



THE BIG POND

A US-GERMAN
LISTENING SERIES

Texas German – Auf Wiedersehen to a Dialect

by Guido Meyer

Woman at Wurstfest: Hi! Welcome to New Braunfels! We're here at Wurstfest!

Guido Meyer: Excuse me?! Where are we? And what is going on here? Well, you heard correctly. We're in New Braunfels. The name gives it away: it's a mix of German and English. The old German city of Braunfels, deep in the German state of Hesse, was simply added a 'New' – same as New York or New Orleans. And so the German immigrants in the 19th century had their American, their New Braunfels.

[MUSIC AT WURSTFEST]

Band leader: ... this actually is our 29th consecutive year of performing here, at Wurstfest!

Guido Meyer: And this is what New Braunfels is most famous for: its so-called Wurstfest. There you have it – another Texas German word. Its translation into English would be something like 'sausage festival.' 'Wurstfest,' however, does sound German, although such a word doesn't exist in the German language. It's Texas German.

Benno Engel: It's sad. I hate to see it die out because it really meant so much to the people here in Texas, learning Texas German, and it is so unique but it will die out. Yes it will.

[INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC]

Guido Meyer: It's called Hill Country Texas. Houston is 300 miles away, Dallas 400. The biggest city in the area is San Antonio. Whereas San Antonio's roots are deeply Mexican, the Hill Country Texas area between New Braunfels and Fredericksburg is Texas' German heritage. The first German settlers came here in the middle of the 19th century. And their offspring is still around. The proof is written on the houses on both sides of Main Street, Fredericksburg. They carry signs saying 'Sozialhaus,' 'Ausländerbiergarten' or 'Auer Haus.' Again – those words sound German, but they don't really exist in German.

Benno Engel: If you grew up in Fredericksburg, for example, you speak Fredericksburg German. If you grew up in New Braunfels, you speak New Braunfels German. There are different words for different things depending on which community you grew up in. But we all within that community spoke the same German and understood each other well.

Guido Meyer: Benno Engel lives in New Braunfels. His first name sounds German, his last name sounds German. Benno Engel is an American though. He's sitting at the restaurant Krause's Biergarten on Castell Avenue in New Braunfels. Krause's Biergarten – another one of those made up German-sound-a-like names. Benno Engel used to be a teacher in New Braunfels – a German teacher, of course.

Benno Engel: I taught at New Braunfels high school until 2005.

Guido Meyer: Alton Rahe, from New Braunfels as well, remembers.

Alton Rahe: Mr. Engel was a high school teacher.

Benno Engel: Then I retired and went back for another four years before I retired again.

Alton Rahe: He tried to emphasize German to the students in class, at the beginning of the school.

Benno Engel: I always taught the correct German, not the Texas German.

Alton Rahe: He says, "Mein Name ist Herr Engel." So later on they all said, "So this is Mr. Herr Engel."

Guido Meyer: There are differences between those two types of German, the 'correct German' and the 'Texas German.' The main one probably is: Texas German doesn't really exist. Or let's say: it didn't exist until the 1850s. Texas German was made up – made up by those people that came to the Hill Country Texas area and settled down here.

Benno Engel: Texas German is a combination of many different dialects in Germany, because the people that came here were from many different areas of Germany and Austria and Switzerland. We never had a pure German accent from over there because they were all mixed together. Some people spoke some Hessisch along with something from Bavaria or something from Austria or Switzerland, so all of the Germans kind of combined here.

Guido Meyer: So not only did the immigrants bring their own local words and slangs with them. They also intermingled their version of German with the languages already being spoken in the Hill Country Texas area, says Benno Engel.

Benno Engel: And then also – since we were cut off from Germany completely once the settlers came here in 1845 – we started mixing in English and Spanish also into the language. So many times we conjugated an English verb as a German verb. So we say things like 'aufgepickt' instead of saying, "We picked them up," "Ich hab' meine Freunde beim Flughafen aufgepickt." Or we wouldn't even use the word 'Flughafen.' We would say "Ich hab' meine Freunde am Airport aufgepickt." So we have all kind of our own little dialectical versions within the German language.

