

# **A KOERTH Brick Wall: the Story and the Search**

**by Margaret Robe Summitt**

**In telling a genealogical story one must always choose between telling the chronicle of the life a family lived, and telling the story of one's search. The search story is, to me, generally more exciting than the family chronicle. A successful search has fortuitous meetings, dogged pursuits, and finally the discovery of buried treasure. At the end, the halo of accomplishment surrounds the recovery of a family history treasure, a last missing fragment of a portrait that, once emplaced, completes a picture, but a picture, in most cases, of ordinary people living through fairly ordinary events.**

**I wanted to find out more about my 3rd great-grandmother, Anna Louise (NICKOLEY) KOERTH, specifically her death date. A death record would be the ending of a chapter, and, presumably, the most readily accessible piece of information about her. The search for her death date, however, has not proved easy. Louise or Louisa, as she was known, was an immigrant to Wisconsin from Central Europe. Family lore says she spoke only German, that she was poor, and that she lived part of the time with one son, then with another. I have as yet no reason not to assume she died in Wisconsin, sometime between 1880 (she is recorded in the 1880 U. S. Census as living with her daughter-in-law) and 1900, when she would have been aged about 100.**

## **THE STORY:**

**Louise by most standards led a life that was neither dramatic nor exciting. The story of Louise's life can be pieced together from documents that, alas, do not tell the whole. The discovery of a single document, however, can make the story intriguing. My recent discovery of a daughter's marriage record has changed a lot about where I assume I should be looking for Louise.**

**Her birthdate can be approximated from Louise's marriage record, which is the earliest documentation I have found. On 18 February 1824 my 3rd great-grandparents, nos. 60 and 61 on my ahnentafel, were married in the Evangelical Church in Jankendorf, Posen Province, Prussia. Literally translated, their marriage certificate reads: "The bachelor and resident [of Jankendorf] Gottfried KOERT, fifth son of the deceased liebgedinger [a word meaning something like retired farmer] Daniel KOERT, is with the jungfrau [young unmarried woman] Anna Louise NICKOLEY, third daughter of the deceased innkeeper Peter NICKOLEY, in the church in Jankendorf married." The banns preceding the marriage were posted on January 25th, February 1st and 8th. Gottfried was aged 33 and Louise was aged 24. He was born 24 July 1791; she would have been born about 1800. Gottfried and Louise had seven children before his death, 17 November 1846. The bracketed**

interpolations are the interpretations of the translator at Salt Lake who helped me.

Assuming Louise was born about 1800, I believe she would have died by 1900. Unfortunately the index to deaths in Wisconsin before 1907 is very incomplete. Assuming Louise was in the household of one of her children when she died, I have also begun to piece their stories together.

All the sons bore the first name Johann, and all the daughters the first name Anna. The children always went by their middle names. Their children were: Daniel, born seven months after their marriage (b. 22 Aug 1824); Ludwig (the first son to bear that name), who lived three months in 1826; Caroline (b. 6 March 1828); Louise (b. 8 Mar 1831); Wilhelmine, who lived about two weeks in 1835; Ludwig (the second, and surviving Ludwig, b. 14 Jan 1837), and Rosina, who died in 1849 at the age of eight. Ludwig the second is said by the 1900 Census to have emigrated to the U.S. in 1862.

On the 5th of December, 1857, the widow Louise KOERTH sailed from Bremen, Germany and arrived with family members on the ship Louisiana at the port of New York. With her were her son Daniel and his wife Wilhelmine (ROSENAU) and their children August and Ottilie; Hendrick BATCHERT, a relative of Wilhelmine (ROSENAU) KOERTH, and Wilhelmine's sister Ernestine (given as Henriette on the passenger list) and her husband Martin DEGNER and their five children. The party gave "Buffulo," New York as their destination.

