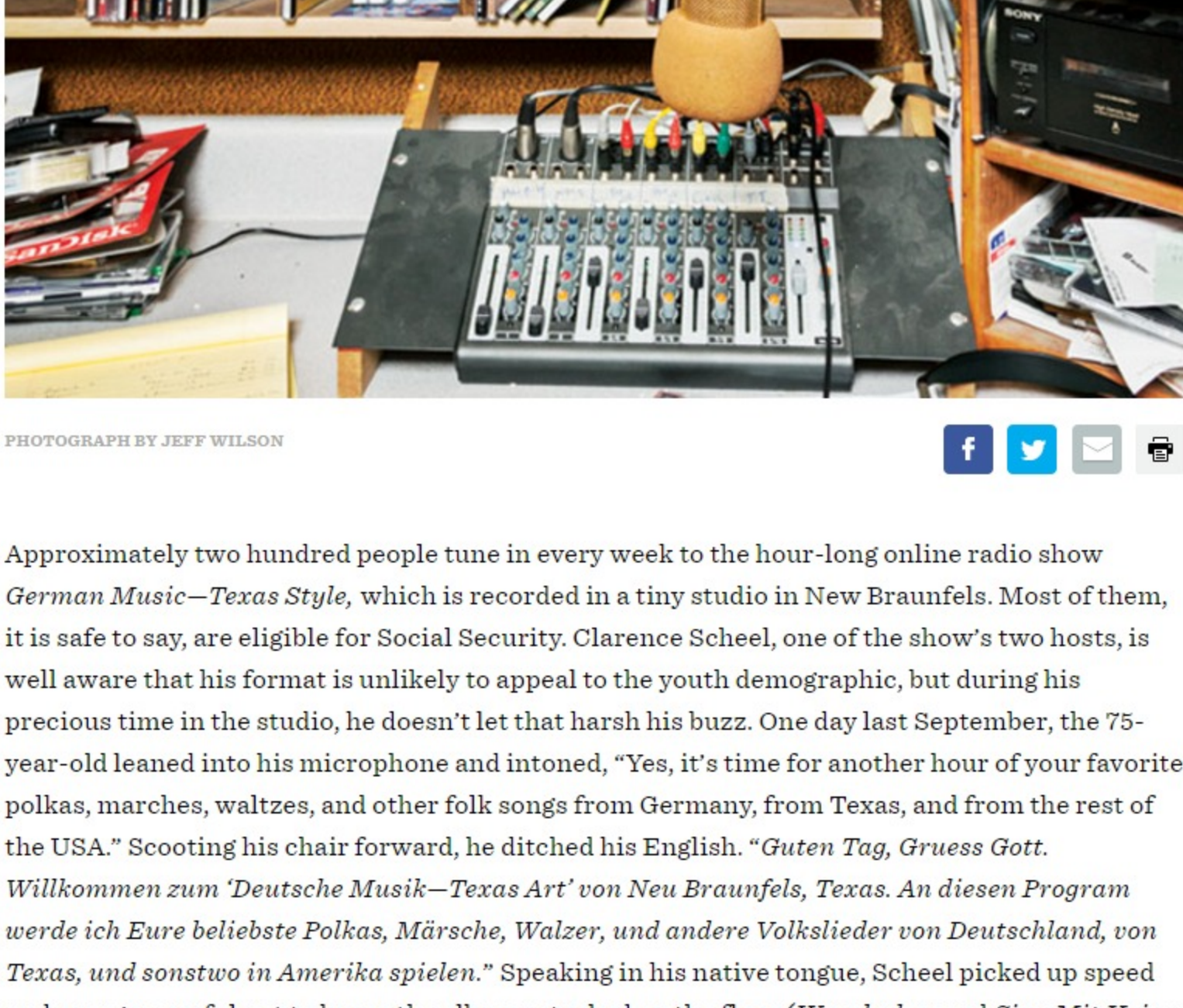


Auf Wiedersehen to a Dialect

TEXAS GERMAN, ONCE THE PRIMARY TONGUE OF NEARLY 100,000 TEXANS, IS ON THE VERGE OF DYING OUT.

