Unearthing Wilhelm
An Immigrant Sketch

By Abbott Ikeler

Elijah, his great-grandson, nearly pulled it off. Buried him deep enough, that is.

For a man with big political plans (a five-year term as presiding judge of three counties), it was no random act telling lies about the family's past, squeezing Wilhelm out of existence between long-dead generations. Besides, Elijah had a wife with D.A.R. credentials and a pile of Philadelphia money. When the chroniclers came calling, he simply had to try.

It worked for a while—long enough at least to win two elections, and see Elijah and Helena into their polished marble tomb. But Wilhelm (with his mark of infamy) kept struggling up through layers of other names and dates and places, worming his way past rocks and roots, making for the light.

The first stirrings came in 1915, a couple of years after Elijah's wife passed on, and nearly thirty since he planted his myths in the county histories. Those tales of a Joseph Eggler (later spelled Ikeler) and his eldest son, the bravest of patriots and pioneers, heroes in both wars against the British, still had pride of place in the annals of the town. But that year, brief and parenthetical, another account appeared below Elijah's, claiming the Ikeler line was founded by a William, not a Joseph: a man without a war record who brought his immigrant wife and family out of New Jersey into the eastern foothills of the Alleghenies when Jefferson was President. Dismissed by the town fathers as the contribution of some

upstart, jealous of Elijah's pedigree, the "William version" was ignored for another eighty years.

But the clay that had packed Wilhelm away so long began to loosen as the century turned. Electronic databases did what memory could not, prying free a ship's manifest from 1753 that turned Eggler into Eichler and Joseph into Hieronymus. Worse still, the document confirmed Hieronymus' arrival in America with half-grown sons seven years earlier than Elijah claimed—an annoying fact that made the patriarch too old, a quarter-century later, to fight on the colonial side, valiantly or otherwise.

With the right surname and a firm starting point at last, the curious closed in fast on the truth Elijah had tried to bury. What follows is the tale their research told:

Wilhelm Eichler first turns up in 1771 as a young father baptizing his daughter in a New Jersey Lutheran church. He's surrounded, innocently enough, by wife and in-laws, just a fortnight after brother Conrad christened his own first born at the same fount. The aging Hieronymus is there, attended by his wife, witnessing the initiation of grandchildren, one by one, into the faith he'd carried out of northern Germany nearly twenty years before.

The next notice of Wilhelm squares with the traditional behavior of a younger son. He and his Elisabeth don't appear again in the record of Eichler births at the church where parents and in-laws and brother continue to worship. Instead, in 1773, the young couple surfaces in the next county north, in another Lutheran parish, baptizing Andrew, their eldest son. They're on their own now, nearer the river and the town, farming among their English neighbors. The Old Straw Church records their baptism of another two boys, Barnabus and William, in '74 and early '78.

Then a sudden, long silence.

A last child, Elizabeth, was born in 1780, but there's no evidence of her having been baptized at the church they'd been attending. In fact there's no evidence of the family's whereabouts at all for the next 20 years.

There is one exception. A newspaper article from December, 1778, includes a William Ekler in a list of 62 men condemned as British loyalists and scheduled to have their assets seized. Wilhelm, it would seem, was interrupted on his way to the American dream. By March of '79, his house, land, cattle, horses, harrows and hoes have all been taken. He's a farmer without a farm, and four small children to feed. Worse, branded as a traitor in the midst of war, he's lost all protection under law.

It's clear from later documents that somewhere in New Jersey in the 1790's, his children begin to marry. First Andrew in '92, then another son in '96.

Still no word of Wilhelm. Decades pass; the fever of revolution subsides; the country gets its constitution; battles with the Iroquois peter out; first Washington, then Adams wins the presidency.

Suddenly, Wilhelm's there again, Rip-Van-Winkle-like after 20 years, in a new state with a new spelling for his name: William Ikeler, of Greenwood Township, Pennsylvania, a subscriber to the Derry Lutheran Church in 1798. The 1800 census confirms his age, his residence and the presence of his wife; the 1802 tax records tell us he's farming 300 acres, with a log house, a barn, three horses, five cattle, and no slaves.

He's not just back on his feet, it seems, but emphatically so. A deed in pen on parchment from 1804 conveys to "William Ickler of Greenwood Township" another 350 acres of land for the sum of "450 pounds of silver or gold." The following year, according to the tax records, his sons and older brother have moved up from New Jersey and settled on the land he purchased, each with 100 acres or more, a log cabin, and

livestock of their own. His daughter has married a long-time local resident on an adjacent farm, and two of his sons have fathered children.

No document from that time questions his patriotism or his place in the newly settled county. Time and distance and the protective presence of other rehabilitated loyalists help to keep the stigma buried. Wilhelm, now William, has twice started from scratch in the New World. The second effort has apparently done the trick.

Then, after ten years as a respectable Pennsylvania farmer, with family holdings of nearly 700 acres, Wilhelm's gone. The1808 tax records suggest he's freshly dead, since his ownership of land and portable property is duly reported, but next to his name the assessor has added as an afterthought "(Dec'd)."

Today, it's fairly certain where he's buried. In the back right corner of a graveyard on the old Greenwood homestead, there's a line of tombstones, only two of which are clearly marked. Second and third from the end are those of his eldest son and wife, suggesting Wilhelm and his Elisabeth, and perhaps his brother Conrad, are under the cluster of blank slate headstones just to the right. If so, according to the custom of the time, they were most likely interred with little ceremony, in a simple winding sheet, with a thin, small rectangle of brownish fieldstone to mark the spot: Conrad in '06, Wilhelm in '08, Elisabeth in '15.

Figuratively speaking, he's still not free of the earth today, though out from under Elijah's pall, and closer to the light than at any time since his death. No one, of course, has the slightest notion what he looked like, and yeoman farmers were hardly the sort to sit for portraits. Then there are those missing decades from his middle age, and the weight of gold and silver that enabled him to prosper near the end—both mysteries still. Did the State of New Jersey finally reimburse him for his losses? Did in-laws or parents bankroll his

recovery? Did he take up some legitimate business a safe distance from those who knew his sympathies? Or, embracing his outlaw status, did he perhaps accumulate the necessary capital by means no God-fearing Lutheran would approve?

In the place where Wilhelm lies, the ground's uneven all around. Dips and swells tell us where the bodies are, and aren't. Finding hollows just below the turf, gophers have dug a score of holes in the patchy soil. If we knew for sure which grave was his, and followed the gophers down, like the ferrets that we are, the experts tell me we'd still find nothing of the Wilhelm we seek, not even teeth.

- Abbott Ikeler