

# A local love story for Valentine's

(As published in *The Oak Ridger's Historically Speaking* column on March 2, 2015)

This Historically Speaking column contains another story from Fred Eiler. He relates a story from the late Oliver Springs' historian Snyder Roberts. I visited with Snyder years ago discussing the history of the Emery Road and enjoyed learning about this area's history from him.

Fred says he had the opportunity to sit in on one of the late Snyder E. Roberts' visits to a classroom as a guest speaker. While talking with the students, they told him history was boring. He asked them what they considered interesting, and a female student responded that she liked a good love story, like "Gone with the Wind." He told them that there were several wonderful love stories in the history of the local area, perhaps involving some of their own ancestors.

Here is the story according to Fred:

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The first story Snyder related concerned the German settlement of Morgan County in the mid-1800's. George Frederick Gerding was a wealthy New York businessman. Born in July, 1800, in the Germanic state of Hanover, Gerding lost his father, William, at a young age and was raised by a maternal uncle.

George attended local schools at Lage and later attended the University of Heidelberg. This was the period of the European "Youth Movement," which was suppressed in Germany by Prince Metternich with the Carlsbad Decrees of 1819. This was probably a contributing factor in George's decision to come to America in 1825. (My own great-grandfather arrived here from Bavaria in 1828.)

In New York, George first worked for Casper Myer and Company for four years, then entered into a partnership with George H. Simon in the import-export business, specializing in cut-glass and chinaware from Germany and France. Gerding had read glowing reports by a German traveler named Bromme who had visited Morgan, Roane and Anderson counties in 1828. He reported on the fertility and cheapness of the land, and the healthy, perfect climate.

In 1839, large tracts of land on the Cumberland Plateau came up for sale in New York City, and George was among the first buyers. He joined with J. C. Knuckelmann in 1842 in a packet-ship line which operated four sailing vessels between New York and Antwerp. This venture put him in contact with immigrant societies.

Thus it was that Gerding, in 1844, joined with Knuckelmann and Theodore de Cock, a wealthy Belgian, to form the East Tennessee Colonization Company. De Cock served as president and Gerding, vice-president.

On August 23, 1844, the company sent Frederick B. Guenther to Wartburg as its agent. In 1845, the first immigrants reached Morgan County to begin the settlement of the company's land, which by that time had reached almost 167,000 acres.

Meanwhile, Gerding was appointed Minister to Belgium and Consul to Baden-Baden for the years 1845 and 1846. He seemed to be able to continue his activities with the Colonization Company while performing his diplomatic duties.

After returning from Europe, Gerding suffered the loss of seven of his fourteen children in New York. For the sake of the health of his remaining children, Gerding decided, in 1849, to take his family to Wartburg, where the Colony was floundering.

The immigrants faced the problems of hewing homes out of the wilderness, and there were problems concerning doctors and medical care. The 475 members of the colony were also struggling with religious divisions.

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Gerding made some progress toward unification. However, by the 1860's the problems associated with the upcoming Civil War were to doom the fledgling colony.

And now the cold, hard facts of history lead to romance.

Of the seven surviving children of the Gerdings, Elizabeth "Lillie" Louisa was born in New York City in 1846. She was brought to the pioneer conditions of Wartburg as a baby, and in later years told how her parents had to cover the windows with sheets to keep the wind in the tall trees from frightening the children.

When the Confederates were retreating through Wartburg following their defeat at Fishing Creek, Kentucky, a Captain and five Lieutenants were sent to the Gerding house to spend the night. They were met at the gate by Lillie, who was fourteen at the time. She is said to have told them, "No Yankees can come in here!"

The Captain explained that were Southerners, and Mrs. Gerding came to their rescue, welcoming them to the home. A strong Southern sympathizer, Mr. Gerding placed Lillie in a boarding school in Vallhalla, South Carolina, where she would have to remain until 1865.

He took the rest of his family to refuge in Louisville, Kentucky. It proved impossible to rescue Lillie from the South until 1865, when Mrs. Gerding, with the help of New York friends, arranged safe conduct for Lillie through General Sherman's lines.