JULY 2015 | BY KATY VINE | 4 COMMENTS



PHOTOGRAPH BY JEFF WILSON

Approximately two hundred people tune in every week to the hour-long online radio show *German Music—Texas Style*, which is recorded in a tiny studio in New Braunfels. Most of them, it is safe to say, are eligible for Social Security. Clarence Scheel, one of the show's two hosts, is well aware that his format is unlikely to appeal to the youth demographic, but during his precious time in the studio, he doesn't let that harsh his buzz. One day last September, the 75-year-old leaned into his microphone and intoned, "Yes, it's time for another hour of your favorite polkas, marches, waltzes, and other folk songs from Germany, from Texas, and from the rest of the USA." Scooting his chair forward, he ditched his English. "*Guten Tag, Gruess Gott. Willkommen zum 'Deutsche Musik—Texas Art' von Neu Braunfels, Texas. An diesem Program werde ich Eure beliebteste Polkas, Märsche, Walzer, und andere Volkslieder von Deutschland, von Texas, und sonstwo in Amerika spielen.*" Walking in his native tongue, Scheel picked up speed and energy, careful not to bump the albums stacked on the floor (*Wunderbar* and *Sing Mit Heino* sat on top). He gave a rousing introduction to the Border Security Headquarters Band's "Winner's Crown March," then cued up the peppy trumpets.

"This radio show was on the air when I was a kid," he said after he'd finished the last segment. "This show is sixty-four years old." Scheel is a retired systems engineer, and while he resembles the actor Jim Backus, best known as the leisurely Thurston Howell III on *Gilligan's Island*, he speaks with intensity and precision. When he was growing up in Converse, twenty miles northeast of San Antonio, *German Music—Texas Style* aired on KGNB, 1420 AM, and Scheel was a regular listener. In particular, he loved the Sunday broadcasts that featured live performances by regional groups like the Hi Toppers Orchestra, which he'd blast from the radio console in his family's living room.

After 25 years in the military (including a stint at NORAD, in Colorado) and a career building computer programs, Scheel moved back to Texas in 1998 and settled in Garden Ridge. In December 2002, KGNB announced that it was pulling the show, news that was as welcome to Scheel as the lambada at Wurifest. "For them to cancel the show, really, was criminal," he argued. "They said it didn't fit into the programming theme. Well, if New Braunfels wants to call itself a German town, the town should have kept it going." Scheel teamed up with Roy Haag, a 69-year-old polka bandleader and instructor, who converted a room in his home into a sound studio. After Scheel set up a website (nbgermanmusic.com) to continue the program online, they were up and running. And it was more than just polkas and waltzes they saved. On their show, the hosts speak not in standard German but in Texas German, making theirs the only regular radio program broadcasting in this dialect. "I took two years of High German in college, but I don't want to use it on the show," Scheel told me. "I want to speak Texas German."

The Texas German dialect is quite different from those spoken in Germany, having evolved far from its native soil for more than a century and a half. As its name suggests, it is spoken in no other part of the world. Scheel, like many of the kids he grew up around, spoke exclusively Texas German until first grade, when he learned English. These days, he speaks the dialect whenever he can, often with friends from Converse whom he has known for most of his life. ("We switch back and forth and don't miss a beat," he said.) He also sings in a men's German chorus, the San Antonio Liederkrantz, which was founded in 1892 as the primary choir for St. Joseph's Catholic Church, in downtown San Antonio. If he should ever require a retirement home, he would prefer to enter EdenHill Communities, a New Braunfels facility with so many Texas German speakers that it retains two fluent staff members. When he detects any sort of German accent from a stranger, he'll attempt to elicit a conversation with an enthusiastic "*Sprechen Sie Deutsch!*"

Scheel, who descends from three of New Braunfels's first settlers, is a determined holdout from an earlier era. After he recorded his broadcast, I accompanied him to downtown New Braunfels, on a mission to procure a strudel. At one point he casually noted that we were standing near a cottage built by his mother's great-great-grandfather Stephan Klein in 1846. This sort of attention to ancestry is not unusual among the few remaining Texas German speakers, who are a proud group. An ongoing study has found that most descendants of German immigrants in Texas do not classify themselves primarily as Americans or Texans or even German Americans. Rather, 69 percent identify themselves as Texas Germans. More than 150 years after their ancestors began arriving, the majority still consider themselves, at their core, settlers.

