

By Nancy Goebel

Spirit of the Wends

The unincorporated little village of Serbin, nestled amid wooded environs along a winding farm-to-market road east of Austin, rarely appears on highway maps. So travelers whisk by, unaware that they're passing through a unique ethnic region of Texas.

Serbin is the heartland of Wendish America. In the countryside surrounding this tiny one-store community and in and around the nearby towns of Northrup, Warda, and Winchester, names like Miertschin, Krause, Mertink, and Noack appear on roadside mailboxes. These residents descended from a small group of Slavic people called Wends who migrated here from southeast Germany in the mid 1800s.

In a saga that recalls the arduous voyage of the Pilgrims, 588 Wends set sail on a tall-masted ship named the *Ben Nevis* in 1854 to escape religious and economic oppression in Prussia. They risked the hazards of the sea and the uncertainties of an alien land to establish what they hoped would be a Wendenland in Texas, a community of their own where they could preserve their Lutheran faith and speak their Wendish tongue. They formed the largest mass emigration of Wends to the New World.

If you've never heard of the Wends, you're not alone. Few people have. They hold the dual distinction of being one of the smallest and most obscure ethnic groups

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that emigrated to the United States.

The Wends date their genesis back to Old Testament days. They trace their origin to Mazan, one of the grandsons of Noah. Also known as the Sorbs (or Serbs), they were one of the earliest Slavic tribes to occupy Central Europe in the Middle Ages.

The Prussians conquered the Wends in 1167 following a bitter conflict that lasted three centuries. By the 1800s, many had assimilated into German culture. The minority who held on to the Wends' conservative religious beliefs, customs, and language (a West Slavonic tongue closely related to Polish, Czech, and Slovak) settled in the Lusatia area of what is now East Germany, along the banks of the Spree River.

During the 19th Century, the Wends encountered intolerable discrimination. The Prussian king denied them citizenship, property ownership, and admission to professional guilds. They were ordered to speak the German language, take German names, and join the Evangelical and Reformed Church, the state-regulated Protestant body.

This latter mandate, that the Wends believed would dilute their pure Lutheran faith, finally impelled them to organize a new Lutheran congregation in the mid 1850s to emigrate to America. They called the Reverend Johann Kilian as their pastor and leader, and they chose Texas as their destination, probably because a small contingent of Wends had previously settled in the New Ulm-Industry area and sent back favorable reports.

The 80-day voyage aboard the *Ben Nevis* proved rigorous and



The Reverend Paul Hartfield is pastor of St. Paul Lutheran Church in Serbin. Wendish immigrants who sought religious and cultural freedom built the present structure in 1871.

heartbreaking. During a stormy crossing, the Wendish congregation lost 73 members to an outbreak of cholera. Then in Galveston Harbor they faced a yellow fever epidemic that took another life.

The Wends made the long trek inland on foot and by oxcart to Rabbs Creek in Lee County where they purchased a league of land for one dollar an acre. The first year was difficult. Housing was crude, food was meager, and diseases like malaria, typhoid, and dysentery compounded their misery. What's more, two years of drought made their stony land difficult to cultivate. But they managed to survive, establish the town of Serbin, and build their first church and school.

Freezing weather and snow marked the dedication on December 25, 1859, of a two-room frame building as the center of the Wends' religious life. Pastor Kilian preached the dedicating sermon in three languages, Wendish, German,



The interior of St. Paul's retains its original look. The lofty pulpit is believed to be the highest in Texas.

and English. The rude structure was the first Missouri Synod Lutheran Church in Texas, and the only Wendish school and church in the United States.

The pastor and his family lived in one room, and the other was used as a chapel on Sundays. During the week, two long tables and benches transformed it into a school. It continued to be used as a school after a new stone church was built.

An influx of more Wendish and German emigrants to the Serbin area after the Civil War led to the construction of a new church building in 1871. St. Paul Lutheran Church stands today as a beautiful example of pioneer construction.

The gleaming white church that rises above the little community of Serbin looks today much as it did more than 100 years ago with its austere facade and high tower and steeple. Of particular interest are its thick sandstone walls and the metal ball on the weathervane

above the steeple. The ball contains an engraved history of Serbin written by Pastor Kilian in the 1870s.

Also, the interior remains basically the same. The ornate, gilded chandeliers are the original kerosene lamps adapted to electricity. The ceiling is still accented with gold stencil designs and painted a bright blue, said to be the Wends' favorite color because it reminds them of heaven. The pews are original, as are the beautiful wooden pillars covered with feather painting, hand-crafted by the early settlers to resemble marble.

Members also made the baptismal font with its gilded hand-carved cherubs, grapes, and cross that still stands near the altar.

The original second floor balcony extends around the church interior. Its focal point is the lofty pulpit, centered above the altar and reputed to be the highest pulpit in Texas.

