

Top News

[Email this story to a friend](#) [Printer-friendly version](#)

UT Researchers Record Dying Dialect From Central Texans

By Nathan Diebenow
Staff Writer

CRAWFORD — While some scientists uncover and study dinosaur bones, a research team from the University of Texas at Austin gathered voices at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Crawford on Feb. 7.

Well, not just any voices—only the Texas-German dialect.

The team from the University of Texas Germanic Studies Department recorded interviews with about 10 individuals for the Texas-German Dialect Project.

This project couldn't have been possible had it not been for its founder, Dr. Hans Boas, stopping for lunch in Fredericksberg on his way from Berkeley, Calif., to Austin to take his job.

"I just heard people speak German, and I couldn't believe that it was actually spoken," said the assistant professor in the Dept. of Germanic Studies. "It was a total surprise. I didn't know about it."

After researching the subject at UT, the native of Goettingen, Germany, realized that the Texas-German dialect will be gone within the next 30 years and started TGDP in September 2001.

Since its inception, the project has conducted more than 80 hours of interviews with 60 people. By March 2004, Dr. Boas expects to have more than 100 hours with about 80 people.

Using funds allocated from the University of Texas at Austin and Texas Humanities (formerly the Texas Council for the Humanities), the project sets out to document the different Texas-German dialects across the state.

Dr. Boas said that for the first seven-to-eight months progress was slow because locating Texas-Germans was through a "friend of a friend network."

After talking with genealogical societies and German-American groups though, the project mushroomed.

"Some people actually were somewhat upset that I hadn't come out to interview them," said Dr. Boas. "Right now, we have a long list of people who are waiting to be interviewed, but we don't have enough time or people to do it all, or money for that matter."

The Interviews

As Dr. Boas explained, the Texas-German Dialect Project's purpose is to describe how people talk and why it works.



PRESERVING GERMAN HERITAGE
— As a part of the Texas-German Dialect Project, (from left) William Zuehlke of Clifton was interviewed by Jarrod Slocum student from the University of Texas at Austin at St. Paul Lutheran Church in Crawford on Feb. 7. A research team from the University of Texas Germanic Studies Department recorded interviews with about 10 individuals.

— Staff Photo By Nathan Diebenow
[Enlarge this photo...](#)

“There is a misconception that there is a ‘right’ way to talk and then there are other ways. From a scientific viewpoint, this is bogus,” he said. “In other words, we’re interested in how people talk, and not in how they should talk.”

“Now, the last in-depth studies of the Texas-German dialect were conducted in the 1950s and 1960s, and since then, the dialect has changed drastically. We want to figure out how and why,” he added.

And the 10 Texas-Germans from the Central Texas area, as well as those from around New Braunfels, Brenham, Fredericksburg, Freyburg, and Round Rock, might be able to unlock that secret.

The interviewees on Feb. 7 were from the Crawford-McGregor area, two are from Waco, and one each from Hamilton, Clifton, and the Valley Mills-Mosheim area.

As Van Massirer, Dr. Boas’ Crawford liaison, explained, the dialects spoken by the early German immigrants in the Prairie Chapel Community were somewhat different from each other but not so different that the various groups had any significant difficulty communicating with each other.

Some of the German immigrants to Prairie Chapel had roots either in Westphalia or Posen, but another larger group had roots in the Rhineland-Pfalz area of west-central Germany. Each of these groups spoke a slightly different dialect.

Many of the latter group immigrated to eastern Austria before they immigrated to Texas, and their dialect was affected somewhat by the Poles and Ukrainians that they lived among in Austria, Massirer said.

However, primarily, due to shyness and to the fact that they have spoken very little German in recent years, most of local Texas-Germans were reluctant to commit to the interviews.

“I have tried to assure them, however, that once the interviews get underway, they will find that they remember considerably more of the language than they thought,” said Massirer. “All of them were fluent speakers in their younger years, with many of them learning to speak German before they learned English.”

More detrimental to the project than shyness to untwisting tongues is the physical health of the interviewees, which can be as minor as hearing impairment and as major as death.

“Bill thought he couldn’t hear well enough, but Thursday afternoon, he said, ‘You know what? I will go,’” said William Zuehlke’s wife, Eleanor, both of Clifton.

“I didn’t intend to come. My German isn’t all that good,” she continued. “I never did speak it regularly. I was the youngest in the family. I did know all the words., but when I would try to say sentences or something, and I got them wrong, my sisters would laugh at me, and I just quit talking.

