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Working to preserve a historic dialect

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AUSTIN --Although stories of *der Cowboy* and *die Stinkkatze* may no longer get told in Texas, Germanic linguistics professor Hans Boas wants to make sure nobody forgets them.

Boas, an assistant professor at the University of Texas, is the founder and manager of the Texas German Preservation Project. Every month or so Boas ventures forth from his campus office in Austin to small towns like Boerne, Fredericksburg and Crawford to conduct interviews with the dwindling number of old-timers who speak the odd mixture of English and 19th-century German.

It's a dialect unique to the Lone Star State, and most of the 8,000 or so remaining speakers are in their 60s, 70s or 80s. Their numbers are expected to dwindle precipitously over the next few years, and Boas says that by 2040, the dialect will probably be gone.

And so *die Stinkkatze* -- the Texas German word for skunk -- and *der Cowboy* will become just a memory.

"The Texas German Dialect Project I started right after I got [to the University of Texas] in September 2001," Boas said. "The main reason was because no one else has been interested in Texas German from an academic point of view. But there are fewer and fewer speakers, and in 30 years it will be gone. I thought it would be a good idea to record the remaining speakers who are left."

Boas says he has interviewed more than 200 Texas German speakers and recorded more than 350 hours of the conversations. Interviewers are typically UT students who ask about childhood memories, games, social interactions -- anything, really, that will get Texas German speakers to provide a window into their lives.

'The culture's legacy'

Boas has preserved audio recordings of these interviews on an Internet database, which also includes video recordings and written text. Besides helping to preserve the dialect, the archive will allow further study of the linguistic features and grammar of Texas German. "It also is important to create a popular account of Texas German to share with local schools, preservation societies and museums -- the dialect is part of the culture's legacy, but it is rapidly eroding," Boas said.

Der Cowboy is Texas German for "cowboy" -- it's basically the English word spoken with a German accent. "*Die Stinkkatz*" literally means "stinky cat"; that is, it's the Texas German word for "skunk." Boas explains that because there were no skunks in their native country, German immigrants invented their own word.

The word "*Luftschiff*" is also unique to Texas German -- or at least, it's unique the way Texas German speakers use the term. During a vacation some years back in Germany, New Braunfels resident Bill Moltz used "*Luftschiff*" to describe his long flight across the Atlantic. For speakers of Texas German, "*Luftschiff*" means airplane.

But in modern German, "*Luftschiff*" means "airship." Texas Germans have been using the word since before the invention of the airplane and never updated it to reflect a post-Wright Brothers world.

"I remember people looked at us in Germany like we were nuts -- they said you flew here in a dirigible?" recalls Moltz, 68, still laughing about the incident. "But that's what happened. We use those terms."

Although fewer than 10,000 speakers remain, at one time as much as 20 percent of the Texas population may have spoken the language. Moltz said that many German settlers arrived in Galveston and spread out during the mid-1800s, and now a swath of German communities can be found running north and south down the middle of the state.

The immigrants settled in dozens of towns like Fredericksburg, New Braunfels and Boerne. At one time there were more than 150 German-language newspapers in Texas, and in many towns German was spoken almost exclusively.

Wars brought decline

But the dialect began to fade during World War I, Boas said.

"A little before World War I, there was a big nativist movement in the U.S. and [the idea] was that if you're in the United States, then you better speak English -- there just wasn't a lot of tolerance for people who speak differently," Boas explained.

He said there was another steep decline during World War II and that the last of the monolingual Texas German speakers are pretty much gone. Those who are left -- fifth-generation Texans like Moltz -- spoke the dialect as kids, but also speak English.

The Texas German Dialect Project has been funded through grants, although that funding expired at the end of last year, Boas said. He said it costs about \$35,000 a year to maintain the program.

It also accepts contributions though a University of Texas endowment.

"Every time we lose a language, we lose a data set -- if researchers have more data, we can create and test theories about how language works more accurately," Boas said.

Texas German Dialect Project: www.tgdp.org

A different dialect

A sampling of unique Texas German words and their translations in European German and English:

Airplane

das Luftschiff -- Texas German

das Flugzeug -- European German

Blouse

die Taille -- Texas German

die Bluse -- European German

Car

die Car (pronounced Kaa) -- Texas German

das Auto (pronounced otto) -- European German

Little town

die kleine Stadt -- Texas German

das Dorf -- European German

Piano

das Piano -- Texas German

das Klavier -- European German

Truck (semi)

der grosse Truck -- Texas German

der Lastwagen -- European German

Skunk

die Stinkkatze -- Texas German

das Stinktier --European German

Squirrel

die Eichkatze --Texas German

das Eichhörnchen -- European German

Socks

die Strumpf --Texas German

die Sökchen -- European German

Source: Texas German Preservation Project

MAP: German influence in Texas. STAR-TELEGRAM/DUWAN X. DAVIS