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AROUND THE NATION

Remembering The Long Lost Germans Of Texas

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Heard on *All Things Considered*

More than a century ago, German settlers found a pocket of Texas to call home between Austin and San Antonio. And once the local lingo merged with their own language, it proved to be an interesting dialect. Weekends on *All Things Considered* host Jacki Lyden speaks with University of Texas professor Hans Boas, who has been archiving the last remaining speakers of this unique blend.

Transcript

JACKI LYDEN, HOST:

It's WEEKENDS on ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News. I'm Jacki Lyden. Coming up, why did a book that flopped almost 50 years ago recently hit the best seller charts in Europe? But first, a pair of stories about language, one that's disappearing and one that never tripped off a tongue in the first place. Let's start in Texas where you might know the accent, but I bet you've never heard it like this before.

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: (Texas German spoken)

LYDEN: Now, that's German but a particular variant of German, Texas German, and it's almost extinct. Professor Hans Boas at the University of Texas has been archiving the few remaining speakers he can find for his Texas German Dialect Project. Back in the 1840s, a large wave of German speakers settled in Central Texas just after the young republic gained independence from Mexico.

HANS BOAS: And by the mid-1850s, New Braunfels was already the third largest town in Texas. It was exclusively German speaking. And most of the hill country throughout the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s developed into an almost exclusive German-speaking area.

LYDEN: So Texas German, how different is it than other German dialects that have developed in other parts of the United States, like the German spoken by the Amish, for example?

BOAS: It is a very different dialect. The German spoken by the Amish was brought much earlier, already in the 17th century. And it has only one or, at the most, two specific donor dialects. Texas German is a dialect that consists of at least five to six very different German dialects.

LYDEN: Did they come up with words for the new world that developed neither German nor English, something that wouldn't be understood back in Germany?

BOAS: They came up with a number of different words. The most prominent is perhaps the word stinkkatze, which means stinking cat, which is skunk in English. These animals don't exist in Europe. On top of that, you will find nouns like carburetor, sense verbs like, to move, to drink. You get words like well and you know, or you get these mixed discourse markers like vas ever, which is whatever in Texas English.

LYDEN: Hmm. Wow. Let's sample one of your interviews with a fellow from Crawford, Texas, which became famous, of course, as George W. Bush's home away from the White House that's just between Dallas and Austin. Let's listen to an - this clip from Crawford.

UNIDENTIFIED MAN: (Texas German spoken)

LYDEN: This gentleman seems kind of rusty.

BOAS: What you hear here is really typical of, I would say, the standard speaker of Texas German today who's in his or her 70s. It's a mix of English and German. It's halted speech. In a lot of cases, these people have not spoken any Texas German in 10, 20, sometimes in 30 years.

So when they, for the first time, have the opportunity to speak it again, they have problems remembering many words. They will either halt, they will pause, they will say a few words in English, and then they will go back to Texas German and back to English and back and forth.

LYDEN: I understand that during World Wars I and II when the U.S. was fighting, it was kind of tough for these people.

BOAS: Yes, exactly. World War I was really the first big loss for Texas German. What happened was in 1918 was a law passed that prescribed English as the only language of instruction in the schools. As a result of that, the kids were told that being German or speaking German or having a German name was un-American, was unpatriotic. And as a result of that, parents decided not to teach their kids any more German because they didn't want their kids to have any disadvantage.

LYDEN: And yet you yourself met people who spoke this dialect. Somebody must still be speaking it. I understand that it's down to about 8,000 German Texas speakers these days. When do you think that the language, which is vulnerable, might be gone for good?

BOAS: I would give it about another 20 to 30 years. So once that last speaker of Texas German is gone, the dialect will be gone. And there's no chance to record it or archive or study it anymore.

LYDEN: Hans Boas teaches dramatic studies at the University of Texas in Austin, and that's where he leads the Texas German Dialect Project. And he joined us from Erfurt, Germany. Very nice to talk to you. (Foreign language spoken)

BOAS: Thanks so much for having me on. (Foreign language spoken)

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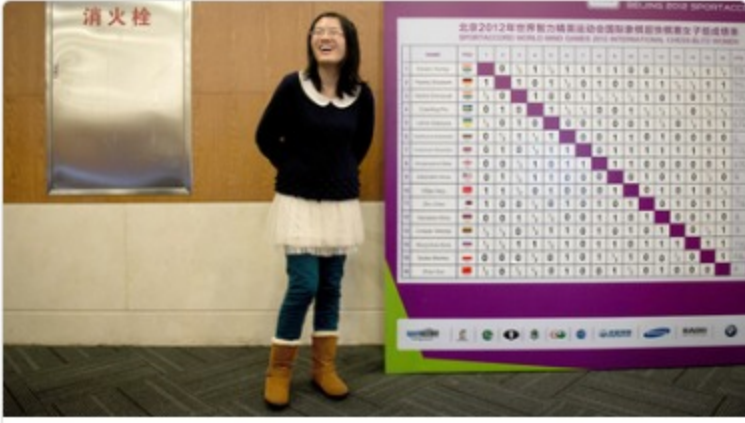
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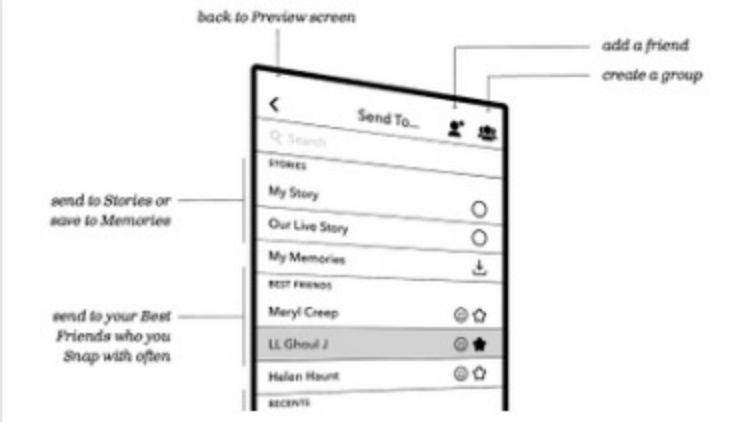
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