THE GERMAN ELEMENT IN TEXAS: AN OVERVIEW

by Terry G. Jordan

The immigration of German-speaking people to Texas is a well-known part of the state's ethnic development. Historians, cultural geographers, linguists, and folklorists all have done research on the Texas Germans and they have published hundreds of articles, books, and pamphlets. The main purpose of this essay is not to present new findings, but instead to provide an introduction for the volume by sketching an overview of the German settlement.

Persons of German birth or descent form the largest ethnic group in Texas derived directly from Europe. As early as 1850, they constituted over five percent of the total Texas population, a proportion that remained fairly constant through the remainder of the nineteenth century (table 1, next page). Intermarriage has since blurred ethnic lines, and twentieth-century census data are of little help in estimating the size of the German-American group, but the German element in the state probably still accounts for about one of every twenty Texans.

From the very beginnings of German immigration in the 1830s, a tendency to cluster in ethnic enclaves can be detected. Most Texas Germans live in a broad, fragmented belt across the south-central part of the state, stretching from Galveston and Houston on the east to Kerrville, Mason, and Hondo in the west; from the fertile, humid Gulf Coastal Plain to the semi-arid Hill Country (figure 1). Contained in this German Belt are the majority of Teutonic settlements in the state, including both rural and urban concentrations.

The German Belt is the product of concepts and processes well-known to students of migration, in particular the concept of “dominant personality,” the process called “cluster migration,” and the device of “emigrant letters.” Most voluntary migrations are begun by a dominant personality, sometimes also referred to as a “true pioneer.” This individual is a forceful, ambitious type, a natural leader, who perceives emigration as a solution to economic, social, political, or religious problems in his homeland. Such is the force of his personality that he is able to convince others to follow him in migration. It is usually possible in retrospect to point to the activities of one such dominant personality.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CENSUS YEAR</th>
<th>foreign-born Germans</th>
<th>native German-Americans, both parents</th>
<th>native German-Americans, only one parent foreign-born</th>
<th>native German-Americans, 2 or more generations removed from foreign-born ancestors and at least ( \frac{1}{2} ) of German ancestry</th>
<th>total German element</th>
<th>total German element as a percentage of the white population</th>
<th>total population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1850 ( a )</td>
<td>9,737</td>
<td>1,621</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>11,621</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1860</td>
<td>21,200</td>
<td>12,100( c )</td>
<td>1,00</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>13,100</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1870</td>
<td>25,000</td>
<td>23,000( d )</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>23,500</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1880</td>
<td>39,275</td>
<td>43,500</td>
<td>15,600</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>18,600</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>52,250</td>
<td>56,600</td>
<td>24,800</td>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>34,800</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900</td>
<td>53,350</td>
<td>77,400</td>
<td>41,000</td>
<td>20,000</td>
<td>51,000</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>6.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1910</td>
<td>48,032( e )</td>
<td>84,400( e )</td>
<td>51,200( e )</td>
<td>35,000</td>
<td>220,000</td>
<td>6.8%</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- a. Allowances were made to include not only German-born, but also German-Swiss, Alsatians, Luxembourgers, German-Austrians, and German-Russians. The basic data were obtained from the United States census.
- b. Allowances were made to include the various groups listed in the preceding footnote.
- c. Figures in this column are unreliable, because there are no census data. The totals were calculated on the basis of average increase of the white population for each decade for the German element as a whole, with appropriate adjustments made for new immigration. The limitation to persons of at least one-half German ancestry further complicated the calculations.
- d. All figures for 1850 were obtained from my hand-count of the manuscript population schedules of the United States Census.
- e. The figure for natives of German parentage was derived from the equation:

\[
\frac{\text{white population not born in Texas}}{\text{total white population}} = \frac{\text{number of foreign-born Germans}}{x}
\]

From the result was subtracted 21,200, the number of foreign-born Germans.
- f. This figure was obtained by applying the following equation to each county:

\[
\frac{\text{number of German-born}}{\text{number of foreign-born}} = \frac{x}{\text{number of persons having foreign-born parents}}
\]

