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Folklore of the German-Wends in Texas

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ON THE MORNING of December 16, 1854, the immigration authorities at Galveston went out to meet the *Ben Nevis*, an English sailship, which had arrived in the harbor. On board they examined the papers and the physical condition of the five hundred Wends who had come to settle in Texas. Seventy-three had died since the band had left their homes in Germany; but since none on board were ill, the authorities permitted the settlers to land.¹

Although these Wends came from Prussia and Saxony, they were not Germans, but descendants of the Veneti of ancient times and the Polab Slavs of the Middle Ages. They called themselves Serbes or Serben, but to avoid confusion with the Serbs of the Balkan region, anthropologists named them Serbo-Lusatians or Wends.

These once numerous people had become more restricted in area until they were surrounded by Germanic tribes, and as far back as 1346 the Germanization of the Wends had begun. The Wendish culture was not related to that of the Germans. Their language resembled that of the Czechs, Poles, and Russians, and their dress, folklore, and literature were more Slavic than German. In 1815, however, the Congress of Vienna divided Lusatia, giving Upper Lusatia to Saxony and Lower Lusatia to Prussia. That was the beginning date of an organized and ruthless program launched by the Prussian government to make the Wends German.²

The most isolated part of the Lusatias, and thus the part that resisted Germanization longest, was the Spreewald, in Upper Lusatia, where the Spree River divides into hundreds of small streams, brooks, and marshes. Here the houses were built on islands, and flatboats furnished transportation during the warm months. The signboards gave the distances from one place to another not in kilometers, but in the time required for the pushing of the boat. In winter, when the canals froze, travel was by sled or skates. The occupation of the Wends here, as well as of those living outside the Spreewald, was mostly agriculture. They grew primarily vegetables and fruits, and in addition cared for domesticated animals and captured the eels which crowded the streams in the spawning season.

The folklore of the Serbo-Lusatians was among the richest in Europe, possibly as a result of their late conversion to Christianity. It was basically the same as that of other groups in Europe, but it was more varied. Included in their beliefs were remnants of the preceding centuries such as animism—the belief that all objects possess a natural life or soul—and the worship of early pagan deities, the personifications of forces of nature. Two of these gods were *Belbog* and *Cernobog*, the white and black gods standing for Life and Death, Light and Darkness, or the Good and Evil Spirits. As Christianity was slowly accepted by these people, this dualistic conception of good and evil was carried on, and the names were changed to God and Devil. The poetic temperament of the Slavic people molded their interpretation of life and nature into stories possessing great charm. These people also expressed themselves so freely in songs that the Wends had one song for every 150 people. The Poles were second in this respect, having one song for every 1,000 inhabitants.³

The only trait that the Wends and Germans held in common was religion. They were either Lutheran or Roman Catholic. Most of the Wends were Lutheran, but they were not united with the German Lutherans, because the writings of the

church had been translated into Wendish and the services were conducted in that language. However, when a parish needed a pastor, and there was a possibility that a portion of the congregation would accept a German clergyman, the government would immediately send a German-speaking pastor. By 1848 there were only thirty-six Wendish preachers left.

The Germans also discriminated against the Wends in economic activity. The Wends had little capital for investment, and any attempt on their part to improve their lot was opposed by the Germans. The majority had to labor with their hands, only a few being able to break through restrictions to become professional men.⁴

In 1840 the 140,000 people speaking Wendish were dissatisfied and unhappy; and when the king, the "Pope in Berlin," forced the union of the Lutheran and Reformed churches, emigration increased and approximately 580 Wends under the leadership of Pastor John Kilian left their homes for Texas.⁵

After landing in Galveston, they quickly took a boat to Houston, thus avoiding contact with the yellow fever epidemic in the Island City. From Houston they crossed the fertile prairie until they came to the Post Oaks near Rabb's Creek in what was then Bastrop County. For fifty cents an acre they got some of the worst land in Texas, whereas for fifty cents more they could have had the fertile prairie or bottom lands. They realized as much, but nearly all were completely without money. They had had little in Germany and after the trip they had even less. If they settled on the prairie, in addition to paying the higher price for land, they would have to buy wood for their houses, fences, and furnishings, whereas in the Post Oaks they could cut their own timber.⁶

