

The Willrich Family

Where they came from and what they brought to Texas

After hearing Elise's story and how she was told to "join me in Texas", we have to ask the question: Just why did her husband Georg get on that ship in Hamburg with his two sons. We understand why Son George had to get out of town to escape imprisonment, but why did his father, Georg? What was he running away from or what was he seeking?

Many émigrés in that 1846 to 1849 time period left Germany because of the political turmoil that finally erupted in the aborted revolution of 1848. Prussia sent in its powerful army to squash that attempt at reforming the oppressive, feudal society—a society where wealthy landowners still owned the serfs who worked their lands, yet there was poverty in the cities as fallout of the industrial revolution. The rising class of civil servants was better educated, but underpaid.

Georg was a civil servant, as had been his father — They came from a family of jurists, and so had been university-trained. But his father, as mayor, senator and judicial authority, was woefully underpaid and Sorrow sat at every table. When Georg wanted to go to the university, there was not enough money and his father wrote letters pleading for a scholarship from a family trust fund. It was denied twice, possibly because Georg had taken part in the revolutionary activities while in school, and had dropped out for a while with some other boys to join in the fighting. His father pleaded for the scholarship committee to overlook such youthful indiscretions and look instead at his diligence and good marks.

Georg did get his legal schooling at the University of Gottingen, and became a judge at Lüneberg. And he solved the money problem by marrying well. His wife Gertrud was the daughter of a wealthy merchant and brewer. After 17 years and 10 childbirths, Gertrud died. A couple of years later he married Elise and fathered three more children before getting on that ship in Hamburg.

The only clue we have to his leaving is perhaps an indication that all was not going well in his attorney's office. At age 48, he was perhaps depressed about his career outlook. The prospect of cheap land in Texas was certainly attractive. So he went ahead with his two sons and embarked on a whole new adventure.

He made a lot of the right decisions in choosing a home site here on the bald prairie south of La Grange. Many immigrant families moved to land near creeks and rivers for the necessary water supply, but then suffered from the "fevers", malaria and mosquito-borne illnesses. The mortality rate was particularly high for young children migrating from Germany. But Georg chose the high ground in a German-speaking community, and it proved to be a very healthy place for his children and grand-children. And he had the money to build a proper house—a huge house by pioneer standards. Just one of these rooms was a large house by 1847 standards in rural Texas, where the usual home was a one-room log cabin.

The change in lifestyle was great in that not a lot of lawyering was possible in this small community, even though courthouse records indicate he was buying and selling land and loaning money to neighbors to help them purchase their home sites. He had to become a dirt farmer quickly. His wife describes how he had to dig holes three-feet deep to plant his orchard of grafted apple trees, and then dig and plant the vegetable garden with little help. Son George, the scholar, now 26, was living on his own and Son Carl was in the army fighting the war against Mexico. Georg had to drive his own ox cart to fetch water and firewood. He was planting tobacco and pruning his grape vines. His stock of horned cattle was multiplying, but required four to five years to grow to marketable size.

In an early letter written in 1848 Elise tells her father in Germany that "We have sold our slaves because they always ran away. It is said here that the Germans don't know how to handle Negroes—are too good to them. The black people, we are told, are often in need of whipping, and neither of us could stand for that. . . . I regret to report that the Americans in these parts, with just a few exceptions, have proven to be self-interested swindlers and cheats. One of them, who had taken a fancy to our Negroes, persuaded them to run away, hoping to buy them cheap after keeping them in hiding for over four weeks."

The family did later own slaves, and after the end of the Civil War, when news reached Galveston on Juneteenth 1865 that slavery had been abolished, Georg Carl and Elise told their slaves that they could continue to live on the farm and work for them.

Georg Carl Willrich, who had been trained as a lawyer and spent 27 years of his life in civil service in Germany, spent the last 30 years of his life as a Texas farmer. He died April 30, 1876, at the age of 78 and is buried in Cedar Cemetery, just two miles down the road. But his biggest legacy to us was his children.

