

The Sound of History

Texas German is a language that was born here. One man struggles to preserve this unique cultural treasure even as time slowly silences its voice.



Written by Megan D. Willome
Photography by Kirk Weddle

Language is a window to heritage. The way we speak explains who we are and where we come from. So if you want to learn the history of the "German belt" in the Hill Country, then listen to Texas German.

Dr. Hans Boas, Assistant Professor for German Linguistics of the Department of Germanic Studies at the University of Texas at Austin, first discovered this unique dialect when he stopped for a much-needed hamburger near the end of a long day's drive from El Paso to Austin. Boas, a native of Germany, did not know he had chosen to eat in the heart of Texas German culture, Fredericksburg.

"I heard this interesting German spoken. I asked, 'Where are you from?' And they said, 'We're from here.' They were fourth or fifth generation Texas Germans," explains Boas.

That simple hamburger stop led to the creation of the Texas German Dialect Project (www.tgdp.org). Boas and his researchers interview as many speakers of the dialect as possible while recording their voices. The information is transcribed and entered into a database that is available to anyone interested in hearing this unique language.

Unlike other German dialects spoken throughout the United States, Texas German resulted when settlers from different parts of Germany came to Central Texas during the land rush of the 1830s and 40s. Since these pioneers spoke different German dialects, they co-mingled until a unified dialect emerged, which remained essentially isolated from the larger world for the next 150 years. "It's different from any other German dialect because of the variety of donor dialects and because of the isolation," says Boas.

Texas German incorporated English words and Germanized them, such as *der Cowiboy*. In other cases, words were created, such as *die Strikkätzle*, "stink cat," for skunk.

Karen Roesch, three years into her doctoral work at UT, lives in Doss, a community in which Texas German can still be heard at town meetings. She helped link Boas with locals who still speak the language, and she has conducted several interviews with Texas German speakers. "It's more like storytelling," she says. "We ask questions to get them talking, like 'How do you make sausage?'"

Some dialects die out after the third generation, and even though Texas German has survived, the number of speakers has decreased from a high of 150,000 to only 8,000 today. Roesch believes the language might die out within the next thirty years because parents no longer pass on Texas German to their children. "Poor little Texas German. You never can say what might happen," she says.

This possible extinction, says Boas, was put into motion by world events of the past. "After the two World Wars, speaking German was considered speaking the language of the enemy," he says. "Anything German had to be basically eradicated. Parents chose to raise their children in English."

If Texas German speakers don't tell their stories soon, the tales and the language will fade into history. To preserve the heritage of Texas German, Boas has started an endowment at the university and he hopes to raise over \$1 million to fund research and scholarships. He has also written a book, *The Life and Death of Texas German*, due to be released next year.