Under these conditions it is not difficult to see why the Wends kept little European folklore. Much of their folklore had been associated with trees, animals, and land; so when they saw mesquite, scrub oak, and oleanders instead of birches,

chestnuts, and alders, and coyotes, skunks, possums, armadillos, scorpions, and tarantulas instead of the few wolves, rodents, and deer of Europe, the stories must have lost their meaning. And how could one possibly imagine that spirits and fairies would exist in the same woods with the wild Indians? Any costumes that were brought over were soon ruined by living under primitive conditions, and if there was money, it would be spent for land and not on new clothes.

As a result, the folklore which developed in Europe was almost completely lost in this new environment, with the exception of those customs which were practical and necessary, such as cures, planting and harvesting ways, and those practices associated with the church. This loss can probably be illustrated by an incident related by my grandmother. Once when her father was telling the children some stories, the mother interrupted the story-telling because she wanted the children to amount to something. By that she meant that she wanted them to work or learn something that would yield financial returns.⁷

Ironically, the Wends did not escape from German influence. There were Germans in Texas when the Wends landed in Galveston, and in 1860 a large migration of Germans brought many to the vicinity of Bastrop County. In this instance the church was the unifying factor for the two groups and fraternization and intermarrying resulted. The question of language was the only real problem, but the pastor and the people were bilingual, knowing both Wendish and German. Services were conducted in both German and Wendish until the 1920's, when German became the only language used in public worship.⁸ Folklore, as a result, is also a combination of the two cultures, and it is impossible to separate the German from the Wendish folklore.

The most common and rich category of German-Wendish folklore is that of the folk cures. My first memories of these cures go back to my childhood when I stepped on a nail. In the hot summers of central Texas going barefooted was taken

for granted, and along with the pleasure went the occasional injuries from grass burrs, mesquite thorns, and goatheads. A wound from a rusty nail, however, was a different matter, and in modern times the injured person would be punished further with tetanus shots. In the days when doctors were far away, and the transportation was slow, the remedies had to be applied at home. In this case the treatment was painless and effective. A piece of bacon rind was placed on the wound, and then the foot was set in a shallow pan containing turpentine. The combination of the two caused a drawing effect on the wound, and the strong odor of the turpentine had the desired psychological effect. This remedy was said to be good not only for wounds, but also for curing boils and chest colds. For curing the chest colds, strips of fatty bacon were sewn on a woolen cloth, saturated with turpentine, and then applied to the chest of the patient. The uncomfortable person had to sleep all night with the sticky, gooey, and evil-smelling poultice, but in the morning the cold was broken.

Our skins suffered not only from the sharp spines of the thorns, but also from the sharp stingers of the yellow jackets and bees, and the painful bites of the big red ants. These were unavoidable. Sometimes we asked for it by standing on the anthill while holding our breath, or by knocking down the yellow jackets' nest from underneath the eaves with fishing poles, but at other times we were innocently playing or picking cotton. If we were near my uncle, we would go to him for aid, and he would remove part of his chewing tobacco cud and place it on the bite. If we were closer to the house, we would run in to Mother who would then place a teaspoon of baking soda on the wound and pour on a little vinegar. It fizzed, and the cooling relief was felt immediately.

Not all the remedies were from materials in the home; occasionally the adults ordered some from Germany or bought them in town. One such medicine, called *Blitz Öl* (Lightning Oil), was, in my grandfather's opinion, the final word in phar-

maceutics. If any of the children hurt themselves, he would administer the medicine, even though it was hated and feared because its burn was worse than the pain of the original wound. One day, however, as Grandfather was splitting wood, the ax slipped and grazed his knee. Quickly he went onto the back porch, for this was his first opportunity to apply the medicine on himself. When he did so, the burning was as fierce as lightning and he gave the bottle a good heave into the pasture. Needless to say, the children were not sorry to see it go.⁹

