

Meet Kurt

Kurt Hoffman* has just moved to Minnesota from the east. He is a young soldier serving at Fort Snelling. He writes to his Aunt Julia back in Pennsylvania to tell her about his new life...

*Kurt is a fictional character but his story is based on real historical facts.

April 10, 1828

Dear Aunt Julia,
I arrived last Tuesday. The fort is about four years old. As soon as I got here I was sent to work in Fort Snelling's gardens. I like my job—except for the mosquitoes. They seem as large as small birds, and their bites are so annoying! I've learned a lot about farming from my friend Josiah, a trader. He travels out from the fort and comes back with all sorts of good ideas on how to farm. The expert farmers here are the Indian women. The Ojibwe live north of Fort Snelling. They hunt wild game, fish and pick wild berries. They also tap maple trees to make maple syrup and maple sugar. In the spring, the Ojibwe women plant corn, pumpkins and squash. They harvest wild rice from the shallow shores of the lakes in the north, too.
I miss you. I also miss your wonderful fresh peach pies. There are no fresh peaches out west!

Your loving nephew,
Kurt

(Five years later, Kurt is still at Fort Snelling)

Sept. 25, 1833

Dear Aunt Julia,
You should see what we've harvested from the fort gardens this fall! We have thousands of bushels of potatoes, and loads of wheat, oats, corn and garden vegetables, too. I got a promotion and am in charge of farming for my company now. It's hard work but I get a bit of a break in the winter.
There is some trading going on. The squatters who live near the fort bring in eggs, wild game and berries to exchange for the potatoes, squash and corn we grow in our gardens. It's nice to have variety in our meals. Buffalo roasts and prairie chickens do taste good!

Your loving nephew,
Kurt

(Kurt decides to leave the army after nine years of service.)

February 22, 1837

Dear Aunt Julia,
Winter is so long out west. How I long for a warm spring day! I'm planning to leave the fort in July. I've learned so much about farming, and would love to have my own farm some day.
I've been thinking about working at the grist mill at St. Anthony Falls. They grind wheat into flour there. I've met a lovely young woman named Penelope Anderson. She's a hard worker and a caring person, and I think I will ask her to marry me. We don't have many women here in the west. I hope Penelope will say yes!

Your loving nephew,
Kurt

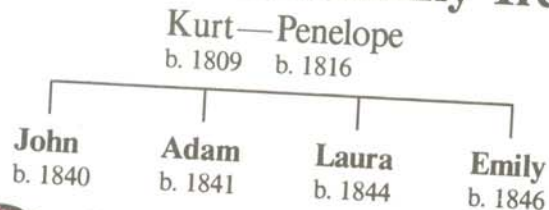
(Penelope and Kurt married in 1838. They now have four children and live in St. Anthony Falls where Kurt works at the grist mill. Milling is a much bigger business, but Kurt is restless again.)

April 18, 1852

Dear Aunt Julia,
I so much want to have a farm of my own. Since the treaty was signed with the Indians to allow the settlers to move west, I've been even more eager. The job at the mill has been good but it's not the same as owning your own land and being independent.
We hear the grass can be eight feet tall on the prairie! Sod-busting will be hard, but I plan to buy one of those new steel plows invented by the man in Illinois—John Deere. They say it makes plowing a lot easier and faster than it was when we worked with the wooden plows. I'm glad I have four strong children to help with the work.
I will be leaving next week to look at the land west of here. We plan to make the move early next spring.

Your loving nephew,
Kurt

The Hoffman Family Tree



How's your history?

- Why aren't there fresh peaches in Kurt's Minnesota? _____
How is this different today? _____
- Why does Kurt call Minnesota "the west"? _____
- What Indian treaty is Kurt referring to in his fourth letter? _____
- Why was the grist mill located at St. Anthony Falls? _____
- Why was John Deere's plow better than a wooden plow? _____
- What parts of Minnesota were prairie? _____

The Hoffmans Get A Farm!

In our last issue, we met Kurt Hoffman. He had worked at Fort Snelling and at the St. Anthony Falls grist mill and was hoping to move to a farm at the end of his last letter to Aunt Julia. (The Hoffman family settles in the southern part of the state. Land is fertile and produces good crops.)

