

Wilhelmina Krumme (née Stille) and Wilhelm Krumme: Letters from America (1837–1842)

Abstract

Wilhelmina Stille and her fiancé Wilhelm Krumme immigrated to the United States from rural Westphalia in 1837. By that time, two of Wilhelmina's brothers had already emigrated, and in the following decades several additional members of the Stille and Krumme families would leave Westphalia for the New World. The Stille and Krumme families illustrate the phenomenon of chain-migration, and they were not untypical of people from their part of rural northwestern Germany, which, with the collapse of cottage textile production and demographic growth, saw some of the highest rates of out-migration in all the German lands during the 1830s and 1840s. The Stilles and Krummes settled in the area around eastern Ohio and what would later become northern West Virginia. They mostly took up rural occupations, though it is notable that Wilhelmina's elder brother Wilhelm also sought work along the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers as far south as New Orleans in order to earn more money. Wilhelmina relates family news to her parents and siblings back in Germany, and she also sends back information about conditions in the United States and advice about whether and under what circumstances various of her relatives should emigrate there. The Stille-Krumme family experienced some degree of success: they managed to buy land and save money, and Wilhelm Stille married into a landholding family of Swiss immigrants. Nonetheless, they also experienced the trials and tragedies of life in a new land.

Source

Wilhelmina Stille to her family [probably October 1837]

Dearly beloved parents, brothers and sisters,

[...] I like it very much here, I have an easy job and peace of mind and the fact that Wilhelm is so nearby makes me very happy, he eats three times a day at our house and the other two clerks too, and that Wilhelm is so much smarter here than he was in Germany I wouldn't have believed it, but I think it's because he has so little work that is easy and he goes all around and talks with all the clever people about all kinds of business and so on, the people are all so good to me, one person says to me come to my house for a week and another one says the same thing, so I don't know where to go, one time we went riding after church, me and the two Wilhelms and one of the clerks and we rode to his parents' and there we were treated like at a wedding, but the one thing that weighs heavy on our hearts is that we think about our dear mother so often and it makes us so sad that she had to suffer so much because of us and still has so much to fret about and suffer what with our bad father that she still has no rest day or night, but dear brother Friederich and Eeberadth and Schallote please do what you can for our dear mother, let her eat and drink whatever she wants to, the dear Lord will repay you many times over, and dear mother, thank you a thousand times for the good things you did for me, but don't grieve for me, I'm much better off here than with you, that's because you can live in peace over here and the people aren't so false. And Friederich, we thank you for the address, dear sister Elisabeth don't grieve for your son that he died, he's sure to be much better off now than anyone with even the best place in America.

And as for your coming here it's no good, there are people who have three thousand talers and are sorry that they came here, the trip cost so much that I didn't believe it myself, the Americans aren't ashamed to overcharge the Germans, dear sister Schallote, I can't say you should come here, because you're too

old to be a servant and buying land isn't like what everyone says, now one other thing for you, dear brother Eeberadt, please send me a woolen coat, blue or brown but a nice one like the rich folks in Lengerich wear, give my best to Heinerich Jäger, and his wife can sew the coat for me, she knows best how it should be, and I must tell you that everyone should bring silver and gold along and not get a draft for it for people get cheated with drafts, and then I want to tell you something about the trip we were on the water for 52 days, it's not very pleasant and it's far worse for those with children. [...] We wanted to buy some land, but we don't have enough money, one third has to be paid at once, if you would be so kind as to send me 100 talers more I would be very pleased. Now I hope that you do as I ask, you mustn't think we don't like it in service, that we want to be our own masters, we still want to work for two years to earn the rest. [...] So write me as soon as you can what's happened at home and who else wants to go to America. [...]

