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*Celebrating Texans*



• GERMAN IMMIGRATION TO THE STATE • TEXAS PHILANTHROPISTS • FIRST LADIES



Although individual Germans immigrated to the American colony of Jamestown as early as 1608, and by 1670 German immigrants were present in all 13 of the colonies, the first organized group sailing on the *Concord* arrived on October 6, 1683. These 13 Mennonite families from Krefeld, Germany, established Germantown, Pennsylvania, in response to the call from the Quaker leader, William Penn, who asked Europeans to come to the new world and participate in the "Holy Experiment" of settlement.

**By Dr. Meredith McClain**

Above: From Bavaria, Henry Clay Smith was one of the early settlers in Blanco Canyon in the Texas Panhandle. All images are from the Southwest Collections, Texas Tech University.

# German Texans

## Leaving Their Mark on the Lone Star State

**A**nd come they did! During the 19th century almost six million people arrived from that European territory, which in 1871 became the German Reich. When one considers that at the founding of the Reich, about 60 million people were living there, then one-tenth of that population went off to America. This would imply that each family in the area had a member in America or knew a neighbor who was there. More than 50 books on America were published in Germany between 1815 and 1850. The number and availability of personal letters back and forth between America and Germany must have vitalized daily life at a level of participation that we can hardly imagine today.

### The First German-Texans

There was one letter from Texas, written by Friedrich Ernst, the first German colonizer in Texas and founder of the town of Industry, which had enormous impact on Germans eager to hear of the great, wide-open land in the sun. Although Ernst arrived in Texas in 1831 ill prepared for the hard life of a pioneer, he grew to love the land. He wrote one particular letter to a friend

in which he praised his new home in glowing terms and added this invitation: "I have a stopping place on my estate for my countrymen until they have selected a league of land. Colonel Austin has recently promised to take care that German arrivals be settled immediately." The friend in Oldenburg, Germany, took the letter to the local newspaper, and thus the glorious report spread like wildfire and opened the way for others to follow.

German immigration to Texas took a unique turn in 1842 when a group of five princes and 16 privileged German noblemen met at Biebrich on the Rhine, near Mainz, and created "The Society for Protection of German Immigrants to Texas." Certainly honorable in its stated purpose, the "Adelsverein" was instrumental in moving 7,000-8,000 emigrants during the next three years into the area of Texas known today as the German Hill Country. That area centers on New Braunfels and Fredericksburg, and includes the surrounding smaller towns that stretch from Mason in the north to San Antonio in the south, the jewel city of the German-Texan belt.

Those beginnings, though, were not without trouble. Aboard the first ship from Germany to sail under the banner of the Adelsverein was a young man from Erndtebrueck named Louis

Martin (image, page 12. Also see related Anna Mebus Martin biography on page 14). The story of his life in Texas is a fascinating saga of success and tragedy that deserves to be better known. Ultimately an important citizen of the Mason area, he influenced relatives and friends from Erndtebrueck to join him. Like so many of his countrymen, Martin was against slavery, and this position often brought trouble. During the Civil War a group of young German settlers from Comfort and the surrounding area were killed by Anglo-Americans as they were trying to leave Texas to join Union troops. Louis Martin's own murder in 1864 in Eagle Pass by American neighbors who then presented themselves to his widow, told her the news, and demanded a fried chicken meal before leaving, points to the brutal intensity of the issue.

Exactly 150 years after the creation of the protection society, W.M.Von-Maszewski published (in German and English translation) the letters of Alwin H. Sörgel, who arrived on the society's 1845 voyage on the *Franziska*. Those letters reveal in detail the human suffering caused by the lack of organization of the Adelsverein, and finally the lack of will to correct the disasters. *A Sojourn in Texas, 1846-47* gives Sörgel's detailed, personal insight into the difficulties met by John O. Meusebach, the man who assumed the problems of the settlements. It is to Meusebach's lasting credit that he signed a treaty in 1847 with the surrounding Comanches enabling a long-range period of peaceful settlement and prosperity for generations to come. It is frequently pointed out that this is the only treaty between Native Americans and European Americans never to have been broken.