Over time, however, Texas German speakers have gradually abandoned their original language, resuscitating it only occasionally, at the bakery, the feed store, or the genealogy club. In New Braunfels and many other Texas German communities, outsiders have moved in and locals have moved away, causing speakers to fall out of practice. Today there are only six thousand to eight thousand Texas German speakers remaining, the bulk of whom are senior citizens. Linguists estimate that the dialect will be dead by 2040.

Scheel shook his head as we discussed this fate. In his lifetime, he has witnessed a massive cultural shift in the region, the near disappearance of a language that was spoken exclusively by almost everyone he knew when he was a boy. He can fight it all he wants, but he knows what the outcome will be. "I have eight sisters and two brothers, and between us we have twenty-eight children," he said. "Of those children, only one really speaks German fluently. So even with my family it's dying out."

THE FIRST GERMAN FAMILY to set foot in Texas was the Ernsts. The patriarch, Friedrich, had been a post office clerk until he was accused of embezzlement (some say falsely) by the grand duke of Oldenburg and departed for New York with his wife and five children in 1831. There, the 33-year-old met a cosmopolitan 31-year-old surveyor named Charles Fordtran, who shared Ernst's wanderlust. They decided to embark on a journey together, and within two years, Fordtran, Ernst, and Ernst's reluctant family made their way to the town of San Felipe de Austin, where Stephen F. Austin granted them thousands of acres between present-day Brenham and La Grange, in northwestern Austin County.

While Ernst's wife, who had wanted to stay in New York, later described their initial months as thoroughly miserable, the barefoot clan surviving on cornbread in a thatched hut, Ernst loved Texas. In letters to a friend named Schwarz back in Oldenburg, he exalted his new home. "Climate like that of Sicily," he wrote. "Wild horses and buffalo in herds; wolves, but of a feeble kind; also panthers and leopards, of which there is no danger." Best of all, he added, the land was free. Schwarz was so impressed by Ernst's letter he had it published in a newspaper, where it was widely read. Within a few years, a handful of German communities had popped up in Texas. By the 1850's, the path Ernst had forged became a highway, and the immigrant settlements formed a German belt from the Hill Country to the coast—a zone still rife with Brandenbergs, Ellebrachts, Hoersters, Kellers, Lehmanns, Muellers, Schmidts, Splittgerbers, Wartenbachs, and Wisemanns, who enjoy their Shiner beer, spiced sausage, and dance halls. (Czechs also began to arrive around this time, settling in enclaves of their own nearby.)

But for all that these German immigrants shared culturally, they didn't always understand one another. There were German dictionaries, but standardized language was reserved for written communication; it wasn't spoken among the people. Everyday Germans spoke in distinct dialects: If a folk troupe in Munich had traveled to northern Germany, the audience would have been clueless.

However inconvenient it may have been for Texas Germans to work out dialect differences, the adjustment was still more practical than learning a whole new language, and for some time a Texas German speaker could get by without knowing English. When Ernst arrived, just before the Texas Revolution, the official language was Spanish, but there were no non-German speakers living close enough to care what he and his compatriots spoke. Within a few years, the Germans proved themselves to be such a resourceful and productive group that, in 1843, the Republic of Texas required that all laws be published in German along with English. Later, following the annexation of Texas into the United States, the official language became English, but even after that, schools in these communities continued to hire German-speaking teachers.

