

WHAT DOES FAMILY MEAN TO YOU?

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Johann Willrich (1964) is a descendant of **Georg-August Willrich** (1818-1891), the first-born son of **Georg Carl Willrich** (1798-1876). His father, **Dr. Karl Ludwig Willrich** (1926-1983), the brother of **Heinz-Georg Willrich** of Heidelberg, emigrated to the U.S. after World War II, settling in Evanston, Illinois. Knowing from his family history that his ancestor had come to Texas, Karl-Ludwig visited Texas many years ago in search of family ties. Johann has attended the Texas family reunions since 1985, and serves on the Board of Directors of the Willrich Family Foundation. He has spoken several times at our family gatherings, and on April 15, 1989, he gave an especially moving speech, which many of us still remember, about the meaning these family ties have to him. Many of us share his feelings. While we are scattered all over the globe, it is good to know we all have our place in this big, noble family that has endured through the most difficult times in world history.

This is the text of his speech.

Ladies and Gentlemen, cousins and honored guests:

If I may, I would like to take you back to the days of my childhood, to an event when I stood in my Father's study, and he showed me a small book. The book was called "Memories of Texas" and my Father told me it had been written by a relative of mine. I couldn't read at the time, but I opened the book and saw a picture of a man in a cowboy hat. I was thrilled to discover that there was a cowboy in my family! I asked my father to tell me the story, but he said I was too young. I asked about the cowboy but there was very little he could tell me. Apparently this relative had gone to Texas at one time, but that was all he knew.

Some years later, my father went to Dallas to visit an old school friend of his. While he was there, he began to think of tracing our relatives, among them the man who had written the book. When he returned to Chicago, he drafted a letter to Bluff, Texas, the last-known whereabouts of his great-grandfather. While Bluff no longer existed as a town, he did receive a reply from Mrs. Marguerite Willmann saying that there were in fact descendents. On his next visit, he contacted Mrs. Willmann who told him of the family and showed him the Bluff (Cedar) Cemetery and the site of the old homestead. When my father returned from his second trip to Texas, he was overjoyed! Not only had he seen his great-grandfather's resting place, but he had also met living descendents from his line!

Soon after, he brought the rest of his family down with him, and I was able to meet a number of my cousins for the first time. I was also able to see the old homestead at its original site.

I remember, as I poked around in the dusty, run-down old house, thinking "Who were the people who lived here?"

The problem at the time was that no one could really answer that for me. Here was history, so real I could reach out and touch it, and yet no one could tell me the story.

Now I had learned the history of my family from my father, the stories of his life, and of his father's and so on, but here was a story he did not know.

I grew up thinking that my family was limited to the four of us, with only a few relatives overseas, and none here in the United States. I remember my father always telling me to take pride in my name, as I was the only one left to carry it on.

And so it was that he discovered the family in Texas.

Along with many other things, my father taught me the importance of the family, that I should always look upon my relations as people to whom I could always go for advice and support, and for love when I needed it. They were people I could always turn to, people who looked out for me. I remember, when I was growing up, how I wished I had more people like that around.

When I accepted the invitation to the first reunion, I wasn't sure how I would be received, being as distantly related as I am. However, when I arrived here, I discovered that not only was I treated like a long-lost brother, but I now had more family than I could count!

I also discovered a family rich in history and strong in pride in the name that my family had taught me to value so highly.

My only regret from the experience was that he could not have joined me in celebrating the reunion of our two branches.

So the story that started with a picture of a cowboy and has brought me here tonight has only confirmed for me the lessons of my childhood: that this family is important, not only historically, but to me, personally, as I hope it is to all of You.

Thank you,

Johann Willrich