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As Texas German dies out, one man tries to record it

By Kyrie O'Connor | March 5, 2013 | Updated: March 6, 2013 12:44pm

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Jim Kearney at his ranch near Weimar,Tx Monday Feb. 25, 2013.(Dave Rossman/ For the Chronicle)

Photo: Dave Rossman, Freelance / © 2013 Dave Rossman

When **Kaye Langehennig Wong** was a little girl in Katy in the '60s, her parents would take her to visit her grandparents in Fredericksburg. "My grandparents lived in a stone house on Main Street," she says. "I played with horny toads and walked down Main Street listening to the ladies in the shops talking in German."

Wong's father spoke only German until he went to school. "My parents spoke German to each other when they didn't want us to know what they were saying," she says. But like many parents of their generation, they didn't teach her.

The German Wong heard on Main Street was unlike German spoken anywhere else in the world. Texas German, the result of the flood of German immigrants

into South Central Texas in the 19th century, is an amalgam of many of the dialects spoken in what is now Germany but was, until 1871, a collection of independent states.

When Germans settled in other parts of the U.S., they tended to cluster with people from the same original area. In Texas, they mixed freely, thus creating a unique language stew.

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Hans Boas fell in love with Texas German when he was driving from Northern California to Austin in 2001 and happened to stop in Fredericksburg. It's been a topic of study for him since then. But he doesn't have time on his side.

Boas, a professor of Germanic studies and linguistics at the **University of Texas at Austin**, isn't trying to revive the language - it's too late for that - just to save the sound of it for posterity. He is trying to preserve the voices of as many speakers of Texas German as he can.

Aging population

Only about 8,000 people speak Texas German now, down from perhaps 150,000 in the 1940s - census data is unclear - and they are almost all older than 60. Virtually no young people speak the language, and it will be dead in 30 years.

Think of Boas as a zoologist studying a nearly extinct species. Even if it dies out, "with a zoologist, you're likely to find bones to dig up, you can kind of classify it and figure out its habitat," he says. When a language dies out, if there are no documents or recordings, it's gone forever.

Jim Kearney is also an amalgam, a scholar/rancher who still lives on and works the family ranch in Weimar. "I put on different hats," is how he puts it. Tall and lean, with a serious mustache, he looks like the rancher from Central Casting. But Kearney, who has his doctorate and will be teaching a course in European immigration into Texas at UT this fall, has encyclopedic knowledge of the German history of Texas.

German immigration, a push-pull of overpopulation and lack of opportunity in the Old World and abundant land in the New, began while this was Mexico, especially in what are now Austin, Colorado and Washington counties. A married man in good standing could get a league of land, 4,428 acres - enormous by European standards.

"They were not paupers," Kearney says. "You could not leave if you were a debtor."

They settled along the tributaries of the Brazos and Colorado rivers - not in the river valleys where the slaveowners grew cotton and not in the low, wet prairies. Most of the places they settled, if you cocked your head at the right time of year, looked like Germany.

In 1842, a group of German noblemen formed the Adelsverein, whose aim was to send settlers to Texas and establish trade. The first try was a near disaster, stranding colonists in Indianola with few provisions. Many died of cholera, but the rest made their way west and founded New Braunfels. The Germans learned how to farm Texas from friendly Mormons and established a successful (and respectful) treaty with the Comanches. "It shows how things could have been different," says Kearney.

Inconvenient language

After 1848, a wave of Freemasons and disaffected intellectuals made a beachhead in Texas. They founded towns such as Comfort, which had no church for 50 years.

Although the noblemen founded a plantation in Round Top, with slaves, the rank-and-file Germans, firm believers in human rights, were resolutely anti-slavery. In the Civil War, this caused strife, says Kearney: lynchings, martial law, gangs, culminating with the massacre by Confederates at the Nueces River of a group of German Unionists camping on the way to Mexico. All told, 28 of the 60-some Unionists were killed.

A new wave of postwar immigrants followed the coming of the railroad, barbed wire and windmills.

In general, the Germans who settled here were not like their Anglo counterparts, says Kearney. "They were completely devoid of the Puritanical," he says. They loved music, singing and dancing, joining clubs and



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leagues, drinking beer. They were civic-minded: proud of being Americans and proud of being Germans.

But after two World Wars and much discrimination, their language became inconvenient, and it started to die.

Professor Boas is trying to get data on and record the voices of as many speakers as he can. Before 2008, he was recording about 10 a month. But as the economy tanked and funding dried up, he's now able to fund only one every two months.

Raising funds is slow going. Boas has theories, but no proof, about why money is so tight.

There's the memory of discrimination, and there's a lingering shame. "Their teachers said 'You speak bad German,'" he says. "Scientifically speaking, there's nothing like a bad language. Every dialect is a purely functional system." But the stigma lingers.

No two sound alike

He has recorded 400 speakers so far. No two have spoken exactly the same way, not even siblings. It depends who their peer group was, what exposure to English they had, what clubs they joined. And the Texas German spoken near the coast is not the same as that of the **Hill Country**.

As Kearney points out, one of the wonders of Texas German is that the original settlers had to invent words that didn't exist in traditional German.

Skunk, for example. They settled on "Stinkkatze" - "stink cat." And sometimes the existing English word worked its way in.

But the language is disappearing.

"You can still hear it if you find places where the speakers hang out," says Boas. "But it's more and more difficult."

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