

Star-Telegram

Hill Country shows its German heritage

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NEW BRAUNFELS -- It's time for Wurstfest in New Braunfels, a 10-day celebration of all things German that last year drew about 110,000 paying visitors to the banks of the Comal River for food, music and beer.

But while folks of all ethnic backgrounds enjoy opportunities to toast the state's German heritage, the last in a long line of Texans who grew up here speaking German from childhood are disappearing and taking with them a distinctive dialect heard nowhere else.

"In about 30 years it'll be gone," said Hans Boas, a University of Texas at Austin German linguistics professor. "It's just a very unfortunate situation."

Boas estimates that a century ago, about 110,000 Texans spoke German. Now it's closer to 6,000 to 8,000, Boas said. Virtually all speakers are more than 60 years old.

Texas-born German speakers have lived in New Braunfels and other Hill Country towns since the 1840s, hearing sermons in German-speaking churches, learning from German-speaking schoolteachers, reading German-language newspapers and passing the dialect to the next generation at home.

Boas said the Texas-German dialect exhibits traits of various German dialects that settlers brought to Texas, mixed with English words for things that didn't exist when Germans were moving here. There are also distinctive Texas-German words: *die Stinkkatze* for skunk, for example. In Germany, the word would be *das Stinktier*.

In towns such as New Braunfels, Doss and Fredericksburg, the Hill Country geography and the divergent sources of German settlement even spawned variations of the dialect that were different enough to enable residents of one town to tell that a fellow German speaker was from somewhere else.

Language of their youth

"The Hill Country was isolated, except for Native Americans," said Boas, who first encountered Texas German when he stopped to eat in a Fredericksburg restaurant. "They grew up in completely German-only communities."

German was so well established that in 1914, there were 24 German-language newspapers with a total circulation of 70,000 in the state. The *Neu-Braunfelser Zeitung* only ceased printing in German in late 1958, according to a history of the newspaper, now the English-language *Herald-Zeitung*.

"I couldn't speak English till I started school," said Clarence Scheel, 73, who lives a few miles south of New Braunfels. "The majority of our friends and all of our relatives spoke German."

Scheel was one of 11 children who grew up on a farm near Converse, northeast of San Antonio. Three of his ancestors helped found New Braunfels in 1845.

"Around here, I think I'm pretty safe to say 95 percent of the farmers, through the '40s, were German, so all the kids spoke it. All the businesses in Converse were German" when he was growing up in the 1940s, Scheel said. "When we went to town, we spoke German to the proprietors. Even into World War II the [Catholic] priest in Selma gave his sermons in German.

"We had our own social groups. We went to dance together, but we did not marry each other," Scheel said. "I was right at the end where we were clannish. My brother, he was engaged to a Polish girl. She broke it off. Her family didn't accept him."

Scheel's wife also descended from German-speakers. Her parents moved to San Antonio and spoke to her in English. But her country-dwelling grandparents spoke to her in German, which she answered in English.

"Once I hit school, there was no more German," Scheel said, adding that his teacher would punish him for speaking the language by making him write on the blackboard: "I will only speak English."

Many of the Texas-German words he learned are nouns and verbs having to do with nature in Texas -- words from farming and ranching that are unknown in German. New technology got new Texas-German words, too.

"We'd say *der Helicopter*, instead of using the German word, *der Hubschrauber*, Scheel said. "The common bond was basically high German with English thrown in."

The dialect basically stopped evolving in the 1950s, Boas said. The nation had already experienced anti-German sentiment during World War I, when speaking German was outlawed in many places.

"World War II didn't help a lot," Boas said. "They essentially gave up because they didn't want their kids to stick out."

Although Scheel said anti-German sentiment wasn't as rabid in the rural Hill Country as elsewhere, Texas felt it. Boas suggested that, to get a sense of what non-German-speaking Texans feared, one should imagine a contemporary situation in which towns between San Antonio and Houston were populated by Afghan Taliban adherents.

"That's how people felt," he said. "They felt like the enemy was living next door."

With the mobility that followed World War II, German-speaking Texans who'd never dated outside their ethnic groups increasingly found mates from different backgrounds. That, in turn, weakened the tradition of teaching German at home.

Two of Scheel's daughters were born in Stuttgart, Germany, while he was stationed as an Army officer. But the kids don't speak German, even though Scheel is bilingual, hosts an online German-music show and performs in the San Antonio Liederkrantz, a singing club established by German Catholics in 1892.

"My wife and I, we just neglected to teach 'em," Scheel said. "There was no reason, except that they had no reason to speak it. We just didn't teach it to the kids."

"We were all over the place" as a military family, Scheel said. "Really, the German language is not very much used, unless you're in a German-speaking country. And the Germans and Austrians all learn English."

Boas, however, believes that there's a real, intangible loss when a dialect disappears.

"Things get lost when you do it in a different language. You lose a way of talking about the world, thinking about the world," Boas said. "And then, of course, the stories you hear from your grandparents, they have specific meanings. German was the language of worship. Especially for Lutherans, the idea of prayer ... that's how they talked to God."

German-less generations

Warren Hahn, 75, and his sister, Mae Durden-Nelson, 78, grew up hearing the minister talk to God in German at St. Peter Lutheran Church. The church is in Doss, a farming hamlet on Ranch Road 783 northwest of New Braunfels in Gillespie County. His grandfather and other German-speaking Texans helped build the 1913 Gothic Revival church from local stone. His grandparents, along with dozens of other Hill Country German Texans with surnames like Itz and Rosenbusch, are buried outside the church. Hahn plans to join them when his time comes.

"There was an era when all our pastors were from Germany," Hahn said. "This was called the mission field."

By the time Hahn, a farmer who lives in the house his dad built in 1936, and his sister, an author who lives in Comfort, were attending church, Sunday school was in English. And when World War II broke out, German was banned at school, Durden-Nelson said.

Though he never learned to read it and concedes that his German is rusty, Hahn jokes about some of the funny-sounding Germanisms he has come across.

"We were down in Stonewall" at a restaurant, he said, when he overheard one customer tell another, "Ich been sure busy."

But Hahn's wife wasn't a German speaker, and the couple didn't pass it along to their children.

Neither did Bill and Diane Moltz, even though they both grew up in German-speaking families in the Guadalupe County towns of, respectively, Geronimo and Zorn. They chalk it up to being young, inexperienced parents.

"German was my first language," said Diane Moltz, 70, a retired teacher who learned German from her parents and spoke it on the playground as a child with her schoolmates "when we were acting silly."

Said Bill Moltz, 72, a retired Texas Water Development Board employee, "My family spoke German all the time. All of our neighbors spoke German."

"When our kids were growing up, we'd speak German when we wanted to speak privately," he said. "That made them mad."

The Moltzes are fifth-generation Texans, grew up setting pins in ninepin bowling halls, belong to a German-American society and sing in a 50-member, four-part-harmony German choir.

Harking back to his self-reliant Hill Country antecedents, Bill Moltz also makes his own wine, including an effervescent white he's glad to share with visitors.

"We still bowl old German ninepin bowling," Bill Moltz said. "It's a completely different game."

Diane Moltz never learned to read German, but she's glad that she and her husband can still speak the language to each other.

"My mother, when they were 8 or 9, they were suddenly told they couldn't speak German anymore" at school, Diane Moltz said. "She said, 'It was like somebody cut off my tongue.'"

But visitors to New Braunfels this week may well catch some Texas-inflected German. The Moltzes' choir is slated to participate in Wurstfest.

"In the circles we run," Bill Moltz said, "we speak a lot of German."

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