. Here she was set to work to take hold of things, which filled her with dismay and deep resentment. She just couldn't understand what advantage she would derive from learning how to milk a cow, kill and dress a chicken, stuff sausages, mold candles, and countless other things. Why should she, the daughter of an army officer, used to city life, always ready to dance and take part in social affairs, be bothered with the things required by those living on a country estate! But in later years everything she had acquired during her stay in the country stood her in good stead and was of tremendous help when she migrated to Texas with her family, and she

was forever grateful that her mother had insisted upon this year of training.

It was after her own mother's death that my mother took complete charge of the household and her father's care, who by that time was a retired Captain and Commander of his regiment. Though not overly blessed with worldly goods, my mother's life as a young girl was filled with much pleasure socially.

Georg Carl Willrich, a distinguished and noted lawyer in Uelzen, not far from Lüneburg, a widower with seven children, was a frequent visitor in my mother's home and always a most welcome guest, because of his constant good humor and genial manners. He fell in love with my mother and asked for her hand in marriage. Grandfather was all for it and quite willing to entrust his daughter to him. She, however, wasn't any too eager to become the mother of seven children, of which the oldest son was already a student at the University of Göttingen, and the oldest daughter attending a finishing school for young ladies. Grandfather encouraged my mother to accept him, pointing out to her that she was no longer very young (mother married at the age of thirty-one years), and besides she would be taken care of, as he, the father, would have very little to leave her.

And so it came about that mother moved to Uelzen with her husband, where her three children were born, of which I was the second one. As the wife of a dignified and distinguished Judge, mother led a life of ease and comfort, with many social obligations, which, however, wasn't of very long duration and came to a sudden and most unexpected end, as follows:

Father's oldest son, George, had participated in the insurrections prevailing in Germany at that time among students against their Government, and was compelled to leave the country or run the risk of being incarcerated in some fortress, a political prisoner. So it was resolved that George should immigrate to Texas, where some many Germans, who had left their own country in search of liberty and freedom from the yoke of governmental oppression, had found refuge and shelter.

Father accompanied our brother George to Hamburg, from where he was to embark. Carl Theodor, father's second son, who had shown no

desire or inclination to attend college, was sent on a long sea voyage to China instead, from which he had just returned at this time. It didn't take father long to decide to send Carl to Texas with his older brother, and after a short, but no doubt weighty deliberation, made up his mind to accompany his two sons.

So father sent word to mother from Hamburg, advising her of what he was doing and asking her to join him in Texas the following year with the rest of the family. She was told to break up their household and whatever couldn't be taken with her was to be converted into money. Poor mother was simply stunned and naturally most unhappy over the prospect of leaving her comfortable home behind, her eighty-year-old father, and her many dear and close friends – but what could she do about it, but comply!

The oldest daughter, Gretchen, was by that time already married to August Keuffel, an attorney living in Lüneburg. He came to our mother's assistance and proved of great help when she started dismantling her home, and arranged all business matters connected with a big move of this kind. It certainly wasn't a simple or easy matter, migrating to a foreign country with bag and baggage and a lot of children, and our mother must be given great credit for having carried out father's wishes in such an efficient manner. One of my stepsisters had died before the family migrated to Texas, but even with our oldest sister Gretchen married and staying behind in Germany, our two oldest brothers already in Texas with father, mother still had three stepdaughters and two children of her own to look after and care for during the long sea voyage.

She had left her first-born, Julius, six years old, with her father in Lüneburg with the intention of returning for him after three years, and thus see her beloved father again. However, this never came to pass, for Grandfather died before time had expired and our mother never set foot on her native soil again. After our grandfather's death our brother Julius was sent to live with an uncle, our father's younger brother, Theodor Willrich, on the latter's estate, Bode, near Hanover, and where he remained until he was twelve years old, when he accompanied mother's brother Otto Kukuk, to Texas.

Mother with her brood of children was aboard a sailing vessel for sixteen weeks before landing in Galveston, Texas on the 29th of July 1847. It wasn't a rough or stormy voyage, but the ship was beset by a great deal of calm, and mother had to suffer inconveniences of many kinds, in spite of arrangements which had been made for private quarters on the upper deck for the family, as well as having supplied herself with a quantity of provisions for the long and wearisome trip.

A good many of her fellow travelers were from Mecklenburg, and among them a Judge Brandes and an agriculturist named Lüders, whose young wives were sisters; also a Mr. Kehrer and others, who became and always remained close friends of the Willrich family, for they all settled in the same neighborhood. This area, some four or five miles from La Grange, was called "Latium," for most of those who came to Texas to establish a new domicile were university graduates and therefore were known as the "Latiners." There was music, dancing, games of Whist and L'hombre, and good conversation during their leisure hours, and because we had a large "saal" or hall in our home where people could congregate, traveling groups would stop by and give entertainments, which greatly contributed to the intellectual life of Fayette County. This settlement was considered the "Garden of Texas," because of its charming and pleasing landscape and rich and luxuriant vegetation.

Our father was on hand to greet his family when it finally arrived in Galveston, and after spending several days at the Beissner Hotel, started on the overland trip with us in a covered wagon. It took a week before we reached Mt. Eliza, and poor mother's dismay when she saw her future home, still under construction and in a sadly unfinished state, must have been boundless. She no doubt often felt deeply discouraged, to be forced to start housekeeping under such difficult and trying conditions. However, it was here that the earlier training she had acquired for work necessary on a farm helped her enormously.

