

For Elise

Celebrating the lives of

Elise and Georg Willrich at Mt Eliza

1847 to 1907 on the Bluff at La Grange, Texas

**Presented in the *Saal* of Mt. Eliza,
at its new location as the home of Paul and Toddy Schenck,
4222 Creamer Creek Road, La Grange, Texas**

"Fur Elise"

piano solo

Ludwig von Beethoven, April 27, 1810

PAUL:

Good morning. Welcome to the Willrich House. This is the house on the prairie that Elise Margarethe Kuckuck Willrich lived in for 60 of her 99 ½ years. We held a birthday party for her in this room a year ago. It was the 198th anniversary of her birth. We may repeat that program a year from now on her 200th birthday, and you can help us honor that great lady today by hearing her story.

This house was still under construction when she arrived here in 1847 with five children. Two other sons had come the year before with her husband. So this family of nine was living in an incomplete house with no running water—either inside or outside. The well had not been dug yet, and when it was, it was not fit to drink. The family continued to haul water in a cask from a nearby creek. Those are just a few of many disappointments that Elise rose above in her long life.

You may have recognized the piano music that opened this program. It is called *Fur Elise* and it was written by Beethoven. The original manuscript of this Albumblatt in A minor for pianoforte bears this inscription: *Fur Elise am 27 April 1810, in remembrance by Ludwig van Beethoven*. We don't think this inscription has anything to do with our Elise, but she was two years old on that same exact date. And we don't know that she even played this music, but thousands of piano students have played it ever since it was written.

We do know some of the music Elise played, because the piano music that she brought from Germany was given to the music library at Festival Hill at Round Top. And, this is Elise's square grand piano. It was built in Louisville, Kentucky, and shipped down the Mississippi River in 1865. It was freighted here from Galveston by ox team. Elise's daughters remember that she played it every day until the final years when she was bedridden. After her death in 1907, the piano remained in the family until it was moved back here to Mount Eliza.

Kathryn Powell, a great-granddaughter of Elise, had the piano in her living room until recently when she moved to a retirement apartment. She graciously gave that piano to us, Paul and Toddy Schenck, to reside here in this historic borne. We want to honor that gift by using it as it was originally intended—to entertain here in the Willrich family home.

MUSIC

MARY:

Elise Margarethe Kuckuck was born on April 27, 1808, in the kingdom of Hanover, in what is now Germany. She was the only daughter of Georg Ludwig Kuckuck, an officer in the German army, Hanoverian division. King George I of England was the first English king from the House of Hanover and never learned to speak English, the language of his subjects. We don't know if Elise ever learned English, but we do know she learned French and Latin in addition to her native German. In fact, we don't know much about her schooling, except that she was quite well educated. In Elise's early years, those stormy war years when Napoleon was in power, the family moved from place to place, finally settling in Lüneburg.

PAUL:

Elise's father, as an army officer, fought many battles against Napoleon's soldiers, and was decorated with medals for bravery and valor. He fought at Waterloo with the British and General Wellington, as did Elise's 16-year-old brother, both participating in Napoleon's defeat. We have to remember that the French revolution and Napoleon's rise followed our own Revolutionary War, and the same revolutionary spirit of freedom started to grow in Germany.

SONG:

MARY:

Elise had many experiences in her early years in Germany. She was care giver to her youngest brother Louis, left deaf and dumb by measles. He was a painter of some promise who died at twenty-one in Hildesheim, some twenty-four miles from Hanover. She also cared for her aging uncle, the General Kuckuck, who was founder and commandant of the institution for the deaf and dumb at Hildesheim. But all was not work, and Elise, as the daughter of an army officer, was very much involved in the social life of the city, including dancing and parties.

Elise, upon her mother's insistence, spent a whole year on the country estate of her mother's friend to learn how to run a home out in the country. Here she set to work on things which filled her with resentment. She couldn't comprehend the good in learning to milk a cow, kill and dress a chicken, stuff sausages, mold candles, garden, and many 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! Little did she know how that training would serve her in later years!

PAUL:

After the death of Elise's mother, Elise took complete charge of the household and of her retired father's care. Though the family was not wealthy, Elise still enjoyed much pleasure socially.

