

Documents

THE KOTHE LETTERS

*Translated and edited by John C. Andressohn**

In no way can the spirit of the past be recalled better than by a study of contemporary letters. Through the kindness of Mr. Herman W. Kothe of Indianapolis a number of interesting German letters were placed at the disposal of the *Indiana Magazine of History*. These letters, while in part personal, nevertheless, throw much light on the early life in our state.

Mr. Kothe was kind enough to furnish background for the material. He writes:

The earliest letter [actually it is the second letter], dated January 15, 1854, was by my great grandfather, Justus Meyer, to my grandfather, William Kothe, who then lived in Baltimore. Justus Meyer had been a teacher in the schools of Melsungen, a town of about 7,000, on the Fulda River, near [about twenty miles south of] Kassel. He had likewise been a teacher of music and, as player of the organ in the Lutheran Church, was known as Cantor. During the revolution in 1848 he was elected as a representative to the Assembly in Kassel. When the reaction set in he became more dissatisfied with conditions in Hessen [the Grand-duchy of Hesse or Hesse-Kassel] and decided in 1853 to migrate to America with his family. He was then 57 years of age. Two sons had migrated in prior years.

William Kothe, my grandfather, had also been a native of Melsungen and in 1849 migrated to Baltimore. He completed the school training of the town creditably and had had some experience as Clerk in the administrative divisions of the government, but had, unfortunately, not perfected himself in any trade. In consequence, his first years in Baltimore were very difficult. He was twenty-seven years of age, and in desperation finally took employment as an apprentice in a bakery. Upon the death of his grandfather in Melsungen, from whom he inherited a small estate, he returned to Germany in 1853 to receive his share, and in view of the small progress he had made in America he looked about hoping to find economic opportunities there. After traveling about and reviewing the situation, he fully recognized the serious economic plight of the country and determined once more to attempt to make a go of it in America.

Aboard the sailboat on which he made his return trip were Cantor Meyer and his family. It was during that trip that Christine Meyer and William Kothe were engaged. William Kothe stayed in Baltimore,

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desiring to establish himself in business there. He planned to use his estate in the purchase of a grocery store. Christine and her father, mother, and her brother Jean, proceeded to Indiana, where they finally established themselves in the virgin forest there, building a log house immediately after arrival.

The earliest letter, which is torn in places, undated, with no signature, was probably written by Christine Meyer to her fiancé soon after she had completed the journey from Baltimore to Indiana. Herman W. Kothe states that it was sent in 1853 from Indianapolis. It is addressed to "Dear, beloved William." In a graphic manner she describes the hardships of the trip.

Learn self-denial in order to be happy. This maxim should be deeply, deeply impressed on one, before one enters upon the very difficult journey to America. After a trip of ten days we, to be sure, arrived safely at George's, but almost too much had to be endured during this trip as we made it. It was cheap, 'tis true, but also heartily wretched. As far as Harrisburg we got along quite rapidly; at eleven o'clock we were already there. From then on, however, it was bad. We had to wait there until 10 o'clock for the emigrant train. That is a miserable trip, for they proceed entirely at their volition; they have no definite schedule for arrival. Having run a few hours, the cars again came to a standstill for half a day and later for half of the night. It was not until Tuesday night that we arrived in Pittsburgh; there we had to spend the night, and on the next day we boarded the steamship. I believed that I had already borne all the inconveniences which we should have during the trip, for you told me that on board the ship it would be very nice, but here, dear William, the misery really began. We were quartered in the lower deck. The large passenger ships, due to the low water stage, are not operating, therefore our ship was a small one. The space, which should have been given over to the passengers, was so crammed with crates and barrels, that one could hardly find a small space on the floor to make our humble bed. Since we had no bedding with us, what we endured was really something. I much preferred not to lie down at all, for when one got up one actually felt broken apart. Yet, despite all, I slept, at times on the crates. Then there was the terrible heat from the boilers and from the sun on the outside. I must confess, dearest William, I was once again truly unhappy, though I believe if you had been with me, I should have borne it more easily.

