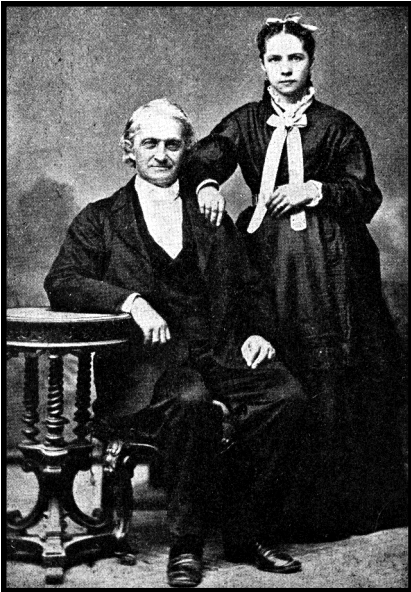


# The Wendish Texans



*Reverend Johann Kilian and his daughter*

The Wends of Texas represent a small Slavic group of people who have never had an independent nation and who have undergone a double assimilation in Texas.

Wends (earlier calling themselves Sorbs) have lived in Lusatia, Eastern Germany, as a recognizable group from the Middle Ages until today. Over the centuries, the Wends endured conquest and restrictions by other cultures and governments. At one time, Prussian governance called for the use of the German language. Wendish was to be abandoned. Then, Wends were barred from skilled labor. Then, Lutheran Wends were required to join Evangelical Reform churches. Plans for emigration were formed.

Just before 1850 some Wendish families emigrated to Australia; then, hearing of German settlement in Texas, a few Wends came to Austin County. In 1853 about 35 Wends entered Galveston to settle in New Ulm and Industry.

The only larger group of Wends ever to leave Europe for Texas was a congregation of Lutherans led by Rev. Johann Kilian in 1854. This group of nearly 500 individuals, decimated by cholera in Liverpool and yellow fever in Galveston, eventually settled in present Lee County. There Johann Dube and Carl Lehmann had purchased a

league of land. Johann Kilian's two-room house served as the church, and the settlers initially lived in dugouts. By 1860 a community named Serbin warranted a post office. The settlement grew until 1871, when a new railroad turned Giddings into the population center for the area.

Life for the first generation was hard, and the Wends were conservative. Dancing and secular music were considered inappropriate activities; the main job in life was making a living, not preserving tradition. Since they came from Germany, most Wends considered it natural to live among already-established Germans in Texas.

Even in Europe, the Wends were largely "Germanized" by the 19th century. In Texas they became more so; Wendish families living in German settlement areas were quickly assimilated. Those Wends who spoke only Sorbian learned German as their second language, then English. Wendish was spoken in Serbin until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but by World War I most of the Wends in the state had adopted German. The Giddings *Deutsches Volksblatt* contained a few columns of Wendish for a number of years, then shifted entirely to German.

Many Texas Wends simply consider themselves German, but in the Serbin area, considerable identity has been maintained through a revival of interest in earlier Wendish customs. Wendish families also moved to many settlement areas of the state: Warda, Swiss Alp, Giddings, Mannheim, Walburg, Houston, and Austin, among others. In all places, churches were established while customs and the Wendish language died.



*St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Serbin*



*Wedding reception of Emma Jurk and Bernhard Joseph Schmidt, Warda, 1907*

Some individuals today maintain that no intermarriage has taken place in their families since the main Wendish arrival in 1854. But for the most part, intermarriage and an acceptance of German, then Anglo, customs has meant a thorough acculturation for most families.

The Texas Wendish Heritage Society was founded in 1971, when the group began its annual participation in the Texas Folklife Festival of the Institute of Texan Cultures, and the membership maintains a Wendish museum at Serbin. The group has revived interest in European costume, foods, and crafts and is attempting to collect, translate, and publish early Wendish documents. Many were lost during the first years in Texas.

The community at Serbin holds an annual Wendish Fest in September and extends a welcome, *Witajcže K'nam*, to visitors. Some of the local descendants dress in European Wendish costume.

The Wends of Texas represent one of the strongest examples of cultural revival by later generations.



*Texas Wendish Cultural Club members (from left) Frieda Wendland, Laura Zoch, Lillie Moerbe Caldwell, Emma Wuensche, and Gertrude Mitschke, 1971*



*Emma Jurk and Bernhard Joseph Schmidt, 1907—Formerly associated with Texas Wends is the German Lutheran custom of a black wedding dress, The symbolic color was a reminder of the difficulties, pain and grief accepted as parts of marriage. In time, the custom changed. Wedding dresses became gray, then white by the turn of the century. Marriage may have become no easier but later generations of women did not want that reminder on their wedding day.*