Accompanied by her brother, Lillie traveled roads lined with the carcasses of dead animals and the graves of half-buried soldiers. They passed through Columbia and Atlanta, both burned during the war. They also passed through Chattanooga on their way to Louisville and reunion with the rest of her family.

In 1867 the smoke of the war had cleared, and Major John H. Hannah, one of the Confederate officers who had been challenged by Lillie, arrived at the Gerding home in Louisville. He had decided that day in Wartburg that one day he would court the charming Lillie and make her his wife.

Lillie was now an accomplished young woman, and apparently soon fell in love with the dashing officer. The two were married June 1, 1867, in Louisville.

Major Hannah was born in Polk County, Tennessee, May 2, 1838. He was the son of John Fruit Hannah, who raised a company of volunteers for the South, including five of his sons. The father was elected Captain of his company, but because of his advanced age, he resigned in favor of his son, John, who became Captain of Company F of the Old Nineteenth Tennessee. Although John was wounded in the Battle of Shiloh, he served for the entire war. He was promoted to Captain in 1864.

Major Hannah and Lillie lived in Louisville, where he engaged in business endeavors. Their first child, Harvey Horatio, was born there August 30, 1868. They returned to Oliver Springs, probably at the same time as Mr. Gerding, in late 1872 or early 1873.

Mr Gerding had won the old Richard Oliver mansion in a court case in New York, and, a widower now, he settled there with his widowed daughter Lottie and her two children. He didn't operate the mansion as an inn, but Lillie related how he entertained many old friends, including the founder of the Rugby Colony, Thomas Hughes, the author of "Tom Brown's Schooldays."

George Gerding sold the remaining his remaining 18,494 acres of the failed German Colony land to the new Rugby Colony in 1879. Major Hannah and Lillie purchased from her father, in 1877, 77 acres for \$1,300. This land had been part of the old Richard Oliver Plantation, and now includes the two Norwood Schools, the Community Baptist Church (on the site of the now lost Richard Oliver Family Cemetery), and the Sharon Hills Subdivision.

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It was also in 1877 that Major Hannah and Lillie entered into a five-year lease agreement with Joseph Richards, then of Knoxville, to use part of the mineral springs and the associated buildings. The couple moved into the Richards' house, located at the rear of the Union Peoples Bank building.

Lillie's life with her "knight in shining armor" came to an unfortunate end on January 1, 1880, when Major Hannah died as a result of his war injuries. This was before the establishment of the Oliver Springs Cemetery, so the Major was buried in the Robertsville Cemetery here in Oak Ridge, just north of Willowbrook School.

Lillie and her two children left the Richards house, and the owners moved in to manage the property, later to establish the world-famous resort. George Frederick Gerding ended what must have been a pleasant stay in the Oliver Mansion when he died there in 1884.

Lillie describes his passing as follows:

At this old brick house, after his eventful career of 84 years, in August, 1884, Mr. George F. Gerding called his children and grandchildren near him, and after looking long at the picture of his beloved wife, he remarked, "I will be with you, Eliza, soon." Then winding the chain of his watch about its stem, he handed it to his young grandson, Harvey H. Hannah, adjusted himself in his accustomed armchair, and fell into an eternal peaceful sleep.

In his will, George Gerding, in addition to the watch given above to Lillie's older son, left his gun to Lillie's younger son, Gerald G. Hannah, who was born in Oliver Springs, March 3, 1876. He also left Lillie a one-sixth share of his estate.

The ending is not totally sad. Lillie had remarried Dr. R. M. A. McFerrin March 11, 1881. In addition to his medical practice in Oliver Springs, he had coal mining interests. They had a daughter, Bernice, in 1883.

On December 12, 1886, Lillie bought from Ellen W. Scott of St. Louis, the house at the corner of Main and Spring Streets, and lots 10 through 39. In this house, Lillie raised her two sons and daughter Bernice McFerrin (1883-1928) as well as Lacarada Pardrone, a Cuban orphan she brought back from a visit to her son Colonel Harvey Hannah who was stationed there following the Spanish-American War.

