

German Texan Families

By Ingeborg H. Rübeng McCoy

When I came to Texas about 20 years ago, I was surprised to find so much evidence of a population tracing its ancestry to my home country, Germany. Names of streets and businesses, architecture, *Rathskellers*, *Opera* and *Auto* restaurants, *Christkindl*feasts and Easterfests, *Völkermarches* and *Oktoberfests*: All of these reminded me of the German culture, but in a quaint and antiquated tradition, perhaps only to be found in rural Germany these days. As I got to know the German Texans as friends, students and colleagues, I was amazed: They were all rather conservative and traditional, even more so than Germans in Germany—or so it seemed to me. For many years, I puzzled over the nature of German-Texan communities. When I had the chance, a few years ago, to explore this culture for a pilot video documentary, I naturally focused on the question of how German Texans characterized themselves, and how they perceived their communities in contrast to other ethnic groups. The results of these interviews again startled me: Elderly and young, women and men informants were agreed in their description of the essence of their German-Texan ethnicity—the German language, good food, feasts, music, hard work, frugality, and close family ties. After mulling it over for a while and probing carefully under the surface of these self-definitions, I realized that all of the enumerated characteristics represent features of the German family in Texas. The language was preserved for a long time in the family; the family gatherings were built around feasts of succulent food, accompanied by music and dancing; and family life was also marked by industriousness and thrift.

With this realization I was well on my way to a more intensive oral history project. If the self-evaluation of the German Texans equaled the definition of the family form, then I needed to talk with the women, because the stability of the German family has customarily been anchored in the woman's responsibility for *kinder* (children), *küche* (kitchen), and *kirche* (church). Although the project is barely past its initial stages, focusing mainly on the eastern German communities around Industry, Cat Spring, New Utm, Brenham, LaGrange, Round Top and Carmine, I can already see several fascinating configurations emerging. Since Irma Goeth Guenther—translator and editor of her grandmother Otilie Fuchs Goeth's well-known autobiography *Memoirs of a Texas Pioneer Grandmother* (Burnet: Eakin Press, 1982)—keeps reminding me that the recollections of the granddaughters are not as fresh as they used to be, I have used literature of the time to round out my observations.

Early German immigrants in Texas lived in a family form different from the one prevalent in Germany. Settling a wild, dangerous, undeveloped frontier, the family household became the economic subsistence unit. The newly acquired land was the family's home as well as its work place. Although most German immigrants to Texas were farmers, Terry Jordan notes in his fine study *German Seed in Texas Soil* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966), that in many areas of Germany from which the Texas settlers came, operational farm units with wholly contiguous lands were not common. Consequently, these farmers lived in villages away from their fields, which were often small and separated, and which lay scattered over the countryside. In Texas, however, vast land holdings provided the unique opportunity to have a homestead surrounded by fields and prairie, creating a farmstead. And for those Germans who had not been farmers in their homeland, subsistence farmsteading must have been a Texas size challenge. Friedrich Ernst, the first permanent German settler and founder of Industry in 1833, for example, had been a postal scribe in Oldenburg; Adolf Fuchs, who initially settled in the Cat Spring area, had been a pastor in the province of Mecklenburg. Ernst wrote a now-famous letter to his German homeland detailing the extent to which their new farmsteading lifestyles in America demanded work and cooperation by the entire family in order to survive and prosper. Although some Germans wrote glowing accounts of their new Texas homeland, the evaluations written by German women about their new life on the farmstead were more like those of Ernst's wife, Louise, as recalled in an interview for *Der Deutsche Pioneer* in 1884:

Here we were now [on Mill Creek], sitting at the edge of civilization; just west of us the Indians were living. . . . Like this we were living all alone in the wilderness [my translation].

And the Ernsts' daughter, Caroline, remembered later in life that at first there was little to eat, mostly cornbread; that they had to go barefoot in winter; and that they had no money. The German pioneer family survived in Texas as a labor-cooperative family household for which the division between home and place of work—as had been the case in Germany—no longer held true. This family unit was often joined by other relatives who followed the first emigrants to Texas. Frequently, German apprentice laborers roomed and boarded with the family before they became independent farmers or craftsmen. From all accounts—orl and written—the image of the father of such large, extended families emerges as that of the provider and therefore as the authority figure. It was the father who tamed the wilderness; cleared the land, which was covered with trees and brush; burned the lush prairie grasses; built the log cabins and furniture; and protected the fields and homestead from roaming cattle and hogs with miles of fence. The men plowed the fields of corn, cotton and tobacco, and they hunted game. The typical father portrait of German Texan immigrant families conforms to the traditional patriarchal counterpart in German culture.