During this period, multiple variations of German, spoken throughout numerous Texas communities, were cross-pollinating, just as the dialects were evolving in a unifying Germany, five thousand miles away. In both cases, after a few generations, the hybrid speech that resulted had lost the more distinctive and challenging features of the individual variations. This "leveling," as linguists call it, allowed Texas German and standard German to be mutually intelligible. The dialects had evolved in parallel.

Which is not to say a German doesn't cock his head when he hears a Texas German speak. Even after leveling, the languages contain inevitable differences. In Texas German, technological advances that postdated the immigrants' arrival, for example, were referred to by their English names. They had no idea what the proper German term would be for, say, a helicopter. Lacking *Hubschrauber*, they called it *der Helicopter*. This was a common tendency. A car was called *die Car* instead of *der Wagen*. *Die Exhaustpipe*, *der Flyball*, *das Popcorn*, and *das Sodapop* entered the lexicon. (Similarly, English words have made their way into border Spanish, speakers of which frequently refer to eating *lonche* or parking their *troca*.)

Beyond terminology, probably the greatest differences between standard German and Texas German—the ones a German will parody, if he's so inclined—are the vernacular's sound and structure. Some of the words are pronounced differently from standard German, with atypical vowel sounds and *r*'s that erupt from the bottom of the throat. Some of the grammatical rules are different too, such as use of the familiar "you" pronouns instead of the polite forms, an inclination that might offend a standard German speaker who felt he deserved a more formal address. And Texas Germans often use intensifying adverbs, so that a phrase such as "That is stupid" becomes "That is indeed stupid!" and "I know that" becomes "I know that all right." Texas German tends to double down.

ONE MORNING LAST FALL, Mildred Schulze was sitting on her outdoor swing and looking out over 112 acres of gorgeous rolling farmland on the outskirts of Schulenburg. The 93-year-old widow runs four head of Angus cows, all alone, with a pickup, a shotgun, and a little blind mutt named Ralph. Her land is a wide spread of pecan, mesquite, and live oak trees, and the flowers under her windows draw enormous butterflies. To get to her house, an 1850's homestead bought by her husband's grandfather in 1883, you travel down roads whose names betray their ethnic affiliations: Elher Grasshoff, Salem Freyburg, Gebert. "Mostly on this side of the tracks were Germans. On the other side were Czechs," she said. "Those who didn't speak Texas German or Czech were Amerikans."

When Schulze speaks in English, she reveals a patchwork quilt of accents; just when you think you've pegged one, it eludes you. Her phrases are sometimes unusual. "Do drink a beer?" she asked. "I have a Michelob and a Shiner Bock." Though it was not yet noon, she disappeared into the house and came back with two longnecks. Popping hers open, she sat on the porch swing and began to narrate her life story. "My mother had eleven children," she said. "Two of them died as infants. I guess they were born dead or who knows back then. I was second-youngest. Had a younger brother. I was between two boys. I didn't really have sisters to help me with anything; they were older and already seeing boys and whatnot." She took a sip of beer. "My father died when I was nine; he had a bad heart. My mother never remarried," she said. "The kids ran the farm."

Without prodding, she revealed a devotion to traditional German foods: the sauerkraut (which she still made herself until recently), the potatoes (which she still grows in the garden), and the sausage, in particular. "I went to a butcher two years ago and asked if he had real dry sausage, smoked dry that you could eat, and he said, 'Yeah, I make my own.' I said, 'Yeah, I know, but I see you do.' He said, 'I can't sell it to you; it's against the law.' I said, 'Oh, man, I wish I could buy a sausage.' Now, he knows me real well. And he went to his freezer and got me a whole bundle he made for himself and—Enjoy it," he says. "Schulze lit up as she recalled the gift. "Oh, I saved it till Christmastime, when the kids came home. Oh, mama."

