

## Cold Case File Revisited: The Murder of 1851 by Scott Noegel

"Cold Case File Revisited: The Murder of 1851." In *The Researcher*:  
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In a previous edition of the SCHRC Researcher (October 24/1 2013), I opened a very "cold" case file from Center-ville, which I entitled: "The Murder of 1851." The grizzly event involved the vicious slaying of Wilhelm Gerken, at the hands of two men, Gustav Eichhoff and George Egloff, in a jealous rage over Wilhelm's wife Catharina. After escaping jail, the two men were never caught. I concluded the piece by pondering: "It is unknown what happened to Wilhelm's young wife, Catharina. Probably she was encouraged to remarry and start again."

Since the article sparked some attention from SCHRC members, I thought it might interest readers to know that after it appeared, a SCHRC member came forward to identify himself as a descendent of Wilhelm and Catharina Gerken. He informed the SCHRC that, at the time of Wilhelm's murder, the young couple had another child, a six-month old daughter also named Sophia (b. February 22, 1851).<sup>1</sup> After the SCHRC shared the lead with me, I was able to learn a bit more about Catharina Gerken and her life before after the tragedy. The research also put me in touch with other descendants who have provided me with stories about the case as passed on to them through their families. From these new insights have emerged even more questions, and a tale that is more intriguing and darker than I had expected.

As it turns out, Maria Catharina Gerkin (nee: Westerfeld, b. May 22, 1823) and Wilhelm Gerken (b. May 17, 1821) both emigrated from Bad Westernkotten, Soest, Germany. I do not know when Catharina came to America, but Wilhelm arrived on May 22, 1848. He and Catharina married two weeks later, on June 5, 1848 in St. Louis, Missouri. At the time, Catharina was five month's pregnant.<sup>2</sup>

These facts pose a rather looming problem for the case as described in the court documents, newspapers, and in Louis Falge's History of Manitowoc County. These sources characterized the murder as a crime of passion by would-be suitors who had unsuccessfully sought Catharina's hand in marriage. However, since the couple had been married a little over three years by the time of Wilhelm's murder, this is temporally impossible; unless the would-be suitors knew Catharina before leaving Germany. Here is where the story gets interesting: neither Gustav Eichhoff nor George Egloff could have known them. Egloff was from France and Eichhoff was from Halver, Germany.<sup>3</sup>

All of this might appear rather pedantic were it not for a very different understanding of the event passed down through descendants of Sophia Gerken. As someone who has written my own family history, I am quite familiar with family lore founded on the complete absence of reality or inherited jealousies. On the other hand, I have found that many oral histories have a basis in fact, and that we do well to assess their validity by triangulating the various accounts. Thus, the more one hears the same story from different and more disparate descendant family lines, as I have in this case, the greater likelihood the story holds a kernel of truth.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, I cannot help but lend the alternative claims some credence, because they were passed down within the family, precisely where one would not expect to find them.

With this in mind, I was surprised to learn of an alternative version of the story that goes briefly as follows: Catharina's lover murdered Wilhelm, he/they framed the two young men, and then married a few weeks later.<sup>5</sup> I realize that such a story could test the sensitivity and historical memories of living descendants, so I shall entertain it here solely as a thought experiment, looking at the evidence anew from this perspective. I shall do so while keeping in mind that one must establish means, motive, and opportunity, which at such a late date, is probably impossible.

Nevertheless, the alternative narrative does shed light on a number of puzzling aspects of the case. I already noted that the widely reported motive for murder was impossible given that neither of the accused could have known Catharina before she married. In addition, the arrest warrant issued against the accused posited that they assaulted him with "certain axes which they then and there in both their hands had and held."<sup>6</sup> Since it is unlikely that both men took turns striking Wilhelm (the murder weapon was apparently Wilhelm's own ax!),<sup>7</sup> the warrant was composed to cast equal guilt on both parties, so that in the event that one proved innocent, the other still could be tried. This suggests that the testimony was too weak to specify the guilty party.

