


A Shared Past

ANGLO-TEXAN AND GERMAN-TEXAN FRICTION DURING WORLD WAR I



OBJECTIVE:

At the conclusion of this lesson the student will be able to write a simulated "Dear Abby"-style letter to young Texans disturbed by World War I.

OVERVIEW:

World War I brought about a special crisis for many Texans of German descent. Large numbers of German Texans lived in the Hill Country, the Coastal Plains, and the cities of the state. When the United States went to war against Germany in April 1917, some Texans questioned the loyalty of German Americans. The propaganda that depicted Germans as "Vicious Huns" did little to improve relations. There were other factors as well. During the Civil War a group of German settlers who sympathized with the Union tried to flee to Mexico and were killed on the banks of the Medina River. If Germans were sympathetic to the enemy in the Civil War, they might be disloyal again. Also, German immigrants had not necessarily tried to assimilate into the larger Anglo culture. Enclaves of German immigrants existed in Texas in 1917 in which very little English was spoken. Another source of friction between Anglos and Germans was the thorny political issue of prohibition of alcoholic beverages. Generally speaking the Germans were less likely to support prohibition.

One must also remember that in 1917 most people believed in "racial personalities" or the belief that all members of an ethnic group possessed the same personality characteristics. Therefore as the propaganda machine cranked up to aid the war effort, negative traits were assigned to all persons of German descent.

In this lesson students assume the role of a "Dear Abby"-type columnist. They read imaginary letters from 1917 from a German Texan and his sweetheart asking advice about how to overcome the anti-German feelings so they can marry. Although fictionalized, the author has drawn upon the experiences of his grandparents in composing the letters. The intent is that a discussion of wartime treatment of German Americans will be stimulated by this exercise.

- PROCEDURE:**
1. Explain the anti-German feeling that accompanied the U.S. entry into World War I. Use information from the textbook and the Overview to describe some of the difficulties this group faced. Standard facts from student texts mention the renaming of sauerkraut, the dropping of German language instruction from schools, and forced kissing of the flag.
 2. Tell the students that you have "found" some letters from two sweethearts written to Dear Abby in 1917. Share the letters with the students and assign them the task of composing a reply to the sweethearts.

New Fountain, Texas
June 17, 1917

Dear Abby,

I have a severe problem, and I hope you can help me. I am in love with the most wonderful, beautiful girl in the world- -Lenore Cass. We would like to marry, but her family does not approve of me. You ask why they should object. I am an educated man with an promising future. I can do ranch work and carpentry. I speak English, Spanish, and German fluently. I am a good singer and a fair poet. I am known as a gentle man who never harms anyone. Some even say I am handsome, but it seems our marriage will not be.

I went to the Cass house to ask Mr. Cass for Lenore's hand, but I never even got past the gate. Lenore's three brothers were waiting for me. They started with insults, but when I ignored them, they picked up stones and started throwing them at me. I wanted to fight back, but there were three of them. They did these things only because I am German. No. I am not German. My grandfather was German. He came to Texas more than forty years ago with my father who was a child then. He had heard that Texas was a land of many opportunities, and he wanted to take advantage of them. Our family has been ranching here for thirty-five years. We are honest, sober, and hardworking, but Lenore's family rejected me because our country is at war with Germany.

Please, Abby, give me advice. How can I make the Cass brothers see I am worthy? Should I join the army to prove my patriotism? Should I get my friends to help me beat them up? What should I do?

In desperation,

William Stern
New Fountain, Texas
June 18, 1917

Dear Abby,

I have a terrible problem. I am deeply in love with William Stern, but I fear we will never marry. Just last week William came to call on me, but my brothers would not let him in. Instead they beat him severely. I thought Poppa would stop them, but he actually told them he was glad they had beat the "Kraut" and taught him a lesson to stay away from American girls.

Why should we suffer because our nations are at war? No. Our nations are not at war. William is a good American just like my brothers. It is only because of the stories the newspapers are printing about Germans in Europe. They make us hate Germans, but William was born in Texas! Oh, Abby, tell me what to do. How can I make Poppa and my brothers love William as much as I do?

Frantic,

Lenore Cass

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