

# German Intellectuals on the Texas Frontier

Among the first settlers in the Texas Hill Country were a group of German Intellectuals who were ill-prepared for frontier life.

by Ira Kennedy

The Texas frontier of the 1850s would seem an unlikely place to find communities with a passion for literature, philosophy, music, and conversations in Latin. Just as unlikely would expectations be very high for communes in the Hill Country attempting to establish utopia along the Llano River. But, in this area, the communities of Castell, Schoenburg, Bettina, and Leiningen were hotbeds for intellectual conversations and revolutionary social experimentation. These communities were the first to settle the Fisher-Miller Grant located between the Llano and San Saba Rivers.

Bettina, was named after the leading German feminist of her day, Bettina von Arnim. Founded by Hermann Spiess and Dr. Ferdinand von Herff (a relative of John Meusebach, the founder of Fredericksburg). Using the watchwords "friendship, freedom, and equality," this colony was settled by a group of forty young men from Darmstadt, Germany. Called the Society of Forty, these early settlers were idealists who believed brotherly love and good will could replace civil law. The community was supported for one year by the Society for the Protection of German Immigrants, after which their communal experiment would sustain itself. Also called the "Darmstadters" as well as "The Forty," or the "Freethinkers" these intellectuals were ill prepared for the hard work of pioneer life. After their financial support ran out the community dissolved.

All of the utopian communities failed after a short period, and many of their families moved to, or helped settle, the community of Sisterdale, also known as the "Latin Settlement," and later, Boerne and Comfort. Of the first settlements in the Fisher-Miller Grant, only the community of Castell remains today; although after a severe flood the town was moved the south bank of the Llano River.

In 1854 a New England journalist, Frederick Law Olmsted, entered Texas, made a tour of the state and recounted the events in, *A Journey Through Texas*. Enroute to New-Braunfels Olmsted met "a free-minded butcher" who "had ridden out early in the morning to kill and dress the hogs of one of the large farmers. He had finished his job and was returning [to New Braunfels]."

The butcher accompanied Olmsted and his party to New Braunfels. "It was sickly on the coast, but here it was very healthy. He [the butcher] had been as well here as he was in Germany—never had been ill. There were Catholics and Protestants among them; as for himself, he was no friend to priests, whether Catholic or Protestant. He had had enough of them in Germany. They could not tell him anything new, and he never went to any church."

Upon arriving in New Braunfels the butcher introduced Olmsted to Mr. Schmitz, owner of the Guadalupe Hotel. Olmsted was astonished by the quality of the accommodations. "There was nothing wanting; there was nothing too much, for one of those delightful little inns which the pedestrian who has tramped through the Rhine land will ever remember gratefully...

"We then spent an hour in conversation with the gentlemen who were in the room. They were all educated, cultivated, well-bred, respectful, kind, and affable men. All were natives of Germany, and had been living several years in Texas. Some of them were travelers, their homes being in other German settlements; some of them had resided long at Braunfels.

"It was so very agreeable to meet such men again, and the account they gave of the Germans in Texas was so interesting and gratifying, that we were unwilling to immediately continue our journey."

Later in his travels Olmsted found himself in Sisterdale, also known as the Latin Settlement, due to the desire of residents in the community to make Latin their official language.

"Evening found us in the largest house of the settlement, and a furious norther suddenly rising, combined with the attractive reception we met to compel us to stay two days without moving...

"In speaking of his present circumstances, [the host] simply regretted that he could not give [his sons] all the advantages of education that he had himself had. But he added that he would much rather educate them to be independent and self-reliant, able and willing to live by their own labor, than to have them ever feel themselves dependent on the favor of others. If he could secure them, here, minds free from prejudice, which would entirely disregard the conclusions of others in their own study of right and truth, and spirits which would sustain their individual conclusions without a thought of the consequences, he should be only thankful to the circumstances that exiled him...

"After supper, there were numerous accessions of neighbors, and we passed a merry and most interesting evening. There was waltzing, to the tones of a fine piano, and music of the highest sort, classic and patriotic. The principal concerted pieces of Don Giovanni were given, and all parts well sustained. After the ladies had retired, the men had over the whole stock of student-songs, until all were young again. No city of fatherland, we thought, could show a better or more cheerful evening company. One of the party said to me:"I think, if one or two of the German tyrants I could mention, could look in upon us now, they would display some chagrin at our enjoyment, for there is hardly a gentleman in this company whom they have not condemned to death, or to imprisonment for life."

"I have never before so highly appreciated the value of a well-educated mind, as in observing how they were lifted above the mere accident of life... 'their mind to them a kingdom is,' in which they find exhaustless resources of enjoyment. I have been assured, I doubt not, with sincerity, by several of them, that never in Europe had they had so much satisfaction—so much intellectual enjoyment of life, as here."

The cultured, intellectual society of the Freethinkers was not without its attractions, especially to such an educated and informed person as John O. Meusebach, the founder of Fredericksburg. According to Irene Marshall King, Meusebach's granddaughter, John and his wife Agnes enjoyed their occasional visits to New Braunfels, "but a trip with her husband to the 'Latin Settlement' at Sisterdale was a stimulating experience. The men and women constituting the settlement were cultured and intelligent; so conversation was on an intellectual level. Merriment prevailed, too, and they enjoyed waltzing, and singing, and concert music on a fine piano. These Sisterdale settlers, self-constituted exiles from Germany, were not so successful in agriculture as in intellectual pursuits, but they had found their Arcadia in Texas and were content. Social and political freedom enabled them to make the most of life."

"After two years in the Sisterdale area, the five colonists [from Bettina] moved a little farther west and, in time, founded the town of Boerne, south of Sisterdale. In that settlement the Meusebachs found congenial friends. The same held for the settlement of Comfort, which was founded in 1854 by Ernst Altgelt. The Altgelt family and the Meusebachs were closely associated all their lives."

Meusebach shared with the Freethinkers a fondness for Latin. At his home in Loyal Valley he built a trellis-shaded structure for bathing out of native stone and cement with a fresh coating of whitewash. "When Meusebach would emerge from his frequent baths in this retreat," King wrote, "wearing a white shirt as was his custom, he would recite verses in Latin. "'Why in Latin?'" he was asked. His answer was, "'I speak gratitude to the Romans in their language for instituting a bath of this style, entered by steps.'" Even Meusebach's tombstone carries the Latin inscription: *Tenax Propositi*—Texas Forever.

Although the utopian communities failed, the concepts of communes, cooperative communities, and back-to-the-earth movements loaded down with books would, a century later, create more conversation and debate than the German intellectuals of the Texas Hill Country could ever have imagined.

Recommended reading: *A Journey Through Texas*, by Frederick Law Olmsted, University of Texas Press. Olmsted's energetic and detailed account is a classic in Texas literature and an indispensable sourcebook for historians. Olmsted does not romanticize the discomforts of his trip. The cultured Easterner remembers in relentless detail the squalor, brutality, and filth met with in parts of East Texas; but he writes fondly of the civility and cleanliness of the German settlements around New Braunfels.

*John O. Meusebach—German Colonizer in Texas*, by Irene Marshall King, University of Texas Press. King, a grand-daughter of Meusebach, presents the full sweep of Meusebach's vigorous life: Meusebach as the young liberal in Germany, as a colonizer in the 1840s, a Texas senator and, later, an observer of the Civil War, and as a Texan who devoted his later years to bringing Texas soil to fruition.