Saturday evening we arrived at Madison [spelled Mathesen]. The train from there had already left and so, due to the fact that no train may run on Sundays, we were compelled to remain until Monday morning. Father, impelled by boredom and curiosity, went to the church of a free evangelical congregation. The pastor had just finished Sunday school with his children. He gave father a book to enable him to follow the service and later they conversed, in the course

of which he ascertained that father was a teacher, and also urged him to play the organ. He then requested him to stay with him, offering to pay him 24 dollars a month for assisting him a little in the school. Father naturally did not accept, but also did not entirely reject the offer. If the buying of a farm does not proceed rapidly, he may undertake it.

Monday noon we arrived here [Indianapolis?]. George was at the depot. He looks very well and was in the best humor. But he had hardly expected us so soon, for he had received our letter on Sunday, and in consequence he had nothing in order. We went again to a hotel. Then in rapid succession a lodging was rented and chairs and a stove were bought. George made a table the next day. So far good neighbors have helped us out, whom we are every day obliged to impose upon. They are tailors, also Germans. At their house we cooked our first coffee. We live like those uncivilized, at least half-civilized. Beds we do not have as yet, for our things have not arrived. Every night the miserable bedding, consisting of straw sacks and woolen blankets, which we fortunately had with us, is laid upon the floor. We had difficulty in obtaining straw. Furthermore, everything here is very expensive; old potatoes 30 cents a peck and new ones way over a dollar. It will be expensive to live here. One fortunate thing is that here at the house there is a good well and we can get wood near it. [At this point the left side of the page has a hole about two inches square.] We live in a neat little frame house. Here things are generally so primitive, that I must admit that it hasn't pleased me a bit so far. After I have been here a while, I hope that I shall like it better. If you could only be here; that, to be sure, is not yet possible, for only today father is at Karl's to look about and get his advice. George is on the look-out for a sawmill. He would have written you, but we do not yet know what we shall do. We'll have to await father's return. [The trip of her father, who had set out to purchase a farm, is described in the second letter.] Oh, dear William, the thought of how we shall start really frightens me at times. It will no doubt be quite difficult, but we'll place our faith in God; He will quite certainly help us. Now fare thee well, and send me word real soon. Is your cough better?

One thing more, yesterday I was out for the first time. I was at Hilgenberg's. He and his wife came with their wagon and called for me. They had been here once before, on . . . Tuesday [the missing words may be "the first"], also with the wagon to call for us, but the weather was so bad that I could not go along. Yesterday, therefore, I saw his establishment and wished that ours might be as far along. He lives at the edge of the woods; has 4 cows, 2 steers, 3 horses, 20 sheep, and a whole barnyard full of poultry. What a confusion of pigs and various feathered creatures! She is a fine and very industrious wife. I believe that she wishes that [he or she; meaning is not clear, would seem to refer to herself] were better educated, and yet they appear to live happily together. Think of it, they insisted that I should by all means ride horse-back, but I couldn't make up my mind to do that.

The second letter was sent from Tipton, Indiana, on January 15, 1854. It was penned by Justus Meyer to his prospective son-in-law, William Kothe.

In order to be able to do more than merely inform you of my address, I have delayed answering so long. I beg to be excused for waiting until after the receipt of your second letter of December 28 of last year to answer the one of the third of that month. That I have now come into the wild (Christian calls it Walachei) [To the Germans Wallachia represented a forlorn wilderness] is known to you, but probably not the reason. I have been traveling around with Karl for many days looking at farms. I also made a bid on a farm here and there, among others one near Cicero [Indiana], consisting of 160 acres, which except for the house was quite an attractive and productive farm. I bid \$3,000. Then, just as we were passing through Tipton, we learned of the public auction of the last state-land, the school-section of 620 acres. Although we barely had time to view the land, we purchased 320 acres for \$2142.00, and in so doing have provided labor for my life as well as that of my descendants. I hope we shall in consequence of this effort find our deserts. All beginning is difficult, a thing which I previously pointed out to Karl. With Karl's help along with that of the others, if God grants us health, we shall make it go. I like to work in the open; I enjoy planting as well as gathering the harvest. I hope you will convince yourself with your own eyes that we in our situation could not do better. My experience has already cost me something here and there, and it will cost still more; that is to be expected.