If this medicine was not effective, there were others that were. The efficacy of one of them was proved by an injury suffered by my Great-grandfather Schneider. He was binding oats, and it took a great deal of skill to drive the four horses as well as operate the machine. In an attempt to obtain additional leverage, he wrapped the lines controlling the horses around his thumb; but on this occasion the trailing lines got caught in the big bull-wheel, and the thumb was wrenched off. All that held it was a bit of skin on one side. He went home, doused the thumb with *Heil Öl* (Heal Oil), and wrapped it snugly with cloth. The thumb healed, and he regained its complete use.¹⁰

A very popular cure was the *Lebenswecker* (Life Awakener), which was used to cure sore muscles, stiff joints, strokes, mastoids, and nearly everything else. It was a contraption the main part of which was a handle with a head the size of a fifty-cent piece made up of hundreds of little needles. The instrument was placed against the ailing part and the handle was drawn back and then released, causing the many small needles to prick the outer layer of the skin. No blood was drawn, but the areas would be red from irritation. Then a little *Lebenswecker Öl* was applied with a feather. The patient was forbidden to get his hands wet for the next three days.¹¹

The *Lebenswecker Öl* was also used internally, but with great care. A girl, by the name of Alma Leitco, was taken to

the Hamilton hospital with a severe case of locked bowels. Drs. Beecher, Chandler, and Cleveland tried everything but finally had to give the case up as hopeless. When Oswald Melde heard of it, he got some of the oil from Great-grandmother, went to Hamilton, and asked for permission to use the oil. The doctors said that since they had given up twelve hours earlier, they would consent. The father hesitated, but then gave his permission. Several years before, he had had a constipated mule and had tried the *Lebenswecker Öl*. A few minutes after the application, the mule had gotten up, jumped, and run, but then dropped dead. The only reason Mr. Leitco now gave permission was that he had prayed for help only fifteen minutes before, and he believed that Oswald Melde was the answer to the prayer. Nevertheless, Mr. Leitco went home. Three drops of the oil were mixed with the yolk of an egg and administered orally. Several hours later the girl passed a tapeworm thirty feet long, and when the father returned she was on her way to recovery.¹²

Some of the cures that interested me, but were not used by my immediate family, were the numerous teas. The older women in the community placed great faith in them. For general health, tea made from linden, rose, or camellia leaves was good. As a specific remedy *Schreck Tee* (Fright Tea) was among the most popular. Anyone who was startled or shocked could get sure relief from a drink of this tea. About three heads of dried *Schreck Kräuter* (Fright Herb) were boiled for about thirty minutes in two cups of water. The patient drank the brew and went to bed, enjoying complete relaxation. The part of the plant that was boiled resembled the blooms of a thistle. It was not purchased, but usually grown in the corner of the garden, and after it was dried, stored in a fruit jar.¹³ Some people say that for added effect, the patient should take part of the object that startled him and boil it along with the tea. If it was a dog, he should take one of the hairs, place it in a tablespoon, roast it, and add it to the tea.¹⁴

Few of the cures are as unpleasant as the cure for bed-wetting. The ingredients are several newly born mice without hair. These are chopped up (without being cleaned), fried, and fed to the child. To keep the child ignorant of what he was eating, the cook would chop up steak in a similar way and give it to the others.¹⁵

Unpleasant in odor was the preventive measure used especially during epidemics. Asafetida was carried either in a bag around the neck or in the pocket. It was used to ward off the germs. Because it was an evil-smelling resin, the nickname for it was *Teufel's Dreck*.¹⁶

Present in several of the cures is the element of mysticism. It is most difficult to find a complete recitation of one of the curing verses. Most seem to mention the name of Jesus and the number three. Here is one used to cure bleeding:

In meines Jesu Garten
Stehen drei bäumelein
Eins heist . . .
Das zweite heist . . .
Das dritte heist . . .
Blut halt stille.

In my Jesus' garden
There are three trees
One is called . . .
The second is called . . .
The third is called . . .
Blood stop.