Guido Meyer: There is no text book for Texas German, no dictionary. Either you know the language or you don't. And the only way to learn it is to listen – listen when your parents and grandparents are talking. Because they still know the language. They invented it.

Benno Engel: It was all just by ear. There were no grammar rules taught by the parents. They just simply spoke it with their children, and the children learned it that way. So however good the parents were with grammar is how good their children were.

Guido Meyer: But even Texas German, a dialect in itself, has its dialects. A visitor who travels through Hill Country Texas and who goes back and forth between Fredericksburg and New Braunfels will run into different variations of Texas German, into different dialects.

Benno Engel: We can communicate with each other, but we do have different words. E.g. the word for a 'thorn,' here in New Braunfels the people all use the word 'Dorn.' In Fredericksburg they say 'Weggel.' Nobody has ever heard the word 'weggel' except for in the Fredericksburg area. So we have to explain it to our friends that I stepped into a weggel – it's a German word that we made up in Fredericksburg.

Guido Meyer: A German word that was made up in Fredericksburg. Or in New Braunfels. That pretty much describes Texas German at its best. Words sound like German – but they are not. They actually don't even exist – except for in this region where people talk as they please.

Benno Engel: The rolled R in German, the guttural R, we don't do that here in Texas. We use the R more to the front of our mouth, so therefore the words don't quite resonate the same as in German. 'Grrreece' – we don't do that here. We simply say 'Greece.'

[THE CHICKEN DANCE PLAYING AT WURSTFEST]

Benno Engel: I'm a member of the organization Wurstfest association. I'm a former 'Großer Opa' also which is the 'Spaßmeister' or Fun Master. 'Großer Opa,' 'unser Großer Opa.' We call ourselves the 'Opas.' It's our Texas version of Oktoberfest, yes. We were trying to figure out something for the tourism in New Braunfels. So we wanted to cut a figure out. Some draw to get people from San Antonio and Houston and Austin and Dallas to come to our nice, beautiful village here. We tried to figure out what do we really do well that other places don't do. And we suddenly realized we had 18 different sausage factories in New Braunfels. And so we called it our Wurstfest. And we've already had lots of plays of words on this. We are the Wurst 'worst' festival in town, it's the 'worst' is the best and so forth.

Guido Meyer: Benno Engel turned from teacher to 'Großer Opa'. With the Wurstfest New Braunfels has a yearly attraction that tries to keep the Texas German spirit alive. Germany is always connected with sausages – but these are local sausages, Texas sausages. The spirit of the festival is provided by the German heritage, transformed into the local language.

Benno Engel: That's an advertising campaign. So we say, "Sprechen Sie Food, Sprechen Sie Fun, Sprechen Sie Music?" So that's still our little hook where you add a little German in with our English, and we try to keep the culture alive.

[THE CHICKEN DANCE PLAYING AT WURSTFEST]

Guido Meyer: Wurstfest started out in 1961. That was a couple of generations ago. Things were a little different in New Braunfels those days, as Benno Engel recalls.

Benno Engel: We were at that time still a very German community. Our population at that time was about 13,000 of which about 9000 were direct descendants of the Germans who came here. Since that time, however, New Braunfels has grown to be a town of 80,000 so the old 9000 are a much smaller percentage of the community. But we still keep the heritage idea, the German angle alive in our Wurstfest.

Guido Meyer: New Braunfels has grown since the 1960s. But the number of German descendants has not. The bigger New Braunfels becomes, the less important the German heritage becomes – and that includes the Texas German.

Benno Engel: The language will probably die out within the next 25 years to 30 years. It is no longer taught at home. My generation is probably the last generation which will speak Texas German.

[INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC PLAYING]

Evelyn Weinheimer: Wir sind in Friedrichsburg, Texas. Es ist eine kleine deutsche Stadt.

Guido Meyer: Evelyn Weinheimer says 'Friederichsburg' when talking about her home town Fredericksburg. The 74-year-old lady works as a historian and curator at the Pioneer Museum in Fredericksburg, right on Main Street.

Evelyn Weinheimer: 1840 waren das 1200 Deutsche hier, die von Deutschland kamen. Ich bin die fünfte oder sechste Generation.