The emigration story continues in two memoirs compiled in the late 1960s by my great-uncle Walter SCHILLING and great-aunt Leonora (SCHILLING) BAUMGARTNER. Great-uncle Walter's narrative gives the most detail: "They had the address of a relative who had gone to America before them, but to land at New York they had to get into a small boat in which to row to shore. Mr. [Daniel] KOERTH got into the small boat first and his mother threw some of their belongings down for him to catch. A pillow-case which contained the letters with the addresses and a jar of butter bounced off Mr. KOERTH's hands and went down into the bay and sank and so was lost. But they knew they had to go through Milwaukee and so they went there. Mr. KOERTH was hired at once for he was a skilled cabinet maker and he wanted to stay there, but Mrs. KOERTH wanted to move to be near her sister who lived in Manitowoc County as they found out when they received the address. They went by boat to Manitowoc and on the way they met the family of Bartholomeus MANKOWSKI who told them they were on the way to Maple Grove Township and there they would accept the hospitality of Jacob SCHILLING, whom they knew from Germany, and they were certain that he was very prosperous, and that he could make accommodations for the entire company. They hired a man with a big wagon to carry them there, a distance of twenty-nine miles. They started out and after some distance the man said he couldn't go any farther. Mrs. MANKOWSKI grabbed his whip and threatened to thrash the daylights out of him if he didn't go on. Our Mother said, "She had grit." The man drove on until his

wagon broke down. I never heard how they made the rest of the distance.”

“When they arrived near the SCHILLING place, they found it was a humble cabin built of logs and with a one-slope roof, like a woodshed. Mrs. MANKOWSKI was so chagrined that she was not even going to go to the place. After some coaxing she did go and they said she called Jacob SCHILLING down in unreserved terms for not living up to his station. He had been the schuldzer of his village (an office similar to a Justice of the Peace with some added powers. He could on his own responsibility summon people before him and settle local or family quarrels). Mrs. MANKOWSKI was not of Jacob SCHILLING’s station but she knew what was proper for him. They had their land in the same section. When the neighbors, who were all woodsmen, heard of the arrival of the immigrants, they invited them to their homes, until the newcomers were able to build houses for themselves.”

Great-aunt Leonora’s version tells slightly different details, filling in the reaction of the immigrants to their loss and a different reason why they ended up in Manitowoc County. The “talkative woman” was no doubt Mrs. Magdalena MANKOWSKI, whose name I found on the passenger list, and the fact that this version includes Wilhelmine KOERTH’s sister Ernestine DEGNER in the immigrant party better fits the passenger list and the story I have learned from my DEGNER cousins. It is possible that the DEGNERS could have gone ahead to Manitowoc County and persuaded the KOERTHS to leave Milwaukee and follow after them, but that would mangle the story that it was Mrs. MANKOWSKI who led all of them to my great-great grandfather Jacob SCHILLING.

“Some people can proudly mention their ancestors of several generations, but this Louise NICOLAI is the oldest I can mention, mother of Daniel KOERTH,” wrote great-aunt Leonora.

“When they arrived in America, the address to which they had planned to go in Milwaukee was lost in New York’s harbor. The address was placed in a pillowcase and possibly other quite valuable things also, and when they transferred from the larger boat to the boat that would bring them ashore, someone tossed the pillowcase and missed. The pillowcase with contents and address was lost. You can imagine the consternation of the immigrants. What to do now? Well, there was a talkative woman in another party who had a suggestion. She said, “We are all going to Wisconsin and will find hospitality in the home of a Mr. Jacob SCHILLING. We believe he will have room for you also. Why don’t you come with us?” Not having any other suggestions, they listened and went with this group. Thus, our parents met when mother was an infant of about one year and father was 8 years old. This was 1857. Their lives might have been very different if the Milwaukee address had not been lost.”

