

UT linguist strikes gold with Texas German Dialect Project

Web Posted: 01/30/2005 12:00 AM CST

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San Antonio Express-News

A lunch stop in Fredericksburg three years ago changed Hans Boas' life.

Boas was driving from California to a new teaching position at the University of Texas when he dropped into a restaurant for a bite to eat.

A native of Germany, Boas couldn't help but tune in when he heard some people near him speaking what sounded like German, but a version with an unusual accent.

Soon after his arrival in Austin, Boas visited a library and found some research about Texas German, a dialect spoken by descendants of the German pioneers who settled in the Hill Country in the mid 1800s.

As a linguist, Boas had hit pay dirt.

Since that discovery, Boas has worked with a rotating team of students at UT to interview and record more than 80 mostly older Texans who still speak the German they learned during childhood.

To Boas, a blond-haired, blue-eyed 33-year-old who invariably gets enthusiastic when he talks about his work, the study of the languages and people of Texas provides a unique window into the history and culture of the Lone Star State.

"There's so many things about Texas that I didn't understand before I came here," Boas says. "And now, looking at all these immigration patterns from the Germans and the Czechs and the other Europeans coming in, the whole barbecuing and the sausage and the dancing and so many other things all of a sudden makes sense."

For the past three years, the \$40,000 annual budget of Boas' "Texas German Dialect Project" has come from UT and Humanities Texas. Last December, Boas received a \$40,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities that will allow him to take a sabbatical next year from his job in UT's Germanic Studies Department to write a book about his work.

Right now, however, much of the research and dozens of audio clips recorded by the project team are available on the Internet at www.tgdp.org.

Boas also has launched a campaign for an endowment to help ongoing funding for the project. He hopes to raise more than \$500,000 over the next five years.

He's also always looking for new subjects to interview.

"When I call for the first time, a lot of people think I'm a telemarketer," Boas says, laughing. "I tell them, 'I'm working in Texas German and all I want to do is sit down and talk to you in Texas German for two or three hours.' Usually, they think I'm some crazy guy."

For more information about the Texas German Dialect Project, call Hans Boas at (512) 232-6358, send him an e-mail at hcb@mail.utexas.edu or visit www.tgdp.org.

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