

1999

Review of Lives and Letters of an Immigrant Family: The van Dreveldts' Experiences along the Missouri, 1844-1866 by Kenneth Kronenberg

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Luebke, Frederick C., "Review of Lives and Letters of an Immigrant Family: The van Dreveldts' Experiences along the Missouri, 1844-1866 by Kenneth Kronenberg" (1999). *Faculty Publications, Department of History*. 167.
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Western Historical Quarterly, Vol. 30, No. 4 (Winter, 1999), pp. 523-524

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Lives and Letters of an Immigrant Family: The van Drevelts' Experiences along the Missouri, 1844-1866. Written and translated by Kenneth Kronenberg. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1998. xxiii + 210 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. £42.75, UK; \$45.00, US).

Correspondence between immigrants and their families and friends in Europe is a resource that has long been underexploited by American historians, chiefly because of problems of language and accessibility. Seemingly inexhaustible in number, such letters provide invaluable access to the experiences, attitudes, and behaviors of countless ordinary Americans.

For this book, Kenneth Kronenberg has selected and translated letters exchanged mainly between brothers Anton and Theodor

van Dreveldt and Anton's son Bernhard, each of whom emigrated to the United States in the 1840s. Anton and Theodor were the sons of a Catholic priest and his housekeeper who lived in Emmerich, a city within the Kingdom of Prussia on the Rhine River near its passage into the Netherlands. The father, John Goossens, was a man of modest wealth and status who posed as an uncle in his elaborate effort to disguise and obscure his children's illegitimacy. His deceptions included the invention of the name van Dreveldt.

Kronenberg provides a text to bind extensive quotations from the letters into a coherent narrative of immigrant experience. The result is a fascinating case study of the dynamics of an often dysfunctional immigrant family. It is likely, though not subject to proof, that the family's problems were rooted in the illegitimacy of the sons.

Theodor, the younger brother, emigrated first, in the aftermath of politically indiscreet behavior as a student at the university in Bonn. He settled near Hermann, Missouri, an early center of German immigration. Theodor's letters, often long and remarkably perceptive of American circumstance, reveal a high intelligence and a pleasant disposition. But he did not adapt well; he suffered from malaria and his business ventures failed. He returned to Germany in 1848.

His brother Anton, characterized by Kronenberg as an alcoholic—uncommunicative, always difficult and quarrelsome—emigrated the next year with his son Bernhard to the St. Louis area, where he remained until his death in 1859. Following a dispute with Theodor over real estate, Anton broke with his brother. Thenceforth all family communication was with his son, Bernhard, who settled in Illinois some miles southeast of St. Louis. Though more successful than his father, Bernhard was also an insecure and contentious person.

Although the contrast, perhaps overdrawn, between the well-loved Theodor and the irascible Anton and son threads through

many of these pages, it fortunately does not eclipse the volume's primary value as a source for immigrant perceptions and attitudes toward slavery, race, nativism, the Civil War, Lincoln, and conscription. The letters also illuminate the problems and privations experienced by immigrants on the frontier, as well as business practices of the time. Kronenberg's translations are graceful throughout and, one may safely presume, true to the original language. His text is less successful; though well written at the sentence level, it is sometimes weakened by problems of organization.

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