



The University of Texas at Austin, Department of Germanic Studies

The Texas German Endowment

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1. Introduction

Imagine that by 2050 Texas German will not be spoken any more. After more than 200 years of use, one of the major languages of Texas will be gone, and with it all of the information that was transmitted with it. The stories of immigration and life on the frontier, the court records, the songs, the poems, the dreams and hopes, and the prayers of generations of Texas Germans will be lost forever. Currently, Texas students and the general population have very little access to information about Texas German history, culture, and traditions. School textbooks mention German immigrants in passing. The Texas History Museum in Austin has one small text about German immigrants, but nothing else. No mention of the many important cultural, architectural, educational, military, and culinary traditions brought to Texas by the German immigrants in the 19th century! This lack of information is regrettable.

2. The Texas German Project at the University of Texas

To overcome this problem, members of the “Texas German Project” at the University of Texas at Austin are interviewing the remaining speakers of Texas German in order to document this unique dialect in the form of stories about all aspects of Texas-German life past and present. The resulting web-based multi-media archive allows future generations to listen to and understand stories told by the last remaining speakers of Texas German. From 2001-2009, members of the “Texas German Dialect Project” at UT Austin have conducted oral-history interviews in order to transcribe and translate them so they can be preserved for future generations. The interviews including their transcriptions and translations are stored in a web-based multi-media archive which will be accessible for free (see <http://www.tgdp.org>). This will ensure that Texas German cultural heritage will be preserved for future generations. So far, more than 320 remaining speakers of Texas German have been interviewed in Fredericksburg, Doss, Spring Branch, New Braunfels, San Antonio, Bulverde, Brenham, La Grange, Freyburg, Victoria, Crawford, and many other places, totaling more than 650 hours of interviews.

Some people may ask: “Why are these interviews important?” In short, these interviews are important because they provide much valuable information about the languages of Texas, as well as its history, culture, and traditions. Many undergraduate students at UT Austin are in disbelief when they learn that German, Czech, Swedish, and Norwegian immigrants were instrumental in building up Texas during the 19th century. Without these hard-working pioneers, Texas would probably not have developed into what it is today. As a matter of fact, without these immigrants, Texas might have even been annexed by Mexico again in the 1840s. To most undergraduate students (and perhaps many others), this information comes as a big surprise as they think that Texas is like any other state in the Union. They may have heard of the Alamo, but very few have heard of the long journey the first German immigrants made from Galveston and Indianola to

what is now Cat Spring, New Ulm, New Braunfels, and Fredericksburg to set up frontier settlements, seek a better life, provide for their families, and secure a future in Texas. This lack of information is a disgrace to all the dedicated pioneers who laid the foundation for what is Texas today.

2. Funding Needs

The process of adding entries to the Dialect Archive is extremely time intensive. Per hour of interview added to the archive, an estimated 50 hours of work are necessary for setting up the interview, traveling to the interview site, recording the interview, digitization, transcription, translation, and editing. So far, 38 undergraduate students, 19 graduate students, and one faculty member have been involved in the activities of the Texas German Dialect Project. From 2001-2006 the project has received funding from various sources both inside and outside of the University (total direct funding received so far: about \$200,000 from Humanities Texas, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the University of Texas at Austin).

After five years of funding by different sources, we have been unable to receive further grants for the past three years. This lack of funding has drastically reduced our ability to record interviews and store them in the archive. While we used to conduct about ten interviews per month, we are now down to only one interview per month. As of June 2009, we have a list of more than 400 Texas Germans who are waiting to be interviewed by the project.

To re-establish the old level of operation, the Texas German Dialect Project requires an estimated budget of at least \$25,000 annually. Since both state and federal funding agencies have cut down on funding for the humanities over the past two years, we have not been able to secure funding from these sources, which means that we have basically reached an interruption in recording and processing interviews. Since many of the Texas German speakers are in their 80s and 90s this means that valuable interviews would be lost in case they passed away before they are interviewed. The sole option to guarantee continuity of the Texas German Project lies in the establishment of a Texas German Endowment to insure its permanent maintenance, similar to already existing Texas Czech and Texas Swedish endowments at the University of Texas.

The Texas German Endowment at the University of Texas is seeking donations from individuals, businesses, and organizations. The donations, which are tax-deductible, are deposited into an account which generates interest each year. This interest will support the recordings and research activities of the Texas German Project for the next 30-40 years. After there are no speakers of Texas German left to be interviewed, the interest generated by the endowment will be used for scholarships for students interested in researching Texas German culture, history, and language at the University of Texas. Special arrangements can be made to name a scholarship or endowment in honor of a person, business, or organization. Checks should be made out to "Texas German Endowment – UT Austin" and sent to Hans Boas at the address below. Receipts will be sent out within approximately two weeks.

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