July 30, 1863

Dear Aunt Julia,

It is wonderful to finally feel we own every bit of our land. We've been on the farm for over ten years but the Homestead Act has helped to make these 160 acres all ours. Things are going fairly well. It's been a dry spring, but it's not been anything like what this area suffered in the '50's. That drought brought hard times for many.

Our eldest son John feels he should be off to help fight the war. Of course Penelope is broken-hearted to see him go. So am I, but he needs to do what he thinks is right. It will make a big difference for us here on the farm. It may mean we will need to spend more of our precious dollars in machinery to help take his place as a farm hand. It's hard to believe machinery can make such a difference in the work, but I know that it does.

Our son Adam is thinking about joining a threshing crew. It would mean he'd be gone during August, September and part of October. He'd be following the wheat harvest to the northwest where the bigger wheat farms are located. He enjoys people and hard work so he should enjoy it. Besides, the money he makes will help buy some more machinery.

The girls are busy helping Penelope with the garden. I don't have time to garden anymore and I miss it. They also help with the milking, the pigs and the chickens. We had good luck with our two sows this spring. They each had a litter of eight piglets. Salt pork is an important food to prairie farmers. We raise plenty of corn to feed the pigs and it looks like we might have pigs to sell if they grow up healthy.

The girls have a tiresome job in the summer, but one that is so necessary. They spend hours each day frightening away the thousands of blackbirds that come each summer to eat the corn crop. You can't imagine how many there are and how bold they can be. The girls sit in the corn field and bang two of Penelope's old cooking pots together to scare the birds. Sometimes they sing or play their willow whistles and that frightens the birds away for awhile.

There are rumors about a railroad being built in our area. Of course it would be a big help to us farmers for getting our wheat to market. I'm not sure when this would happen. Penelope and the children send their love. Do you think you could make a trip out here to see us sometime? It's been 35 years and I long to see you again.

Your loving nephew
Kurt

The Hoffman Family Tree



How's your history?

1. What was the Homestead Act? _____
2. In what war was John planning to fight? How did it affect our state? _____
Minnesota's people? _____
3. What is threshing? _____
4. What kinds of machinery might Adam's money buy at this time? _____
5. How would the railroads change the lives of prairie farmers? _____

The Hoffmans

Amanda, daughter of Karl, granddaughter of John and great granddaughter of Kurt, continues correspondence with the Hoffman family in Philadelphia. She and her husband Kermit Keister are helping manage the Hoffman farm.

November 10, 1950

Dear Laurence,

I am still thinking about the wonderful visit we had while you were here last spring. The week after you left, our 400 White Rock chicks arrived. I was busy getting the brooder house ready for them. The chickens are my responsibility. Some days I get 38 cents for a dozen eggs and some days I get 55 cents. It's a fluctuating market!

Son Ted and his family are now living in the house across the road from us. He is a veterinarian. It's handy to have him here to vaccinate our 110 pigs and care for the other animals, too.

We bought a four-row corn planter this year. We planted DeKalb #239 and #404A—two corn varieties we've had good luck with in the past. A bad storm flattened some of the corn this fall so we couldn't use the corn picker. It took many days to hand pick, even with the help of our grandchildren and many of their friends.

We'll be having Thanksgiving dinner here this year. Have a Happy Holiday.

Lovingly,

Amanda

November 12, 1976

Dear Laurence,

Thank you for the birthday card with the picture of an old-fashioned farm. It brought back memories! It has been fun thinking about our last few years in farming. Things have changed so much. I guess I'd say we are in an age of chemicals and technology. Chemicals help us control weeds, insects and diseases and fertilize our crops, but we have to be very careful to use these things safely.

There is so much help with the work these days! Huge tractors, combines, corn pickers, electric pumps and elevators... Some folks are thinking about using computers to keep farm records and help with management decisions!

Our animals have changed, too. Technology has made them larger and healthier. Most farmers seem to be specializing again—they either grow fieldcrops or livestock, or have dairy farms.

We hope to visit you in Philadelphia soon. We can fly from the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport and be there in three hours!

Love,

Amanda

Hoffman Family Reunion July 4, 1991

Dear family,

We are planning a Hoffman family reunion for the 4th of July. We hope you will be able to join the fun! You can camp down by the creek on the old home place if you like and stay several days!

