

Hermann Heinrich Gerke was born in the town of Bohmte, in the Kingdom of Hannover (in what is now western Germany) on September 15, 1802. He was the second child of Johann and Julia Gerke, a farming family. He had an older sister and four younger brothers.

Hermann's early years must have been dominated by the Napoleonic Wars, during which time great armies repeatedly swept back and forth across western Germany. During most of Hermann's childhood, Hannover was occupied -- first by the Prussians, then the French, then the British, then the Prussians again, then the French again, then the Russians. However, the Napoleonic Wars ended when Hermann was 13 years old, and with peace came a decade of prosperity and tranquility.

Johann Gerke, Hermann's father, died when he was 23 years old, making Hermann the primary breadwinner for his family. Four years later, at age 27, Hermann married Agnes Meyer, a 25 year old widow. Agnes had a two-year-old son from her previous marriage, so Hermann became a stepfather as well. Over the next eight years, the couple had three children of their own -- two sons and a daughter.

By the time Hermann was 30, overpopulation was causing economic problems for Hanoverian farmers. Unlike English farmers, who passed their entire estate to the eldest son, Germans divided their land among their children. By the 1800s, the resulting farms were so small that a family had difficulty supporting itself. Rising food prices made it more difficult to feed a family. Conscription implemented in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars was unpopular, particularly with young men. The one benefit of overcrowding was that it drove up the price of land -- selling a small farm generally raised enough money to pay for passage to America.

Sometime in the 1830s, the entire extended Gerke clan decided to seek a better life in America -- Hermann's mother Julia, all of Hermann's siblings, their spouses and children, even many of their in-laws. In 1834 the youngest of the Gerke brothers, 19-year-old Ludwig, left for America ahead of the others, presumably to find a suitable place for the family to relocate. Like other poor immigrants, he headed west towards uninhabited land the family could farm. He eventually found his way to Adams County, Indiana. Indiana seems a natural choice -- it is flat, like Hanover, and has a fairly similar climate (though Indiana is hotter in the summer and colder in the winter). In 1837, the other unmarried brother, Dietrich, came over. And in the autumn of 1838, everyone else followed: 36-year-old Hermann, 34-year-old Agnes, and their four young

children, along with Hermann's sister and two remaining brothers and their families, traveled to the port of Bremen and boarded a small German brig called the Neptune. As farmers from a landlocked part of Germany, it was almost certainly the first time they had ever seen the ocean. In those days, crossing the Atlantic usually took about three weeks, but could take much longer if the wind was wrong. They landed in Baltimore on October 13, 1838.

The Gerkes made their way first to Cincinnati, where they stayed with acquaintances. From there, they made their way by ox team over muddy trails towards Indiana. There were few shelters along the way, so the family probably had to make camp most nights in winter weather that fell well below zero. Indiana was no longer a frontier state, but it was still undeveloped and sparsely settled. Today Indiana is wide, flat farmland; in the winter of 1838, Indiana was thickly covered in dark, primeval forest.

In February of 1839, four months after setting foot in America, Hermann Gerke and his family arrived in Adams County. The county seat of Decatur was just a few houses, and the nearest town of any significance was Fort Wayne, 21 miles away and with a population of less than 2,000. They stayed with Dietrich until spring. When the snow melted, each of the Gerke families began building farms, carving a few acres out of the middle of the forest by cutting down trees. For the first summer Herman and Agnes lived largely outdoors as they built a tiny one-room log cabin. Hermann passed down stories of being frightened by the hoots of unfamiliar owls, and one night coming face-to-face with a bear near their cabin. By the end of the year, they had built a hewed log house big enough to shelter the family for the winter.

In the summers, they raised potatoes, corn, and pigs; in the winters, they cleared more farmland, cutting down the ancient trees and adding precious acres to the farm. The sons worked alongside their father from at least the age of twelve. Every few months, Hermann would hitch up his team and ride for seven hours into Fort Wayne for supplies; these trips took three days. One of his sons recalled how frightening it was to be alone in the woods when their father was away on these trips: "Soon after the Gerke family settled in the county the father went to mill with an ox team to Fort Wayne, expecting to be gone from home three days. On the evening of the third day the father had not come; the children commenced crying, never expecting to see him again, but about 11 o'clock in the evening he arrived, causing much rejoicing in the family."

Indiana grew and prospered, and the Gerke family prospered with it. When Hermann

and his family arrived in 1839, Adams County had 2,000 people and no real public buildings; a decade later the county had 5,600 people, five stores, three churches, a courthouse, and a jail. In the same decade, Hermann Gerke and his wife had another four children -- two sons and two daughters. Unusually for the time, they never lost a child in its infancy.

1838, the year the Gerkes arrived in the United States, was just at the beginning of the flood of German immigration that was to transform the United States from an Anglo-Saxon nation to a multi-ethnic one. The world the Gerkes and subsequent German immigrants created in Indiana was an outpost of German culture: hardworking, stoic, and devoutly Lutheran. Most of their neighbors also spoke German, and German was the language spoken in church for a hundred years. Their children and grandchildren grew up speaking German, and married the children of other German immigrants.

More pioneer families poured into Indiana in the 1850s. Roads connected the towns around Fort Wayne. Hermann Gerke and his family finally built a proper frame house in 1854, the same year that the railroad came to Fort Wayne. The one dark spot in the 1850s was the death of Hermann's stepson in 1854, at age 26. A year later, Hermann's eldest son turned 24, married another recent Hanoverian immigrant, and left home.

Hermann Gerke died a prosperous farmer at age 62 on October 3, 1864, 25 years after he came to the United States. He owned well over 400 acres of prime Indiana farmland. In a will he wrote the week before he died, he divided his land among his sons, and gave \$1000 to each of his daughters. His estate was worth perhaps \$15,000 at a time when the yearly salary of a Union soldier was less than \$200, and the average yearly family income was \$400. Hermann Gerke had left Germany an impoverished farmer, and after a quarter century of toil in America he had become, by the standards of the day, a wealthy man. He left behind his wife, seven children, and three grandchildren.

Contributed by Matthew Gerke - no source listed