



Hold Dear, As Always: Jette, a German Immigrant Life in Letters

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Henriette Geisberg Bruns was twenty-three when she arrived in 1836 at the isolated Westphalia Settlement in central Missouri with her husband, baby son, two brothers, and a maid. Jette, as she was known to her family and friends, had not come to America by inclination, but from duty. Her husband Bernhard, a physician, had fallen victim to the emigration fever sweeping Germany in the 1830s and was convinced that he could provide a better life for his family in the American Free States where land was plentiful, the soil was fertile, and taxes were low. Born into a large, prosperous, closely knit family, Jette had set out for the New World reluctantly; but once in Missouri, she was determined not to give up and go back home, as a neighboring family did.

Although she maintained her resolve, this collection of letters written to her family in Germany shows that her life in America was often beset by deprivation, disease, and loneliness. Jette had been persuaded to emigrate for the sake of her children's future; however, of the ten born in central Missouri, five died in childhood, three within three weeks in September and October 1841.

Despite the family responsibilities and the hardships she faced in Missouri, Jette maintained a lively interest in American political and social life. For fifteen years in Westphalia and almost fifty in Jefferson City and St. Louis, she observed and offered astute—if sometimes acerbic—commentary on the historic as well as the daily events of nineteenth-century life. Left destitute by the death of her husband, who had served as mayor of Jefferson City during the Civil War, she opened a boarding-house in her home across from the state capitol to support her own children and those of her brother. There the German radicals in state government gathered to argue and debate.

This rare collection of personal family letters, combined with an autobiographical sketch Jette wrote after the Civil War, illuminates the experience of one immigrant woman in a land that was always foreign to her.

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