In each case, the number of German-born was subtracted from the result in order to arrive at the number of native-born with German-born parent(s). The state total was then adjusted slightly upward to allow for the native offspring of Swiss, Alsatian, etc. immigrants.
- g. This figure, taken directly from the census, is the total foreign-born population of German mother tongue and is presumably identical with "foreign-born Germans."
- h. Derived from census figures for mother tongue of the first generation native-born. A small allowance was made for those first generation native offspring who never acquired the mother tongue of their German parent(s).
personality and conclude that, had it not been for that person, the migration in question would not have occurred or would have been inconsequential. In the case of the Texas Germans, the dominant personality was Friedrich Ernst, a professional gardener from the Grand Duchy of Oldenburg in northwestern Germany. Ernst came to America seeking greater economic opportunity and intended to settle in Missouri. While in New Orleans, he heard of Texas and the large land grants available to Europeans in the Austin Colony. Ernst chose to come to Texas, and in 1831 he received a grant of over 4,000 acres from Stephen F. Austin. This grant, lying in the northwest corner of present Austin County, was the nucleus of the German Belt.

Friedrich Ernst was no ignorant peasant. He had enough education to permit him to write lengthy letters back to friends in his homeland. It was through these emigrant letters that Ernst exerted influence on other prospec-
tive migrants in Germany. He told of a land with a winterless climate like Sicily, with abundant game and fish, a fertile, rich land awaiting only the impress of German labor to make it produce abundantly. He tantalized his readers by assuring them that taxes were virtually nil, that huge amounts of land were available for only a surveyor’s fee, that hunting and fishing required no licenses. In sum, he portrayed an earthly paradise. Like the writers of most emigrant letters, Ernst stressed the positive aspects of his new home country and downgraded or omitted the negative. One of his letters was published in a newspaper in northwestern Germany and in an emigrant guidebook, greatly magnifying his role as a dominant personality. A small, steady stream of migration from northwestern Germany to south-central Texas was the result of Ernst’s letter writing, and within ten years a number of German rural communities had been established in the general vicinity of Ernst’s land grant.

Once begun, migrations prompted by a dominant personality tend to snowball. Those who are induced to follow the true pioneer in turn influence others to do the same. Friends and relatives are most susceptible to this kind of influence. The number of emigrant letters rapidly increases, and among the later migrants are other forceful personalities who wield persuasive powers. “Cluster migration” is a natural and expected result of dominant personalities and their use of emigrant letters. It describes the tendency of people to move in clusters, leaving certain confined districts in the homeland to settle similarly confined colonial areas overseas. In this manner, people from several small parishes in rural Germany can be responsible for occupying a county or part of a county in Texas. Typically, the neighbors in the new homeland had been neighbors in the Fatherland. The influence of dominant personalities moves most easily among people who know one another, and the decision to emigrate spreads like contagion through a population by personal contact. The migration set into motion by Friedrich Ernst drew mainly upon several small districts in Oldenburg, Westphalia, and Holstein (figure 2). The cluster of people did not, as a rule, migrate at the same time on the same ship. More often, the migration was drawn out over several years or decades, with the more adventurous and self-assured coming first and the laggards later.

The movement of Germans to Texas gained increased publicity in the Fatherland through the late 1830s and early 1840s. It attracted the attention of a group of petty noblemen, who envisioned an organized project of overseas colonization by German peasants, a project the nobles hoped would bring them wealth, power, and prestige, while at the same time alleviating overpopulation in rural Germany. Variously called the Mainzer Adelsverein, the Verein zum Schutze Deutscher Ein wanderer in Texas, or the German Emigration Company, the organization began work in the early 1840s. Texas was chosen as the site of the colony, in part because of the favorable publicity surrounding the Ernst-inspired migration and because Texas was an inde-
AREAS OF ORIGIN OF THE GERMAN SETTLERS IN TEXAS

1 Hesse-Darmstadt
2 Electoral Hesse
3 Münsterland
4 Brunswick
5 Oberlausitz
6 Mecklenburg-Strelitz
7 Wetzlar-Braunfels area
8 Waldeck
9 Anhalt

