



(From left) Elise Flanary, Greg Wurzbach, Debbie Chandler, and Rodney Van Oudekerke enjoy German-style beer, sausage, and pretzels at Krause's Biergarten and Café in New Braunfels.

Be sure to designate a driver if you plan to drink alcohol.

Beyond Bratwurst

A journey into the heart of German Texas

STORY BY TRAC W BARNETT ■ PHOTOGRAPHS BY SARAH LIM

Lively polka tunes mingled with the scent of grilled bratwurst. A bevy of girls in Bavarian *dirndls* bounced by aboard a hayride. A young family tried ninepin bowling on a wooden plank. Then a fellow in a plumed hat, ruffled shirt, and tall riding boots caught my eye.

"Pardon, may I ask," I began. He held out a white-gloved hand. "Prince Carl, madame. Charmed, I'm sure."

For a moment, I could have imagined myself in 19th-century Germany. But I was actually 5,000 miles and nearly two centuries away in New Braunfels, at the annual Folkfest celebration of the town's German pioneer heritage. There was

plenty to celebrate. During the 1800s, an estimated 5 million Germans immigrated to the United States. While many went to New York and Pennsylvania, thousands came directly to Texas by way of Galveston, and a German belt developed from the port city to Kerrville. By 1860, there were more than 20,000 Germans in the state; another 40,000 arrived after the Civil War.

Today, German immigration to Texas is most associated with bratwurst, polka, and Oktoberfest celebrations. But as a descendant of German immigrants myself—my great-great grandfather arrived in New York from Baden, Germany, in 1846—I wanted to explore the rich history of German Texas, and to see how the state's German past lives on today.



Sisters Mary Irwin (far left) and Diane Moltz (far right), along with members of the Comal Community Band, dance the chicken dance at the Historic Bandstand in downtown New Braunfels. The chicken dance is an oompah song that is popular at Oktoberfest.

New Braunfels

I began my quest in New Braunfels. Here, in 1845, a hopeful band of pioneers established the state's first German colony. In those days, the area was a forested wilderness on the banks of the Comal River. Of course, I found a different New Braunfels that's now one of the nation's fastest-growing cities. I made a beeline for the log cabins and live oaks of Folkfest Heritage Village, a showcase for German pioneer culture. Folkfest, which takes place every April, had just begun.

I found a fascinating array of humanity. Buffalo soldiers were getting chummy with Confederates over at the Civil War reenactors' camp. Across the way, an artisanal broom maker showed off his wares, and a whiskered fellow on a wooden stool twisted plant fibers together to make rope. Meanwhile, the Lindheimer Chapter of the Native Plant Society, which was named after the German father of Texas botany, displayed potted plants for sale.

I soon met the white-gloved Rodney Van Oudekerke and his lederhosen-

sporting sidekick, Greg Wurzbach, two descendants of original German settlers. A retired police officer and member of the German American Society of New Braunfels, Van Oudekerke roamed the fairgrounds while playing the part of Prince Carl of Solms-Braunfels, the town's highborn founder.

As we sat at an improvised *biertgarten*, Van Oudekerke told me about the area's German past. His ancestors had been a part of the movement of Freethinkers—liberal German intellectuals who settled the Hill Country around Boerne, Comfort, and Sisterdale.

Some were fleeing the failed revolution in Germany in which they had played a part, and others were trying to establish utopian communities. The Freethinkers movement faded out, but many of its members went on to make their mark in other ways.

As I wandered through Folkfest, I came across the dirndl-wearing girls I'd seen earlier, only now they were singing in German. Afterward, I chatted with their teacher, Mary Irwin, and her sister, Diane Moltz, who was

offering sauerkraut-making demonstrations. They're fifth-generation German pioneer descendants who take their heritage seriously. "None of our children speak German, and it's our fault," lamented Moltz, 77, who grew up speaking the language. Now, as members of the German American Society, she and her sister work to keep the culture alive. The organization offers German language classes to adults and children, and it runs a German summer camp.

Around town, I saw more vestiges of New Braunfels's German past, including the Sophienburg Museum and Archives, located on the site of the old log fort that Prince Carl had named for his sweetheart; Main Plaza and the historic bandstand; the old Phoenix Saloon, where an immigrant named Gephardt invented chile powder; and a series of murals depicting the settlers' lives. Around the corner from the image of handsome Prince Carl, I sat down at historic Krause's German restaurant and sampled savory schnitzel, sausage, and German beer. Then it was time to move on.



Evelyn Weinheimer, archivist at the Pioneer Museum, enjoys some Hill Country wine at Das Peach Haus in Fredericksburg. Das Peach Haus was founded at the Wieser family peach orchards in 1969.

Fredericksburg

Located an hour and a half northwest of New Braunfels, Fredericksburg was the second German colony to be established in Texas. These days, more people come to explore the area's booming wineries, but many visitors find themselves equally enchanted by the town's fusion of German and Texas culture.

Surprisingly, no descendants of German pioneers run any of the town's wineries. True to their tradition, early settlers made wine and beer at home, but when the wine industry began to take off in the 1980s, it was started by what pioneer descendent Evelyn Weinheimer laughingly calls *auslanders*—German for "outsiders." Weinheimer, 72, says she is the last generation to grow up speaking German at home, but as an archivist at the local Pioneer Museum, she's working to keep German traditions alive.