Georg Carl Willrich, a lawyer in Uelzen, not far from Lüneburg, a widower with seven children, was a frequent visitor in the home and always a most welcome guest, because of his constant good humor and genial manners. He fell in love with Elise and asked for her hand in marriage. Her father Georg Kuckuck was all for it. Elise, 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. Elise's father encouraged her to accept Judge Georg Willrich, pointing out to her that she was no longer very young, being thirty-one years of age, and besides she would be well taken care of financially.

And so it came about that Elise moved to Uelzen with her husband where three of her four children were born. As the devoted wife of a dignified and distinguished Judge, Elise led a life of ease and comfort, with many social obligations.

PAUL:

The easy life did not last long and came to a sudden end. Georg Willrich's oldest son, George, was in school at the University of Göttingen. However, 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 risk arrest.

Therefore, it was resolved that son George should emigrate to Texas, where so many Germans, who had left their own country in search of freedom from governmental oppression, had found refuge.

Meanwhile, the second son, Carl Theodore, had just returned from a voyage to China as an education, since he had shown no aspirations to attend college. Georg decided to send both his sons to Texas and accompanied them to Hamburg from where they were to embark. After a short, but no doubt weighty deliberation, Georg made up his mind to accompany his two sons to Texas.

SONG:

MARY:

Georg sent word to Elise from Hamburg, asking her to join him in Texas the following year with the rest of the family. She was told to pack up their household and sell whatever couldn't be taken with her. Poor Elise was simply stunned and naturally most unhappy over the prospect of leaving her comfortable home, her eighty year-old father, and her many dear and close friends.

The oldest of Georg's daughters was married by then and of great help in the move. Since one daughter had died, and the two sons, George and Carl, had emigrated, Elise was left with three step-children and two of her own to mind on the voyage. Elise's first-born, Julius, now six years old, was left with his grandfather Kuckuck to begin his education in Germany. The group was on a sailing vessel sixteen weeks before landing in Galveston, Texas on July 29, 1847.

PAUL:

Here in Fayette County, the home, Mt. Eliza, was still under construction. The house was to have a stone cellar and a lot of other stonework in the "fachwerk" German style, all done by a stonemason named Kreische. Georg Willrich traded Kreische a piece of land he owned on the high banks of the Colorado River known as "The Bluff" just above La Grange, as well as cash for the work. Kreische later built his own "Kreische House" as well as the "Kreische Brewery" on that land. It is now, of course, the State Park which also houses the monument to the Texan soldiers of the Mier and Dawson expeditions, "Monument Hill".

MARY:

Elise started housekeeping at Mt. Eliza under difficult and trying conditions. 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 ten miles. However, it was here that the training she had acquired for work necessary on a farm helped her enormously.

Elise's letters home to her father and to her stepdaughter are full of tender words of endearment for her family. However, they also have a very practical side. She asks for worsted yarn for her husband's socks, spools of thread, knitting cotton, several pounds of another thread, knitting needles, crocheting needles, and an entire bolt of blue and white printed linen to make work clothes for the entire family, boys and girls alike.

PAUL:

Elise also describes to her father how they looked back with pride and satisfaction on overcoming the many difficulties of the first year—the many privations and self-denials. For example, for three months they had neither a scrap of butter nor drop of milk, but “we got by nicely,” she wrote home to her father. “And how wonderful did the first cup of coffee with milk and the first piece of cornbread with butter taste to us! How slowly did I sip my coffee and munch my buttered cornbread. Truly, it seemed to me like nectar and ambrosia! Black coffee and dry cornbread aren't very good, and one has to be hungry indeed to get them down. Yet hundreds in Texas never have anything else—morning, noon and night—but black coffee and dry cornbread and think nothing of it.”

She goes on to tell how “the corn is ground three times through hand mills and then sifted through a sieve to remove the coarse groats. It is very troublesome to make bread this way, because it has to be done three times a day, at the same time that the hearth is already filled with pots and pans. The two pots of cornbread with their lids filled with red-hot firebrands throw off a terrific heat.”

MARY:

Elise's family did not live on just cornbread and coffee. A letter back to her father describes their sumptuous garden planted entirely with vegetables—sweet potatoes, cabbage, cauliflower, kohlrabi, turnips, radishes, cucumbers, water cress, snapbeans, mustard seed, etc.—all planted in the first year. An orchard of fine grafted apple trees was on one side of the house, and a vineyard of European grape varieties on another side. Georg was selling his vine cuttings for 25 cents each when Elise was getting 20 cents and 30 cents a pound for her butter—and she had to milk the cow before churning the cream. They had salted beef and young roosters to eat, and so many eggs they could sell some. Salad greens grew wild, and so did the blackberries. So this city-bred, intellectual lady worked alongside her lawyer husband as two farmers to bring their own food from the Texas soil. And, she asked daughter Gretchen in Germany to send all the flower bulbs she could get her hands on—queenscrown, lilies, tulips, hyacinths, narcissus, and even gardenia cuttings.