We'll tell stories of our great-grandparents and their 160-acre homestead here in southern Minnesota. You'll have a chance to see:

- the remodeled homestead farm house
- the first steel plow Kurt Hoffman owned
- Penelope's log cabin quilt
- the old threshing machine

We'll show pictures from the old days:

- before electricity
- when the grasshoppers destroyed much of the crops

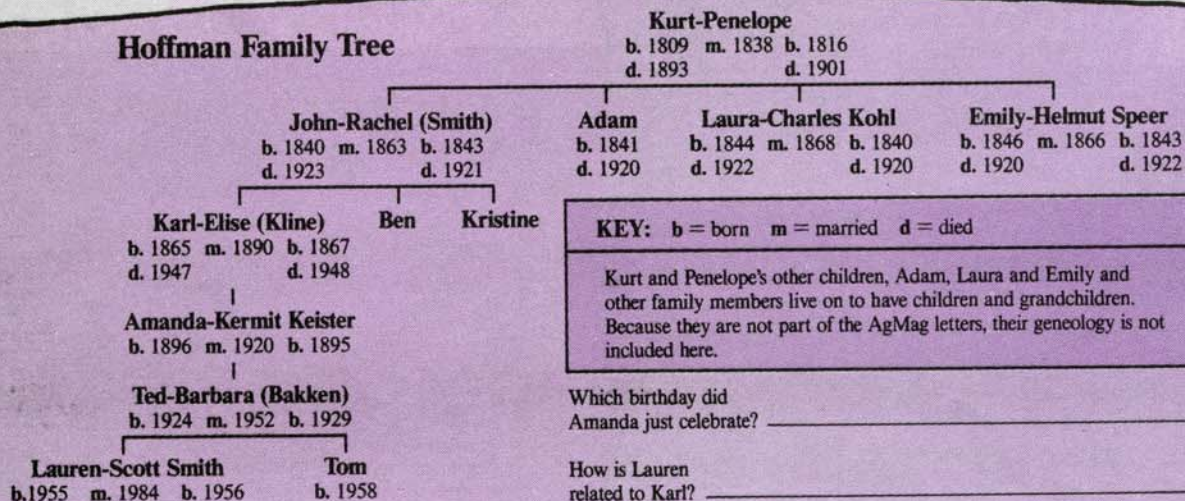
- the drought years
- before indoor plumbing
- when corn grew "knee high by the 4th of July"

We'll have pony rides and rides in an air-conditioned combine, 1500 pigs to see, week-old piglets in the farrowing house to hold, soybean fields, corn "chest high by the 4th of July," fried chicken and all the trimmings, fireworks in the south forty.

Please come. Along with the rest of the nation, we will be celebrating with Tom, back from service in Saudi Arabia. We want to hear about your family and your life in Philadelphia. Bring your old photo albums and your new video camera. It will be a special time.

Lauren Keister Smith

Hoffman Family Tree



The Hoffmans: Next Generations.

In our last letter, Kurt Hoffman was writing to his Aunt Julia in Philadelphia. This first letter is written by Kurt's son, John.

November 27, 1885

Dear Aunt Julia,

Pa has asked me to write to you. His health is not good. He had a bad summer with breathing problems and chest pains. It has kept him from doing what he loves best—helping with harvesting the fall crops.

I have taken over the family farm. My wife Rachel, sons Karl and Ben and daughter Kristine all help with the many chores. We would have to hire help if we didn't have our children. This spring we had 21 little pigs. We have a few cows to milk and some chickens that lay eggs and give us a chicken dinner now and then. This fall we harvested corn, wheat and barley.

My brother Adam went out west in 1875. He worked on the big bonanza farms in northwestern Minnesota, then bought land in the Red River Valley. Wheat farming has not turned out to be very profitable for him. The soil has been over-used and doesn't produce

the good crops it once did. There was a lot of wheat going to market for a few years so the price of wheat has been down. Stem rust disease has also been ruining a lot of wheat. Adam is hoping flax will be a better crop for him.

Sister Laura went to Normal School in Mankato and learned to be a teacher. She taught for about five years in the country school next to our farm. She had to stop teaching when she married Charles. Women can't teach if they are married. She helps Charles in his creamery now.

We had a sad day last August when one of our work horses, Ol' Gray, died of the heaves. He was such a good horse. I miss him. Now I must find another horse to buy. We'll need it when we start cleaning the barns and hauling manure to the fields before planting.