The bleeding would stop almost immediately, but this help should only be used in extreme cases, because while this verse would stop the bleeding, the healing of the wound would be slow.¹⁷

Since there was also a verse to promote healing of the wound, possibly these two should have been used together. The only line known is: "Est stehn drei blumen auf Christi grab . . ." ("There are three flowers on Christ's grave . . ."). Many of the mystical cures of the Wends centered around Mutter Spielert, who lived in Giddings. Great powers were attributed to her, including the ability to cure erysipelas, a common Wendish disease.¹⁸

The cure for warts requires a person to hold a silk thread over the wart and tie a knot in it. The thread is then buried

next to the house where there is moisture. When the thread rots, the wart will be gone.

The remedy for side-ache caused by walking is even simpler. To cure the side-ache, the person should stop, pick up a rock, spit on it, and replace it.²⁰

When you ask the *Grossmutter* (Grandmother) if the cures are any good, she will smile and say, "Sie leben noch" ("They are still living").

Home cures were also used on animals. There was usually a man or woman in the community who had power over the worms in animals. This was a helpful person, for young calves often get worms at the navel before the navel dries. In most cases the owner merely went to the person and described the calf. When he returned home the calf would be walking around the lot bleeding at the place where the worms were. The owner then applied some salve on the wound so the flies could not get to it. If the wound was at the navel, it would be necessary to pull some of the skin together with a string.²¹

In curing a sick horse, the healer drew blood from the horse, fastened cotton on a stick, and daubed the blood with the cotton. Then he placed this cotton in the hole of a tree.²²

To prevent their stock from being stolen, the Wends called upon a Mr. Drosche for help. He made the sign of the cross on the ground in the middle of the lot and as he mumbled something he would make signs on the animals and on the ground around them. After this treatment the horses would throw the thieves or refuse to be driven by them. Another way to prevent the stock from being stolen was to nail horse-shoes to the ground and drive the cattle over them.²³

The immigrants had to have some kind of variety in their life of hard work, and that variety was supplied by the church. Sunday service or any function of the church was time for worship—and everything else. The customs observed at marriages and funerals shed a great deal of light on the life of the people.

In the years immediately after the migration the marriage customs were almost identical with those used in Europe. Wedding celebrations usually lasted three days. Announcements and personal invitations were issued weeks in advance. The wedding party assembled at the bride's home, and before they left for church, they would sing a hymn and say the Lord's Prayer. The bride was dressed in a very tight-fitting black gown, which symbolized the sufferings of the new life ahead of her. (In the 1890's gray was substituted for black, and after 1900 white was accepted.) Flowers were used generously on the carriages, the horses, the church, and the attendants. There were usually ten bridesmaids and ten groomsmen. After they had taken their places at the altar, the congregation sang a hymn, and the pastor preached a short sermon. The vows were then exchanged and the groomsmen laid money on the altar for the pastor and the organist.

After the ceremony, everyone rushed to the bride's home for the celebration. Usually some children had the road roped off, and the groom had to bribe the children with small change so they would lower the rope. When the party and guests arrived at the house, the pastor and cantor led the people in hymns and a prayer, and the eating began. Since there were few tables, the wedding party ate at the first table, and then the rest of the people ate in shifts late into the night. The bride and groom remained at the table until midnight. During the course of the evening someone would pull off one of the bride's shoes, which would then be passed around and the guests would contribute for another shoe. Beer and whiskey, bourbon for the men and *Kümmel* for the women, helped make the celebration lively.²⁴

If the parents wanted to be sure that the daughter and son-in-law would never go hungry they would get a barrel (196 pounds) or four sacks of flour, and use it all for the wedding celebration. Every kind of pastry was baked; any not eaten was given to the guests as they departed.²⁵

Good fortune was also indicated by drizzle or fine rain falling on the bride's hair as she entered the house. Another saying favored marriages in cold weather:

Heirat in Januar wenn's eisig und kalt
Erlangs du Reichtum wenn auch nicht kalt.

(Marry in January when it's icy and cold
Eventually you will become rich if not quite soon.)