Congruent with the role of the patriarchal father, we would expect the German woman in Texas to conform to the traditional expectations: to be a wife and mother. But listening to narrations by elderly women about their foremothers, and reading amazingly similar stories written by German women in Texas, has convinced me that the women, in fact, fulfilled active, extensive roles which were crucial to the survival of the farmsteading family. Not only was the women's work vital to the family subsistence, it also contributed to the family's income. In the oral and written texts, the descriptions of women's tasks center on one theme: Women's work is never done. Even when the men had finished their labors, the women were still busy with children, chickens, cooking, washing, baking, cleaning, gardening, and sewing. Baking cornbread in pots over open fires, sewing patches of old overclothing into warm quilts for use against the blistering cold of blue northerns, making shirts and underwear from flour sacking, tending cattle, watching over children, working in the fields, nursing, providing folk medical services, midwifing, laying out the dead, trading milk and butter to Indians in return for runaway cows: all of these tasks and many more traditional ones were accomplished by women in their new farmstead environments. Their houses were pretty miserable: At least one visiting female relative from Germany is reported to have fainted away when she entered such a pioneer structure. Caroline Ernst remembers her home as a cold, leaking and uncomfortable hut.

Even for the second generation of women, the work pattern had not changed much. Leola Tiedt recalls her mother-in-law's situation:

But, you know, he [Otto, Leola's husband] is one of these that was brought up . . . The minute you walked into the house, you're through. Ah, his mother would be out in the field picking cotton, she would almost stay there until the others were . . . Most of her dinner was cooked in the mornings, you know, and so on. And in the between times she walked on home and so on. And then, when they [the men] got home, you know, eh, the men didn't have to do . . . The two boys and the father, they didn't do anything. And they didn't have to help.

How much organization of time, space and menial chores must have been invested in such workdays!

Besides keeping things running smoothly at home, the women contributed to the cash flow of the family. The egg and butter money earned by women is nearly proverbial: the butter churn represents one of the primary symbols of the country woman's life. Similarly, the woman's kitchen garden was an important income source, particularly for German women in Texas. In Germany, Jordan reports, even when the fields lay some distance away, the kitchen garden was situated close to the other female domain, the house, thereby providing easy access for the woman. How important the garden became for women on the frontier has recently been established by Annette Kolodny. Her study of frontier mythology indicates that, although the frontiersman imagined the wilderness as a virgin land, an unspoiled Eve to be taken, the pioneer woman dreamed more modestly of a garden to be cultivated. Indeed, the garden became a great stabilizing factor for German pioneers. A German settler wrote home explaining: "I am ready to sell, but my wife, she does not like it; where has she started a garden, she plans to live there. My idea is to buy and sell, to win or to lose [my translation]." Leola Tiedt remembers with great clarity her grandmother Helen Bothe's garden:

Her gardening was . . . just another outstanding part of her life. Oh, [I can still visualize] every inch of it! I even drew a sketch of it and I know exactly where she planted everything. And the unusual part of it was that she never would let my grandfather get in there with a shovel. [That was because] she spaded it up and because he would mess up. . . . As soon as something was harvested she had something else growing, and even before it was harvested she would have something growing; and if grandpa came in there he would just plow out some of her plants; so she would spade up her garden or make us grandchildren, and her children, the younger children, do the spading. . . . [She grew] everything! She had Zuckerscheiben which are now snow peas. And people made such a big to-do about them the last few years. I said: "My goodness, I was brought up on those. . . ." She had, oh, her asparagus bed. I guess when she cooked asparagus . . . that was nothing outstanding, that was just a common . . . vegetable to us. . . . And kohlrabi, oh, everything.

Grandmother Bothe gardened all year round, and grew raspberries and boysenberries, and had a special status in the community because she experimented with new vegetable varieties so that, as Leola recalled: "Everybody came and looked, you know . . . looked up to her."

We are used to thinking that cash for eggs and butter was a woman's pin or cookie jar money. But Jordan's accounts of income for the German farmers in Texas from butter, milk, and especially garden produce tell an entirely different story. Reading, for example, that market gardening in and around San Antonio was dominated by Germans—and keeping in mind that the women worked the gardens—it becomes clear that German Texan farm women contributed substantial amounts to the cash income of the family. As late as the time of the Depression, Irma Goeth Guenther remembers that the women in her family made and traded cream and butter to help out with family finances. The oral accounts provide a few clues to how women managed their cash. There are the typical memories of cookie jars on hard-to-reach shelves; discussions behind closed doors by husband and wife about finances; the story about one family's friend who used to bring her money box to their grandmother to keep while she went in to town in her buggy; and the specific recollection by Elizabeth Lehmann, an accomplished local historian of Washington County:

My grandfather, you know, he was born in 1860. The man was still in charge, but my grandmother [Lehmann] certainly, she had her money, and he had his money. Now that was unusual for me, you know at that age, because my parents didn't do that. If [their money] was all together. . . . [Grandmother's money] was egg money. . . . Eggs, oh, chicken and eggs and, I believe, butter. . . . And she did with her money what she wanted to, and she kept it in a place. . . . So they [the grandparents] were so different, you know; Mama depended on my father for it [the money]. But grandmother, she had it.