His oldest son, George W., for whom the trek to America was made, returned to Germany two years later to continue his studies or to take part in the 1848 revolution, we don't know which. However, he arrived too late for the revolution but just in time to get arrested and thrown into jail. There he wrote a novel that was later published in Germany and taught himself to play the violin. He escaped the jail and hid out with friends for five years. He finally returned to Mount Eliza and his parents in 1853. He became professor of languages at the Texas Military Institute in Rutersville ten miles from here, and then professor at Baylor University in Independence. There he met and married Liane de Lassaulx, a professor of French and also from Fayette County. Unfortunately, George W. died of typhoid fever a few weeks after the birth of their son. That meant his great potential was never realized except through his own son. That son, George III, was highly educated starting from the cradle. His mother continued teaching French at Baylor, and her students would take turns caring for the baby during her classes. And continuing the family tradition, George studied law and practiced here in La Grange for many years. He served as county attorney from 1886 to 1890. Always interested in military tactics, he organized the Fayette County Light Guard and served as captain. During the Spanish-American war he served as captain and major in the First Texas Infantry. Here in Fayette County he served as county judge from 1903 to 1918 and continued his law practice until his death in 1932. Judge Willrich finally realized the prominence of office that had been premised as part of this long family tradition of jurists.

Carl Friedrich Theodore Willrich, Georg's second son, accompanied his father and brother on the trip to Texas in 1846. Then 18 years old, he responded to militia recruitment of young Germans and enlisted in the war with Mexico. After his return he helped his father on the farm and also was in business hauling freight. He later moved to Pennsylvania and married Agnes Hart Bowman. The couple's four children were born there. After he and his wife moved back to Fayette county, he was elected mayor of Schulenburg and then served as Justice of the Peace for many years. He died in Schulenburg in 1906 at the age of 78.

The oldest Willrich daughter who made the trip with Elise in 1847 from Germany to Texas was Pauline, then 17 years old. She married a year later to a most respected citizen and veteran of the Battle of San Jacinto, Johann Andreas Huebner. She died 11 years later, a year after the birth of her sixth child. She was 30 years old. Of her five children that survived infancy, one lived to the age of 102 and the other four into their 80s and 90s, and all were prominent. Her daughter Elise married a neighbor, Emil Richers, a merchant and later mayor of La Grange. Emil and Elise had 12 children, of which 10 survived to adulthood.

Pauline's oldest son George Huebner was not yet 10 years old when the Civil War broke out. He had developed proficiency as a teamster on the farm, so he was pressed into service hauling cotton to Mexico, the only way that the Confederacy could generate funds getting around the Union naval blockade. It was one way young men could avoid the army, although hauling 10 to 15 bales of valuable cotton on a wagon was hazardous duty, avoiding the south Texas bandits, the Union army encamped at Brownsville, the border bandits, and the Mexican bandits. It took 6 to 8 yoke of oxen to pull one wagon through the desert, and they had to haul enough food for men and animals for the three month round trip. Of course, with cash in hand, the trip back was equally perilous. George Huebner did survive three such round-trips and later became a postwar freight hauler, farmer, county commissioner, and father of six children. His grandson George Huebner is a retired professor of electrical engineering at Texas A & M University, and a frequent visitor here to Mount Eliza.

Three of Pauline and Johann's sons went to Matagorda County in the 1880s and bought an entire league of land. That is 4,422 acres. Then they kept buying out other settlers at 25 cents an acre until they had over 10,000 acres of mosquito-infested swampland along the coast. They were cattlemen, but found that cotton was an extremely good crop, getting as much as two bales an acre in the best years. They were among the first to grow rice in Matagorda when irrigation ditches were dug. The biggest cash crop for many ranchers proved to be oil, and that was also true of the Huebner Ranch. If this high finance is getting to be a little too much, we must realize that they got their start right here in Fayette County, with the help of their father, Johann Huebner, who had married Pauline Willrich. He helped them buy their first league of land. When questioned how he could have any money after coming out of the Civil War with only a pocketful of Confederate script, he said he had a 300-acre farm at La Grange that he sold for \$10 an acre, which was about double land prices then. It was completely fenced with cedar rails, a labor-intensify job that cost more for the fencing than the land cost. He also liked to read, and he read in the newspaper that a new-fangled invention called barbed wire would soon take over, and so he decided to sell out at \$ 10 an acre before barbed wire would cut his land value in half. The Huebner Ranch still exists at Bay City today, and one of its grandchildren, also Polly, was a best friend of ours in Houston and a frequent visitor here. Some of our antique furnishings in this room are Huebner pieces.