Guido Meyer: In 1840, there were 1200 Germans in Fredericksburg – much less than in neighboring New Braunfels, but enough to put their stamps on the new born city. She is the fifth or sixth generation now, depending on how you count it, she says.

Evelyn Weinheimer: My parents and my grandparents always talked to me in German. But when I started school here in Fredericksburg in 1950, we weren't allowed to speak German in class. We had to learn English. And therefore some grandparents and great-grandparents said, "Well, if our children are not allowed to speak German at school any longer, we will stop doing so at home as well." They still talked to each other in German, but not to the kids.

Guido Meyer: This is why the younger generation is not carrying the torch of Texas German – because no one is teaching them. So for Evelyn Weinheimer, the history of Texas German has been told: German is dead, she says. And it won't come back.

Evelyn Weinheimer: Deutsch ist tot hier. Das kommt nicht wieder, ja.

Guido Meyer: Although – there's still an exception. The German tradition and heritage is alive when it comes to music. Believe it or not – polka is still on the air in New Braunfels!

Evelyn Weinheimer: Alles, was noch in der Radioprogramm ist, ist Polkaparty von acht bis neun in the morning. So I wonder if some of these old Germans are dancing polka around their breakfast table.

[POLKA MUSIC, INTRODUCTION HOST, POLKA SONG]

Roy Haag: I'm Roy Haag. We have the German internet show which is called NBGermanMusic.com. We play music from Europe and from United States and of course Texas.

We call it German music Texas style. Almost on every show we try to play at least three, maybe four New Braunfels bands. At one time we had 11 German Polka bands in New Braunfels. And we try to play something from the old country, across the sea, across the big pond.

[POLKA MUSIC PLAYING]

Guido Meyer: 89% of Roy Haag's listeners do not understand German. So even though Roy and his colleagues are playing German music, they don't waste any time on mentioning German song titles. Their listeners simply wouldn't understand. So the hosts translate the titles and leave the rest to the German music.

Roy Haag: I grew up speaking nothing but German out on a farm half way between New Braunfels where we are at now and San Antonio. All the neighbors spoke German. And then Mom and Dad said 'you are going to school next year – your first grade teacher might not be able to speak German.' And she couldn't. She couldn't even say 'ja.' So they taught me in English in one year. And I'm glad they did. And with a name like Haag I worked real hard to lose my German accent.

Guido Meyer: That he did. But neither did Roy Haag lose his affiliation to the German culture nor to the German music nor to the German language. He even did his own research and came up with ways how to handle that rather complicated language.

Roy Haag: Through the years I made up my own rules, like if there's a vowel at the end, pronounce it, if there is two vowels together, don't pronounce the first one, pronounce the second one. The big looking B is a double-s and so on. I've kind of mastered most of the words. I have trouble with the Bavarian language. I heard the Germans have the same problem.

Guido Meyer: They do. But – that is another story.

[POLKA MUSIC PLAYING]

Guido Meyer: Roy Haag's family lived throughout the years, decades and centuries when Texas German was big in New Braunfels. It was an ongoing exchange between the two languages – spoken by the German settlers and their offspring, understood by the local population. But these days, Texas German is on the decline.

Roy Haag: Because we lose words. For instance, in New Braunfels, for some reason, the New Braunfels Germans lost the word for 'gate,' 'fence.' Now those are everyday words that we shouldn't have lost. But why we lost them, I have no idea. 'Mach die Gate zu.' It's supposed to be 'Tor' which is 'gate.' I think because we just don't use it enough. If you don't lose it, you lose it.

Guido Meyer: Here's the problem again: because of World War I and II, parents and grandparents stopped passing on their Texas German knowledge to their children and grandchildren. Some of them still do learn German at school – but that's the real German, the complicated German, the boring German. The tradition of Texas German is fading away. And Roy Haag thinks he made out another reason for this process:

Roy Haag: Marriages. For instance, when we had the German restaurant, we had a lot of Mexicans come up and visit us and sit there for hours and enjoying the food and drinks and stuff. Almost every group that came up, one of those has married a purely Mexican who didn't speak German. So it's just a question of time before it disappears.

