



The Wendish congregation is hardworking, sturdy, and sober.

GOD WITH THE WENDS

St. Paul's Lutheran in Serbin is rooted in the ways of the Old World; an open-air Catholic church thrives on the shifting sands of Padre Island.

St. Paul's Lutheran Church Serbin

The town of Serbin is not shown on most road maps, but the fact that it is home to a historically important church with an architecturally fascinating building makes it well worth the effort to find. Both the town and St. Paul's Church, the first Missouri Synod Lutheran congregation in Texas, were founded in the 1850s by Wends (also called Sorbs) after they fled Central Europe. Their Prussian oppressors had not only seized their land and forced them into inferior jobs but also tried to make them give up their Slavic language in favor of German and combine their Lutheran churches with the Calvinist Evangelical Reformed Churches in a single state-regulated Protestant body. Rather than accept economic discrimination and religious homogenization, the Wends migrated to Central Texas under the leadership of the Reverend Johann Kilian, an

able scholar whose translations into Wendish of Luther's Large Catechism, the Augsburg Confession, and numerous other religious texts helped preserve the language long after its users settled in the New World. Today, a metal ball atop St. Paul's steeple contains Kilian's handwritten history of the original community.

When the good ship *Ben Nevis* docked in Galveston in 1854, the five hundred immigrants made their way inland and purchased land in what is now Lee County,

near Giddings. As evidence of their religious commitment, the new colony set aside 95 acres for a church and school and, in 1871, erected St. Paul's.

From the outside, the church is plain to the point of starkness, with high, thick walls broken only by tall, narrow windows. The interior, in marked contrast, is a visual delight. The walls and ceiling are bright blue, with orange stenciling around the capitals of the wooden pillars, and the pillars themselves are covered with whimsical feather painting.

The gilded chandeliers are the original fixtures, converted from kerosene to electricity. The most striking architectural feature is the ornate pulpit, which stands at balcony level, nearly twenty feet above the lower floor. Originally, the men of the church sat in homemade pews in the balcony, while the women looked up to their pastor—and to their husbands—from the St. Louis factory-built pews below. The original pews, like the beautiful pipe organ installed in 1904, are



Bright and beautiful, St. Paul's has gilt chandeliers and hand-painted pillars.

still in use.

The Wendish language has practically disappeared, but St. Paul's church is anything but dead. A wrong turn that took me through Winchester and Northrup instead of along the shorter Paige Road route got me to the church a few minutes after 350 to 400 people had occupied all the permanent seats. I thought at first that the group was heavily weighted with middle-aged and older people and wondered why it had taken so many cars and pickups to transport them; then we stood for the first song, and all the teenagers and young couples in the balcony came into view, doubling the visible congregation.

The faces, bodies, and raiment, particularly of the folk on the lower level, were unmistakably those of hard-working, sober, rural people. The women favored dresses of flowered print and easily laundered material. A significant proportion of the men wore open-collared, windowpane-plaid shirts whose pockets were put to their intended use. As best I could tell, none sported blow-dry hairstyles, designer eyeglasses, or gold chains. Most, I would guess, do not wear neckties in their work, and I am confident that virtually all specify "regular" when they get their hair cut. Their hands were large and tough and horny, and when they walked around the churchyard after the service, it seemed that almost every man over fifty was afflicted with some kind of limp or stiffness, perhaps the result of unfortunate encounters with recalcitrant animals or angry farm equipment.

The singing was spirited and loud, like one hears in movie scenes of country churches. I assume the songs they sang on this particular morning were favorites, since three out of four had been worn out of my tattered songbook. Despite a packed house and considerable heat, the two-foot-thick walls helped keep the building tolerably cool, especially if one had access to a Jesus-in-Gethsemane fan furnished by the S&A Appliance Company of Giddings.

By a happy coincidence, the date of my visit was Confirmation Reunion Sunday, and nine of the thirteen living members of the confirmation class of 1930 were on hand, including the Reverend Herbert Driessner, who had been the class's top scholar and had gone on to become a Lutheran pastor, now retired. Driessner preached on "A Temple Which God Builds." He spoke with assurance and authority on the process of the Christian life, but the most impressive testimony to his long experience was his ability to appear oblivious to the amazing wails of a large blond baby whose mother could have performed a notable act of Christian mercy by removing him, with appropriate tenderness, from the sanctuary, or perhaps even from the county.

With a kind of self-confidence not unusual among Lutherans I have known,

Driessner suggested that his confirmation class offered good examples of divine architecture. All thirteen living members of the original class of fifteen, he observed, were still "lively stones in the temple of God." The Lord has never failed any of them, he asserted, and all would "cling to the Savior till we are called to our eternal rest."