We hope you and your family are well. Pa and Ma send their love.

Love to all,

Nephew John

(Kurt dies in 1893 at age 84. Penelope dies in 1901 at age 85. Aunt Julia has died, too. Kurt's son John is writing to Julia's daughter Rebecca, who lives in Philadelphia.)

Christmas, 1901

Dear Cousin Rebecca,

This is not the happiest Christmas greeting. My mother Penelope died last month. She never really got over Pa's death in '93. The last years were lonely for her. Rachel and I still live in the homestead farmhouse. Our oldest son, Karl, lives in a house across the road from us. We still raise hogs along with corn, wheat, barley, chickens and cows. We sell the pigs, the cream and some of the wheat and barley. The rest is food, either for us or for the animals.

Last year many of the neighbors put money together and bought a threshing machine. It uses steam power and separates crop seeds from stems. It sure is a lot faster than harvesting with horsepower. We go from farm to farm helping each other thresh in the late summer. You should see the feasts the women bring out on threshing days!

Please come for a visit some time. You could take the train all the way!

Fondly,

John Hoffman

(Karl, son of John, grandson of Kurt sends this letter to his cousin Paul. Paul is a grandson of Aunt Julia and lives in Philadelphia. John died in 1923 at age 83.)

Christmas 1936

Dear Paul,

Happy holidays! We had a fair year even with the drought and the depression. At least we've had food to eat. We hope things are well with you folks, too.

We are still raising pigs. Grandpa Kurt started this farm with pigs, and would have been happy to know we still raise them.

We've been having lots of problems losing our topsoil to the wind. Last summer was very hot and we had terrible dust storms. On August 13, I wrote in my journal that we had not had rain for 82 days. The crops didn't do well. If we keep losing our rich topsoil, we will have problems growing good crops for many years to come. Next spring we plan to plant evergreens on the north and west sides of the farm buildings to help keep the wind down during the winter.

We still milk a few cows. We sell the cream to the creamery to be made into butter. We have chickens for eggs and sell some of the old hens. Last month we sold 24 hens and got 17 cents apiece for them.

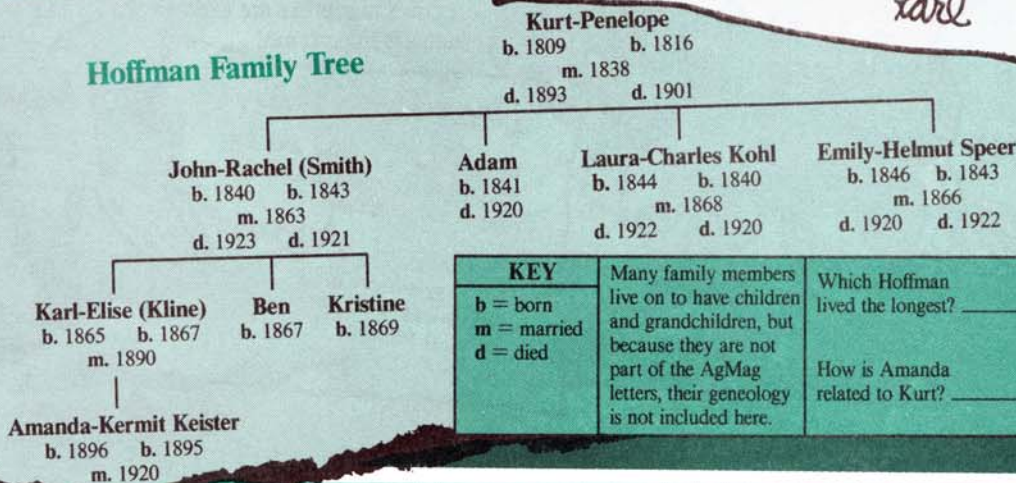
Our daughter Amanda and her family live on the old home place across the road from us. They have put in electricity so everything is quite easy. They even have running water and an inside bathroom! They have a refrigerator and lights, too. Next thing you know they will have one of those fancy electric milking machines we saw at the County Fair!

We wish you and your family a Happy New Year!

Your cousin,

Karl

Hoffman Family Tree



KEY		Which Hoffman lived the longest? _____
b = born	Many family members live on to have children and grandchildren, but because they are not part of the AgMag letters, their geneology is not included here.	
m = married		How is Amanda related to Kurt? _____
d = died		