source areas of major importance
other source areas

FIG. 2.
dependent republic more susceptible to political takeover by the princes. The Adelsverein failed in most of its objectives and was a financial disaster, but it did bring thousands of Germans, mostly peasants, to Texas. Between 1844 and 1847, over 7,000 Germans reached Texas under the auspices of the Adelsverein. Many of these immigrants perished in epidemics, many settled in cities such as Galveston, Houston, and San Antonio, and others occupied a swath of the rugged Texas Hill Country, creating the western end of the German Belt. New Braunfels and Fredericksburg were both founded by the Adelsverein. The immigrants were derived mainly from clusters in central-west Germany, particularly Nassau, southern Hannover, Brunswick, Hesse, and western Thuringia (figure 2). Advertising and recruitment had been concentrated in those provinces, the home districts of the noblemen who belonged to the Adelsverein. The Baron von Meusebach, for example, came to Texas as one of the leaders of the Adelsverein, and no fewer than thirty-four villages in his home county, the Dillkreis in Nassau, contributed emigrants to the project. The cluster migration process in the Adelsverein movement is evident on the local as well as the provincial level. Some German farm villages lost a substantial part of their population to the Texas project. One such was the Hannoverian village of Gadenstedt, which sent at least seventy-three people to Texas in the 1844-1847 period. Within ten kilometers of Gadenstedt were twenty other places that also contributed settlers to the Adelsverein project.

At about the same time, another organized colonization project was undertaken. Directed by the Frenchman Henri Castro, this project brought over 2,000 German-speaking settlers, mainly from several clusters in the Upper Rhine Plain of Alsace, to Medina County, west of San Antonio. Founded in 1844, Castroville became the nucleus of the Alsatian colony, though many of the immigrants settled in San Antonio instead because opportunities were better there.

The settlers who came because of Castro, the Adelsverein, and Friedrich Ernst were not the economic dregs of German Europe. Quite the contrary: they were solid middle-class peasants from land-owning families, artisans, or, in a few cases, university-educated professional people and intellectuals. Perhaps the majority were farmers who also possessed a modest trade. More exactly, they were the more ambitious among their peers, farmers and artisans who saw a low ceiling imposed upon their ambitions by the social and economic system of Germany. They were not starving, not poverty-stricken, and not oppressed. Indeed, migration overseas required a substantial cash investment, quite beyond the means of the rural poor.

The organized projects ended by 1850, but by then the German Belt was well established (figure 3). A snowballing process of emigrant letters and cluster migration continued through the 1850s and did not stop until the Federal blockade of Confederate ports. The number of German-born persons
TEXAS 1850

DISTRIBUTION OF THE GERMAN-BORN POPULATION

Each small dot = 25 persons of German birth

Towns:
- 1000-1500
- 500-1000
- 250-500
- 100-250
- 50-100

All military personnel excluded

Based on a hand count of the manuscript U.S. Census

Fig. 3.
in Texas more than doubled between 1850 and 1860, surpassing 20,000 (table 1). Throughout the decade prior to the Civil War, the German Belt continued to expand. One new area of settlement was the sandy postoak woods in Lee County, where some six hundred Wends from Oberlausitz established a colony centered on the community of Serbin in the 1850s (figure 2). The Wends, many of whom were bilingual in German and Sorbian (Wendish), came under the leadership of Pastor Jan Kilian, clearly a dominant personality.

The Civil War brought about only a temporary interruption of the German immigration. The drums of war had scarcely fallen silent before the emigrant ships were once again bringing their human cargoes to the wharves of Galveston. In the post-bellum period, from 1865 to about 1890, more Germans came to Texas than had come in the thirty years prior to the war. Probably as many as 40,000 Germans arrived in Texas in the period between Appomattox and 1890 (table 1). Many of them followed the example of their predecessors, settling in the rural areas and towns of the German Belt. Among the longer-settled German areas, only the Hill Country failed to attract substantial numbers of post-bellum immigrants.

Many other Germans chose to settle elsewhere in Texas, and by the 1880s German folk-islands were beginning to dot central, northern, and western Texas (figure 1). Only East Texas, the Trans-Pecos Country, and the Rio Grande Valley failed to develop German folk-islands. As early as 1881, Germans founded the colony of Marienfeld on the High Plains of West Texas, one of the first agricultural settlements in that part of the state. Marienfeld, with its splendid vineyards, soon succumbed to drought, but the large majority of the German colonies thrived.

For the most part, the German immigration of the 1865-1890 period was derived from the same general areas of the Fatherland that had supplied the 1831-1861 settlers. Cluster migration, aided by emigrant letters, was clearly still at work. But to a greater degree than previously, the eastern provinces of Germany contributed people to Texas. Toward the end of the post-bellum period, another source of German immigrants became important: the Midwestern states. Germans who had initially settled in Illinois, Minnesota, Iowa, and neighboring states began entering Texas in the 1880s. For example, Muenster, a German farming colony in North Texas, was founded by clusters of Germans from Iowa and nearby states, under the leadership of the Roman Catholic Church and the Flusche family.