“Mother’s father was a cabinet maker by trade in Germany and he could have

found good work in Milwaukee, but his wife and Martin DEGNER's wife, Ernestine, were sisters (family name ROSENAU) and they were unwilling to part, so they went to the forest country together. Daniel KOERTH could have made a good living in the city, but not in the forest primeval where they settled and almost starved in those early years in Manitowoc County. During that winter, the KOERTH home was built of fresh hewn logs so that there was a division to provide space for the animals at one end. The other end was for the family and had one door and a half window with six small panes. The furniture was made by hand and was scanty. Benches took the place of chairs. Spoons and ladles were whittled by hand out of wood. Before a stove could be bought, fire was built on large flat stones for cooking and heating."

"Daniel KOERTH's mother, Louise NICOLAI, must have been made of stuff like iron to endure the hardships of her life. The food was inadequate and when the GRUENINGS who lived near Beaver Dam said they could give them a heifer or two or three other cattle, they wished to get them. So, father Daniel and his mother started out for Beaver Dam. I do not know if they had got occasional rides on that long walk, but if they didn't, they walked and walked. Great Grandmother's shoes wore out, and when they stopped at a house to beg for shoes, they did not know "shoe" in German is also "shoe" in English. So they pointed to her badly worn shoes. They were lucky. The good woman gave great grandmother a pair. But the long trek from Kasson to Beaver Dam was not a complete success. When the heifer had a calf, she gave blue milk. That means it was not rich in cream content, and therefore had a blue color. Poor great grandmother. Sometimes, she lived with Daniel KOERTH and sometimes lived with Louis KOERTH [her son Ludwig, the second, a.k.a. Louis]. She had no home of her own and everywhere there was work!"

Great-uncle Walter SCHILLING identifies Mrs. GRUENING as the sister of Louise (NICOLAI) KOERTH. The trek from Kasson to Beaver Dam was about 90 miles south, then another 90 miles back.

So far I have not found Louise in the 1860 Census or 1870 Census online at Heritage Quest. This is not surprising. The KOERTH surname is transcribed and spelled so variously that I have given up searching for the "correct" spelling. In the 1880 Census Louise is living with her daughter-in-law Wilhelmine (ROSENAU) KOERTH, widow of Daniel. Daniel was drafted into the army in 1864 (he couldn't pay the \$300 to escape the draft) and after serving for the duration in Company E, 13th Wisconsin Infantry, he was discharged at San Antonio, Texas. By that time he had contracted the jaundice that took his life in 1871. In 1890 Wilhelmine applied for a widow's pension; however, the affidavits contained in her application make no mention of Louise. I have not found evidence that Louise was living in any other household.

**THE SEARCH:**

The story of the search begins when I was about fourteen years old, and I received typed copies of the family memoirs, written by my great-uncle and my great-aunt, from my grandmother. In great-aunt Leonora's story, the surname was spelled Nivolai. This was apparently an error in deciphering German handwriting. I wasted time searching for the surname Nivolai where none existed.

The search really took off in 1978 when grandma received from a cousin, Judith (DEGNER) OEHLER of Wauwatosa, WI, a letter identifying Judi as a "genealogy bug." Judi had found the 1857 passenger list of the ship Louisiana and also the name of the town, Jankendorf, from which the KOERTHS came. I kept in correspondence with Judi until such time as when, my Ph. D. dissertation being nearly finished, I had my first opportunity to go to the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. This was in June 1988. Careful inspection of the Salt Lake catalog revealed that the information I wanted was mostly likely in three microfilms containing the Jankendorf Evangelical church records, entitled "Protestant Church parish registers and transcripts of baptisms, marriages and deaths for Jankendorf, Posen, Germany, now Sokolowo Budzynskie (Chodziej), Poznan, Poland. Includes Budsin for years earlier than 1889." FHL films #1194720, 1194721, and 1194733.

These films are a mother lode. When I returned home to Los Angeles after my first week with them in Salt Lake I sent Judi three thick envelopes of photocopies and my research reports. When she called me by phone a week later, she said: "Could you hear my whoops of joy all the way to California?"