Growing up in the twenties and thirties, she said, she never would have heard her schoolteachers instruct the class in German. "It was against the law." By then, much had changed since the state's embrace of German in the early 1840's. In 1909 the Legislature passed harsh English-only laws; students who didn't speak English could face corporal punishment, shaming, suspension, or expulsion. Several years later, America entered World War I, accelerating the decline of Texas German. Some parents stopped speaking it altogether, and even if they didn't, the message to children was clear: any American child with a German accent risked teasing, maybe even a pummeling, from the non-German kids. Some counties went so far as to forbid German in public. (In one case, a Lutheran pastor was whipped when he didn't adhere to the ban.) Naturally, there were some communities that were slower to convert and continued to use German for newspapers and record-keeping, but in time even this tradition faded. In 1957 the 105-year-old *New-Braunfelser Zeitung* became one of the last Texas papers to switch from German to English.

Because Schulze married another Texas German, she never lost her fluency. When she had children, she wanted them to learn both English and German. She got her wish in part. Her son took standard German classes in high school, and he retains fluency to this day. But her daughter grew increasingly self-conscious about speaking the language, and if a class might have boosted her confidence, she was out of luck: by the time she entered high school, the German classes had been replaced by Spanish.

LANGUAGES DIE IN DIFFERENT ways. A political decree can seal a language's fate. A natural disaster can foretell its doom. Indigenous languages in El Salvador disappeared when speakers were threatened with oppression and genocide. The Tambora language succumbed when a volcano exploded on the Indonesian island of Sumbawa, in 1815. By the end of the twenty-first century, half of the 6,900 languages currently spoken will be extinct.

A dialect's passing may not be as dramatic, yet with the demise of Texas German, one of the main ethnic groups that helped form the state's culture will no longer have a distinguishable voice. There will, however, be a record of it. In 2001 Hans Boas, a German-born German professor at the University of Texas at Austin, founded the Texas German Dialect Project, an online archive that currently holds seven hundred hours of interviews with nearly four hundred Texas German speakers (four hundred more are waiting to be interviewed). "Texas German is unique but frustrating," he said one day when I visited him in his office. "Linguists like patterns. They like to know where the verb goes. In Texas German, there are few patterns. Sometimes the verb is in this place, other times it isn't. Sometimes the front vowels are rounded, sometimes they aren't."

Before Boas arrived in the state twelve years ago, no one was studying the Texas German dialect. "I was on my way to UT, moving from California, and I stopped at this restaurant in Fredericksburg," he said. "I heard these guys speaking this interesting time of German, and I walked over and asked them, 'Where are you from?' They said, 'We live here.' Well, I said, 'you sound funny,' and they said, 'We speak Texas German.' I went to the library and read up on it and thought, 'Dang, someone has to do something with this.'"

Boas started the project within his first month at the university, asking his undergraduate German grammar students if any of them had family members who spoke Texas German. They did, and soon afterward he took his first trip to New Braunfels and recorded a few subjects. After each interview, he asked the subject for more contacts in the Texas German community, and out came the phone book.

What Boas has constructed is unusual. Normally, linguists record and archive indigenous languages; rarely is an immigrant language given the same attention. Boas has made all his interviews publicly available so that they can be downloaded and scrutinized. "For the first three or four years I got critical emails from Brenham and Chappell Hill," he said. "People were saying, 'Why don't you come to us, we speak the real Texas German. That Hill Country Texas German is butchered; it's for tourists.' The main problem, of course, is that there is no coherent Texas German." Because the nineteenth-century immigrants lived in isolated clusters, there are many regional varieties of Texas German, so that a common word in La Grange, like *Schiewer* (splinter) or *strakt* (straight), might elicit a blank stare in New Braunfels.

Boas's efforts have brought him so much attention that he has become a celebrity among Texas Germans. One day, he told me, he was walking down his street, speaking German with his preschool-age daughter, when a neighbor approached him. "Hey, my daddy spoke German," the man said. Instead of brushing the man off, Boas peppered him with questions: How did his father know it? Where was he from? What was his name? When the neighbor finally caught Boas's name, he said, "Oh! You're the dude!"

