



THE BIG POND

A US-GERMAN LISTENING SERIES

German-Texan Heritage Societies

by Berit Mason

Berit Mason: This is Berit Mason reporting from San Antonio, Texas.

Glenn Guettler: They always put in the church bulletin that we have these meetings, and we seldom attract one new visitor.

Berit Mason: 83-year-old Glenn Guettler is president of the Texas German Society, with 20 chapters, scattered among east Texas towns. But his North Houston group struggles to attract new members.

Glenn Guettler: And I am just curious why there is not more interest, because we have the meetings right there – where they go to church there, you know. [LAUGHS]

[TRADITIONAL GERMAN MUSIC PLAYS]

Berit Mason: Between 1820 and World War I, nearly six million Germans emigrated to America. But in 2017, only about 5,000 bothered to make the trip. So, if Germans don't come to America anymore, what happens to German-American heritage societies – those fun-loving booster clubs – that help keep the culture alive? After all, some 50 million German-Americans live in the U.S. today, more than any other ancestry. Industrious people, who brought us bowling, the Christmas tree, frankfurters, and kindergarten. In the mid-1800s, Germans were the third biggest ethnic group in Texas, digging in to settle that state alongside Anglos and Hispanics. Earliest settlers arrived in the 1830s, around the time of the Texas revolution.

[GUNS SHOOTING]

Berit Mason: Texas joined the union in 1845. In the 1840s, the *Adelsverein*, the German immigration company, helped to plunk thousands of wide-eyed Germans in the middle of raw, brushy Texas – some next door to Comanche country. [CHEROKEE SOUND] But Professor Emeritus of German at the University of Texas at San Antonio, Dr. Christopher Wickham, says Germans survived because they were pragmatic.

Christopher Wickham: The *Adelsverein* are interested in negotiation. They are not interested in confrontation. They are interested in coexistence, and cooperation, with the native population.

Berit Mason: Unlike Anglos, most Germans honored treaties with Indians. Hard-nosed and determined, they were abstemious, despite their love of beer. They were anti-slavery, pro-education, and communities hosted neither paupers nor millionaires. Local elections lasted days. Everyone would vote. By the 1850s, German was the second dominant language, next to Spanish. Germans established early public schools, Lutheran churches, and German-language newspapers, even bringing intellectualism to outposts like Sisterdale. A landmark left by those German immigrants is San Antonio's oldest restaurant: the 101-year-old Schilo's – still serving the best hot split soup, anywhere. But Schilo's owner, Bill Lyons, says German food today is a tough sell.

Bill Lyons: The Germans, they eat a lot of real stout food, and a lot of people are more health-conscious today. So, we've added some salads, some lighter menu items, to try to appeal to people that are more health-conscious than they used to be.

Berit Mason: And like German food, German culture here has lost its preeminence.

Bill Lyons: We're right in the center of Hispanic America, and so – breakfast tacos seem to be popular everywhere.

Berit Mason: Daughter Elizabeth Lyons Houston wants millennials to walk in and demand a plate of bratwurst.

Liz Lyons: I see that San Antonio is in this very pivotal moment of change, probably the biggest since Hemisfair 1968. As a young professional, that was really exciting to me, to be a part of that. So, I saw an opportunity here. Millennials love authentic experiences and both restaurants, Schilo's and Casa Rio, give an authentic experience.

Berit Mason: They also love nitro coffee, which Houston has added to the menu, next to the root beer. After the two world wars, Texan Germans underwent a forced assimilation, pushing the culture deeper into the shadows.



Berit Mason: In the postwar years of the '50s and '60s, immigration picked up – then nosedived. In 1890, San Antonio was one-third German. San Antonio's 151-year-old Beethoven Hall is where those German settlers got together. It's home to the Beethoven 'Maennerchor,' a big backyard beer garden, a pub, and their German-American cultural center, the Kuest Haus, where they offer language lessons. President of Beethoven Hall, Claus Heide, moved to San Antonio in the 1960s. He almost wasn't president.

Claus Heide: And to that time, the director of the choir said, "Well, you know, the Beethoven is probably going to go down the drain, because there is not enough German immigration anymore. And it's hard to find singers, German, and it's hard to find members, and ..."

