

Sketch of the Parents of the "Ernst Girls" (Elizabeth, Martha, Sophie, Anna, Sarah, Mary)

By Henry F. Rahe
1866-1951

This history was written by Henry F. Rahe in 1942. It has been re-typed and photocopied by several family members. This copy was re-typed from a photocopy of what is assumed to be the typed original, kept with copies of other original papers. Some of the later versions that were re-typed (by Lois (Rahe) Gerda and perhaps others, even Henry F. himself?) contained altered language to make the meaning clearer. It is also possible that the changes were simply errors. I have changed words back to their original form but inserted brackets where later editorial changes were made.

Janice J. Gerda, great-great-granddaughter of Henry F. Rahe, on August 19, 2001.

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I know very little in detail of the history of the lives of my grandparents, Casper Ernst and Anna Kunigunde Wittch Ernst. For some reason the name of Wittich was changed to Wittig. All descendents of this family go by the name Wittig. On my mother's confirmation certificate in 1859 the mother's name was spelled Wittig.

I will tell you first what I know of Grandfather Ernst. He was born about 1808 in Hessen Kassel, Hessen, Germany. He was left an orphan when seven years old and was raised by a sister and brother-in-law. How and with whom he came to this country [America] in 1830, I do not know.

He was a cabinet maker and ship carpenter by trade, and that probably accounts for his locating in Vermillion [sic], Ohio. At that time the town was quite a harbor and ship building center on Lake Erie. There were three [Ernst] brothers here in America but I do not know their given names. One lived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He was well-to-do, for I have heard from my mother and aunts how, on the occasion of a visit from this brother and his wife to Vermillion, Grandmother Ernst put on the best dishes and tablecloths, (and Grandmother had some very fine hand worked linens). The Ernsts must have had some means when they came here. The other brother, who lived in or near Vermillion, had a large farm, sent his four or five [five] children to college, and was prosperous. It was his son Louis, your your [sic] grandmother's cousin [this phrase omitted in later versions], who wished to give her [Elizabeth] an education and send her to college at his expense. That family went for education. This Louis was a teacher and professor all his life. He and a younger sister went to California in the early seventies. Another cousin, Casper Ernst, was killed in the War of the Rebellion. Another cousin, Washington Ernst, was a well educated [sic] man. For a time he lived in Saginaw and Frankenmuth, Michigan, where he taught school for a while and then did other work. When I was in Frankenmuth at the age of five, he was in the grocery and meat business with Uncle Reichle's brother, Fred. He eventually married a Frankenmuth girl, Sabina Ruf,

and moved to a farm in Kansas [the beginning of this sentence was cut off in the original's photocopy] and lived there for many years until his death.

[A sister of these boys, Elizabeth (Betsy) married Isaac Smith.] In the spring of 1864 they emigrated to the west with a company of friends and acquaintances from around Vermillion. They went to the promised, and at that time much advertised land, of Kansas and Nebraska. Aunt Sarah Ernst (Reiber) accompanied her cousin Betsy. They traveled with oxen, cattle, horses, covered wagons, a regular caravan. When they got to the Mississippi [River], the first section, which made very good time in traveling, had to wait for the second section to come up before crossing the river. While waiting there, Aunt Sarah ran into Adam Reiber. Neither knew that the other was traveling with the caravan. They had known each other from childhood and were sweethearts.

Grandmother Ernst did not favor their keeping company and [strenuously] objected to it. To forget some of their troubles each decided, though unknown to the other, to join their friends and go west. They were married in Illinois, December 23, 1866.

Grandmother Ernst objected to all of her daughter's [sic] selection of husbands unless the choice fell on a minister or teacher. But I am getting away off from the story of the Ernst family.

Cousin Betsy Smith and family settled in Garfield, Nebraska, where she lived until her death some ten years ago. Her children and descendants still live there.

Grandfather Ernst was a six foot tall, broad shouldered, good looking man. He had black hair and was dark skinned. He was easy going and good natured, but his weakness was drink. By what I have been able to gather on this subject, [however,] he was not a drunkard. Knowing Grandmother Ernst as I did, although I was rather young to form an opinion, the trouble between them was that Grandmother would not stand for his weakness and she got a divorce some time in 1848 or 1849. As stated before, the Ernst brothers must have brought some means with them from the old country. Grandfather

Ernst bought about an acre of land in the center of Vermillion and built a fair sized frame house on it. This property and some money he gave to his wife at the time of the divorce.

The Vermillion Telephone Exchange, a small brick building, now stands on the northeast corner of the property. The old house is still standing and being lived in. This property Grandmother Ernst sold very cheaply to her brother, Conrad Wittig, when she and the whole family moved to Newburgh, Ohio in 1854 to live with the preacher, John Strieter, who had married her eldest daughter, Elizabeth.