Leola Lehmann's observation that her grandmother Schaw "had a bunch of kids!" describes the wealth of children in the German farmsteading family. Keeping in mind that frequently children died at birth or when very young, it appears that most women gave birth to 10 to 15 children. "Everybody had large families," recalls Leola Tiedt. Although German discipline is a notorious folk characteristic, I heard no descriptions of harsh disciplinary measures for children; rather, the informants remembered strict but kind treatment in childhood. It was the work that boys and girls were assigned at a very early age that constituted their discipline. They were responsible for gathering firewood, tending cattle, looking after younger siblings, working in the fields and gardens—even 5- and 6-year-old children had many duties. Grandmother Schaw's three sons accepted adult-like responsibilities when their father died, and her nine daughters worked in the fields, as the Lehmann sisters recall. Leola Tiedt's fascination with the life of her grandmother Bothe derives from the fact that this woman was only 12 years old when her mother died, whereupon the young girl assumed the responsibilities of caring for her father and her three brothers. Leola relates that her grandmother, at the age of 12:

. . . had to sew for her father. He needed a shirt so she took a sugar sack for the main body of the shirt, and two flourbags for the sleeves, and so that's how her sewing began as a child.

All of the informants recalled that they had many work tasks at a young age; that they had few toys, generally homemade; and that their games were largely played with sticks and stones and mud pies. The frugality of family life appears early in childhood: oranges and apples were special treats at Christmas, as were the meals at various family occasions like birthdays, Easter, or Christmas. Such frugality distinguished the lives of young boys and girls even in subsequent generations, finding expression in Leola Tiedt's anecdote:

I can remember . . . when I was teaching way back then, 1925. . . . Round Top always had a big dance on the 31st of December, bringing in the New Year, and these, three of these girls didn't get to go to the dance, 'cause the weather was so bad. And the parents wouldn't let them go, and I said: "Well, did you mind that you didn't get to go?" [They] said: "Oh, no—when they [friends] were gone, we got, each got three pecans." So they were satisfied with three pecans. Can you imagine, a modern . . . student? . . . Like that. Sixth grade, and they were satisfied with three pecans. In place of going to the dance. So, so few things satisfied.

A noteworthy feature of the children's role in the German Texan family is the responsibility tradition dictated for the oldest girl. These children very early were their mother's reliable helpers with smaller children, house and garden chores. Even as young women, they were expected to remain at home and to continue various work assignments. If the oldest daughter somehow managed to escape the role, another daughter took the assigned place in the family structure. Frequently, these women neither married nor had any careers, finding shelter, as they got older, with other sisters. Many of the "Old Maids" in German families can be traced back to this older daughter tradition.

The decisive question to be answered about the German-Texan family is whether, and if so, how, the family patterns have changed since pioneer times. The two remarkable observations that have emerged from my studies may, in time, help formulate the answer. Even though the form of the typical family has been and remains to be a large extent quite traditional, the women's role has undergone changes. During the pioneer farmsteading generation, the women were—more so than they had been in Germany—participants in providing the subsistence for the family. They had a degree of forcefulness and ability to plan, which enabled them to sustain and nourish the farmstead even when husbands were absent. Such resourceful, capable women could be projected as matriarchs. But even during the first generation's later years, and certainly during the following generation of daughters, women became increasingly confined to the sphere of the house. Because of advancing technology and urbanization, and changes on the farms and in production, women were no longer the important link they had initially been in the early farmsteading family unit. Perhaps the traditional symbol of women's work, the quilt, can best define this change. As long as the quilt was a utility object, made from old scraps of clothing in order to have protection against the cold, and produced collectively with other women, the German Texan women still held a strong position in the family. Later, when quilting became an individual woman's leisure time work in the parlor, using fancy materials, the women's role had changed to a less substantial one in the family, making the role of the men more powerful. When families fell on hard times, however, as during the Depression, the women often rose to their earlier, stronger roles as co-providers.

Attendance at the large annual meetings of the German-Texan Heritage Society—dedicated to the preservation of the German tradition—and perusal of the society's *Newsletter*, with its profusion of family reunion announcements and its extensive genealogical exchange sections, indicate that the German Texan family, in principle, is alive and well. No longer forming the pioneer farmstead family unit, but rather, comprising extensive family networks, the German Texans have increased their search for contacts with ancestral German families. Thus, German Texans are conserving one of the finest German traditions: the family. It comes as no surprise that the majority of the editorial board of the German-Texan Heritage Society are women following in the footsteps of Otilie Fuchs Goeth, who wrote her memoirs with the specific intent of holding her descendants to the preservation of the German language and culture within the framework provided by the extended family.

Ingeborg H. Rübeng McCoy is Professor of German at Southwest Texas State University, and head of the German Texan Women Oral History Project.

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