

# Seeking out Texas German speakers

UT language department wants to preserve stories, culture, language

By Ken Esten Cooke

Standard-Radio Post editor

The Texas German Dialect Project wants you — if you speak Texas German and want to help keep the language alive.

The TGDP gave two programs last week at the Lyndon B. Johnson State Park and Historic Site, including an overview of the project and

soliciting help from German speakers.

Between 2001 and 2019, the TGDP has recorded more than 1,200 hours of conversation with 700 Texas Germans. The project, part of the University of Texas Department of Germanic Studies, then analyzes and edits the interviews to compare and contrast language and how it was used over the generations between

German migration and today.

Margo Blevins, a Ph.D. student with the TGDP, said the project was started by Hans Boas, a German native who got the idea to study the Texas German dialect in 2001 after driving through Fredericksburg and hearing locals speak a Texas version of German in a local bakery.

“He quickly became acquainted with the Texas-

German culture and he wanted to do his part to try and preserve the stories and the dialect as it is spoken for future generations,” Blevins said.

Blevins said the project is still looking for people to help contribute by sitting for an interview.

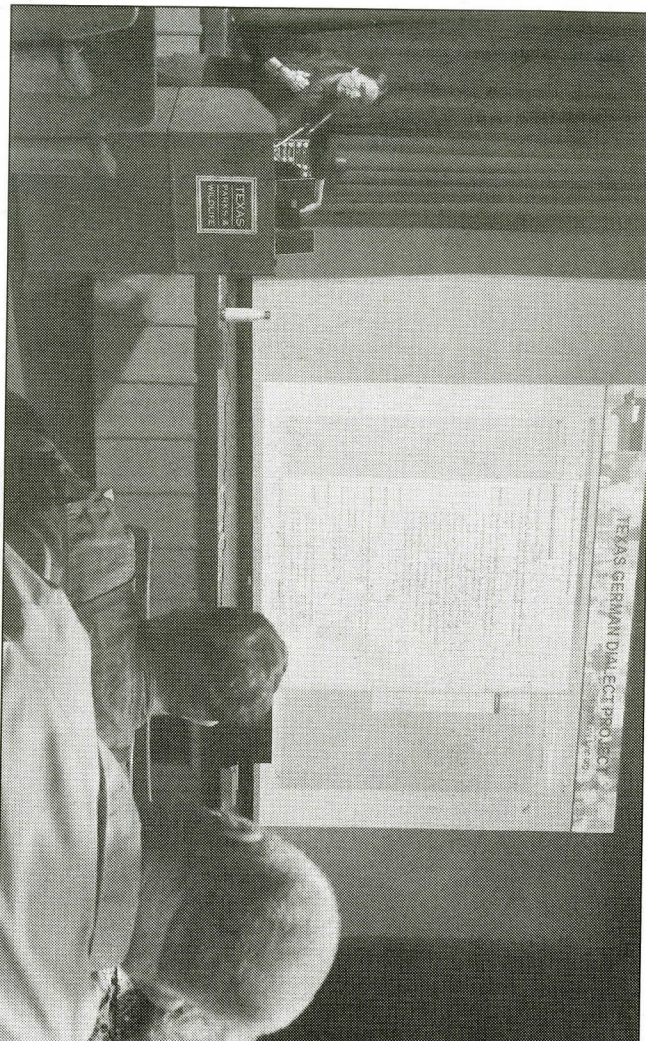
“Texas German is a mixture of dialects,” she said. “They

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Margo Blevins gave a talk on the language and culture of German Texans.





Margo Blevins, Ph.D. student in the University of Texas Department of Germanic Studies, speaks to crowds in the theater at the Lyndon B. Johnson State Park and Historic Site. Blevins hoped to inspire locals who still speak German to share their stories and expertise with the project directors in an effort to keep the language alive. — Standard-Radio Post/Ken Esten Cooke

## TEXAS GERMAN

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were from lots of areas in Germany and they settled in a lot of different areas in Texas. Texas-German is a mixture of a bunch of those dialects and English, all rolled into one."

She said Germans began coming to Texas in the 1830s, though those numbers were limited to "a few adventurous types" who would then write back to their families to tell them what they had seen.

"The first main wave came in the 1840s, and that brought about 7,000 Germans," she said. "So by the 1850s, German was a really strong language in Texas. It was spoken in schools, in newspapers, preached in churches and was spoken in businesses."

Blevins said another large wave of Germans came after the Civil War, which brought another 40,000 Germans. She said "the German Belt" was established with the main settlements in the central part of the state, including New Braunfels and Fredericksburg.

"There was sort of a pattern, but it also was pretty spread out," she said.

By 1907, there were almost 100,000 German-speaking population in Texas.

During and after World War I, there was anti-German sentiment, which brought pressures to speak English, some English-only laws, and pressure for German newspapers to publish in English.

In World War II, there was more, along with roads being built, which brought in outsiders to previously insular

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Hear interviews and sign up to be interviewed online at  
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communities. (The *Wochenblatt*, Fredericksburg's German-language newspaper, ceased publication in 1946.)

In 2011, it was estimated there were only about 6,000 German-Texan speakers.

Language scholar Joseph Wilson in 1986 predicted: "Fifty years from now (in 2036) there will be no speakers of Texas German left, and monolingual Texans will find it hard to believe that German was a living language in Texas, spoken by hundreds of thousands for 200 years. Every sample of Texas German we can collect now, while Texas German is still alive, will be precious in the future."

Blevins said that explains the work of the Texas German Dialect Project (TGDP).

The TGDP does oral history interviews in German as much as possible. Blevins implored many in the audience to sign up for the free service, which seeks to record the language, colloquialisms and stories. She played audio clips which showed the different pronunciations and words for different items, some of which may have been influenced during the German settlers' travels through

Louisiana, such as the word "Galerie" for front porch. "Once those stories aren't being passed on, it will be an unfortunate thing for future generations," she said.

She said the stories that come up most frequently include childhood, chores they may have had, school life, dances, growing up, how things have changed, foods and other subjects. But interviewers are open to any conversations, Blevins said.

She played audio from one interview, in which an elderly German Texan reflected on foods his family prepared during his childhood. His interview was mixed with English phrases such as "home-made Brot."

Other words did not exist and Germans fashioned new words, such as "Sinkkatz" for skunk or "Eickatz" for squirrel.

The project has been used extensively in research from individuals, genealogy and teaching lessons.

She said one of the organization's word lists comes from Glen Gilbert, who began seeking out interview subjects in the 1960s and 1970s, knocking on doors in the pre-Internet days.

The main point of the project is to keep the language alive as long as possible and record it for posterity.

"We're always looking for more people to interview," she said. "Texas German is just a really cool mixture of varieties," she said.