Charlotte, or Sophie; Willrich was 13 years old when she came here from Germany with Elise and the other children. Six years later she married Dr Robert Friedrich Dencker and had four daughters. The family was one of the most respected in the county and lived just down the road in Cedar, about where Cedar Cemetery is now.

Franziska was 11 and the youngest of Elise's step-daughters making the trip here in 1847. She remembered well riding her pony to what is now Monument Hill in 1848 when she learned that the reburial of the Dawson Massacre volunteers and Black Bean victims was about to take place. Of course, her father, Georg Willrich, had given the land for the burial, and one of the speakers was General Sam Houston. At age 21 Franziska married John Vogt and they built a smaller *fachwerk* house about five miles south of here near Black Jack Springs, where she lived for some 60 years. That house is still standing today. She died at age 95, outliving three of her eight children, most of whom lived out their lives in this county as farmers and prominent business people.

Julius Willrich, Georg and Elise's oldest child, was six years old and just starting school when the family moved to Texas. He was left in the care of Elise's father, Captain Georg Ludwig Kuckuck, to get his schooling. Unfortunately, Elise's father died of cholera the next year. Julius was brought to Mount Eliza in 1851 by Elise's brother Otto. When the 11-year-old Julius arrived in fine clothes and lace cuffs, he was met by his brothers and sisters in bare feet and riding bareback. Julius was one of the prominent members of the Prairieblume Society, where his old-world education and manners were appreciated. He enlisted in the Confederate Army and served through the war. After the war he taught in local schools, including Teutonic Hall adjacent to the Willrich farm on land donated by Georg Willrich. He continued living here in Mount Eliza and was one of the principal caregivers for his mother until she died in 1907. Julius died in 1919 at the age of 78.

Anna, Elise's oldest daughter, made the sea voyage here as a four-year-old, and so was deprived of a formal education in her earliest years on the farm. However, she was home-schooled, and was a member of the Prairieblume literary society coached by poet Johannes Romberg. At age 22 she married Gustav Groos, son of another local immigrant farmer, who by then was in the mercantile and banking business in San Antonio and Eagle Pass. She and her husband and his brothers founded the Groos Banking family and became among the most prominent businessmen of San Antonio. In her 103 years she outlived three of her eight children.

Otto Willrich was two years old when Elise brought the children to Texas. When he was 14 years old, the family sent him back to Germany to receive a proper education. After four years he returned to Mount Eliza and the farm. Five years later Otto married Anna Kloss of Mecklenburg, Germany. The couple lived their entire lives here in the Bluff area, celebrating the birth of 10 children and 18 grandchildren before their golden wedding anniversary. Otto died in 1929 at the age of 84.

Louise, Elise's youngest, was born in this house in 1849. She left it for only a few years when she married Emil Koehler in 1871. She moved back here in 1874 to care for her aging parents. Georg, her father, died two years later, and her mother, Elise, died 34 years later. That meant that all but one of her children were born in this house, and some of them had their

weddings performed here. Seven of her eight children were still living when Louise died in 1944 at the age of 94.

It is important to note that all of the spouses that these nine Willrich children married in this country were also born in Germany. It was a German-speaking family in a German-speaking community of intellectuals, and the children married within the community. Many of them lived out their lives in the Bluff or La Grange area.

So that is the story of Georg Willrich and his family. We still don't know why Georg got on that ship in Hamburg with his two sons, but I think we are glad that he did—that our community was better off for that decision, and that our state and country were better off because thousands of others also made the fateful decision to "Join me in Texas".