## The First German-Texans on the Last Western Frontier

For hundreds of years the Comanches considered the vast grassland of the Llano Estacado in the Panhandle of Texas to be their holy hunting ground. Hidden camping grounds within Palo Duro Canyon



were thought to be sacred safe havens.

But in 1874 as more than 300 Comanche, Kiowa, Cheyenne, and Arapaho lodges were quiet in the early hours, Ranald Mackenzie's cavalry troops descended and put an end to that era. The American government's plan to move the inhabitants off the Llano Estacado in order to open land for white settlement worked, and as the Native Americans were forced into Oklahoma, the first European moved in. He was Heinrich Schmitt, born of humble origins the same year as Texas, 1836, in Bavaria, and died a well-known, highly respected, and wealthy man in Blanco Canyon in 1912.

Hank Smith left Fort Griffin with his wife Elizabeth and their two children in November of 1878, and after a seven-day trip, they pulled into Blanco Canyon in Crosby County where they would spend the rest of their lives. Hank had been a real frontiersman throughout the Wild West before meeting Elizabeth, but as he settled into his two storied, hand-hewn limestone house isolated on the vast Llano Estacado, he grew to love the country. His letters to friends contained lists of

the abundant wildlife there and the crops he had cultivated. He also issued generous invitations to visit and offers to provide hospitality to any person coming up the Mackenzie Trail.

Completely unknown to Hank Smith, a German writer named Karl May, his exact contemporary, created best-selling novels set on the Llano Estacado and featuring a pioneering type much like Hank—the German mountain man Old Shatterhand. The life Hank lived in person in the American West is deeply imbedded in the fantasies of many Germans who read thrillers such as *The Ghost of the Llano Estacado*. Those stories, made into films in the 1960s, live on today in Germany where there are no less than ten summer amphitheatres devoted to the reenactment of May's novels, which are still best sellers. The Karl May Society has more than 2,000 members worldwide. It is only surprising to those who do not know about this German secret to learn that the first International Karl May Symposium to be held in North America took place in Lubbock at Texas



Germans were fascinated with Texas. The photo on page 10 is from one of the Karl May movies filmed in Yugoslavia in the 1960s showing the Frenchman, Pierre Brice, in the role of the Mescalero Apache chief Winnetou, and the American, Lex Barker, playing the German frontiersman, Old Shatterhand. The German writer May is pictured at right, in a costume that he wore to recreate the image of a frontiersman. The real-life Hank Smith, shown above in front of Hacienda Glorieta, the first permanent home on the Texas High Plains, was just the type of man that the Germans were trying to emulate.



Tech University in September 2000. Those who do know understand why the high point of the symposium was a trek to Blanco Canyon to meet the 85-year old granddaughter of Hank Smith, Georgia Mae Smith Ericson, and soak up the spirit of the place.

Whereas Hank Smith was something of an entrepreneurial loner, the second German to influence settlement of the Llano Estacado was the Catholic colonizer, Reverend Joseph Reisdorff (1840-1922). After completing his training at the Catholic Diocese in St. Louis, Missouri, Reisdorff adopted the special vocation of Catholic colonizer and founded settlements at Windthorst (Archer County, Texas 1891) and Rheinland (Knox County, Texas, 1895), before beginning Nazareth (Castro County, near Lubbock) in 1902.

Through advertisements such as the one translated below in German-language newspapers in America, Father Reisdorff made his colony in Nazareth known to German families:

*Short directions to the Catholic German colony of Nazareth, in Castro County, Texas: In order to arrive at the newest Catholic Colony, one takes a train from any point in the United States which*

*goes to Amarillo, Texas. In Amarillo one takes the Pecos Valley train to Hereford, Texas. In Hereford one turns to W.H. Ranzor, our agent, who brings all Catholics seeking land for a small price to Nazareth, and if it be desired, then he will bring them back to Hereford.*

The combination of inexpensive, good land, and the promise of a Catholic church and school offered large German-American families the opportunity to better their situation. Two of the earliest families to arrive and take up residence in Nazareth were the Wendelin Litsch family (11 children) from Oklahoma and the Bernard Huseman family (seven children) from Indiana.