Berit Mason: But new members are coming from unusual places. Neighborhood locals, like Rebecca Rodriguez, are discovering the old Beethoven Hall. Enchanted by its charm, she enrolled her son in the 'Kinderchor.'

Rebecca Rodriguez: I thought, it would be good for him to learn other languages, for one. Because he does Spanish and English at school, and here, he comes and sings in German. But at the same time, I also thought it would be great to broaden his horizons, you know. Learn about new, different cultures, and different things. That way, one day, maybe I can take him to Germany, and he can talk to the people for me, 'cause I don't speak German either.

Berit Mason: Along with the beer.

Claus Heide: They expect it. You don't have it, they don't show up.

[DRINKING BEER SONG]

Berit Mason: Beethoven Hall is in Southtown, just south of an invigorated downtown. Newly gentrified, it's where the hipsters dine in cool cafes, tucked among neighborhood art galleries. So, suddenly, Beethoven Hall is part of a pub crawl!

[PUB DOOR OPENING AND CLOSING]

Berit Mason: Language lessons are given at the Kuest Haus, with students like Angelika Rocha, who yearn to connect with their German heritage.

Angelika Rocha: We are living in a time and society that a lot of people study Spanish. Why German? I used to speak German until I was four. Then I was not allowed to speak German, nor Spanish.

Berit Mason: Born in Bremen, she came to the U.S. with her parents when she was a tot. But she wants to speak German when she visits family.

Angelika Rocha: The toughest part is the article 'the.'

Berit Mason: She pounds away at her 'der, die, das' just to forge the connection. There are about 16 Texas German organizations of various kinds, but Beethoven Hall's Diane Kriese says clubs that don't own a property, struggle.

Diane Kriese: And because of it, they never seem to have enough money to do anything. They are not as cohesive, they don't work together. They don't really do much to get new members. And they are fading away. And I think that having this place – and the responsibility – we really have to have garden events to make money to cover the bills.

Berit Mason: So, having a physical foothold is critical to keeping the clubs going.

Diane Kriese: I think it definitely is.

Berit Mason: Austin's German-Texan Heritage Society are owners of an elegant, two-story building, blocks from downtown's state capitol.

Christopher Markley: Because we have an historical building in the middle of Austin, which is unique. Because we have gardens and it's a beautiful site, you know, people are drawn here.

Berit Mason: German settlers built the white brick building in 1857. Director Christopher Markley says they inherited it from a doctor, along with his 27 Dachshunds. But vice president Janis Gonser says their 1,000-person membership had dwindled to about 375.

Janis Gonser: I have a tech background, so for me it was very interesting. And I said, “I have a specific skill set.” So, we created a new website, which was needed, we went through that. And then we started doing more regular campaigns on social media, and we were able to capture a lot more of the younger crowds.

Berit Mason: Markley says their search for new members was on, expanded to the most unlikely types.

Markley: So, one night, we had “Rock Oktoberfest,” which was at Mohawk, which is a heavy metal bar right next to us. And then we had our traditional Oktoberfest, and then we invited Cheer Up Charlies to come along. So, each group or each member next to our location got to play with us and we got to play with them in Oktoberfest. And I call it “Expanding beyond our walls.” Let’s reach out to the communities, to include them, and get different demographics. At our Oktoberfest, you will see the normal, traditional Lederhosen and Dirndls. At the same time, you will see someone with Lederhosen that is a punk rocker with a mohawk on his head, and tattooed.

Berit Mason: Today, they’ve topped 500 members, which includes Germans!

Markley: Actually, a lot of the Germans that are around the Austin area, are actually living in Austin because of the high-tech community. A lot of them are expats, and they are actually at the University of Texas as well, ‘cause we have a lot of colleges around here. And so either they are here for work, they are coming for the university, or their parents migrated over.

Berit Mason: But history is fixed, and one group that cannot grow – no matter what they do – is the Berlin United States Military Veterans Association. Jerry Bryson is membership director. In 1965, Bryson was part of the ‘Berlin Brigade’ – a U.S. Army private, he went to support the American presence in Cold War Germany.

Jerry Bryson: We were in a Cold War situation in Berlin, where it was mostly just – uh, you know, hoping something didn’t break out.