I have not yet finished mining all the gold in them. They contain, among other things, the marriage record of Louise and Gottfried, the birth records and some of the marriage records of their children, Gottfried's death record, and some of their children's death records. Although I do not read German, if the records are in ledger format I can readily figure out what kind they are (birth, confirmation, marriage, or death) and what their dates refer to. The devil, however, is in the details. The earlier records (mostly marriage records ca. 1780-1790) are written as paragraphs, not as entries in a ledger, and they are hard to decipher even if you know German script. Not even the translator I worked with at Salt Lake was entirely sure what some of the words meant; evidently there are idiosyncratic abbreviations and, to be sure, misspellings. I am waiting for the transcriber at the Posen web site to post the abstracts at <http://bindweed.main.poznan./pl/posen/search>. In the meantime I made a Google search of the film numbers. I found a web page in which another genealogist is using these same records and honestly admits that at certain points he could not figure out what they were saying. That makes me feel a little better. At various points in the films there are indexes which are roughly alphabetical; these are not the best but they help, and some helpful soul has underlined the surnames in the early marriage records to make them stand out.

Now for the exciting record. I now know that Caroline, the eldest daughter,

was married in America before the first known emigration (in 1857) of her mother Louise. On 5 January 1854 in Milwaukee, WI, Caroline was married to Valentin SPRENGLER, a native of Bavaria. I also now know that the SPRENGLER family did not stay in Wisconsin; they had western wanderlust. By about 1860 they were on the move, first to Illinois, then to Iowa, then Colorado and ultimately (by 1880) to Stockton, California.

I was extremely fortunate to find Caroline's marriage record. The State Historical Society of Wisconsin's web page includes a Wisconsin Genealogy Index. This index is like the International Genealogical Index in that it helps a person know whether to pursue a trail further. It gives just enough information to tantalize, and promises the complete record if you send them your money. When I found Caroline in the index, I looked at the notes to the marriage record and saw that it included a film number, 1032382, Tif number 809, and image number 276. A little research proved that this film number 1032382 was a Salt Lake number, corresponding to Marriage Certificates for Milwaukee County, 1836-1876. Thus I ordered the film, expecting to find Caroline's certificate without difficulty.