The manner in which the court case was conducted also appears to cast some doubt on the guilt of the two young men, not only because Egloff and Eichhoff were understood to be only recent acquaintances of Wilhelm, but because the judge kept delaying the trial. The judge summoned no less than thirty-one people to give testimony, most of them neighbors of Wilhelm Gerken, but none of them provided a statement proving their guilt. In fact, immediately after Wilhelm's body was found, it took many days to issue a warrant for their arrest, because the authorities could not find sufficient

evidence. Indeed, the two young men also had entered pleas of not guilty. When the judge failed to put the accused up for trial after several months, newspapers began sympathizing with them. The *Manitowoc County Herald*, December 4, 1851, reported: “The fact of them having made use of premeditated means to effect their liberty would seem almost convincing proof of their guilt, and yet, under the circumstances, such a judgment appears more severe than is warrantable. When it is remembered that they waited patiently for months, in view of their anticipated trial, and that they made every preparation for their securing the attendance of eminent counsel and important witnesses, and that they waited until it was certain no special term would be held and without the intervention of extraordinary means, a long and dreary winter’s confinement was before them--when all these things are taken into account, considerate persons will be more disposed to suspend a hasty and severe judgment, and entertain the hope, at least, that they may be guiltless. Their escape

will be justly looked upon as a reproach to the county, because, if the jail was insecure--as was evidently the case--a sufficient guard should have been prevailed to insure their safe custody.”



Theodor and Catharina Schulte, ca. 1860, and 1893<sup>8</sup>

Such reports make one wonder whether there could have been other sympathizers that abetted their escape. Curiously, the authorities had no problem locating and retrieving the accused men several weeks after the warrant was made, one of them as far away as Milwaukee. Yet, they could not track the accused the very morning after their escape.

It also is an odd fact that the court files refer to Catharina as Mrs. Gerken, because she already had remarried by the time of her summons. She had married (Caspar) Theodor Schulte on October 25, 1851, a little more than a month after Wilhelm’s murder.

1. [unclear]	
2. Theodor Schulte	25
3. William Gerken	27
4. William Gocke	25
5. Caspian Westerfeldt	25

Theodor (b. February 20, 1823) had come from Eikeloh, Germany, a village less than three miles east of Wilhelm and Catharina’s hometown. As the passenger list for the barque Olof Wyk reveals, Theodor and Wilhelm arrived together at the Port of

New Orleans. In the roster clipping at left, not only are they listed side by side, but a Caspian Westerfeld appears with them, possibly as an assumed name for Catharina.<sup>9</sup>

A letter written by Theodor Schulte to his mother on July 25, 1848, mentions Gerken by name and records his observations as he and Gerken traveled from New Orleans to St. Louis to Centerville.<sup>10</sup> Aside from its inherent historical interest, the letter reveals that Theodor left Germany in haste, apparently without informing his mother. It also suggests that he left under some suspicion. As he admits: “Yes, I know well that everyone has suspected that I got away to America.”<sup>11</sup> He then states that if had he stayed in Germany, he would be “sitting in the Luxembourg fortress and have no freedom.”<sup>12</sup> Oddly, Theodor also refers to Gerken by his last name (i.e., “der Gerken”), but when speaking of friends and relatives with whom he met in St. Louis, he uses their first names. He also refers to the marriage of a cousin that took place before he reached St. Louis, but he makes no reference to Wilhelm and Catharina’s marriage, which took place while they were there.

Since Wilhelm, Catharina, and Theodor knew each other before emigrating, it perhaps should not surprise us that, when they reached Centerville, Theodor and Wilhelm purchased adjacent lands. What perhaps is surprising is that, unlike all of Wilhelm’s other neighbors, Theodor’s name appears nowhere among the witness, court, or other testimonial documents created in preparation for the trial. He apparently was never questioned or summoned. In 1850, Theodor apparently had gone to St. Louis, while retaining his property in Centerville.<sup>13</sup> But when exactly did he return? He was clearly in Centerville when the trial was being prepared. According to one family account, Catharina had written to Theodor in St. Louis asking him to assume responsibility for her property, as she intended to return to Germany, but instead, she and Theodor married.<sup>14</sup> According to another, the invitation and possibly his absence were simply part of a cover up.<sup>15</sup>

While the reports in no way prove the guilt of Catharina and/or her second husband, they do suggest an opportunity, and perhaps even a motive. Indeed, if we still are to maintain that the motive was one of a jilted suitor, then there are no other candidates.<sup>16</sup> At the very least, the facts validate the descendants' claims that Catharina remarried soon after his death. I leave it to the reader to consider whether seven and a half weeks allowed enough time for her to overcome her husband's brutal murder before remarrying or whether she did so because she had few to no economic options with an infant in tow.

