

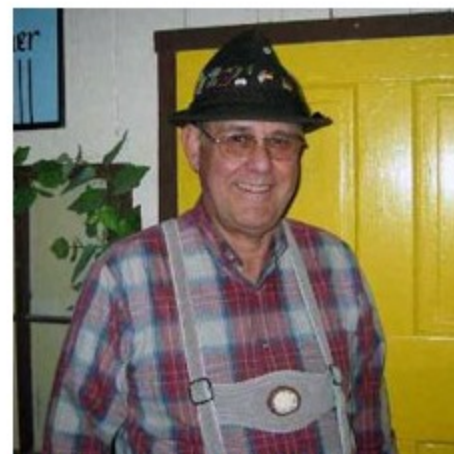
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Texas German Dialect is Dying Out

Hernán Rozemberg - Fronteras: the Changing America Desk



Clarence Scheel is one of the hosts of "German Music Texas Style." Photo courtesy of Scheel.

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Texas German is a remnant of a robust German immigrant community that settled in the Hill Country near San Antonio. From the Fronteras: the Changing America Desk, Hernán Rozemberg reports that the dialect is dying out.

March 16, 2011 - The waltz-and-polka radio show "German Music Texas Style" was broadcast in South Texas for decades. When it was taken off the air a few years ago, 74-year-old disc-jockey Clarence Scheel switched it over to the Internet. Now, the old-time German songs he plays have a global following. It's his contribution to keeping his cultural tradition alive.

Scheel's ancestors include three of the 150 founding families of New Braunfels, a small city 30 miles north of San Antonio.

"Growing up as a young child, we spoke nothing but German at home. It was not until I started grade school, there I learned how to speak English," said Scheel.

German immigrants began arriving at the Texas coast in the 1840s. One of their most popular destinations was the wide-open region between San Antonio and Austin, now known as the Texas Hill Country. The names of the communities they founded remain: New Braunfels, Fredericksburg, Luckenbach, Boerne.

"The whole area is really heavily influenced by German immigrants and their descendants," said HANS Boas, born in Germany and now teaching at the University of Texas at Austin.

"They built the towns, the infrastructure, the roads, the churches, the schools. Many contributions to the arts, to architecture, to music, clearly, the beer brewing, the sausage if you look at Texas barbecue nowadays. You look at the potato salad and the cole slaw, all those have definite German roots."

The Sophienburg Museum in New Braunfels chronicles the history of German settlers in the area. Linda Dietert is the executive director.

"Prince Carl ... was sent to Texas to find land for these Germans to come to because they had heard of the vast lands in Texas."

As Dietert spoke, a group of elderly ladies, employees and volunteers at the museum, could be heard chatting in Texas German about their days as kids decorating Easter eggs.

It's not common to hear Texas German anymore. Most native speakers are in their 60s or older and never passed the language on to the next generation. That's why professor Hans Boas launched the Texas German Dialect Project. So far, more than 350 interviews in German have been collected and posted online.

"The idea is that once Texas German will have died out in about 20 to 30 years, there is going to be a permanent historical record of this unique dialect that once was spoken for about 150 to 200 years in the center of Texas," said Boas.

At 78-years-old, Alton Rahe still remembers word for word a Christmas presentation, a poem he wrote and recited in German, for school when he was five.

Rahe's wife, Yvonne, sparkles as she proudly boasts that her grandchildren don't know German, yet they go to bed each night reciting a German prayer she taught them. So the language may eventually fade away, but bits and pieces will always remain.