

MY WENDISH NEIGHBORS

by

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Upon arriving in Lubeck last June, I picked up a brochure at the Tourist Bureau and began reading about this delightful Hansestadt of Northern Germany. The first sentence stated: "Lubeck was established as a Baltic trading center under Count Adolf II of Schauenburg in 1143, just five years after the destruction of the royal city of the Slavic Wends, Luibice (Old Lubeck), located at the mouth of the Schwartu River." Most readers would have continued without a second thought, but this information was very significant to me. For on that same day, back in Serbin, Texas, just 7 miles from our farm, Wendish descendants were celebrating the 125th anniversary of the migration of the Wends from Germany to Texas.

In a large bookstore I asked for some books on the Wends, for although I knew that the Texas Wends had come from Saxony and Prussia, I had not realized the extent of the Wendish influence and colonization in Northern Europe. The clerk replied that there was not much current interest in "those old people" and that I would have to go the library in Hamburg. I explained that "those old people" were of particular interest to those of us who are acquainted with the people in certain farming communities of Lee and Fayette Counties in Texas. She very kindly took down a map and showed me the many Wendish place names south of Lubeck. A friend in Hamburg later told us that many words in the German language are a Wendish heritage ---such as "nee", used in place of "nein". When I returned to Texas, I began reading again on the history of the Wends.

The Texas Wends had come from Lusatia (Lausitz), which is about 50 miles south-east of Berlin, with the southern limit of Upper Lusatia the boundary with Czechoslovakia along the Lusatian Mountains. Although Lower Lusatia, containing the swampy Spreewald, is better known for its Wendish population, few of the Texas Wends were from the Spreewald. In East-Germany (the DDR) the current official name of the Wends is Sorbs. The Slavic ancestors of the Wends originally lived east of Lusatia, but in the 4th century, as Germanic tribes moved out of the territory between the Elbe and the Oder Rivers, the Wends moved in and continued westward. By the end of the 6th century they were dominant in central Germany, but continuous conflict with the German armies pushed them back east of the Elbe. Finally the Wends were subdued in 963 by forces of Otto the Great, and in the ensuing years Lusatia was tossed about between Germany, Poland, Bohemia, and Hungary. In 1815 the Congress of Vienna decreed that Lusatia be split between Saxony and Prussia.

The Wends had by now been subjugated, and transformed from a cultural majority to a minority of serfs. Through the years they had been Christianized and Lutheranism became the dominant force in their lives. In 1848, extremely unhappy with the economic situation (serfdom had been abolished and now they really had nothing), with life in general under Prussian and Saxon rule, and wishing to preserve their Lutheran Church without union with the State or Calvinism, they began emigrating. One group emigrated to Australia, others to Canada, but the largest Wendish group to emigrate en masse chose Texas.

A few families had individually come to Texas, along with the many German immigrants, and settled at *New Ulm*. In those days, German newspaper were filled with letters written by immigrants and travelers describing Texas, the land of golden opportunity. It was exactly what the Wends were looking for and a small group of 35 arrived in Texas in 1853 and joined the families in New Ulm. The second group formed an incorporated association of Wends from villages in Prussia and Saxony. As a group independent of the State Church, they chose as their religious leader, Rev. Johann Kilian. The group of 158 families (about 578 individuals) boarded the English ship, the "*Ben Nevis*" in Liverpool and arrived in Galveston, December 15, 1854. Seventy-three had died in route, mainly due to an outbreak of cholera.

Some of the families remained temporarily in Houston and others went ahead to look for a suitable site for a permanent settlement. In March, 1855, the association bought 4,354 acres of rather poor land in *Lee County* along *Rabb's Creek*, and the group reunited. They sub-divided the land into farms, the town of Serbin, and property for the Church, parsonage, school and cemetery. Their pastor journeyed to *Missouri* to attend the *National Convention* of the *Missouri Synod*; and the *Serbin Church* became, in 1865, the first Texas Church in the *Missouri Synod*. The group had brought a church bell cast in *Kleinwelka* (near Bautzen) and one of the prominent leaders, *Karl Teinert*, built a wooden organ.

The present stone Church building was finished in 1871, and although extremely plain on the outside, is very distinctive inside. The interior is all wooden, painted in a blue and white color scheme, with a balcony on all sides where the men sat. The pulpit is at the height of the balcony, and lovely chandeliers, originally gas, provide the light. The language used in the early years in the Church and school was of course Wendish (which is more like Czech than German), but many people favored a change to German. The outcome of much discussion and a great deal of controversy over the years resulted in the change to German in 1920. Although they eventually converted to English in the 1960's, services are still held in German every second and fourth Sunday in the month, and in Wendish on special occasions. Over the door in the foyer hangs a painting of the "Ben Nevis", symbol of the beginning of a new life for the Wends.

Other Wends immigrated throughout the 19th century to join the first settlers of Serbin. According to George R. Nielsen's recently published research, approximately 1,200 Wends came to Texas. As the settlers of Serbin prospered,

and others joined them from Germany, the Wends spread out to form satellite communities such as **Fedor, Loebau, Words, and Walburg**. Some bought land in established communities such as Winchester, Thorndale, and Swiss Alp.. Their religious dedication and strong family ties have kept the Wends closely connected and they still look to Serbin as "home base". From 1899 to 1940 a Wendish newspaper, "Deutsches Volksblatt" was published in Wendish and German in Giddings, and served to unite the Wendish Community. Today the Texas Wendish Heritage Society (Box 311, Giddings, TX, 78942) is active in preserving their heritage.

To read the passenger list of the Ben Nevis, is to read the 1980 telephone directory of, for example, **Warde**. The family names of many of our neighbors **Kasper, Lehman, Teinert, Kieschnlck, Moerbe, Felke** and **Schmidt** are all found on the ship's list. Other Wendish descendants in this farming community are **Kunze, Mitsche, Pietsch, Noeck, Jurk, Zoch, Bohot**, etc. The name **Garrett** sticks out like a sore thumb amongst the other farmers. It is interesting to trace the history of each family but somewhat confusing to a newcomer, as they all seem to be related to each other. I would think a computer would be required just to schedule family gatherings at Christmas time.

As the Wends spread out, they bought more fertile land on which to farm. Of course, some men were craftsmen, others operated sawmills and cotton gins, or were merchants, but they all farmed to some extent. Many families still live on the land where their ancestors settled and many still pursue farming or running the saw-mill, just as their Great-Grandfathers did. Of course,, some of the present generation hold jobs in the "city" in addition to managing the farm.. The **Kunze** family of **Warda** is listed in the *Texas Family Land Heritage Registry*, which honors families whose farms have been continuously managed by the same family for 100 years or more. The Kunze farm has been in the family since 1871 and is today managed by two of the **Kunze "boys"**, as they are locally called. When not busy with farm, George is Dean of the Graduate School at Texas A & M University and Otto is Professor of Agricultural Engineering.

Accessed August 1, 2012 at:

<http://trees.ancestry.com/tree/31072146/person/12361152260/story/dea9ea48-5a7d-40b9-a4f8-bcbe53fcc51e?otid=44208387&opid=6189682771&hf=Story&pn=1&hs=recent&pg=32880&pgpl=hf%7cpn%7chs>