Guido Meyer: So the melting pot character of the state of Texas itself encourages the mix up of different cultures. But if one culture is weaker in numbers than another one, then the weaker ones loses and dies out. Spanish is on the rise, Texas German is going away. And so is Roy's polka show. For this week.

Roy Haag: Usually what I say is, "Thank you for tuning in today and I hope that you enjoyed the show, auf Wiedersehen and god bless."

[POLKA MUSIC PLAYING]

Alton Rahe: I played in a German polka band for 39 years. We sang German and all those sorts of things. So we tried to promote German in that sense. We tried – but in time it's just a losing battle.

Guido Meyer: Alton Rahe likes polka as well. And he likes history. Being retired now, he works as a volunteer at the Sophienburg Museum & Archives in New Braunfels.

Alton Rahe: I spoke German. But I never did learn to read or write it that well. So I just learned to speak it at home. You speak, you repeat, and so it becomes part of your language. My daughter who learned a little more German, a little more reading and writing ... so one time we were at a function where there's some German writing on the wall. I said, "Nina, I can't read that," and she said, "Well, I can read it, but I don't know what I'm reading." So between the two of us, she read it aloud, when I heard her read it I said, "Ja, I know what you're reading." So between the two of us, we got the job done. [LAUGHING]

Guido Meyer: That's what Texas German is all about. One party knows its German, the other party knows its English – and when they meet, Texas German emerges.

Alton Rahe: Initially the Germans started substituting a few English words into their conversation mainly to let the people know that they knew some English. Now the English are trying to show a little German, so they're dumping in a few German words. "Mit einem kurzen Ansatz ist er auf sein Horse gejump't und ist die Rout' runtergepratet." I played a lot of dance music and a lady called me next morning and she was, "Oh, wir haben das so enjoyed!" But we all understood each other, so didn't mean any harm. We were conversing.

[POLKA MUSIC PLAYING]

Alton Rahe: I was born in a small community, about 15, 20 miles from here, close to Canyon Lake. We children conversed in German all the time, so that's where part of the transition took place. Some children in school couldn't speak German, so we started conversing in English. But in time I'd say the language started fading. One particular word I keep thinking about my son – says, "Oh das ist schrecklich." That word he just picked up and everything not totally right, "Das is schrecklich."

Guido Meyer: The more American families moved to Hill Country Texas, the harder it became for German to survive. And then, again, came World War II. The Nazis and their war discredited the German language for generations to come. And it probably will never recover.

Conny Krause: Mein Name ist Conny Krause. My ancestors came from not too far from Magdeburg. There are a lot of farmers. And that part of my mother's family came in the 1880s. They spoke the dialect they spoke in Germany. When they came over, they brought that dialect with them. And because especially the people that live in the rural areas, they kept those words, they kept the dialect, and then as they raised their children, that's what they taught

their children. Because, like, most people say 'Eigelb' for the yolk of an egg, my mother would say 'Dotter.'

Guido Meyer: Conny and Michael Krause work for the German Tex Inheritance Society which is based in Austin. And that implies being the German Santa Claus once a year – or, as Michael calls him: Saint Niklas.

Michael Krause: The outfit I have – the wife made the costume, and it is a dark red outfit that is a long robe that has the equivalent of a coon skin appearance on it and a hood over the head that has the coon skin apparent fur on it. That's the local Texas wildlife.

Guido Meyer: Texas wildlife on a German Saint Niklas. Here you have it again: the Texas German – in the costumes, in the traditions and in the language.

Michael Krause: I talk to them in German. We teach them the little prayer that is, "Ich bin rein, mein Herz ist klein, soll niemand wohnen dadrein als Jesus allein."

Guido Meyer: And the other 11 months of the year? The Krauses are farmers. That's the difference between Austin and New Braunfels: New Braunfels has the space and also the time for farming, for running your own property – and for taking care of that special accent you grew up with.

Conny Krause: My husband uses the name 'Kerl' when he talks about a guy. I would use 'Mann.' He uses 'Kerl.' 'Kerl' means like 'guy.' He would say like, "Hast Du den Kerl gewissen?" And I would say "Weißt Du den Mann?" We throw in words that our grandparents or great grandparents used. But if we go to Germany lot of times they are not going to know exactly what you're talking about. And if we go to different areas of Germany, they always think we're a German from a different area of Germany on vacation.