It was also at this home that Lillie entertained her sister Lottie (who sought the spirit of her son Robbie, lost in the Spanish-American War, in the tower of the Victorian mansion she built on the site of the Richard Oliver mansion that had burned in 1893), her brother Fred, and sometimes her cousins Mrs. Benjamin Bradford, Charles Gerding, Sr., and Charles Gerding, Jr.

In the afternoons, passers-by reported hearing the family conversing in German while seated on the lawn furniture. Lillie Gerding Hannah McFerrin died in 1923 and was buried in the Oliver Springs Cemetery. If her first husband and her father had been buried in the Richard Oliver Cemetery, which they then owned, their graves would have been lost with the destruction of that property.

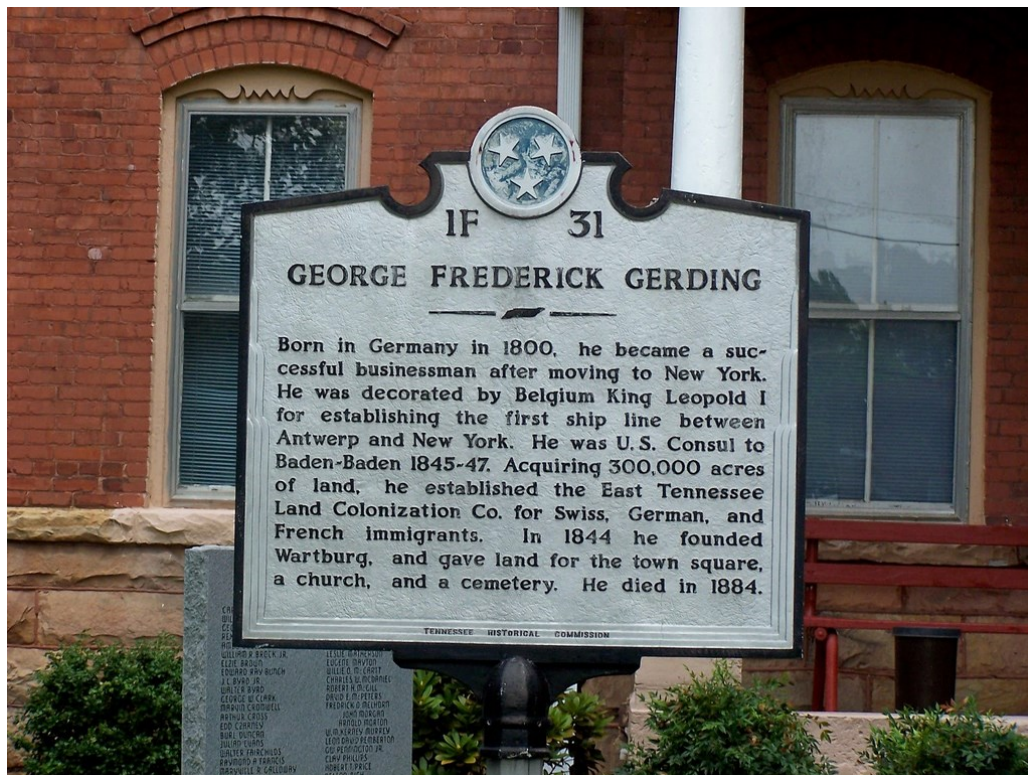
If you are interested in the history of the Anderson, Morgan and Roane county region, the works of the late Snyder Roberts, from which most of this information came ("Story of Oliver Springs, Vol. IV."), are available through the Oliver Springs Historical Society, online at: <http://www.oshistorical.com/> and at Harvey's Furniture Store in Oliver Springs.

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Richard Oliver's 35 room house and Inn (1832)



George Fredrick Gerding Historical Marker

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Major John Harvey Hannah's grave in Robertsville Baptist Church Cemetery behind Willowbrook Elementary School