Sitting in his office chair, Boas slipped in a DVD featuring an interview he'd conducted in German with Clarence Scheel about a decade ago. Boas watched the video for a while, then paused it to analyze Scheel's speech. "One of the things he does frequently is, when you have a voiceless consonant—a *t* or a *k*—it would go to a voiced consonant. *T*'s become *d*'s, *k*'s become *g*'s. That's one thing he's doing all over the place. Not that uncommon." He pushed play again, noting Scheel's English use of "football" and "baseball." "With certain words, he is preserving the English pronunciation, and he's also unrounding the front vowels, so instead of *fünf* for 'five,' he'll say *finf*."

So that I could get a feel for his interview process, Boas invited me along to Fredericksburg, warning me that we had to go before November. Come hunting season, Boas told me, the younger ones (in their sixties) would all be out in the woods, and then they'd be making sausage, and then they'd have the holidays, and you wouldn't catch them until spring. You get the sense sometimes, when talking with Boas, that while you've been going about your business, a separate civilization has been carrying on right under your nose.

ON THE CAR RIDE FROM Austin to Fredericksburg, Boas talked about the Texas Czechs, whom Texas Germans envy for their success in preserving their culture. "Texas Czech survives because they were isolated and not marred by two world wars," said Boas. "But they were associated with the Communists, and that language, too, is dying out." The Czechs also tended to give money to historical institutions, like the Texas Polka Music Museum, in Schulenburg, and a million-dollar Texas Chair in Czech Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. "Boas interrupted his train of thought to say, 'The first German road is right here!' Trautwein Road." When I asked if he'd had luck finding money to support his project, he said the amount he had received from the Texas Germans paled in comparison with the Czechs' fund-raising efforts. He wasn't entirely sure why. Maybe they were simply richer. "They're just good Germans," he said.

About an hour later, we turned off the main strip in Fredericksburg and pulled up to a senior center with a wooden sign that read, "The Golden Hub: Treffpunkt für Senioren" ("Meeting Place for Seniors"). Boas and his assistant, Luke Lindemann, proceeded to the library and quilting room, where they set up for the interviews. In the dining hall, an 83-year-old with a thick German accent, in a Western-style shirt and Wrangler jeans, was already raring to go. He introduced himself as Elmer Wahrmund. He said he had worked in farming and ranching for most of his life. In his retirement, he was spending his time teaching English to new immigrants, and since many of them spoke Spanish, he was taking a Spanish class at the Golden Hub. Before his lessons started, at twelve-thirty, he figured he could record his story for posterity.

For nearly an hour, he described his upbringing to Boas in Texas German, dropping in English words with German pronunciations: "schwimming," "schpring," and "danz hall." When Wahrmund's story began to peter out, Boas switched gears and started the second half of the interview, presenting Wahrmund with a list of phrases in English to be translated into Texas German, a process meant to elicit specific vocabulary and grammatical patterns that vary from speaker to speaker. "He took the most sausage," Boas said. "Get that skunk off my front porch." Wahrmund rattled off his interpretations in Texas German. He clearly had the opportunity to employ his neglected skill, and he seemed ready to go on for another hour.

But by the time Wahrmund had finished the list, the dining hall was packed with potential interview subjects ready to eat lunch. Everyone stopped eyeing the chicken dinner about to be served when Boas approached the podium. "Hello, my name is Hans Boas, and I'm with the Texas German Dialect Project," he began. The seniors pleaded to get a better look. If any of them knew some Texas German speakers, he asked, could they please come by the library?

By the late afternoon, Boas and Lindemann had conducted eight hour-long interviews between them. Boas considered packing up, but he lingered, just in case another volunteer or two showed up. When a German native arrived, he thanked her but explained that only Texas German speakers qualified. A conversation ensued, and in a matter of minutes the German corrected a Fredericksburg native about the pronunciation of the word *marode* ("tailing").

"It's 'marode,'" the German said, emphasizing the final *e*: mar-o-duh.