Berit Mason: His group of Cold War veterans could soak up the sun in Hawaii or Bermuda – but instead they make a pilgrimage to Berlin, honoring those who served, to reunite and reminisce.

Jerry Bryson: Being assigned to the Berlin Brigade was a – uh, kind of a plum assignment. But the biggest challenge, as far as membership director, is not only finding members, but retaining them.

Berit Mason: About 2,800 veterans have belonged to the association.

Jerry Bryson: Seems like the younger generation are just not the joiners like the ones from World War II, and Korean era, and Vietnam era.

Berit Mason: The challenge that Glenn Guettler faces, of age and attrition. Today, they have less than 800.

Jerry Bryson: Our membership eligibility ended in ‘96. And of course, there is no one else assigned to the Berlin brigade after that era, anyway.

Berit Mason: One day the association will end, simply a function of Father Time. One German organization that *is* growing is the New Braunfels Wurstfest, a 50-year-old, 10-day festival, begun to promote local sausage makers. Attendance is about 200,000 people.

Denzel: Hang out, eat food, have a drink, relax. Love the beer garden atmosphere because it forces you to meet people, and they interact with everybody, so ...

[ROUGH SONG]

Berit Mason: Mason Etheridge wears his light blue and white Oktoberfest costume.

Mason Etheridge: Yeah, I actually bought it at a Halloween store, but the outfit itself – it is the traditional Bavarian flag.

Berit Mason: Oktoberfest and Christmas markets are the rare occasion you'll see German costumes in Texas, but at Wurstfest you'll also see the German traits of order and discipline.

Millennial 1: Beer is, is, probably a major part of it, but there is a lot of community.

Millennial 2: And this is very – sort of disciplined. It's not, you know, rowdy or ...

Millennial 3: Yes, what I also like is that everybody is here just to have a good time. No bad vibes. It is more communal and friendly.

Millennial 2: Very civilized.

Millennial 3: Yes.

Berit Mason: Wurstfest Grand Opa Michael Meeks says, while raising money for charities, organizers support American-German relations.

Michael Meeks: Our founder, Prince Carl, his grave was in disrepair. And so we collected funds here in New Braunfels and went over there and fixed that up, permanently. In fact, we just took over a plaque and finished off that project about two weeks ago.

Berit Mason: Wow, I just think that that is just a marvelous way to keep up a friendship.

Michael Meeks: Yeah, and we're going back over there next April.

Berit Mason: New Braunfels is named for Braunfels, Germany.

Michael Meeks: In the 150th, back in 1995, we invited 150 people from Braunfels here. And this year, we hope that – that we have 175 go over to Braunfels.

Berit Mason: Just north of San Antonio, New Braunfels was founded by Prince Carl of Solms of the *Adelsverein*. The tidy little town is part of the 'German belt,' a crescent of German settlements in central Texas. From these sprung today's singing groups and heritage clubs. 2018 Wurstfest president Eric Couch says the state's growing Hispanic population doesn't rival German culture. It helps it.

Eric Couch: I am actually a little unique: My father was German, my mother was Hispanic. That is a good blend of what goes on here in New Braunfels itself. But as our world becomes

a smaller place, I think we are going to continue to see more of that blending. Not just in the German and Hispanic culture, but in lots of cultures.

Berit Mason: Opa Cesar Castilleja says Hispanics and Germans enjoy an old bond.

Cesar Castilleja: The music ties us very close together. You have the polka, so you have the conjunto. They are very similar. You can ask any of the musicians here that play accordion, play the trumpet – they are going to say, “Well, I can play conjunto, but I can also play polka.”

Berit Mason: But not everyone is happy about such blending. Fourth-generation German Dorothy Schneider says the German language has disappeared from her town.

When were you speaking German with your neighbor? About 15 years ago, or so?

Dorothy Schneider: Uh, no, 30 years ago.

Berit Mason: Has New Braunfels changed that much?

Dorothy Schneider: Yes, ma’am, because they said New Braunfels was the prettiest part of Texas, and everybody came to New Braunfels. [LAUGHS]

Berit Mason: Do you like the changes or not?

Dorothy Schneider: No!

Berit Mason: Back at Beethoven Hall, leader of the ‘Damenchor’ Diane Kriese says German dominance has been toppled. But that’s okay, because the new majority Hispanics help make up for it.