Yet, life went on. Catharina and Theodor continued to live and farm in Centerville, just south of where Wilhelm was found, and they had six children of their own: Mary (b. March 21, 1853, d. June 22, 1932), Theresa (b. March 6, 1855, d. October 24, 1947), Frank (b. May 23, 1857, d. May 21, 1875), Joseph Peter (b. April 8, 1860, d. May 3, 1940), Anton (b. May 10, 1863, d. October 12, 1933), and Helena Lena (b. June 18, 1865, d. June 1, 1958). Theodor and Catharina amassed a good deal of property too. After combining their lands, they purchased an additional 160 adjoining acres. By 1870, their property totaled 320 acres and it was valued at \$12,000.<sup>17</sup>

Theodor died only a year after the census on July 26, 1871, at the age of forty-eight.<sup>18</sup> Catharina outlived him by nearly twenty-three years and passed on April 17, 1894. They both were buried at St. George's Catholic Cemetery in Centerville.

Life went on also for Sophia Gerken, Catharina's child with Wilhelm. She lived with her mother and step-father, appearing as Sophia Gerken in the various censuses, until June 5, 1873, when she married John Wilhelm Knauf (b. June 24, 1844, d. June 13, 1893). Like Sophia, John had lost a parent at a young age.<sup>19</sup> Knauf was a Civil War Veteran, self-made man, and an important player in the politics and economy of Stevens Point and later Tomahawk.<sup>20</sup> Sophia and John had eight children of their own, though two of them would sadly die young.

Life went on for the two accused men as well, though perhaps for a time under different names and in more distant locales.<sup>22</sup> If they indeed were framed for the crime, then we must view their escape as good fortune or perhaps the result of a helping hand. According to Louis Falge's *History of Manitowoc County*, one of the accused returned to Centerville around 1880, but no one pursued him, because, as he put it, "grass having grown over the affair." I now wonder whether his use of the word "affair" was meant as a *double entendre*, a clue to the reader. In 1880, Catharina was still alive, though both her husbands were beneath "the grass," as it were.

If history imparts lessons, then I believe we might learn a few things from this thought experiment. First, it demonstrates that there are many sides to history, not all of which are contained in plat maps, census reports, and other documents. The oral histories of our own families are equally important resources, even if they are sometimes darker than we would like them to be. Second, the social dynamics among the early settlers was as filled with the stuff of soap operas as any small community today. We tend to think of the past as a golden age, but the past has its equal share of tarnish. The alternative history also reminds us that the age-old adage, "don't always believe what you hear and read," is a point well taken. Old stories can tell the absolute truth, be utter fictions, or represent a muddling of the two informed by generations of "telephone."<sup>23</sup> Newspapers of the day too, as often today, thrived on sensation and simply parroted what came to them from other papers. Yet, since the accused never went to trial, the sad truth is that we will never know who killed young Wilhelm Gerken. While the murder certainly was a crime of passion, we cannot truly know whose passion it was.

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<sup>1</sup> Their first daughter, also named Sophia, had died on October 23, 1850. Sadly, she died in a fire while her parents were working in the fields.

<sup>2</sup> This is revealed by the birth date of their first child, Sophia (b. October 22, 1848). Despite claims to the contrary, such predicaments occurred quite frequently in this early period of immigration. However, the circumstance also lends this particular story additional intrigue.

<sup>3</sup> The former appears in the early censuses. It could have been used for the region of Alsace-Lorraine, since it was part of France. Still, this is too far away. The latter town is roughly seventy miles from Wilhelm and Catharina's hometown.

<sup>4</sup> Only one of the descendants with whom I have been in contact was unaware of the alternative story, because, as was related to me, no one in the family ever talked about it.

<sup>5</sup> Of course, one cannot rule out a third scenario in which Catharina committed the murder and framed the two men without her second husband's knowledge.

<sup>6</sup> The record is housed in the Cofrin Library, University of Wisconsin-Green Bay, #CF1-X98.