Wilhelmina Stille to her family

[Winter 1838–39]

Dearly beloved mother, brothers and sisters,

[...] The third one we received on August 24th and read that our father was dead which upset us because we didn't expect his departure but one must be content for he had quite a long life, I have to tell you that Krumme left his first boss in April, and went to Adolp Oberhelman, he gave him 15 talers a month and now he's given him 2 miles of rocks to pound^[1] now he's got it, since he's working he earns a lot and that's how he wanted to have it, for work is a real pleasure for him. Here now he had to go into boarding with someone else, that came to 2 talers every week and then he had to pay 2 gute groschen for each piece of washing and here everything has to be washed every week, so Oberhelman told him to get married, for he wouldn't lose anything on it. 2 talers would easily do for food for the two of us. And also because his work clothes were all torn and the Americans don't want to mend the old clothes of the Germans, so we got married on August 10th, Oberhelman drove with his nice wagon to pick up our German pastor named Langforst, born in Unnau, that's four hours away and we ate and drank at his house, from there we drove to Alexander which is 1 hour from there, there he married us and the text we had was Psalm 2 verse 11. Serve the Lord with fear, and rejoice with trembling, and when we came back we had another meal and a good time then he took him home again and all for free, but we gave the pastor 2 talers. [...] So we want to tell you that we've bought 80 acres of land and our brother has too, they are next to one another but his is so much better it cost 400 talers and ours 300 talers, we paid 200 talers of it since we didn't have any more, but our brother paid for all of his, we were supposed to pay it all too, but we begged so much that they gave us time until July 4th, if we don't pay, it will be sold again. So we're asking you, dear mother and brothers in the name of the Lord, send me the rest of my money, add up everything I've already gotten, even if it isn't much I'll be happy. Buy me a coat first and have it made for me because it costs too much here, dear mother and brothers, please don't fail me because we have nowhere else to turn. The new start cost us a lot, we had to buy feathers for the beds, a pound costs 16 gute groschen, and we bought a cow [...] and then all the other things that you have to have, send it with Friederich Krumme since we think he is coming to stay with us, you wanted to know how big the city is where we live, there are two storekeepers who trade in carpenter's tools, all sorts of things, cloth and dry goods, hardware, plows, shovels, axe and all sorts of pots and pans, flour and a little of every kind of *Merdesien* [merchandise]. A steam mill, a tavern and also a few more houses they're all in a row along the water, that's called the *Rewe* [river] that's where the steamboats come and load everything in and out and when people want to get on or off the steamboat they have to go there, the place is 22 miles from Welingen [Wheeling] and Piethsburg is another 45 miles beyond Welingen. I also want to tell you that my brother Wilhelm left his boss last fall and went down the river on a boat that was loaded with all kinds of goods, flour, potatoes, string beans, cabbage, onions, apples, half of it was his and two others had a quarter of it each. The city is called Neuoliens which is 15 hundred miles away it's in South America there they can't grow such things but none of them made much with it because last year there was too much of

everything. And when he got back he started to work on his land, he's built himself a house and has already cleared 3 acres of farmland. [...] We live 3 hours away from Welinggen right on the road and are very happy for I have a happy marriage and live in peace. Peace nourishes, discord consumes. The Otthermans want to stay here this winter because the water is so low they can't go any farther inland. I must also let you know that old Witthenbrock is dead and the eldest daughter is married. [...]

Friederich Krumme has to pay for half of the postage.

Wilhelmina Stille to her family
[about 1839]

Dearly beloved mother, brothers and sisters,

[...] My brother Wilhelm is also quite well, he is eleven German hours away from us, he's working in a distillery and earns 18 talers a month in the clear, I think he'll be getting married next fall if it's God's will, for he's built a nice house in his place and cleared 15 acres and he can plant a lot there. We live near Oberhelmann's, three hours from Weelingen, Wilhelm still works for Oberhelmann for he is a good man. Everything here costs a lot. [...] Wilhelm took the letters to my brother himself he told him he couldn't write this time for it was Saturday when Wilhelm was there and on Sunday he had to be a godfather for a child three hours away from there, the Germans all have their children baptized but the Americans don't know anything about that, if it's a boy the father gives it the name, and if a girl, then the mother, there are such strange beliefs here, when people are grown up the pastor puts them completely under water then they believe they are all clean, they can never sin again, and some think that once they've had communion they can't do anything evil. [...]

You three have to pay for the postage together.

Dear mother please send me some thread. [...]

