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Texas German: How southerners are keeping a distant dialect alive



A Texan enjoying 'Wurstfest'. Photo: DPA

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In Texas, some locals are clinging on to their Germanic heritage. One explained to The Local how their dialect survives, years after other immigrant languages died out.

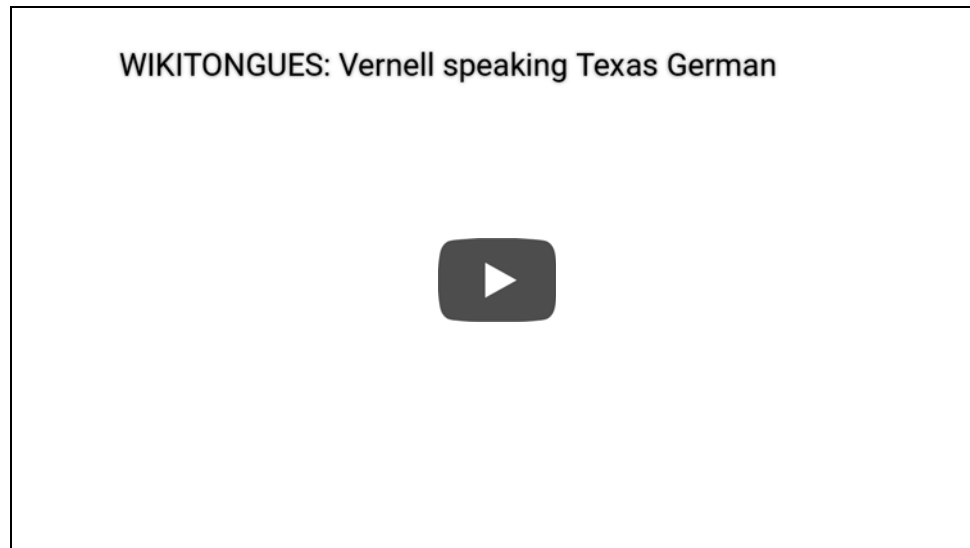
A man walks into a butcher's in Weimar and asks for 'zwei Pfunde gemahlte Fleisch, bitte.' A seemingly mundane, unremarkable encounter. But this isn't Thuringia, it's Texas.

Many Texans revel in their German heritage. Similar to many other heritage cultures all across the USA, Texan Germans seek to celebrate and conserve their ancestry. But what's distinctive about German Texans, however, is that the language, for now, is still spoken in parts of the community.

Germans started arriving in the Republic of Texas in the 1830s, a decade before Texas was absorbed into the United States of America. German immigrants settled broadly in a belt across the central-southern part of the state, founding towns such as New Braunfels, Fredericksburg and Weimar.

Whereas most other immigrant languages, such as Italian, died out after the second or third generations, German in Texas is unusual as it is still being spoken amongst the fifth and sixth generations of Texan Germans.

Hans Boas from the University of Texas established the Texas German Dialect Project, through which he seeks to study and record Texas German. Throughout his studies, he has accumulated roughly 800 hours of interviews with about 600 Texas German speakers.



He explained to The Local how German was able to survive into the 20th century.

"From the 1830s, you had many communities in Texas which were completely functioning only in German. You had German schools, German churches, German shops. There were portions of Texas Hill County where up until the 1920s, 97 percent of the population was German speaking. Very few people actually spoke English."

On the eve of the First World War, an estimated 100,000 Texans spoke German, and there were around 90 German-language newspapers and magazines. But the world wars triggered a repression of German language and culture, and the dialect all but died out. Today there are no more than 10,000 Texas German speakers.

According to Boas, survival in the workplace meant speaking English, so many parents made the "conscious decision to not pass Texas German on to their kids," he told us. "This was not only in the hope of better career prospects, but also because they feared 'anti-German discrimination against their kids.'"

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Boas classifies Texas German as a New World dialect but considers it different to other New World dialects, such as New Zealand English, which usually take around four generations to become a coherent dialect. German in Texas lasted for only about two to three generations before it was repressed in the early twentieth century.

"There was an interruption in the new dialect formation, so what you have today is the remnants of Texas German as it was spoken in the early 20th century, he said. "As a consequence, it's not a completely formed New World dialect, 'which means everyone speaks really differently."

The influence of English is another notable dialectal feature. Texas German speakers borrowed many English words for which the early settlers had no German equivalents, especially for the agricultural, educational and technological domains. A skunk, for instance, became known as a *stinke Katze*. Die Car and der Helicopter were, likewise, not words brought over by the earliest settlers.



Fredericksburg, Texas. Photo: DPA

English has also affected the intonation of Texas German, which Boas labels as "uniquely Texas sounding. Speakers have effectively lost the rounding of the lips; über is pronounced more like eeber, while fünf is sounded more like finf," he says.

While Boas won't be able to revive the Texas German dialect, attempts to preserve and celebrate German culture and heritage are popular throughout the state. The Texas German Society was

founded in 1983 with the purpose of promoting German heritage, language and culture. An Oktoberfest, replete with Lederhosen, Dirndls and – of course – beer, is held yearly in Fredericksburg. And for sausage aficionados, Wurstfest has taken place in New Braunfels for almost 60 years.

Although not the first place you might think of to indulge in a bit of German culture, it seems that those in Texas desperate for their Bier and Wurst fix will be suitably satisfied.

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