[The general trend of the next paragraph is: Give greetings to our various friends in Baltimore.] If you should perchance see our good pilot, assure him of my enduring esteem, I beg you, and tell him that I and my whole family are well and happy in Tipton in the state of Indiana, where we have a farm. Our colorful life aboard the ship recalls truly pleasant memories despite its monotony. The seasickness, the eternal swaying, the horn sounding weirdly in the dense fog—all these incidents recede into the background. It is an admirable thing that the unpleasant is so quickly blotted out from our memory. Europeans ought not to be so terrified by an ocean journey. Our friend Nöhl [?], according to his letter of September 5 of last year hopes to be able to relate his stormy past experiences at a cozy fireside [in Melsungen], to tell of his unsuccessful hopes and his disappointments. I hope he will encourage our friends who have been left behind to follow us. For a great many Melsunger, says my kinsman J. Worst, will follow us. It will indeed be a good thing for them, if they come. Work and food can be found here everywhere.

I was in Indianapolis a week ago (the train leaves Tipton at 7 A.M. and arrives in Indianapolis at 9 A.M., departs from there at 1 o'clock and at 3 I can be home again). I went there to get laborers, only two for a few months, but could not find any, so scarce is labor here. Up to now I have been compelled to pay 75 cents a day and meals, and can't even get any. If I did not have a family of workers,

I'd be in a bad way. Karl is expert with the ax. A few days ago I contracted to have four acres cleared at \$5 per acre plus board. This spring I hope to have with me an aged but faithful worker from Guxhagen [a village near Melsungen] and also John Kraft. His son is in Baltimore. G. Worst wrote me that one of the Ellenbergers, a brother-in-law of Mayor Schmoll [of Melsungen?], desired to come to us and help. He is honest and diligent. We can use him.

Although the region and the woods are wild and the temperature at present raw (since Christmas we have had two weeks of continued cold, 6 to 8 degrees, then three days 12 to 14, the last three days again cold, on the 14th of this month 10 degrees), I like it withal because of the friendly and helpful attitude of the neighbors. Every week I have visits from neighbors, though, sorry as I am, I am unable to return them all. One evening five came, bringing with them their church hymns in four voice arrangements; we had hardly sung for half an hour when there were twelve strangers in my room. They came with lanterns and mostly on horse-back. An exceptionally good tenor was among them. It is too bad that we could not sing our beautiful German hymns. Not a one of them understands a word of German, and I as yet little English. We have always understood that the American is not sociable, but my neighbors are a pleasant exception. A few days ago our friendly neighbor King, with whom we lived five weeks, arrived at 6 o'clock in the morning to discuss some matter with Karl, and in the evening he came with his well-educated wife to visit with us. Twelve days ago he took Christina in his hunting-sledge to the Sunday services at the "Meading" church [meeting; probably refers to Quakers] and today again he sent an invitation. They are devout, and indeed the fundamental characteristic of the American is religiosity, based on his supreme principle: No happiness without liberty, no liberty without morality, no morality without religion. They practice their religion through a life of brotherly love. They often go to church, but pay for no preacher. They are their own preachers, not trained, but nevertheless preach in an engaging manner; they exhort one to a kindly disposition, to brotherly love; at times they exhibit a certain narrowness in matters of faith, but yet they are very tolerant, do not ask about their neighbor's creed, do not baptize their children, but leave that to the children themselves whether they want to join a sect and then be baptized. Thus you will find here persons twenty years old and older who have not been baptized. Tipton has a good school and a capable teacher, but no parsons [the word employed is *Pfaffen*, used in an unfavorable sense and usually refers to priests]. However, that raven band has here too reared high its head in the larger cities such as Cincinnati, Indianapolis, etc., even in the country districts. The Jesuit Volmer [of Melsungen] would play a sad part here with us. The poor deceived folk in Melsungen!

[The letter closes with words of greeting to various Baltimore friends, and expresses thanks to the daughter of Schirmann for bringing along a coffee roaster.]

The third letter was written by Justus Meyer and sent to William Kothe from Tipton on August 10, 1854. It deals with the hardships and difficulties of pioneer life.