Diane Kriese: Some were in the military, so they have a link to Germany. And others just live in the area and enjoy coming here. The Germans have always been friendly with Mexico.

Berit Mason: To keep the Damenchor singing, they put out the welcome mat, to whomever is interested.

Diane Kriese: We had a Chinese doctor for a few years, but her practice got busy. But she enjoyed singing, and was happy to be with us.

Berit Mason: On a cool October night, Joseph Huntington and Stefanie Godfrey relax at the old Beethoven Hall pub. They live in Southtown, among the Bauhaus lofts and hotspots. But they enjoy the cozy respite of this place, with its dark wood paneling, neon Schlitz signs, and photos of stern German forebears.

[PUB NOISES]

Male pubber 1: I mean, it’s a place where – if you are a member – you get to keep your stein here.

Male pubber 2: Really good service. Once a month, there is always some kind of festivity going on.

Male pubber 1: Mostly, it's kind of like your *Cheers*. You come down and you just talk about random stuff of the day. You'll see a lot of the same members.

Female pubber: We were at a Happy Hour across the street and somebody says, "Oh, there is a German beer club across the street!" And my husband says, "We are going to check this out before we go." And they said, "You can be a member," and he was like, "I always wanted to be a member of a beer club!"

Berit Mason: These aren't corporate franchises, measuring beer by the thimble-full. Bobby Johnson says Beethoven Hall has meaning.

Berit Mason: And why do you think it is important to keep German heritage alive?

Bobby Johnson: Because they help build San Antonio. They are very important to us in the Hill Country, too.

Berit Mason: They were such a dominant influence.

Bobby Johnson: Absolutely. Yes, ma'am. From the 1850s forward, they have the best beer in the whole world. The Germans do.

Berit Mason: Art Weissler's great-great-grandfather came to San Antonio from Munich. He and his wife visit Germany every year.

Can you explain Americans' attachment to the old country?

Art Weissler: I think it's because the way the world is getting so crazy now. Going back to the old country where they are more simple, and they are not all involved in materialism, like in America. Go into the small towns and they are still like it was way back in the early 1900s.

Berit Mason: And that's where you like to go?

Art Weissler: Oh, I love it.

Berit Mason: Weissler, Johnson, and misty-eyed Americans are looking for something, a search that this German Beethoven Hall Christmas market vendor understands.

German vendor: America does not have its own culture, as such, so the different people hold onto a little bit of the old culture because they need something to associate with. That is how it is. People dwell on memories of how it was in the old country a long time ago.

Berit Mason: German transplant Joseph Wirwal says sometimes, it's more Germanic over here.

Joseph Wirwal: I think, over here, you are more German than in Germany. I am also in the choir in the German working club and we start our meetings with the German and American national anthem. You never find this in Germany.

Berit Mason: Glenn Guettler's Texas German Society may struggle to attract new members – but it doesn't mean a complete loss of interest. His sons and grandsons download German language lessons, they explore their ancestry online, and are planning a trip to see the ancestral home. So, what do 20th-century social clubs selling 19th-century history contribute to the 21st century? They help Americans understand where they come from.

Sophienburg Lady: Finding out about the secret past is exciting, you know? They get to plug into something larger than themselves.

Berit Mason: And these jolly groups sell something missing in today's technocratic world. *Gemütlichkeit* – friendship, warmth, and hospitality, needed by any people, of any ethnic group, in any century.

[MUSIC PLAYS]

Berit Mason: Next door to the symbol of Texas independence, the Alamo, is the historic Menger Hotel, built by those determined 19th-century German Texans. Descendent Nancy Menger Draves says the German influence has ebbed, but their unmatched fortitude helped establish San Antonio – and for that, they are remembered. She reads a letter written by her great-grandfather, immigrant Doctor Rudolph Menger, dated October 26, 1869.

Draves: I have to empty a bottle of wine in hopes that Germany and the United States will exchange ideas. I think that it would be to the good of both countries. Mountains and valleys won't come together, but people do.

The Big Pond - A U.S.-German Listening Series is brought to you by the Year of German American Friendship (Deutschlandjahr USA), a comprehensive collaborative initiative funded by the German Federal Office, implemented by the Goethe-Institut, with support from the Federation of German Industries (BDI).

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