I found my way to Market Square, or Marktplatz, a showcase for the town's German culture. A replica of the beloved eight-sided Vereins Kirche—the town's first church and school, now

a museum—lies at its heart. In the lush gardens behind it, a sculpture features its founder, John Meusebach, sharing a peace pipe with a local Comanche chief.

Baron Otfried Hans Freiherr von Meusebach—or simply John O. Meusebach, as he was known after he gave up his nobility and took over leadership of the society of German noblemen from Prince Carl—is credited with negotiating a peace treaty with American Indians that was never broken. Fredericksburg was on the edge of Comanche territory. Relations between Texans and the Comanches were sometimes violent. But under Meusebach's leadership, the German settlers enjoyed peace with their Comanche neighbors.

I met up with retired history teacher Glen Treibs, whose ancestors were among the first to arrive in the area. He accompanied me to Der Stadt Friedhof, the town cemetery. Behind the tidy rows of granite gravestones with inscriptions like *Ruhe Sanft* (rest in peace) lies a grassy field that he said contains several mass graves.



Stinkkatze and German-Texas Fusion

What happens when thousands of German immigrants move to Texas frontier towns? You get oompah bands and German lagers in the dance halls, wild venison in the sausage, Hill Country peaches in the strudel, and fine china in the log cabins. Here are three other classic German-Texas mash-ups:

CONJUNTO MUSIC

Developed among working-class Tejanos in the early 1800s, conjunto blends traditional Mexican musical styles like mariachi and song forms such as *corridos* with the rhythms of polka and waltz from German and Czech immigrants.

CHICKEN-FRIED STEAK

German settlers loved their Wiener schnitzel, a tender, pounded-thin veal steak breaded in flour and fried. Nobody has proven a connection, but some food historians believe that chicken-fried steak was a frontier interpretation of the dish—a way to turn the readily available tough beef cuts into something like comfort food.

TEXAS GERMAN

A German dialect evolved in Texas with its own distinct sound and vocabulary. Germans who encountered skunks in the state, for example, came up with a new word for the creature: *stinkkatze*, or stinky cat. And while their counterparts back in Germany would come to call an airplane *das flugzeug* (the flying thing), German Texans called it *das luftschiff* (air ship). Texas German was once the dominant second language of Texas, but today, only 6,000 to 8,000 mostly elderly men and women speak the language, and experts say the dialect could disappear within 20 to 25 years.

Soon after the first German settlers began arriving on Matagorda Bay, which was the next stop after Galveston, the Mexican-American War broke out again. All the available wagons were commandeered for the war effort, and that left the German immigrants stranded on the wild, mosquito-infested coast for months. More than 1,000 immigrants died of epidemics before they ever reached New Braunfels.

"From the time we left Germany in the first two years, half the people were dead," Treibs said as we made our way through the cemetery. "And then, after two epidemics and starvation, we're on the wrong side of the Civil War. I just marvel that any of us survived."

As Treibs intimated, the Civil War broke out just as the German communities finally began to prosper. The Germans generally opposed slavery, but they found themselves in the middle of the Confederacy. Many suffered conscriptions and massacres at the hands of Confederate soldiers. Yet many hardy Germans prevailed, and Fredericksburg, like New Braunfels, soon grew into a prosperous town. Hard work and faith got the immigrants through those dark times, Treibs said.

Charles Feller echoed that perspective when I met him the next day during a visit to the Pioneer Museum. Now 83, he grew up on a ranch outside Fredericksburg. He began his studies at the one-room schoolhouse that he later bought and donated to the museum. As we surveyed the room, he showed me one of his favorite German expressions etched on a chalkboard and translated it with a grin:

"Work makes life sweet. Laziness weakens the joints!"

I could practically hear the voice of my own grandfather, a farmer whose own work ethic was as legendary as his homespun wisdom.

"We worked hard, but we played hard, too," said Feller, explaining the concept of *gemütlichkeit*, which, roughly translated, means fellowship and



Rodney Van Oudekerke (right) and Greg Wurzbach stand in front of a mural of Eugene Krause, who founded Krause's Biergarten and Café in 1938. The mural serves as an homage to New Braunfels and its German roots.

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Holiday Shopping, German-Style

German Christmas traditions abound in Texas. Examples include Christmas trees, Advent calendars, gingerbread, and hot mulled wine. And, of course, German Christmas markets pop up every winter. Here are three worth a visit.