By the time of his death in 1922, Father Reisdorff had successfully established Nazareth, founded Umbarger, and created a large German community in Slaton. His successors faced less optimistic times. German-Texan settlers of the Llano Estacado bore enormous hardships in their first years, dealing with the unknown land and the unexpected weather patterns. The unrelenting wind, droughts, extreme heat, and then bitter cold battered the pioneers as they attempted to tame the land and erect

humble shelters.

After the first difficult decades of settlement came the world wars with Germany. American neighbors focused their suspicious attention on the isolated rural German settlements. Local vigilante groups were keen to ferret out anyone considered disloyal, and there was even talk of German spies. Misunderstandings, fears, and hard times sometimes turned rumor to hostility. According to Goose Ramey, a local Dimmitt historian and eye witness of the event, Armistice Day in 1918 produced one such incident in

Nazareth. Few Nazarenes today discuss the fact that their Catholic priest was forced by a citizens' group from Dimmitt on November 11 to step out of the Catholic church, kneel down, and kiss the American flag. For years, though, there was a boycott by area residents of stores in Dimmitt in favor of those in Tulia—despite the fact that they were almost twice the distance away.

By the 1920s, the Ku Klux Klan had a firm grip on Texas, and the outbreak of violence by Klan mobs targeting German-Catholic priests was dramatically documented by numerous newspapers. One man in Brenham was beaten for speaking German. The most vicious act on the Llano Estacado was the 1922 beating, then tarring and feathering of Father Keller, Father Reisdorff's successor in Slaton. A similar attack on Father Meiser,



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later the same year in the central West Texas town of Olfen, confirmed an alarming pattern. Despite these hardships and unfounded suspicions, German Texans established a foothold on the Texas High Plains, and today, generations later, their families are part of the melting pot of Texan cultures.

### Conclusion

The great interest in Texas felt throughout Germany in the 19th century, and the resulting migration, are something of a lost chapter of European history today. In Texas, though, fourth and fifth generation German-Texans are

entering the 21st century with renewed devotion to the documentation of their family stories. In all corners of the state one finds active members of the German-Texan Heritage Society, which is elegantly headquartered in Austin's German Free School Building (see sidebar on page 15). Older classic publications of German-Texan history are being reissued, and new research is producing books, articles, and exhibits that protect endangered details of this history from the ravages of time. These important documents provide evidence of the powerful contributions of these German immigrants to the Lone Star State. ★

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## Anna Mebus Martin



Anna Martin and her sons; image from the Southwest Collections, Texas Tech University

### America's First Woman Bank Founder and President

Galveston was the port of entry in 1858 for Anna Henriette Mebus and her family when they arrived in Texas from Germany. The Texas frontier must have seemed strange and untamed for this refined teenage girl, who with her family settled in Hedwigs Hill on the Llano River. For though they had enjoyed great wealth in Germany, it is said that the family might have been fleeing the shame of financial ruin when her father's business failed, and they immigrated to Texas. One year after her arrival, at the age of 16, Anna married her merchant cousin Karl Martin (relative of Louis Martin, see image on page 12), and together they farmed and ran a small store.

Following a long illness, her husband died in 1879, leaving Anna penniless and with two adolescent sons. Starting with \$150 that she borrowed and a determination to succeed, Anna took over the operation of A. Martin & Sons. Thought to be one of the first general merchandise stores in the area, it was reputed that during the late 1880s, Martin's business sold more barbed wire than any other in the

region, and it was one of the first to have a telephone and electricity. In fact, a mere two years after her husband's death, Martin had a large, completely paid for inventory. This successful mercantile enterprise allowed Martin to build a home near the store, purchase several automobiles, and eventually open The Commercial Bank of Mason in July of 1901. She served as president of that institution, and along with her sons, the family operated the bank until 1958.

Martin's business sense was legendary. She learned the cattle industry—who wanted to buy and who wanted to sell—and also became an accomplished wool buyer as well. In a time and place that was the domain of men, Anna Mebus Martin was a woman who through struggle over adversity came to embody the enterprising spirit of her adopted home.

Anna Mebus Martin died in 1925 at the age of 81 and is buried in the family cemetery at Hedwigs Hill, near the spot where her success as a businesswoman began.