

## **Couple records Texas German dialect**

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Clinton Acker does not speak much German these days, but last week, he spent four hours reciting childhood memories in his parents' native tongue.

Acker and his wife, Doris, struggled to remember a language they have not spoken in years so they could participate in a University of Texas project to preserve the Texas German dialect.

The project was founded by professor Hans Boas, who first heard the unique dialect in Central Texas after stopping in Fredericksburg for lunch on his way to Austin from Berkeley, Calif.

Boas wants to record as much of the old language as possible before everyone who speaks it is gone — most Texas German speakers, like Acker, were born before World War II and are well into their 60s and 70s.

The Ackers were interviewed by Hunter Weilbacher, a New Braunfels High School alumnus who speaks fluent German and wants to pursue graduate studies in linguistics.

"I'm interested because a lot of my relatives are Texas German speakers," he said. "It's fun and interesting. People are usually surprised at how much (of the

language) they remember and can use.”

Although Acker learned German at home from his parents, he stopped using it when he went to school.

“My parents always spoke to me in German, but I would answer them in English,” he said. “That was pretty common among kids our age.”

During WWII, speaking German in public became even less common.

“If you knew who was around, you would speak German, but if there was a stranger, you would be more careful. It might be a spy,” Acker said.

Weilbacher prompted the Ackers to speak freely for about an hour. Although the words were halting at first, they came more quickly the longer they talked.

During the second hour of the interview, Acker gave the couple a word list in English and asked them to translate it into German.

The dialect spoken in Central Texas is a mixture of German dialects from around Europe as well as the other European languages spoken by area immigrants. It is more similar to the German spoken in the 19th century than the language spoken today in Berlin.

Weilbacher said many of the words that are different were technology-related — immigrants did not have the German vocabulary to talk about many of the new things they encountered in America.

“For example, a lot of Texas German speakers use the word for ‘air ship’ instead of the modern German word for airplane,” he said.

English also had a transformational effect on Texas German.

In particular, immigrants seemed taken by the verb “to pick up.” The German translation is “aufholen” with the

past tense of "aufgeholt."

But a Texas German would say "aufgepickt."

Weilbacher and Boas are collecting these dialectical jewels and recording them in an online archive so other linguists can use the information in their research.

Of the 8,000 speakers they estimate are still alive, they have interviewed 97.

Although the Ackers were hesitant to participate at first, thinking they did not speak enough "proper German," Weilbacher said their interview was one of the best so far.

Acker said he was glad they did it.

"It doesn't come real easy, but it brought back a lot of memories," he said.

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