Dear Son-in-Law,

You can realize that the arrival of my godchild August with M. Korn gave us never-ending pleasure. We almost forgot to go to sleep. In good health they arrived here on Monday, June 26, at 6 o'clock in the evening. They had enjoyed Sunday in Indianapolis, at Mr. Hilgenberg's and with George, who boards there. The fine saplings and slips, which the godchild was bringing along, were lost between Cincinnati and Richmond. George made efforts in Indianapolis to recover them, but to no purpose. They would have been worth more than \$20 to me. The postmaster in Tipton said that in Baltimore the packages should without fail have been provided with my address, in which even he could readily have located them, but lacking an address, nothing could be done. It will irritate Koehler. Have him send a package from there [Baltimore], for which I shall gladly pay him two dollars, which, however, will by no means adequately pay him for his trouble. Do send me by mail, before winter sets in, fruit kernels such as good cherries and pears etc., for of all the seeds which I planted, cherries, pears, apples, berries, nuts, only two apple-kernels sprouted. Everything was lost because of wetness, ice, and frost. After my godchild and Korn had rested a few days, clearing the area in front of the house was begun, and in eight days five acres had been completed. Would that they were already fenced in.

August is handy at all work, accomplishes twice as much as Korn. This poor fellow has little ability for manual work; he will never be able to handle an ax. He is good-natured and obedient, does help mother with the washing some, but for himself as farm helper and for the farmer, it is a poor deal. A farm laborer from abroad would be delighted to come here for the 60 dollars which he gets for a year's wages, and with such a person I could really accomplish something. Plowing, mowing, fence building, all expensive essentials, which every German laborer knows, Martin will never learn. In his accomplishments he is not much better than Jean [John], and has neither the zeal nor the endurance of Jean, which doesn't mean that he may not be a very good tanner. For \$60 Werner Gernhard, a capable laborer, would have come [from Melsungen]. If they were only disabused of the idea that 60 dollars here requires only light work. If I were able to pay these 60 dollars for work performed, then these persons would have earned the right thereto, but not when I pay in advance and carry the risk. For if one dies or becomes unfit for work, the 60 dollars are gone. Sixty dollars in advance are the equivalent of \$120 if the payment were made after the work has been performed. Every one should be on his guard against employing a person trained in a trade if he is to lay hold of an ax or a hoe. They perform such labor reluctantly, look longingly forward to the conclusion of the work period and do not want to learn the knack of this work. For me such a worker is an additional loss because Henry by his disobedience and his other

faults spoils every worker who is not already trained. From the outset Karl and Henry acted unfriendly toward August. [An unfriendly act of Karl's toward August is next described. Henry left and hired himself out to a nearby farmer for two months.] He gets ten dollars monthly and comes to visit us every Sunday. When he related that they work there two hours before breakfast and two hours after supper, I expressed the wish that here too Karl, Henry, and Martin each cut down before breakfast a small tree in front of our garden, where we have cleared, only a quarter of a half an hour's work and none in the evening; but Karl answered: "I will not work before breakfast" and Henry said: "I don't care to cripple myself by working." So I went out with Martin the next morning—Jean was still asleep—and each of us cut down three small trees, and we did the same the following morning. Martin now goes out regularly to tackle a tree and if he strikes a tough bird with a diameter of one and a half to two feet, he must have help. Henry and Karl in recent days have also come along, but they do as they desire, not as I wish. I can't keep them.

August is so anxious to learn English; for us, mother, Martin and me, it is just as necessary. Henry had received \$60 from me in Kassel for English instruction, in order that we might learn from him. He was to write one sentence each day upon the blackboard, which I had set up for that purpose [probably in Tipton], but he failed to do it. I myself on several occasions copied passages from the grammar, but then Henry was too tired [to help; Henry apparently had learned a little English in Kassel, but failed to help the others in Tipton.] "In short," August said, "I see they are both [probably Henry and Karl] blowing in the same horn to get rid of me. I shall have to learn English from an Englishman," and went off to Schenk. I shall have to engage a teacher during the coming winter.