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Weihnachtsmarkt

Nov. 17-19

This market in New Braunfels features a German café, classes in the art of German paper-cutting, and 50 vendors selling authentic German crafts and collectibles such as nutcrackers, smokers, Inge-Glas ornaments, and delicate schwibbogen candleholders. (830) 629-1572; sophienburg.com.

ab 

Enchant Christmas Light Maze and Market

Nov. 24-Dec. 31

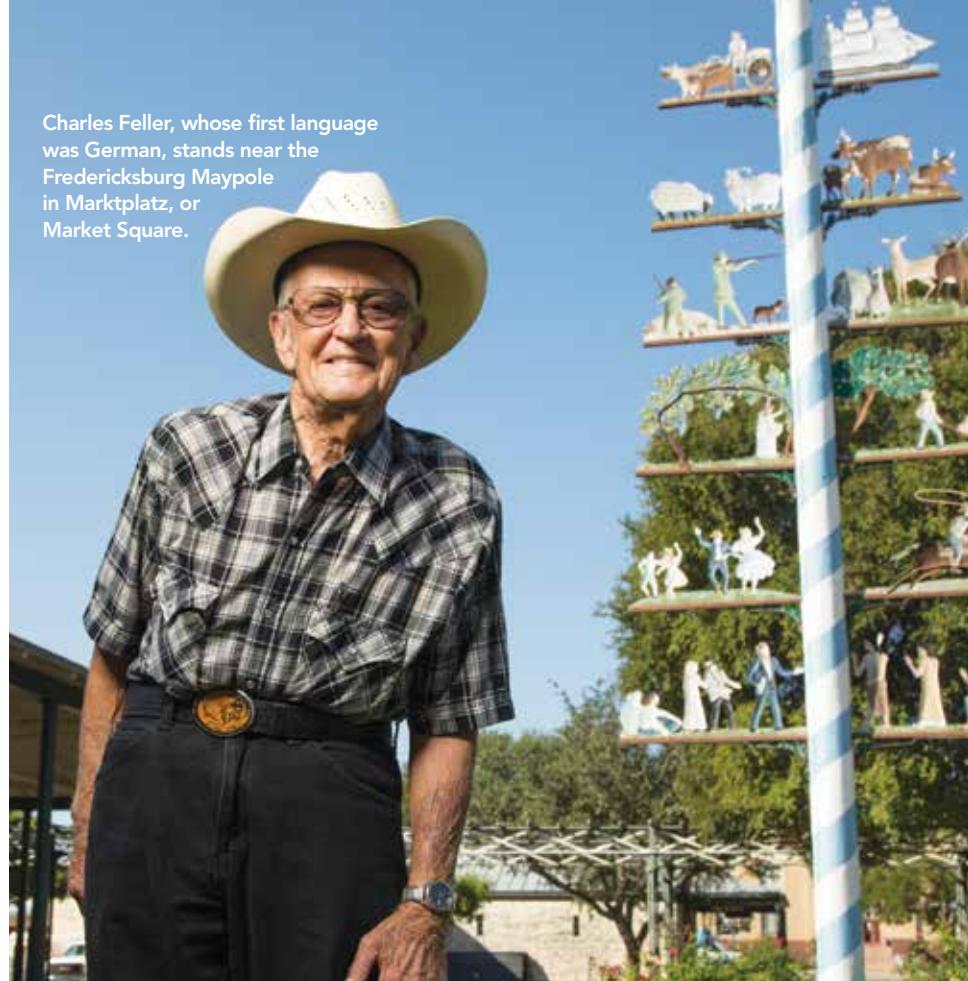
The Texas Christkindl Market in Arlington is undergoing a transformation this year with its inclusion in Enchant, a massive maze of lights. The market will still feature traditional German vendors, regional decorations, and typical foods. (800) 342-4305; txchristkindlmarket.com.

ab 

Tomball German Christmas Market and Festival

Dec. 8-10

In picturesque Old Town Tomball, near Houston, this free mega-event features more than 200 street vendors and 400 performers across four stages. Traditional foods—potato pancakes, strudels, gingerbreads, glühwein, and bratwurst—add cheer to this popular German Christmas market. (281) 379-6844; tomballgermanchristmasmarket.com.



Charles Feller, whose first language was German, stands near the Fredericksburg Maypole in Marktplatz, or Market Square.

good cheer. In hard times, the Texas Germans turned to one another. They founded clubs for gymnastics, singing, ninepin bowling, and shooting. Some clubs live on today in New Braunfels and Fredericksburg.

Feller recalled the many dances that took place on Saturday nights in community halls throughout the region. German classics and line dances such as the schottische blended with Texas Swing and kept spirits high. To this

day, bands like the Seven Dutchmen Orchestra perform polka and waltz rhythms.

We talked about the old days for nearly two hours, until Feller climbed into his pickup and headed back to his ranch. There would be time later for some good old-fashioned gemütlichkeit. But first, of course, there was work to be done.

Tracy L. Barnett, a mostly vegetarian freelance writer based in Mexico, blames her German ancestors for her schnitzel cravings.



Walking into the Past

Immerse yourself in German Texas history by walking in the steps of German pioneers while hearing their stories from an experienced guide.

Fredericksburg Historical and Architectural Walking Tour

Guides Eileen Whited and Vicky Troy are direct descendants of original German settlers. Whited is also a historian and Pioneer Museum docent. (830) 990-8441; pioneermuseum.net/walking-tour.html.

Spass Walking Tours, New Braunfels

Historian Jan Kingsbury offers a variety of tours, ranging from a Historic Cemetery Tour to a Downtown Mural Tour; all cover the town's rich German heritage. (830) 660-7263; spasswalkingtours.com.

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