<sup>7</sup> Reported by C. Joseph Nuesse, "An Immigrant's Progress: From Westphalia to Wisconsin," *Voyageur Magazine* 5/1 (1988), p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Photographs found in Nuesse, "An Immigrant's Progress," pp. 7, 10.

<sup>9</sup> Nuesse, "An Immigrant's Progress," p. 13, n. 14, notes that family resources consistently had Catharina traveling with Gerken and Schulte. He suggests that Caspian might have been an assumed name. He adds that according to notes kept by Catharina's youngest daughter, Catharina had a brother names Caspar Antona Johannes (b. June 13, 1817), but that he died in infancy. Nevertheless, German records show that Catharina had another brother by the same name, who was born on March 14, 1820. Yet, he would have been



John and Sophia Knauf<sup>21</sup>

twenty-eight, and not twenty-five, as shown on the shipping log. On the other hand, Catharine was exactly twenty-five.

<sup>10</sup> The letter states that he and Gerken became sick after three days aboard ship, but that they both viewed the experience as a healthy purgative. It also reveals that they left St. Louis via steamboat on June 9th and stayed in Milwaukee for eight more days before heading north. The letter is housed in the Cofrin Library, #SC 85. It was subsequently translated and published, along with historical background, by Nuesse, "An Immigrant's Progress," pp. 7-13, 31-33.

<sup>11</sup> "Ja, ich weiss gewiss, das ich binn nach Amerika gemacht."

<sup>12</sup> "Sonst täte ich jetzt Wohl in der Festung Luxenburg sitzen, und hätte keine Freiheit." Nuesse, "An Immigrant's Progress," p. 9, wonders if this possibly refers to time spent serving in the Prussian garrison.

<sup>13</sup> This according to a descendant of Theodor and Catharina Schulte. Indeed, Theodor's name does not appear in the 1850 census for Centerville.

<sup>14</sup> Reported in Nuesse, "An Immigrant's Progress," p. 12.

<sup>15</sup> The claim that Catharina wrote to Theodor in St. Louis does suggest the possibility of a previous trail of correspondence. If Theodor had intended to stay in St. Louis, then one also wonders why he retained his holdings in Centerville.

<sup>16</sup> Nuesse, "An Immigrant's Progress," p. 13, n. 21, discounts the claim of suitor jealousy by saying "the account does not seem reliable." However, Nuesse's only informant appears to have been Theodor and Catharina Schulte's youngest daughter, Helena. No descendants of Wilhelm were consulted. Moreover, Nuesse was born in Sevastopol, Wisconsin, just twenty-five miles north of Algoma, where Hel-

ena lived. Since Nuesse cites correspondence from her dated May

22, 1948 (p. 13, n. 18), they knew each other at least forty years before he published his article. Thus, he clearly relied on only one side of the story.

<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, on May 11, 1855, Theodor purchased some of the land (S14 of E1/2 W 1/2 NW 1/4) from Edward Eickhoff (i.e., the brother of one of the accused men).

<sup>18</sup> He died intestate (cause unknown), and because all of his children were minors, Catharina had to petition the probate court to appoint a male guardian. Dominikus Schneider (b. August 4, 1823, d. November 15, 1903), who was a neighbor and witness to their wedding, served in this capacity until 1884, when the youngest child turned nineteen.

<sup>19</sup> He had come to America at the age of three from Trier, Germany, and he had lost his mother when he was ten.

<sup>20</sup> A brief sketch about John Knauf appears in *Commemorative Biographical Record of the Upper Wisconsin Counties of Waupaca, Portage, Wood, Marathon, Lincoln, Oneida, Vilas, Langlade and Shawano* (J. H. Beers & Co., Chicago, 1895), pp. 582-583.

<sup>21</sup> I thank Lisa Knauf for the photograph.

<sup>22</sup> Gustave Eichhoff does not appear in the censuses until 1870, when he was living in Dent, San Joaquin, California, with his family. In 1863, he had married and started a family of six children, but in 1876, he committed his wife to an insane asylum. He had his marriage annulled and he later remarried. He died on February 23, 1893. I have not located George Egloff anywhere in the records.

<sup>23</sup> For example, according to one descendant, Wilhelm was killed with a shotgun, though the court files make it clear that the weapon was an ax.