Wilhelmina Stille to her family
[probably Fall 1839]

Dearly beloved mother, brothers and sisters,

[...] We also want to let you know that I gave birth on July 13th to a beautiful baby boy who amazes everyone. His name is Johannes. [...] The baby was born before the doctor came. They don't have midwives here everyone has a doctor, for the first 2 weeks I was very weak but afterwards quite healthy. I also want to tell you that my brother Wilhelm got married on July 4th which is a holiday here to Chatarina Kreps, born in Zweitzerland, her father lives near his place, further we want to tell you that we have sold for 500 talers the 80 acres we bought and have bought another 120 acres where 25 to 30 acres have been cleared, but we still owe 100 talers on it which we have to pay by July 4th; you wrote us that you wanted to send us some more money, we talked about it with Wilhelm, he said that's too little, he figured out he should get another 300 talers besides what he's already gotten, he figured it for the work he did, but we don't want to tell you what you have to do, do what you think is fair according to your conscience, when we add it all up it comes to 137 talers that we've already received, you can add it all up yourselves when you write again let me know how little Friedericka[2] is doing for she means a lot to me, I dream about her so often and call out her name. Dear sister Schallotha if you can't marry well over there and would like to, I think it would be better for you to come over here with Friederich Krumme, if you all agree and our dear mother and brothers there are satisfied with it, if you bring all your money then you can buy something here and then you'll be much better off than over there. For my life I wouldn't want to live in Germany again since I live here so happily and in such contentment as a person could wish but you have to follow your own mind, if you don't really want to then it's better that you stay there.

[...]

Wilhelmina Stille to her family
[probably early 1841 or 1842]

Dearest beloved mother, brothers and sisters,

We want to let you know that Schoppenhorst and Sophia Krummen arrived and stopped by on October 24th, and they are well and brought everything for us, so we heard that you are well which makes us very happy and that we have a new sister-in-law which is just as we would wish. [...] These are bad times now, there's not much work and if you work the pay is not good, that's because we're getting a new president, here there's a new one every 4 or 8 years, if he's good then he stays for 8 years otherwise only 4 years, with the changeover it's always a little bad, we've lost our best payer, namely Adolp Oberhelman, he went down the *Rewe* to buy land since there wasn't any more work on the roads which hurts us too, in terms of money we're not any richer now but we have more in the household, that is we bought ourselves namely a nice cow and we've raised our own heifer and a horse and a foal that's 2 years old and a cart to haul wood and stones, and a bedstead and a table, the cow we bought cheap for 13 talers, the people went down the *Rewe* and couldn't take it along. [...]

Wilhelmina Stille to her family
[probably early 1842]

Dear mother, brothers and sisters,

[...] Brother Wilhelm is still in good health but his wife is poorly, she gave birth to a baby boy on July 22nd, and the first one died three months ago which grieved him very much, otherwise he had a good year all of his crops turned out well. He is pleased that you want to send him the money. [...] I also want you to know that we're still living on the same place where we've always been, we've rented out our land for 2 years, since for one year we couldn't rent it out so well, since it gets better every year, but when the 2 years are up we'll go and live there ourselves, God willing. [...]

Wilhelm Krumme to his wife's family

Traidelphia, May 30th, 1842

[...]

Dear mother, brothers-in-law and sisters-in-law

Parents, brothers and sisters,

The reason I must write you a sad letter, which I cannot conceal from you, is that my dear and your dear Willemina fell sick on February 14th. [...] And the Lord God who called her into this life and gave her to me took her away on April 21st at midnight when she passed away in my arms, and she died of consumption and dropsy. [...] The time had come for her to leave these earthly tabernacles for the merciful God had prepared her a better home. [...] At first I sometimes wished that if it were God's will then all three of us should lie in one coffin, but it was not God's will, but I still miss her all the time. [...] For I can tell you that it was almost 6 years ago since we swore our love to one another and since that time it never grew cold until this moment. Even if I can no longer see her with my eyes, my thoughts are always with her, and I will never forget her, since we never had quarrels, instead we lived in peace and harmony as a married couple should, believe you me. [...]

I also want to tell you the circumstances of the burial. That here in this country many people are buried

like animals, but I had the preacher to the house since he is my neighbor and a good preacher at that, but he is English: the text you can find in Job 19, verses 25 to 27. Dear Eberhardt, my brother Wilhelm wants to have his proper baptism certificate, please get it and send it when you write again but please write again soon, here I have to stop.

I am and remain your brother-in-law Wilhelm Krumme.

NOTES

[1] Stille worked on the National Road, which led from the east coast through Triadelphia to Wheeling.

[2] Presumably the illegitimate daughter of Wilhelmina's sister Maria Sophia, born on March 23, 1831.

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