Bad fortune, however, was indicated if the string of pearls the bride was wearing should break, for she would cry one night for every pearl on the string.²⁶

At the present time the weddings held among the people in the rural communities have changed somewhat. The celebration now lasts only one day, but the relatives who have moved out of the community return for a few days before the wedding. The weddings continue to be held in the church, but with much smaller parties. After the ceremony, the guests follow the wedding party to the bride's house—in automobiles. After greeting the parents of the bride and all the friends the guests gradually work their way to the woodshed where the beer is dispensed. Soon the coverings are removed from the tables and barbecue and all the accompanying dishes are served. Later in the evening, with the beer still flowing, dominoes, 42, and *Schafskopf* (sheepshead) are played. Occasionally the Hungry Five, consisting of a trumpet, baritone, clarinet, trombone, and snare drum, play some old German songs, such as "*Gerade aus das Wirtshaus.*" When the players get thirsty, they play "*Bier Her*" and the bartender answers immediately with five schooners. Most of the guests leave between twelve and three in the morning, but some celebrate much later.

Sometime after midnight the newly married couple will steal away and go to their home, or to some other home in the area. About half an hour later the young men will follow with plowshares, hammers, and any kind of metal that will

produce vibrations. The charivariers approach the house quietly and suddenly begin the *Katzenmusik* (cat's music). Sometimes they are invited in, but in most cases they give up and go back for more beer.

Many different customs are connected with death. In Europe one custom is to cover the mirror with a cloth and scatter the clothes of the deceased person over the floor and leave them for four weeks.²⁷

Some of the people still cover the mirror when one of the family dies. Others have been known to keep the doors to the room where the person died closed for a period of one year and then get a neighbor to open it.²⁸

The death of a person is signaled by the tolling of the church bell. It is rung for a minute, and after a brief pause, rung for another minute, followed by another pause, and then rung for a third minute. This practice symbolizes the Trinity. Then the age of the person is counted out with the bell strokes. The people in the community know who is ill, and from the number of bell strokes can usually guess who has died. The burial takes place several days later, in the afternoon. The school children sing, and after the sermon the body is viewed. The procession to the *Kirchhof* (cemetery) is led by the pastor and teacher, who are followed by the pallbearers. At the grave another hymn is sung, led by the cantor.

There are other folk stories or customs which are without a doubt related to some in Europe. Great-grandfather Schneider was a blacksmith, but he learned his trade in Germany. Usually the *Meister* or teacher would take several boys and teach them the trade as they worked without pay. One Sunday when the *Meister* was at church the boys looked around the shop and in some of the cupboards which the teacher kept closed. In one they found a book, supposedly the Seventh Book of Moses, which they began reading. Soon a crow flew in through the window and lighted on a beam. The boys continued reading, and another crow flew in. More crows came until there were

crows outside as well as inside the shop. When the boys noticed this, they became frightened and replaced the book. At the same time the teacher came out of the church and saw the crows. He went to the shop, took the book, and began reading it backward. As he did so the crows flew away in the same order in which they had come, and when he reached the first word all were gone.²⁹

In Europe the folk place great confidence in the water dipped from a spring or stream on Easter morning. This idea also exists among the American Wends. One woman I knew would rise before sun-up on Easter morning, draw some water from the well, and make a small trail of water around the house. This would keep out insects the rest of the year. Another belief is that water dipped on Easter morning is healthful and that even though kept for some time it continues to taste good.

Other stories are definitely of American origin. Many of the Wends and Germans also came to America to avoid the draft. When they came to Texas they were faced with the draft for the Confederate Army. They did not want to fight, and if they did they would rather fight against slavery and thus eliminate the competition of slaves in agriculture. Many stories are told of how the young men evaded the draft. Most of them hid out when they heard that strangers were in the community. If work had to be done they wore dresses and sunbonnets in the fields. My Great-grandfather Moerbe was caught one day and was about to be drafted when they noticed his bowlegs. People say he was so bowlegged that a pony keg could have been placed between his knees. He could not be taken into the army, but when the officials discovered that he was a tailor, he was encouraged to go to San Antonio to sew uniforms.³⁰

A final major category of folklore is of dubious parentage. Many of the beliefs regarding planting and agricultural activity are also found among the English-speaking people, but since

these sayings are widely accepted by the German-Wends, they should be included.