Following the old European cus-

tom, men originally sat in the balcony, while women occupied the first floor pews. During those early days, churchgoers were admonished not to carry six-shooters or other weapons to church, leave church during worship, comb or arrange hair in church, or "laugh as though in sport" in front of the church doors or windows.

Although the church has always been a strong unifying force in Wendish life, dissension developed within the Serbin congregation after they moved to Texas.

"It revolved around the desire of some to use German instead of Wendish in the school and church, the very thing they had been so much against back in Germany," explains the Reverend Paul Hartfield, pastor of St. Paul today.

"Since many of the people who lived in the area were German, it was easier for the Wends to transact business and make contacts with their new neighbors if they spoke German. So, increasingly, more members wanted to worship in the German language, too."

Over the years, Pastor Kilian began to conduct more services in German and in 1929, the last Wendish services were held. Presently, German services are conducted at the church twice a month.

"The great irony of the Wendish emigration," writes descendant Ron Lammert in a pamphlet about the Texas Wends, "was that in the effort to establish a pure Wendish colony where the language and culture could be preserved, these very things were lost due to the economic and social realities of the frontier."

St. Paul Lutheran Church still flourishes as the center of community life. It boasts 600 members (mostly Wendish and German descendants) and a modern school with gymnasium and auditorium. Each year, on the Sunday preceding Memorial Day, hundreds of

Greg White



Old Wendish crafts like Easter eggs decorated with geometric designs can be seen each August at the Texas Folklife Festival in San Antonio.



O. C. Garza

Members of the Texas Wendish Heritage Society (above) recall the difficult voyage across the Atlantic aboard the *Ben Nevis*. At left, Irene Teinert and Evelyn Kasper wear traditional costumes.



O. C. Garza

Wends from all over Texas converge at the church for their annual homecoming picnic, a religious and social event that includes church services, a barbecue, sports activities, and games.

Today, of some 100,000 Wends in the world an estimated 7,000 live in Texas. Although Wends migrated to at least 10 other central Texas communities and to Eastland and Shackelford counties in West Texas as well, the largest number settled in the farmlands around Serbin, and this is the only area where remnants of their heritage remain.

You can visit the vintage church or stroll through the old cemetery nearby where the rigors of pioneer life are most evident in the brief life spans recorded on the tilting

stones. Or you can spend some time in the little museum, housed in an old school building down the road, where the story of the Wends is most vividly portrayed. Established by members of the Texas Wendish Heritage Society to preserve their fading culture, this is the only Wendish museum in the United States.

"Distinctive Wendish culture has been slipping away over the years, and it's only been recently that there has been a renewed interest in our unique heritage," explains Evelyn Kasper, museum coordinator. "I've donated many of my family heirlooms and a book about my family's history to the museum, as have many of the local people."

Since the museum opened in

1981, local residents have been combing their attics and rummaging through their possessions to retrieve priceless articles of historic interest for the museum.

The small building brims with a profusion of Wendish items: old books, Bibles and hymnals, costumes from East Germany and pioneer apparel of early Serbin, implements used by the settlers and artifacts brought over on the *Ben Nevis*, a large assemblage of photo-

graphs and family memorabilia, and displays on Wendish traditions, customs, and folk medicine.

The newest exhibit in the museum shows equipment and printed material from the Giddings *Deutches Volksblatt*, a newspaper established in 1899. It provided local news primarily in German, with occasional articles in Wendish and English. The publisher was the only one in the U.S. equipped to print in Wendish, but he did most-

ly job printing in that language.

The Texas Wendish Heritage Society was formed in 1971 so Wends across Texas could join efforts to save their disappearing culture. Currently, the society has about 350 members from all parts of the world.

In addition to establishing the museum, the society has built a fiberglass replica of the *Ben Nevis* for use as a float in community parades, and it participates in activities like the Texas Folklife Festival in San Antonio. Members are encouraged to make Wendish costumes to wear on special occasions, and old customs such as decorating Easter eggs with elaborate geometric designs also are being rekindled.

"A few people are even bringing back the Wendish language," Mrs. Kasper says. "One man studies Wendish every day."

She is referring to 85-year-old Carl Miertschin, a tall, large-boned man. In his venerable family homestead off a dirt road in Serbin, he spends many hours each day reading his Wendish Bible and newspaper sent to him from a Lutheran church in East Germany. Miertschin also enjoys singing Wendish hymns. In fact, he has become so proficient as the community's only Wendish vocalist that he performs at funerals, weddings, and other



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Wendish homes like that of Alfred and Alma Dunk (left) feature colorful flower gardens. Above, Mrs. Esther Schmidt cans pickles. At right, Sheri, Kristi, and Wilbert Noack tend the family garden.



occasions that call for Wendish music.