The Fredericksburg native wasn't sure how to take this. "That's not how we say it," she said.

"Marode," the German repeated, emphasizing the *e*.

The women looked to Boas for a verdict. He shifted in his chair uncomfortably. Finally, he intervened. "It's not wrong," Boas told them. "It's just different."

A FEW WEEKS AFTER I MET her, Mildred Schulze and I drove to a rest home in La Grange to visit her older sister, 99-year-old Edna Hoefer, the last of Schulze's siblings. Hoefer had Schulze's strong will, but her body was giving way. She complained that Schulze's speech was heavily influenced by her husband's family. "It's hard for me to understand Mildred," she said. "I know sometimes she could hit me over the head."

What memory she has is receding. As Schulze attempted to revive her sister's verbal recall, she began to sing, "*O du lieber Augustin*," and her sister looked as if she were trying to place the song. Hoefer waited for Schulze to finish, then laid out a common saying that translates as "My hat has three corners, three corners has my hat. If it has not three corners, it is not my hat." Both sisters cracked up at this one. "I remember *them* words," Hoefer said.

"Some of the people here are German, and I can understand what they say. I talk a little bit with them too," Hoefer said. "Two of them sit near me at dinner, and they do talk together. In German. *Mm-hm.*"

Hoefer admitted that her German wasn't very good. She'd stopped speaking it when she entered school at eight years old and hadn't practiced much since. She didn't mourn the loss of her family's distinctive dialect. In fact, what she'd really wished she could speak growing up was Czech.

Schulze perked up. "Edna, tell me: *Ja nevím moc Moravsky*. What did I say?"

Hoefer looked delighted. "I don't understand Bohemian!"

"At school we were four Germans, the rest were Czechs," explained Schulze.

Hoefer thought for a moment, combing her memory. "I am *Yemak*," said Hoefer.

"*Nemec!*" Schulze said, correcting her.

"*Nemec!*" Hoefer said.

Schulze interpreted: "I am German."

The sisters visited for a while, until Hoefer grew tired, and Schulze decided it was time to leave. As they were wrapping up their conversation, Hoefer's roommate entered. Schulze asked, "*Sprechen Sie Deutsch?*"

"I don't speak it," the roommate responded.

"You're like me," Hoefer said.

"Well, I married one," Schulze said. "There aren't many people in the community that speak German anymore. They're losing it."

The roommate nodded. Schulze gathered her things and walked out of the room, and Hoefer followed in her wheelchair. "*Halt dich munter*," Hoefer said as her sister walked down the hall. This was a customary salutation that meant "Keep your health," though it literally translates as "Hold yourself awake." Schulze looked as if she were about to giggle. She probably wouldn't have an opportunity to speak Texas German for a few days. She looked just as she had while talking about dry sausage and replied in kind, "*Halt dich munter.*"

"Correction: A previous version of this article stated that a million-dollar endowment archives Texas Czech. In fact, the million-dollar endowment is dedicated to the Texas Chair in Czech Studies at the University of Texas at Austin. We regret the error.

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Stefunk 4 years ago
A better translation for munter is active, especially physically active. I can be very much awake but not munter, like when I lie on the couch, watch TV.

Marweth 3 years ago
One famous speaker, in a way, died in 1973. LBJ, 36th president of the US, used halting German, as most of his classmates were German and it interspersed school life, just like the above Hoefer wanting to have been able to speak Czech, though not of Czech background.

LBJ's hill folk classmates laughed at his limited abilities of the local dialect Texas German, according to Robert Caro's biography.

Ty Salzmann 3 years ago
Ich bin neunzehn Jahre alt, ich komme aus einer reinen deutschen Blutes-Linie. Ich wohne in Sitterdale, Texas. Ich würde gerne Texas-Deutsch von einem Muttersprachler lernen. Es ist ein Verbrechen, diese Sprache sterben lassen.

Gary Marbach, Converse Native 4 years ago
Das war erfreulich!

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