And so I fare. Karl will probably soon establish his own household and leave us. In that case August intends to return to us for a time. But I would like to have either Karl or August, to have both costs me too much. I cannot pay August less than he receives elsewhere, and Karl wants \$150 a year. In eight years he would be in possession of the farm. Under these conditions I must secure a reliable worker from our homeland, and even if I had to pay him 60, 80, or 100 dollars a year. After two or three more years Jean will be able, if God so wills it, to plow and to mow; then we shall get along. Under these unhappy conditions my small sum of cash resources will soon be exhausted. To maintain my necessary reserves I shall have to have the 100 dollars returned after two years [probably a loan]. To get ahead is out of the question, and [the possibility of having] to toil for others in my advanced years, to be racked with such work as clearing and fence building, which should be the lot of a young, sturdy man, no humane person would expect of me. We borrowed \$20 from George four weeks ago. Now there is no meat, no rice, and also no money; we had to take things on credit.

I got corn a week ago two miles distant, 12 bushels @ 30 cents. Karl has 80 bushels in his crib, and I offered him 30 cents, but he refused to sell me 12 bushels, either all or none, so I had to fetch it

two miles. Our wheat crop has developed very meagerly. We had the poorest wheat in this vicinity, because Karl had failed to plow drainage furrows, and thus it was damaged by the cold and the dampness. August said: "Rather than raise such poor wheat, I'd grow none." Egler, our neighbor, has fine wheat, also the others. The oats are fair, and we have twelve loads of hay. Karl and August mowed hay at Egler's, he receiving three-fifths, we two-fifths. Martin and Henry made it [put it in the barn?]. We shall get few potatoes, because Karl planted them too late; he did not want to hitch up just for the potatoes alone, and I did not have a laborer to carry out my orders. August was not yet here. Henry and Jean have been hewing brambles in the uncleared area, which is full of roots. In the last two months it has rained only twice, thunder showers, each time accompanied by storm; the last time, on the third of the month, so severe, that nine trees crushed the corn in the large field near the house. At Wolschase's farm the damage was greater; there the storm broke down one-fourth of the stalks, and hurled many trees into the cornfield. This recent storm did not produce as much rain as the first, and the ground is again very dry. It is a marvel that things continue to remain green despite the drought. We hope and implore daily for rain.

Here in Indianapolis wheat flour costs \$6.50 to 7.00. Butter costs 8 cents, eggs 6 or 7 [a dozen?]. How much would the freight cost per hundred-weight from Tipton to Baltimore? Would it probably be better to send produce than money? [Probably refers to the loan of \$100 mentioned earlier.] The shipment would, of course, have to be insured. In Noblesville, 20 miles from here, great quantities and good flour is milled for shipping.

This fall we, mother, Jean, the godchild, and I, plan to call on Ingels in October, if we by then have acquired some English. We are to get a load of apples there. Last year he harvested 2,000 bushels. We shall also visit Rohrscheid, Winter, and King. Christine should write to King's, but in English. Mrs. King has written to us, wants to know how things are going. King's letter I still have not answered. It will be hard work for me [to write in English].

If only the Baeder girl were here to help mother. I don't know, should I pay her passage money and agree to an annual payment of \$10 to the elderly Baeder as long as she is in our service. She has repeatedly written us and pleaded that we pay the passage for her and her aged brother; she would be glad to work at anything she could do. Both would be useful to us, if they kept their promise and worked for us several years.

[The letter ends with a number of greetings.]

The last letter was written about twenty years later, in 1874. Christine Meyer Kothe had returned to Melsungen for a visit, and in this letter describes her trip and her reception in the old home. The frugality of this pioneer family is evinced by the fact that she traveled in steerage. The letter

reveals a high degree of nostalgic longing for the old home surroundings.

That we have arrived safely in dear Germany, you probably have learned, I hope, from Emma and George. Nevertheless, I shall have to start at the beginning if I am to give a detailed account, a task which I dread, for you know how reluctantly I write. To begin with, in Baltimore we had the most friendly reception. I was ill when I left there [probably Tipton], had pains in the small of the back and in my right side; I was in agony, and the trip on the train did not make matters any better, for the trip is strenuous and that followed by steerage, for that indeed is a horrible abode. Our cellar would be a salon in comparison. [After some comment on the trip, she avers that nothing would ever induce her to travel in steerage again.] What my emotions were when I saw the red tile roofs of Bremerhafen is beyond description; that is a thing that must be felt. [She then describes how she reached Melsungen, the many visits to relatives and friends. Despite the excellent German of the letter, she speaks of a Herr Kast, who *rented* a business (*der den Holzhandel gerendet hat*). A touch of Indiana.]