All the Ernsts of whom I have seen photographs were good looking people, and your mother and her five sisters [those six Ernst sisters] did not get their good looks from the Wittig side of the family, but from the Ernsts [side]. Uncle Leutner always said those "Ernst Girls" were regular belles, not [sic] matter what they wore, if it was but a calico dress. (And a calico dress is about the only kind worn during and after the Civil War.)

Grandfather Ernst died in 1850 at the early age of 42, of typhoid fever, which was a deadly disease in those days. He was buried in Vermillion [cemetery] along [the shores of] Lake Erie. The cemetery has since been washed into the lake.

GRANDMOTHER WITTIG ERNST

Anna Kunigunde Wittich was born March 16, 1811 in Kreis Rothenburg, Bebra, Hessen, Germany. Her parents were well-to-do and she received a [very] good education for those times. She had command of a very fine high German and later here in America acquired a very good [command of] English. She was a fine seamstress and a past master in fine knitting and crocheting. None of her daughters ever reached the perfection of their mother in these accomplishments. She had the misfortune to lose her mother by death. Her father married again and our grandmother did not get along very well with her stepmother. Some of her cousins, the Gleins and the Kropfs and some friends decided to come to the United States. She thought it would be fine to accompany them here and if

she did not like America, would return to Germany. They left Germany in March 1836. I am being guided by this date of departure by the date on Grandmother Ernst's passport, of which I have the original. It gives a very good description of Grandmother and also politely asks all officials and authorities coming in contact with her on her journey to courteously extend any needed protection or assistance. The passport, of course, is in the German language and I herewith submit a translated copy. The schoolteachers of the family have O.Ked [sic] the translation so you may rest assured that it is authentic.

| PASSPORT NO. 103. – GOOD FOR ONE YEAR CHURFUERSTENTHUM HESSEN, PROVINCE NIEDERHESSER | | |
|---|--------------|--|
| Age | 25 years | All civil and military authorities are requested to allow the bearer, Anna Kunigunde Wittich, single, born at and resident of Bebra, this circuit, free and unhindered travel to North America and return if she so desires, and to courteously extend to her any needed protection and assistance. This pass, valid for one year, was issued at the behest of the local council. (Attest des Ortsvorstandes) In Rothenburg on March 24, 1836. One Thousand Eight Hundred Thirty Six. Der Landrath Remlie |
| Height | 5 ft. 1 inch | |
| Hair | Brown | |
| Forehead | Arched | |
| Eyebrows | Brown | |
| Eyes | Blue | |
| Nose | Pointed | |
| Mouth | Medium | |
| Teeth | Good | |
| Chin | Full | |
| Face | Long | |
| Complexion | Healthy | |
| Stature | Slim | |
| Special description | | |
| xxxxxxxxxxxxx Signature A. Kunigunde Wittich | | |

The company of travelers were [sic] on the ocean eleven week. It was a voyage of calms and storms as related to me by Grandmother. They made the entire trip here by water. From New York, they went up the Hudson to the Erie Canal; then by canal [boat] to Buffalo and by lake boat to Cleveland. Just how Grandmother got to Vermillion I do not know. My supposition is that some of her countrymen were interested in boat building and she accompanied them to the [then-] busy little boat building center at Vermillion. One of the men [Philip Minch] became a big lake boat builder and vessel owner. Years ago, some of you older members may remember, in one of the worst storms in lake history,

The Philip Minch, at that time the largest boat on the lakes, broke in two and sank with every thing and every person on board.

At Vermillion, Ohio is where the married life of happiness and trouble for Casper Ernst and Kunigunde Wittich commenced, was lived and ended. They were married in 1837 by a Justice of the Peace. I always supposed that all the children were born in Vermillion, but in the book Strieter's Lebenslauf, your father [Rev. Strieter] gives Brownhelm, a place six or seven miles from Vermillion as the birthplace of your mother, [the elder daughter] Elizabeth. The other girls were born in Vermillion.

The life in Vermillion was the usual life of a small town. Vermillion, on account of the ship building, always had quite a few transients and life was somewhat livelier than that in the ordinary town of that date. While they lived there, the Lake Shore Railroad was put through the town. It was a big event. Your mother, Elizabeth, had a number of friends and acquaintances among the men working on the railroad. The engineer on the work engine [train] would always blew the whistle every time he passed their house, which was right along the railroad right-of-way, and Elizabeth was always there to give them the "high sign."

The arrival and departure of boats, the building and launching of new boats, [the] rivalry among the fishing boats, and other aquatic events made the life of the inhabitants quite busy [life of the village quite interesting.]