It is generally believed that the moon has a powerful influence on the earth, for no one questions the moon's control of the tides. It is logical, therefore, that its power would be felt in other areas than the tides. If both plants and humans, as the scientists tell us, consist of a large percentage of water, why should not the moon dictate to plants and man the courses they must take?

People who are close to nature are strongly conscious of this influence. If, for example, the corn is planted on the decrease of the moon, the ears will be large, but if it is planted on the increase of the moon, the stalk will be large. It is also true that if calves are branded on the increase of the moon, the brand will grow, whereas if they are branded on the decrease of the moon the brands will either keep the same size or diminish in size. Farmers and ranchers also know that if trees are killed on the decrease of the moon they will not send up shoots as they would if they were chopped down on the increase of the moon. This influence is even true of hair. If hair is cut on the decrease of the moon, it will grow more slowly, and it will not be necessary to return to the barber so soon.³¹

The signs of the zodiac also regulate farm activity. Animals should be castrated under Pisces, but never under Cancer. Potatoes should be planted on February 22 and cucumbers on Maundy Thursday.³² If the cucumbers continue to grow too much foliage and not enough cucumbers, a shoe should be buried among the plants.³³ Crops planted under Cancer will be injured by insects. Any pest, such as Johnson grass, is best killed under the sign of Cancer.³⁴

Finally, there are some folk-sayings of various kinds:

"If you walk backward while talking you will push your mother and father to hell."

"Do not burn old clothes, bury them."

"Do not move a broom along."

"Do not move or marry on Friday."

"If a bird flies into the church or the house, it is bad luck."

"If the procession bearing the corpse from the church to the graveyard is stopped, someone will die from the same house as the deceased."

"Do not eat a lunch wearing your hat, even outside, or the devil will laugh."

"After you eat, an angel waits for the prayer of thanks to take it to heaven."⁸⁵

1. Anne Blasig, *The Wends of Texas* (San Antonio: Naylor Co., 1954), pp. 27-29.

2. George C. Engerrand, *The So-Called Wends of Germany and Their Colonies in Texas and Australia* (University of Texas Bulletin, No. 3417; Austin: University of Texas, 1934), pp. 11, 22.

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-17, 47-58.

4. *Ibid.*, pp. 29-31.

5. Blasig, *op. cit.*, pp. 17, 18.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 30.

7. Interview with Mrs. E. F. Moerbe, Pottsville, Texas, November 2, 1958.

8. Blasig, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

9. Interview with Mrs. Esther Gromatzky, Pottsville, Texas, November 2, 1958.

10. Interview with Martin Moerbe, Taylor, Texas, November 16, 1958.

11. *Ibid.*

12. Interview with Mrs. Eleanore Schneider, Austin, Texas, December 10, 1958; interview with Oswald Melde, Aleman, Texas, January 11, 1959.

13. Interview with Arthur Moebus, Serbin, Texas, October 18, 1958; interview with Mrs. Mitschke, Serbin, Texas, October 18, 1958.

14. Interview with Robert Malke, Serbin, Texas, October 18, 1958.

15. Interview with Oswald Melde.

16. Letter from Mrs. Wm. H. Nielsen, Vernon, Texas, December 2, 1958.

17. Interview with Oswald Melde. Mr. Melde did not know the names of the trees, but believed that no other names could be substituted.

18. Interview with Martin Moerbe.

19. Interview with Oswald Melde.

20. *Ibid.*

21. Interview with Arthur Moebus.

22. Blasig, *op. cit.*, p. 59.
23. Interview with Oswald Melde.
24. Blasig, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-56.
25. Interview with Oswald Melde.
26. *Ibid.*
27. Engerrand, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-51.
28. Interview with Oswald Melde.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*
31. Interview with Arthur Moebus; interview with Robert Malke.
32. Interview with Otto Schneider, Austin, Texas, September 3, 1958.
33. Interview with Mrs. Arthur Melde, Aleman, Texas, January 11, 1959.
34. Interview with Otto Schneider.
35. Interview with Oswald Melde.