After 1890, the German immigration to Texas began to taper off. New folk islands were founded as late as the 1920s, but in most cases these were peopled from the previously settled German areas in Texas, particularly the German Belt. Second and third-generation German-Texans, looking for cheap land, flocked westward, a movement finally halted by the Great Depression. Little change in the extent of the German-settled area has occurred since 1930.
To attempt to characterize the Germans who settled Texas is difficult, for they were diverse. Among them were peasant farmers and intellectuals; Protestants, Catholics, Jews, and atheists; Prussians and Swabians; abolitionists and slaveowners; farmers and townfolk; frugal, honest folk and cattle thieves. They differed in dialect, customs, and physical features. Certainly the majority had been farmers in Germany, and most came seeking economic improvement. Only a few dissident intellectuals fleeing the 1848 revolutions came for political freedom, and almost none, save perhaps the Wends, were motivated by a desire for religious freedom.

To traverse the German settlements today is to be reminded of their diversity. Even in so confined a settlement area as the Hill Country, each valley offers a different kind of German—the Llano Valley with its stern, teetotalling German Methodists, who also renounce dancing and fraternal organizations; the Pedernales Valley with its fun-loving, hard-working Lutherans and Catholics, who most assuredly do not renounce drinking and dancing; the Guadalupe Valley with its atheistic Germans, descended from intellectual political refugees.

The scattered German folk-islands are no less diverse. You will find among these small ethnic enclaves Muenster in Cooke County, largely Westphalian Catholic; Waka in Ochiltree County, Midwestern Mennonite; Hurnville in Clay County, Russian German Baptist; Lockett in Wilbarger County, Wendish Lutheran; and many others equally distinct.

Because the Texas Germans are diverse in character, their achievements and the imprint they have placed on the state are varied. They have distinguished themselves in many professions and activities—producing Nimitz in the military, Kleberg in cattle ranching, Schleicher in politics, and Schreiner in retail business. Many German settlements are still distinctive in architecture, foods, customs, religion, language, politics, and economy. The visitor to the Texas German Hill Country, for example, can see numerous half-timbered and stone houses, mile upon mile of rock fence, and grand Gothic churches with jagged towers reaching skyward (see article by Maria Herrmann in this issue). He can hear the distinctive German patois spoken in the streets and stores of Hill Country towns, eat spiced sausage and sauerkraut at local cafes, drink Texas-German beers such as Pearl and Shiner, polka at any one of almost countless dance halls, observe the rifle competition at a rural Schützenfest, witness the ancient Germanic custom of Easter Fires at Fredericksburg, and see the neat, prosperous farms and ranches that occupy the countryside.

This is not to say that assimilation has made no inroads. The peak of German cultural influence in Texas was probably reached in the 1880s and 1890s. The difficult years of pioneering were past by then, but isolation still preserved much that was German. Since then acculturation has taken a heavy toll. Two world wars and the associated anti-German prejudice did irreparable
damage to German folkways in Texas, hastening the extinction of the German language. Since about 1900 the rural German communities have received no additional immigrants from German Europe, allowing Anglo-Texan culture to penetrate the Teutonic rural refuges. Rural depopulation, intermarriage, and modern communications are rapidly obliterating rural German Texas.

The rather substantial German immigration of the twentieth century has been directed almost exclusively to the cities of Texas. Even there, in the urban areas, German culture has declined rapidly, mainly because the compact German ethnic quarters that characterized cities such as San Antonio in the nineteenth century have broken up as the prosperous third- and fourth-generation Texas-Germans flocked to the suburbs. King William Street, once the most affluent German neighborhood of San Antonio, now boasts very few German-American residents. The once-thriving German-language press, vital to cultural survival in a literate society, fell silent in the early 1950s, following the earlier demise of the German-language schools.

It is not unreasonable to predict that little of an authentic German character will survive in Texas by the year 2000. Many Teutonic cultural and economic contributions will survive, but by the twenty-first century they will be part of the common heritage of all Texans, not just those of German descent. Family surnames and a scattering of place-names will persist, but the culture they once symbolized will largely have disappeared.

NOTES


2. The best source for information on the Wends is George C. Engerrand, The So-Called Wends of Germany and Their Colonies in Texas and in Australia (Austin: University of Texas Bulletin No. 3417, Bureau of Research in the Social Sciences, 1934).


