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FEATURED

## Local linguists look to save Texas German dialect from dying

By Jordan Gass-Poore' New Braunfels Herald-Zeitung  
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Bill and Diane Moltz in front of their beer stein and mug collection Monday afternoon.

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The Texas Hill Country shares secrets and mysteries of the state's varied past that some may overlook as they drive down Highway 16.

It took an outsider, native German Hans Boas, to clear the brush off a state-wide dialect that has been forgotten by academics and researchers for decades.

Boas, a University of Texas at Austin Germanic linguistics professor, started the Texas German Dialect Project in September 2001 after stopping in Fredericksburg on his way from California to Austin for work.

"It was pure chance," he said.

While eating lunch, Boas said he overheard a group of elderly men speaking in an "interesting sounding German," one infused with English words and phrases pronounced with a German accent, and others that sounded like the language but were not quite what he was used to as a native speaker.

The dialect Boas heard was "Texas German," which developed when German emigrants settled across the South Central part of the state throughout the mid-to-late 1800s.

Their descendants who continue to speak the language, having been influenced by English and modern technology, may be the last generation to do so.

That is why Boas is working to document the dialect through digital archives of audio and textual materials, including in-person interviews with native speakers of Texas German, before it is extinct by what he predicts to be 2050.

"It's essential that we have some type of record to honor these immigrants," he said, adding that no substantial research has been conducted on the Texas German dialect for nearly four decades.

The word "Stinkkatze," which literally translates to stinking cat or skunk in English, is unique to Texas German. This animal does not exist in Germany.

New Braunfels resident Diane Moltz said that airplanes had not yet been invented when her German ancestors immigrated to Texas. When they were invented, Texas German speakers used the word "Luftschiff," or airship, instead of what is now the standard German "Flugzeug."

“Our ancestors spoke pretty good German, but as time went on and new products and so forth came into their lives there was no German word for it, so they would kind of make up this word and typically it was pretty weird,” said Moltz’s husband Bill.

So far, Boas said he has interviewed 406 people, including the Moltzes, and will continue this fall in Seguin and San Angelo, as well as continuing to raise awareness through conferences in San Diego, Germany and Iceland.

“Ideally, I’d like to continue to do research for another 20 to 25 years,” said Boas. “... It’s important to understand how a significant group of immigrants came to Texas and how they evolved into Texans over time.”

The disappearance of New Braunfels resident Bill Moltz’s great-great-grandfather in Germany may be reminiscent of what he and some estimated 8,000 others are experiencing with the loss of the Texas German dialect.

Both examples may be the result of a changing time that only persists through oral histories.

Moltz’s ancestor Peter had sold all of his belongings in his home country to bring himself, three sons and wife to property purchased in Texas.

Before Peter left, he travelled across the mountains to see the daughter from his first marriage that continued to live in the city where he had started a business, which she now manages with her husband.

Peter knew the chances were slim that he was ever going to see his daughter again because of the time it took to travel from country-to-country and its expenses.

But his journey back home to his family would prove to be worse.

Caught by an unexpected late spring snowstorm, Peter probably died from hypothermia. Or, so the story goes.

What is known for sure is that Peter’s legacy lives on in Moltz, the result of those family members who took a risk by going ahead with plans — made prior to their patriarch’s death — and sailed to Texas.

The Moltzes' first language was German, with Bill learning English from his older sister once she entered public school.

"My first memories of speaking English are after WWII," he said. "Before that, you could go shopping downtown (New Braunfels and Geronimo) and everyone spoke German."

As many as 100,000 people spoke Texas German during its height, Boas said. Fewer people began to speak the language after WWI because of anti-German sentiment, even though it continued to be spoken in some homes.

Diane Moltz said she learned German from her grandparents and parents, who continued to feel more comfortable speaking the language in their isolated Zorn community than English throughout their lives.

She remembered her grandmother's story about suddenly not being allowed to speak German in public school because of a federal law. When she could not help but speak the banned language, she was whipped and hit with a ruler on her hands.

"She said it was like all of a sudden it was like someone cut my tongue off," Moltz said.

Even though the Moltzes were not discriminated against for speaking German, they did not teach their children the language.

"We didn't really make that decision, it was just nobody spoke German where the kids were raised, in Buda," said Diane Moltz, adding that she and her husband would only speak the language at home when they wanted to discuss something privately. "It wasn't important to us at that time."

Bill Moltz added that their four children have expressed anger toward them because they did not teach them German. But they learned certain words and phrases in the language by visiting their grandparents during the summer.

Texas German and its ethnic connotations continue to be celebrated, honored and preserved through the work of Diane Moltz and her sister, who teach an annual summer German language camp for children, as well as adult language classes in January.

“My sister and I do everything we can to keep it from dying,” she said. “But it’s just going to happen. I think it’s one of those things that happens to every language. I think by the seventh generation, you can’t even find a trace of it anymore.”