“This was fun, though, but I don’t think I did too well.”

The process by which the researchers gather information lasted about an hour for each individual, and included three methods used to determine the status of Texas-German.

The methods were the interviewees’ translations of word lists and sentences, open-ended questionnaires, and social group activities.

Having the interviewees translate sentences is “very controlled, so we can compare person A from Fredericksburg from person B from New Braunfels,” said Dr. Boas.

The questionnaires are intended to provide the interviewees with topics by which they would elaborate on daily activities of the typical Texas-German.

“They can talk about any topic they want, so someone will talk about sausage making for two hours, which is great because the goal of this is for them to talk about their favorite topic,” said Dr. Boas.

The social activity, like playing cards and drinking coffee, serves much the same purposes, he added.

The project also includes genealogical information, said Dr. Boas, and the participants seemed willing to oblige.

Sharing Languages

Dr. Boas said that the German the Texas-Germans speak is “somewhat 19th-century German,” or more closely akin to what Otto Von Bismark spoke than Kraftwerk (a modern, German music group).

“It’s different from what’s spoken in Europe today, but still mutually intelligible,” he said.

He explained that as the Germans started to settle Texas in the 19th-century, they adapted their language according to the new objects, ethnic groups, and surroundings they encountered.

For instance, one new object they found was the common, ordinary beer pitcher.

“German doesn’t have the same concept of pitcher because in German, the way you pour beer is either out of a glass or out of a bottle,” explained Dr. Boas. “You don’t have the concept of a large glass container where you go up to the barrel, pour beer into it, and use it to pour beer into other glasses.

“So what happens with Texas-German is that the German speakers borrow the word and incorporate it into their language.”

Something similar happened with “skunk.”

“The Germans called one ‘shtink katze,’ which literally means ‘stinking cat,’” he said. “So the same thing happened. They didn’t have a word for it. They used the existing German vocabulary to put together to describe this new thing that they saw; whereas, the first European settlers came over and adapted the Native American word ‘skunk.’

“You see that all over the place.”

The Great Shhhh!

After the first waves of German immigrants had settled in Texas, said Boas, but the English language received big boost due to America’s involvement in WWI.

“You have the occasional families coming in between the two wars and even after WWII,” said Dr. Boas, “but all of a sudden from one day to the other, you weren’t allowed to speak German any longer.

“Overnight, if you spoke German you were stigmatized because it was the language of the enemy.”

He said that in 1917, each state in the Union passed it’s own laws that would eventually stop the German language from being spoken regularly.

“In Texas, the law stated that only English could be taught in school,” said Boas. “So if you were raised German, if your whole community speaks German, and that’s all you know, and you go to school, and there’s English spoken, it’s almost like going into another country.

“So you have kids who grew up speaking German for five or six years, then they go to school and learn English.”

Eleanor Zuehlke said that one hour a week was devoted to German language studies at

her little country public school in Brenham.

English was taught beginning in first grade, she added.

“It was so easy for all of us because we all knew German,” said Zuehlke.

The church and the public school at side-by-side on purpose, she said, but “how they got by with that I don’t know.

Time and Money

Time and money are not on the project’s side, according to Dr. Boas, because the majority of the Texas-German speakers are 80 years and older, and running this project comes at a high cost.

“It has happened a number of times that an interviewee passed away before we get to interview him/her,” said Dr. Boas. “Every informant lost is somewhat tragic as they might be speaking a particular sub-dialect that has not been previously recorded.

“So far, two of our informants from New Braunfels have passed away, but we luckily have their recordings. Time is a crucial factor.”

Dr. Boas said that for each hour of interview conducted, they calculate about 40-50 hours of time for pre-and post-production, including setting up the interview, doing the recording, editing, transcribing and translating.

With its current funding from UT Austin and the Texas Humanities, TGDP has had an annual budget of about \$40,000 per year over the past two years, but time is limited.

“Since we don’t know how long we will be successful with grant writing, we are building up an endowment at UT in order to cover our operating costs,” said Dr. Boas. “We hope to be able to raise more than \$1 million over the next five years in order to continue our work once funding runs out.”

“In my opinion, the TGDP is extremely important from the standpoint of heritage preservation,” said Massirer. “Texas-German is a unique dialect that was once widely spoken in Texas but is now limited to probably no more than 7,000-8,000 fluent speakers across the entire state.

“With the passing of the present generation of speakers, the dialect will be gone forever.”