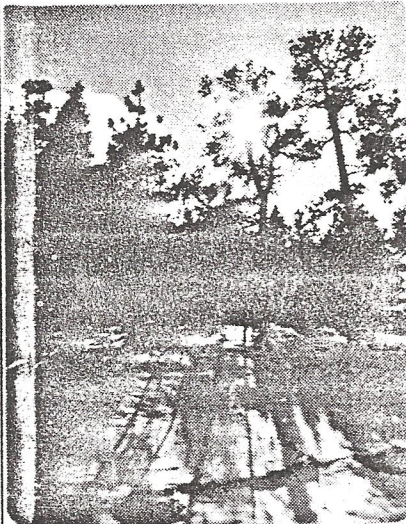
At the conclusion of the sermon the members of the class stepped to the front of the sanctuary and sang the class hymn, "Jesus ist der Gute Hirte," with two ladies in the front row assuming most of the musical burden. The responsibility of being honorees of the day apparently weighed heavily on their spirits, for I never saw anything resembling a smile from any of the nine. Grace brings assurance, peace, and salvation to Lutherans; it does not dispose them to backslapping joviality or charismatic bliss-smiles.

When worship was over, people stood around and talked for an extended period before heading over to the picnic grounds for the reunion barbecue. In that time I had opportunity to observe the operation of the informal boundaries that help ethnic groups remain intact. The churchgoers were quite cordial to each other, though without hugs or other overt signs of affection. But apart from Pastor Paul Hartfield, a couple from Houston, and a brisk woman who saw me looking at photos of confirmation classes populated by members of the Bamsch, Matthijetz, Mutschrink, Schautschick, and Zoch families and asked, "You from around here?" with an inflection that suggested she knew the answer, no one offered me so much as a good morning in a space of three hours.

This self-contained spirit continued at the barbecue. My experience with church dinners has most often involved a common table laden with cold fried chicken, roast beef, ham, sweet potatoes with melted marshmallows, green beans boiled to fiber, fruit cocktail with whipped cream (now replaced with Cool Whip, another step in the decline of pure religion), fourteen kinds of pie, and pre-sweetened iced tea. While some sister flapped her apron to keep the flies away, you filled your paper plate and then sat either with your friends or with newcomers. At St. Paul's, folk brought individual roaster pans, lined up to buy enough barbecue to feed those who came with them, and separated into family groups to eat with their own kin and kind.

I sensed no hostility toward strangers, and my few questions were answered readily. Rather, it was as if they saw I was simply passing through, was probably not an angel in disguise, and did not appear to be in distress. If I had come to see the church, as many do, I could see it with little help. If I needed something, I would doubtless ask. If I did not ask, then I must be doing fine and would resent interrup-

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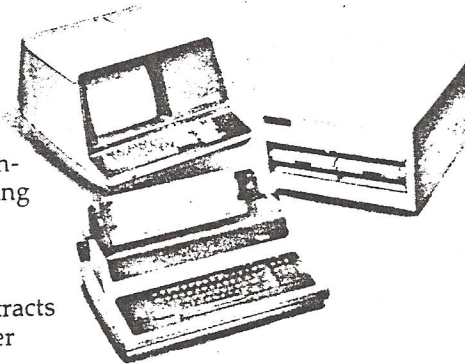
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tion or prying. They had done fine without me for all these years; there was no pressing reason to change things now.

In sum, St. Paul's is a thriving rural church with a building worth going to see and a congregation with a strong sense of itself. But if you happen to go on a day when there's a barbecue, you might have a better time if you bring your own pot and your own people.

St. Andrew's by the Sea North Padre Island

St. Paul's of Serbin may have little need for tourists; St. Andrew's by the Sea would not exist without them. Named for the fisherman apostle who had a gift for bringing people to Jesus and seeing that they were cared for when they came—it was he who located the boy whose loaves and fishes Jesus used to feed the multitude—St. Andrew's is an open-air outpost of faith that serves weekend visitors to Padre Island.

The church is located approximately four miles south of the Laguna Madre Causeway and a few hundred yards back from the beach, just behind Ira's (SHELLS, CORAL, T-SHIRTS, BEACHWEAR, TOWELS, TACKLE, ICE) and the adjacent U-Tote-M. If you pass 7 Seas (COLD MELON, LIVE SHARKS), turn around and go back. From a distance the concrete pavilion resembles an unfinished section of freeway overpass, or perhaps a drive-through bus wash. Up close it is quite attractive, with a flat roof reminiscent of some Roman and Mayan structures sheltering a T-shaped arrangement of graceful and surprisingly comfortable concrete pews.

The church was established in 1973 by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Corpus Christi with the hope that it might attract enough island residents to become a full-fledged parish. For the present, however, its ministry is limited to a mass at noon on Sundays and, from Memorial Day to Labor Day, a Saturday evening mass at seven o'clock. Summer crowds are good, averaging 150 on Saturday evening and 250 to 300 on a typical Sunday, with as many as 600 in attendance on holiday weekends. When winter brings a drop in both temperature and tourists, services are conducted in a small enclosed lounge area at the rear of the building.

Though few attend St. Andrew's on a regular basis, those present on the day of my visit must have made special plans to come, since fully 90 per cent of them arrived in the five minutes just before noon. Apart from a sprinkling of older people the crowd was mostly families, with few singles or young, childless couples. Dress was casual. A few women whose devotion to the sun god had made them old before their time wore pantsuits and high heels, but jeans, shorts, and T-shirts were the dominant choice for liturgical leisure wear. The informality of spirit and apparel were aptly exemplified by a woman