The beautiful linen mother had brought with her from Germany was exchanged for farm implements, such as a plow and other necessities. She had brought with her what was called an "Economy stove," which, however, wasn't put to

use until much later, for father had already provided a large hearth built of stone in the big, roomy kitchen, and to install mother's stove would have meant tearing out all the masonry just completed.

Months went by before the house was finished, for during its construction a well had to be dug, fields laid out, gardens planted and fences built, for which the cedar posts had to be felled and hauled for ten miles. A large cellar was also excavated and its walls of stone built by a mason named Kreische, and father paid for his work with some land he owned on the high banks on the Colorado River just above La Grange.

Father had purchased this piece of land because of its location, with a charming view of the picturesque little town in the distance, and the swiftly flowing river at its feet. This strip of land is still owned by the Kreische family and for many years was known as Kreische's Bluff. Recently part of it has been converted into a State Park and has been named Monumental Hill. It is here where the remains of those Texans who took part in the Mier expedition in 1842 lie buried under a stately monument, erected in their memory.

Our brother Carl fought against invading Mexican forces soon after our family's arrival in Texas, and upon his return to the farm became a great help to father.

Brother George, because of whom the family came to Texas, returned to Germany after a few years to complete his course at the University of Göttingen. He was, however, because of articles he had written regarding the uprising of the students against the German Government, immediately apprehended and imprisoned for six months before he was able to make his escape, after which he remained secreted in the home of a friend in Hamburg for more than a year.

George finally returned to America in 1853, after an absence of almost five years. He began teaching at Rutersville, in Fayette County, Texas, a military school, and being a man of literary attainments, became Professor of Languages. Later he taught at Baylor University at Independence, Washington County, this being the first university established in the State, and was Professor of Languages in that institution also.

Here ended mother's narrative of recollections out of the past. It was to have been continued, but unfortunately and regretfully was not. I can only add what I remember of the visits we were privileged to make at the old farmhouse, Mt. Eliza, with our wonderful little Grandmother, who lived to be almost one hundred years old.

It was during our Easter vacation, which always lasted a full week, that our parents took us on these delightful visits, by train from San Antonio as far as Schulenburg, from where we continued in an open conveyance, which was, called an ambulance in those days. It was drawn by two sturdy horses and had seating capacity for all of us and room besides for our baggage. The drive of twelve miles to Mt. Eliza was along country lanes, full of deep ruts and holes caused by early spring rains, which made frequent stops necessary to free the wheels of their heavy load of sticky mud. It took two hours and more to cover the distance we now can make in twenty minutes by automobile.

The excitement our arrival caused was always tremendous! Little Grandmother would be standing under one of the huge live oak trees behind the old farmhouse, shading her eyes with her hand, the better to see us as we drove up. I can still see the big group of relatives eager to greet us, while the faithful old watchdog, chained to his house under the tree, joined in the joyful and noisy welcome with his loud barking. Our first meal in the big kitchen at the long table with our cousins was always a merry occasion, followed by many more, just as jolly and happy.

To visit the hogan at feeding time, to stand by to watch the milking of the cows, or take walks to the little creek near by, or across the meadow to inspect the rows of corn in the fields, as tall as we were, gather blackberries, so juicy and sweet, from the vines along the road, to get a good view of the little white church on the hillside in the distance, breathe the fresh country air, -- what bliss to all of us who came from the city, and how sad were we when we had to leave again!

The Easter festivities were many and always began with a fish fry on Good Friday, when we had a big picnic at Buckner's Creek, where the fish had been caught by our men folk the day before for the gay and happy outing. The day usually ended with a dance at some little schoolhouse, with the harmonica or accordion furnishing the music, -- and none ever sounded livelier or merrier.

Two days later the Easter egg hunt took place on the grounds of the "Teutonia Halle," which was another joyful occasion for all of us. I never succeeded in finding any of the many colorful Easter eggs, but instead walked all over them as they lay in full view on the grass-covered hillside, with not a bush or shrub within miles in which the Rabbit might have laid them. Families came for the Easter egg hunt from as far as eight and ten miles away, in their big, roomy farm wagons, or on horseback, and of course all the babies were brought along. Wrapped in their little blankets, they were placed side by side in the little bunks built especially for that purpose in a small room off from the big hall where the gay dancing was going on.

We, all of us, thoroughly enjoyed these festive occasions, and to this day I haven't forgotten the fun I had dancing with the big, bronzed sons of the farm.

When the time came to return to our home in San Antonio -- and to school -- we shed many tears as we were driven back to Schulenburg. As we passed into the country lane we again could see little Grandmother, this time among her rosebushes in the garden in

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Narrative by Minnie Gross Wilkens
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front of her home, with the rest of the family, waving goodbye to us as we drove by. It was always such a sad parting.

In later years we brought our own children for visits and they, too, learned to love the dear old home called Mt. Eliza. Old and young alike grieved when the farm was sold, and our visits had to become "just memories," - happy ones indeed!

Minnie Gross Wilkens
San Antonio, Texas
November 27, 1953