Around the edges of the letter she wrote numerous comments, which show that her thoughts were constantly reverting to Tipton.

Now, dear William, I don't regard your suit as too expensive; you surely needed one. The poultry rearing doesn't seem to be getting on very well. Feed them well and don't forget to water them, dear Henry. I hope you will succeed with the soap, dear Gustav.

A translation of a letter of September 3, 1885, was also among the material placed at our disposal. The original manuscript, however, was not included, which made it impossible to check the transcription and the translation. The letter was written by William Kothe, who, as the contents show, was still in Baltimore and now married. It is addressed to his parents-in-law.

Last Saturday I received a letter from G. Koch, from Bremen, with the enclosed letter for you, wherein he relates that his son only now, after many complications, has arranged their trip to America. They will be aboard the ship "Maryland," Capt. Helmers, which should leave on the 15th or 16th of August. Furthermore, Koch writes that he was unable to engage one or two laborers, for you. However, on the trip to Bremen he had induced an emigrant to America and his son to go to you. Despite every effort the machinist will find it difficult to find work here, for many of the same trade, who are locally well known, are still unemployed, due to the fact that the factories are operating only in part. Several from Melsungen, who had even been employed as mechanics in such factories, have already experienced $\frac{1}{2}$

to $\frac{3}{4}$ of a year of unemployment, and there are yet no prospects for betterment. F. Schreiber (brother of William) also has no job, though every effort has been made in his behalf. In consequence he is obviously displeased and longs to return home. Arnold, who married the daughter of your neighbor Conradi, arrived 6 weeks ago and is also without employment. Widow Kruhn from Millstreet in Melsungen, will sail in a few days on the next sailboat, to return home, and the so-called Stollen (loaf shaped cake) Baker Kothe, has probably already landed there. What will the people of Melsungen say when those persons return?

In our vicinity—Norfolk and Portsmouth—a yellow fever epidemic is raging in a terrible manner and is still on the increase. The cases are mainly fatal. Many physicians from here and other places have gone there and by such efforts the situation has been much clarified. The appeals from there are touching and even though substantial assistance (in money already over \$50,000) has been sent, follow up calls are coming here constantly. During the last few days an appeal has come from the Germans there, stating that in addition to the pestilence they were now confronted with the danger of hunger.

For some time it had been our intention to dispose of our effects here and to move closer to you, but this has been consistently delayed from time to time. My wife has ever had a longing for such a place as would afford her some opportunity of associating with her parents and brothers, that if we can convert our property satisfactorily, I am for it. The conditions are still very depressed and it is not yet possible to determine when they will be better. In consequence stores are subjected to substantial losses. In addition, the demands of my family up to now, as well as those of others, are too substantial to enable me to meet all of them.

For more than a year my brother-in-law, Ohrenschall has boarded and roomed with us and in addition, in that time, has received from us quite a sum of money. It would amount to more than \$100 in ready money. I have been unable to obtain reimbursement and in consequence my sister has been required to secure it with her estate. My brother comes along without a cent and pawns his musical instrument for \$25.00. After chasing about endlessly, I procured its release, for who was expected to pay: no one but I. For the past 8 days he is instructing in a newly built school, for the assurance of which position I have made considerable sacrifice. Because of the depression and the sacrifices named, our stay here has been spoiled and as I see it, our removal would be for the best. My wife is of the opinion that in Indianapolis there would be various opportunities for our livelihood. In what manner we shall again become occupied we shall leave [to the future], for on the site one may come to a conclusion and find a position, which one has not thought of. We have related to you conditions here for the purpose of obtaining your judgment as to the advisability of our settling in your vicinity, prior to entering upon an arrangement to sell. Write to us at your early opportunity.