Guido Meyer: Maybe even a German from a different time. In rural New Braunfels and in rural Fredericksburg, sometimes it's hard to keep track – with technology, with time, and with the language that's commonly spoken today. Which is not Texas German anymore. Neither in Germany nor in Hill Country Texas.

Conny Krause: It's 150 years old. It's the actual German that our ancestors came over with. And it's generically not spoken in Germany anymore.

Michael Krause: I think a lot of the folks that are older generation folks, still speak that, but it's correct: they are slowly getting up in years and passing away. And children these days are not learning that particular dialect anymore that we had quite as much.

[INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC PLAYING]

Guido Meyer: Back to Fredericksburg where we meet Laverne Boos. Laverne used to be a nursery school teacher. Today she sometimes steps by at the Visitor Information Center in downtown Fredericksburg.

Laverne Boos: My great-great-grandparents left the city of Koblenz in Germany in 1846. I am the 5th generation living here in Fredericksburg now. I speak the German we speak here in Fredericksburg. Ich spreche das Deutsch, wie wir hier in Friedrichsburg sprechen. I used to work at a kindergarten for four years. The younger the children were, the faster they picked up on the German language. And they still haven't forgotten it: little songs, the numbers, the

colors and so on. When they see me on the street these days, they always say: “How are you, Misses Boos?” – “Wie geht’s, Frau Boos?” Das wissen sie noch.

Guido Meyer: That memory and that experience is on the bright side. But there’s another side, especially in Fredericksburg. Businesses have realized that there’s still a market in addressing the German population and the German heirs.

Laverne Boos: So many strangers are settling down in Fredericksburg nowadays. They want their business to have a German name. But they themselves don’t understand German. They don’t know much about this town or about the Germans who live here. They are just using a German name for their store to make people walk in and buy what they are trying to sell.

Guido Meyer: And that is something Laverne Boos doesn’t appreciate at all. Yes, she likes tradition. But they have to be real, not fake. One example: the furniture store Auer Haus on Main Street, right in the heart of Fredericksburg, the main shopping mile. The name is a play of words: Auer is spelled A-U-E-R. Auer is an old German last name, and also many towns, lakes and rivers in Germany carry that name. But of course it sounds like the English genitive of ‘us’ – ‘our.’ Funny enough: ‘Haus’ is spelled differently in German and in English, but it’s pronounced the same: house. So it’s Auer Haus in the middle of Main Street.

Laverne Boos: The people who run Auer Haus are not here from Fredericksburg. They are strangers.

[BAND PLAYING AT WURSTFEST]

Guido Meyer: So this is where we are today. Americans who dare to move to Hill Country Texas, to New Braunfels or to Fredericksburg, are considered strangers – strangers in their own country. At least by the old Germans who don’t want to watch their tradition and their Texas German fading away.

[BAND PLAYING AT WURSTFEST]

Benno Engel: But the heritage or the cultural aspect is still alive and possibly will even grow because of all of the different multimedia ways of testing our DNA – we have all these different things like 23 and Me and Ancestry.com and MyHeritage.com, and people find out, “Oh, I have a lot of German blood in my system.” We are a melting pot here in the United States. So many people will say “You know, I’m one third German, I’m one third Native American, Indian, I’m one third Italian,” and so forth. And they walk in the gate at Wursthfest and they all use the one phrase they know, “Guten Tag, I am German.” So the cultural end of it I think is going to stay alive because of the diversity.

Guido Meyer: Some linguists estimate that there are only between six and eight thousand people left who still speak Texas German. And no new Texas Germans are added – which means this strange but funny dialect will be extinct by 2040. Until then, the annual Wursthfest in New Braunfels seems like the last hoorah of the Texas German.

Alton Rahe: Nice German Wurst. My mother in law would say ‘Wurst,’ not ‘Wurscht.’ That’s what our family would say, ‘Wurscht.’

Benno Engel: As we would say in Texas German: Mach’s gut!

Alton Rahe: And as long as you understand each other – so what. We keep going.

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