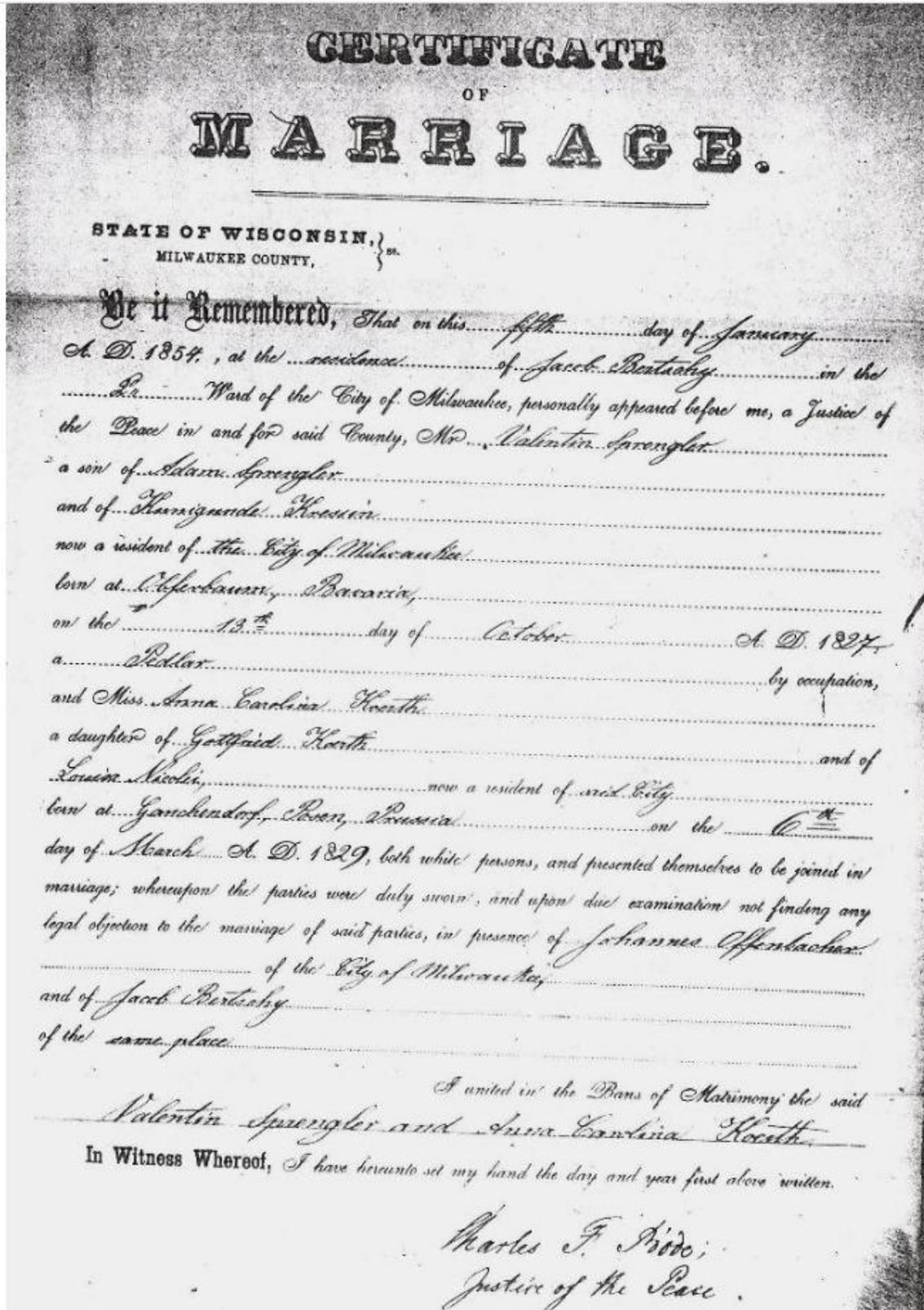
And I did, but no thanks to the film. The relative ease of finding it was due entirely to my good genealogy angel. The certificates in this film are only roughly in year order and in no standard format. Some are handwritten paragraphs. Some are printed forms. The information recorded in the certificates varies. The first half of the roll (1861-1862) contains a few records out of order, from the 1830s and 1840s. The second half starts with 1854 but the certificates are lumped together by the months of the year, not by precise date. There are no numbers on any of the certificates, so I still have no idea what the Tif and image numbers refer to, unless they are part of some system known only to the State Historical Society. My genealogy angel was really smiling on me. I just kept cranking the wheel around the year 1854, a little forward, a little backward, until suddenly I found the names of the bride and groom staring at me. More fortunately still, this certificate gave the full names of the bride's parents, thus actually proving what I hoped it would.

The discovery of this document opens a host of new questions. Some of them just beg for answers, yet these answers are the least forthcoming. Was the address in Milwaukee, the one that got lost when the pillowcase landed in New York harbor, the address of this SPRENGLER family? How could we ever know? What if it was the address of Louise's sister, the supposed Mrs. GRUENING? In what year did Louise and her son Daniel make the trek to Beaver Dam, and was the sister's married surname GRUENING after all? Was she even Louise's sister?

Some questions probably can be answered. What became of Louise's daughter, also named Louise? Since Caroline arrived in the U.S. in 1854, and Ludwig the second in 1862, how many passenger lists should I be looking for? A Louisa KURTH died 5 Dec 1893 in Milwaukee County, according to the Wisconsin Genealogy Index. Nothing more specific about this record is available online. Is it

time to break down and buy this record for \$15 from the State Historical Society?

The search continues. The story, already lived, has not yet been written.



**Marriage Certificate**

**Valentin SPRENGLER and Caroline KOERTH**

**5 Jan 1854, Milwaukee, WI**

(from SLC microfilm no 1032382-Marriage Certificates for Milwaukee Co, 1836-1876)