Like a number of the Wends still living in the Serbin area, Miertschin traces his ancestors to the *Ben Nevis*. His story is one of the most heartrending.

"My great-grandparents died of cholera on the *Ben Nevis*, so my

poor grandfather and his brothers and sisters came here as orphans. It must have been terribly hard, even though good people took them in and raised them," he says in an accent with a slight Slavic lilt.

You hear the same Slavic lilt down the road at the home of Ellford Bigon, who also dates his lin-

eage to the original settlers. "My grandmother was just an infant and my grandfather was four or five when they came to Serbin," he explains. "We're still living on the same land they purchased."

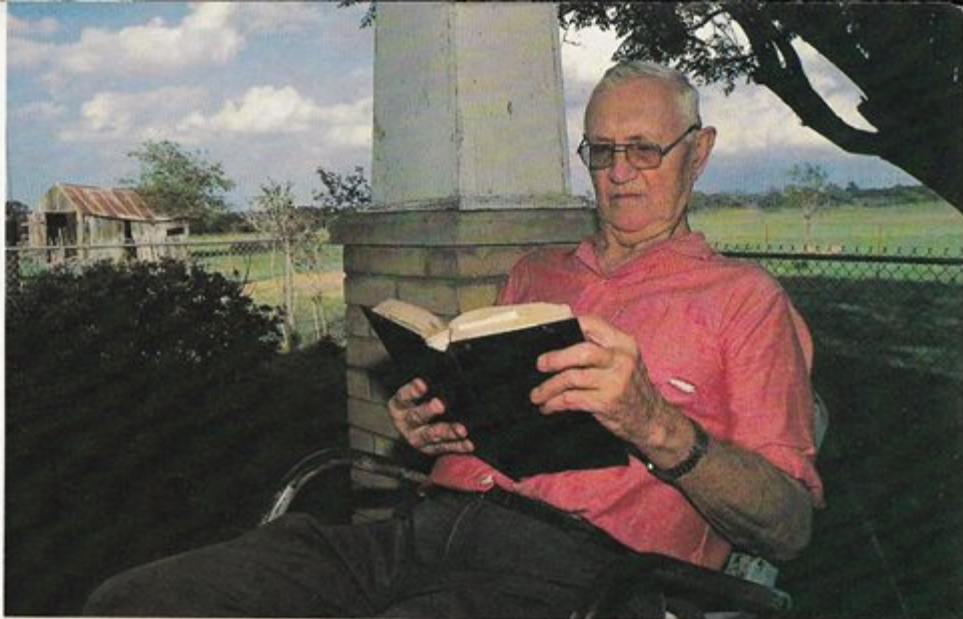
Ellford and his wife, Wilma, built their home on the old family homestead. Flower gardens (the Wends



Carl Miertschin reads his 87-year-old Wendish Bible every day. As the community's only Wendish vocalist, he performs ancestral songs on special occasions.

Woods and pastureland dot the countryside around Serbin where an old-world tranquility keeps alive the spirit of the Wends.

J. Griffith Smith



are noted for their gardens) surround the house. Inside, they display numerous family heirlooms including a framed copy of the Lord's Prayer in German that probably came over on the *Ben Nevis*.

While some descendants have lived in the Serbin area all their lives, often on the land purchased by their forefathers, others left and then returned to occupy land left through inheritance.

Laverne and Walter Gersch lived in Eagle Lake for several years be-

fore they came back to the property that has been in Walter's family for five generations.

"Even though a number of Wends leave the area, many return. Serbin really is home for most Wends, and this is where they want to raise their families just as they were raised and their ancestors before them," Mrs. Gersch says.

The Gersches, who own an automotive business in Giddings, prefer to meet many basic needs just as their Wendish forebears did. They built a large part of their own home. They raise most of their own food, put up pickles and canned goods, and enjoy making homemade noodles and sausage. They find contentment in being thrifty and self-reliant, strong traits in Wends.

Serbin is part of modern America now, and most of its distinctive Wendish customs have faded away. Still, the people here hold on to their ethnic past in many ways.

"While we never became the Wendenland that was envisioned, there is a Wendenland in spirit here," Mrs. Gersch maintains.

Wilma Bigon puts it this way: "This is a unique, close-knit community where people help people. I think it's because of our common heritage in the church. It's still the center of our lives and the dominant force that brings us together as one." ❏



When . . . Where . . . How

Serbin is seven miles southwest of Giddings via U.S. 77 and Farm-to-Market roads 448 and 2239. St. Paul Lutheran Church is open during daylight hours. The Texas Wendish Heritage Society Museum just north of the church is open Sunday from 1 to 5. There is no admission charge. For more information, call Pastor Paul Hartfield at 409/366-2219 or Evelyn Kasper at 409/242-3367.

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