

Migration from Germany to Illinois

Name	Date	From	To
Wilhelm Gerber (1834-1892)	1852	Ihringen, Baden, German Confederation	Chicago, Cook, Illinois
Sophie Kühn (1835-1877)	1855	Salzwedel, Saxony-Anhalt, Prussia, German Confederation	Chicago, Cook, Illinois

Wilhelm Gerber (1834-1892)

Wilhelm Gerber was born on 3 November 1834 in the village of Ihringen, in the Grand Duchy of Baden, then part of the German Confederation. Set along the volcanic slopes of the Kaiserstuhl, Ihringen was known for its vineyards, mild climate, and fertile soil. Daily life followed the steady rhythm of agriculture and craft, shaped by family ties, church life, and close village relationships.

Though prosperous by rural standards, Ihringen was a small and orderly wine village whose land was both fertile and finite. Most families worked modest vineyard plots that could not support multiple generations. In households with several children—especially several sons—it was understood early on that not all would inherit land or remain in agriculture. Learning a trade offered a practical and respected alternative.

Childhood

Wilhelm was the third son in a family of five children, with two younger sisters following behind. We don't know exactly what his father did for a living but given that all three sons went into skilled trades, the family was likely part of the artisan or small-trades class—comfortable enough to afford apprenticeships but still very much working people.

Wilhelm's childhood likely combined vineyard labor and household duties with steady schooling and early exposure to craft work, where precision and reliability mattered more than acreage. Baden's emphasis on basic education and discipline prepared him to read, calculate, and submit to apprenticeship.

Then came 1848, a year that changed everything. At just thirteen, Wilhelm finished Volksschule (primary school)—the age when boys usually began apprenticeships. But that same year, his father died, leaving Wilhelm's family without its earner. Additionally, the Grand Duchy of Baden erupted in the Revolution of 1848, a political upheaval that swept across the German states. For a boy Wilhelm's age, it must have felt like the world he knew had ended.

In Baden, boys typically entered an apprenticeship around age 13, right after finishing Volksschule. Since Wilhelm's father died at that time, it's very likely that the family rushed to secure an

apprenticeship for him—both to give him a livelihood and to help steady the household. Barbering would have been a practical choice: every village needed one, and it was a respected trade that combined skill, steady income, and social standing.

Apprenticeship

An apprenticeship in the 1850s was no small undertaking. A young apprentice signed a formal agreement with a master, moved into his household, and spent years learning the craft through long hours of hands-on work. Discipline was strict, and expectations were high. When training was complete, the apprentice became a journeyman, free to travel and build experience before eventually setting up shop on his own.

By 1852, Wilhelm was 17—the right age to finish his apprenticeship and step into journeyman life. At that time, his older brothers, Louis (22) and Herman (20), were reaching the ages when military conscription loomed large. In Baden, turning 20 meant entering the draft lottery, and the threat of being pulled into years of army service hung over every young man.

Baden used a draft lottery to decide who would serve in the army, and the odds weren't great—about one in three eligible young men were chosen. Once drafted, a man could expect three years of active duty, followed by several more years in the reserves, and then additional service in the militia (a system somewhat like today's National Guard) until he turned thirty-two. In other words, military service could shape an entire decade of a young man's life.

By the early 1850s, Louis, Herman, and Wilhelm had all finished their apprenticeships and were equipped with useful trades. But they were also standing at the edge of adulthood with the shadow of conscription hanging over them. Staying in Baden meant accepting the real possibility of years in uniform. Leaving offered something entirely different: freedom, opportunity, and the chance to build a new life on their own terms.

Immigration

Wilhelm made the choice to emigrate in 1852, when he was just 17. He left Ihringen, traveled north to the port of Liverpool, and boarded the ship, *Dorcas Prince*. After weeks at sea, he arrived in Baltimore on 29 July 1852. Records show that his mother, brothers, and sisters also immigrated and likely sailed on the same voyage, all of them choosing to cross the Atlantic in search of a better future.

Sophie Kühn (1835-1777)

Sophie Kühn was born on 1 January 1835 in Salzwedel, a town in northern Germany. Salzwedel was a very different world from the rural wine villages of southwest Germany. Salzwedel lay in the Altmark, a historic region of northern Germany that by Sophie's childhood was part of the Kingdom of Prussia. It was an old Hanseatic town—economically modest by the nineteenth century, but still marked by guild traditions, strong Lutheran institutions, and a dense urban fabric of half-timbered houses, workshops, and narrow streets. Life there combined small-town urban rhythms with lingering medieval structures of work, religion, and social order.

Sophie's family—whose parents' names are unknown—likely lived a working or lower-middle-class life, especially given that multiple children later emigrated. Her father may have been a craftsman, tradesman, laborer, or small shopkeeper, occupations common in Salzwedel at the time, while her mother would have managed household labor, child-rearing, and possibly piecework or informal trade. Families were often larger than surviving records suggest; infant and childhood mortality were common, so it is quite possible that Sophie had siblings who died young or remained in Germany. The presence of at least one brother and one sister who later joined her in Chicago suggests a family accustomed to cooperation, shared labor, and collective decision-making.

Childhood

Sophie's childhood unfolded during a period of economic pressure and social change. Although Prussia had introduced compulsory primary education, schooling for girls remained basic. Sophie likely attended a Lutheran girls' school or a mixed village school, where she learned reading, writing, arithmetic, catechism, and domestic skills. Education emphasized obedience, morality, and preparation for marriage or service, not independence. By her early teens, formal schooling would have ended, and Sophie would have contributed full-time to household work or entered domestic service, textile-related labor, or shop assistance—common paths for young women in towns like Salzwedel.

The years of Sophie's adolescence coincided with growing instability. The 1840s were marked by crop failures, food shortages, rising prices, and unemployment, especially in northern Germany. The revolutionary unrest of 1848 exposed tensions between traditional authority and popular demands for reform. For families with limited means, these years sharpened the sense that opportunity was narrowing rather than expanding. Young women in particular faced restricted prospects: late or uncertain marriage, low wages, and lifelong dependence on family or employers.

Immigration

By the time Sophie emigrated around 1855, she would have been a young woman shaped by discipline, thrift, and adaptability. The journey itself was long and exhausting. Sophie and her siblings likely traveled first by cart, riverboat, or rail to a northern port such as Hamburg or Bremen, where they waited days or weeks among crowds of emigrants for passage. They crossed the Atlantic in steerage, packed into shared bunks below deck, with limited privacy, simple food, poor ventilation, and constant motion. Illness was common, but family members relied on one another for care and reassurance. After four to six weeks at sea, they would have arrived at an American port and then continued inland by rail or lake steamer to Chicago, entering a German-speaking immigrant world where familiar language, churches, and kin networks softened the shock of arrival and allowed siblings to begin building a new life together.

Sophie had grown up in a structured Lutheran culture, learned to manage scarcity, and understood her role within a family economy. The decision to leave—especially alongside siblings—suggests strategic hope: the belief that family members working together could build a better future abroad. In Chicago, these same traits—practical literacy, endurance, domestic competence, and emotional resilience—would have allowed Sophie to navigate immigrant neighborhoods, contribute economically, and help anchor a new family life far from the narrow streets of Salzwedel.