As stated before, Grandmother Ernst would or could not put up with the weakness of Grandfather Ernst and divorced him in 1848 or 1849 (I do not know the date.) So with this act he passes out of the life of Grandmother Ernst and family [out of... the picture.]

In 1853 the preacher, John Strieter, comes into the life of the Ernst family. He was a missionary trying to round up Lutheran people into congregations. He failed to form a congregation at Vermillion, but he found a wife there, Elizabeth Ernst. They were married January 17, 1854. In October 1854, after selling her property, Grandmother Ernst and

family moved to Newburgh, Ohio with Rev. John Strieter, who had received a call to the St. John's Lutheran congregation there.

When they got to Newburgh, Rev. Strieter could not support the Widow Ernst and her five daughters, and besides the parsonage was too small [to hold them all.] Aunt Martha worked out and they farmed out three of the girls [Sophia, Anna, and Sarah] to other pastors. Aunt Sophie, Aunt Sarah and Anna, my mother [All three] all of them [were] under eleven years of age were the ones placed in pastor's families and they had a hard life [time] of it. Aunt Sophie, who resembled her mother in stature, temperament and will power more than any of the other girls, would not put up with this farming out proposition and they had to take her home and keep her there until after her confirmation. She then went to work for Rev. H. C. Schwan. It no doubt was a hard thing for Grandmother Ernst to send her young girls, [of] eight, nine, and ten years old, to other people even if they were ministers. It was her own doing, [however,] and Uncle Strieter was [also] to blame for much of it. All relatives, both from the Ernst and Wittig sides, opposed her determination to go with [the] Strieters, and promised her all the help she would need to raise her family. This act estranged her from all her relatives, especially her brother. She never corresponded with any of them or visited them. She was the one who was estranged and not the relatives. In later years and especially in her last illness (Uncle Leutner in whose home she died told me this), conscience pangs bothered her, on account of her conduct toward her relatives, especially her brother and the separation from her husband. I once spoke to Uncle John Strieter about this moving of the family from Vermillion and he admitted that it probably would have kept the family together had they remained in Vermillion and would have been "better according to human reason, but what was to be, was to be."

They lived in Newburgh until the call came to Rev. Strieter to be a missionary in the state of Wisconsin. He accepted the call and in November 1859, he and [the] family went

to Wisconsin. Grandmother Ernst and the [five remaining] other girls moved to Cleveland where some of the girls [Martha and Sophia] were already working. Grandmother and Mary kept house together. After Aunt Sarah and Anna were confirmed, they [also] worked in Cleveland at housework. This continued during the Civil War.

In 1867, Grandmother became very ill at our house. She [eventually] recovered, but was never really well again. After Aunt Mary was married to Fred[Erick] Leutner, Grandmother made her home with them, except in the summer months when she would visit with us or with Aunt Sophia Franz.

In the winter seasons, [because of bronchial trouble,] she kept close to the house. She had a bronchial trouble. In the late winter of 1874, she became much worse and after several weeks in bed, she died March 23, 1875. The funeral was March 25, 1875. The body was first placed in a vault in Erie St.[reet] Cemetery and on April 4, 1875 she was buried in our church cemetery -- St. John's Lutheran [Church], Garfield Heights, Ohio. Here she rests with three [of her] daughters, Sophie, Anna and Sarah, with their husbands, and fifteen grand and great-grand children.

Grandmother had a large circle of friends among our church people and had many acquaintances among ministers and teachers of our synod.

The six daughters of this marriage were:

| | | | |
|-----------|--------------------|---------------------|------------------------|
| Elizabeth | Born Aug. 28, 1838 | Died Dec. 6, 1924 | Mrs. John Strieter |
| Martha | Born Feb. 14, 1843 | Died Aug.21, 1924 | Mrs. Henry Reichle |
| Sophie | Born June 26, 1844 | Died May 7, 1925 | Mrs. Frederick Franz |
| Anna | Born Oct. 16, 1845 | Died June 30, 1925 | Mrs. Henry H. Rahe |
| Sarah | Born Dec. 17, 1846 | Died Oct. 7, 1925 | Mrs. Adam Reiber |
| Mary | Born March 3, 1848 | Died Sept. 18, 1894 | Mrs. Frederick Leutner |

I have written and addressed this story of the life of Casper Ernst and Anna K. Wittig Ernst, of whom we are all descendants, to my cousin Carl Strieter, who is as I am of the third generation. They were our Grandfather and Grandmother.

Henry F. Rahe
 Son of Anna Ernst and Henry H. Rahe
 Cleveland, Ohio July 12, 1942