SONG:

PAUL:

A good many of the fellow travelers on the ship settled in the same community which became known as “Bluff.” This area, some four or five miles from La Grange, was also called “Latium” or the Latin settlement, for most of those who came there were university graduates and therefore were known as “Lateiners” or “Latiners”. The Latiners were well educated and proud of their culture, but not experienced farmers. They often spoke of the really good farmers who were perhaps not as well educated as “Speck Bauern” (bacon farmers) because they had a lot of good bacon in the smokehouse. When this expression reached the bacon farmers, they retorted by calling the Latins “Schwarten Bauern” (bacon rind farmers).

However, these Latiners brought a lot of their old-world customs with them, and their tables were often set with fine linens and silverware. There was music, dancing, games of Whist and L'hombre, and good conversation during their leisure hours. The large “Saal”, or hall, at Mt. Eliza (where you are seated now) was the place to congregate. Traveling groups would stop by and provide entertainments, which greatly contributed to the cultural life of Fayette County.

MARY:

Another daughter, Louise, was born to Georg and Elise in December, 1848, in this house, and then the grandchildren were on the way. Some of these grandchildren were also born in this house, because the

daughters liked to come home for the birthing. It was said that Mt. Eliza was a very healthy place. And three of Elise's grand-daughters who were born in this house also went on to have their marriages performed in this room.

One of the great concerns Elise and Georg had here in primitive Texas was the education of their children. Elise wrote home to her married step-daughter for an ABC book, because neither seven-year-old Anna nor five-year-old Otto could spell yet—even though both children could ride their ponies over the countryside and fetch flour and meal from the mill.

PAUL:

In 1850 the Bluff community organized a church-school council because an Evangelical Lutheran congregation in the Carolinas was sending young seminary graduates to Texas to establish Lutheran congregations and schools here. One missionary helped them form a parish school board and start work on the school house. The church was to be built several years later. Until then, Georg wrote in a letter to his daughter Gretchen, "divine services on Sunday will no doubt be held in our home because of its being the roomiest in the entire settlement."

About 1857, the problem of schooling was approached in an unusual way by Johannes Romberg, who lived at Black Jack Springs, a few miles away. He came from a family of pastors, but poor eyesight prevented him from university studies. Instead, he had to apprentice as a merchant, and that type of career reduced his social standing in Germany's stratified social structure. So he brought his wife and six children to Texas in 1847 and became a farmer, on equal terms with all the other immigrants. But he was still a scholar and poet at heart. In fact, he later became the poet laureate of Texas. About 1857 he organized young teenagers into the "Prairie Blume Society", and encouraged them to write short articles or poems or letters that expressed their thoughts about their lives. At monthly meetings these literary efforts would be read - anonymously so as to avoid hurt feelings - and then critiqued by the group of young people. Many of their meetings took place in this very room, and their written stories are preserved at The University of Texas.

MARY:

After Georg Willrich died in 1876, daughter Louise, even though married and with a growing family of her own, took care of her mother for the next 30 years. The grandchildren living in San Antonio and elsewhere in Texas would come to visit their little grandmother at Mt. Eliza.

When Elise died on October 16, 1907, a few months short of her 100th birthday, she left to mourn her passing, besides her children, who were by then grandparents themselves, 23 grandchildren and 15 great-grandchildren. The funeral took place in this house and burial was beside her husband in Cedar Cemetery just down the road two miles. Some of the dried flowers from the funeral arrangements were sent to Gretchen, the oldest daughter who remained in Germany. Gretchen wrote back that she would keep the petals with other dried flowers from her own wedding to be put in the casket when she died.

PAUL:

Gretchen remembered in that letter the time when Elise had become her stepmother 67 years earlier: "Always I will continue to thank God for our beloved little Mother, who had so much love for all her children. What a faithful heart was hers, and what a heavy obligation she accepted when she took us seven motherless children into her heart."

(Pause)