

The Wendish Lutherans of Texas

by William G. Wagner
and Ron Lammert

A warm, early-morning sun announces its plans for the day. Inside the church, the Sunday worshippers supplement the tiny breeze by gently fanning themselves. A painting of the Last Supper appears on front of their fans; the back side reveals their source—courtesy of S. & A. Appliance Co.

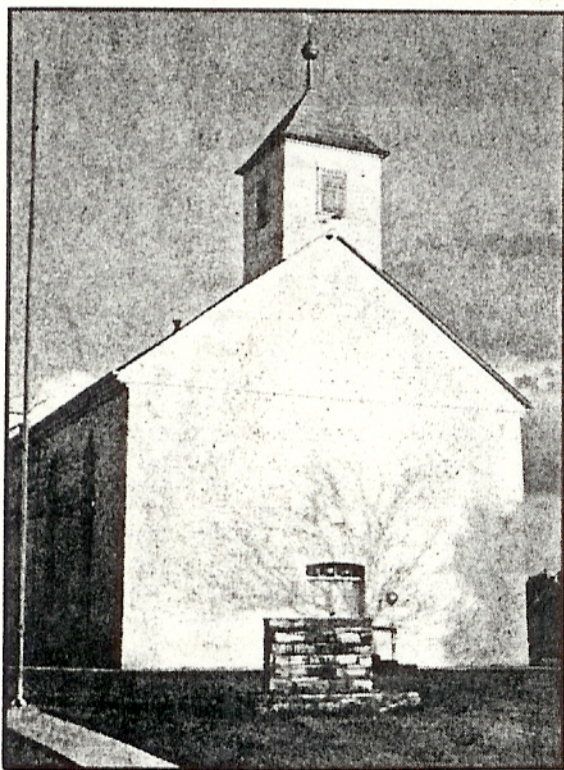
Scrubbed and combed youngsters sit next to their parents as pointed toes of cowboy boots peer from beneath their pressed trousers. The men's ruddy, sunburned faces speak convincingly of outdoor lives.

These are people of a unique place: a land where Spanish conquistadores sought their riches, where Comanche Indians waged war against the first settlers, and where The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod was established in Texas.

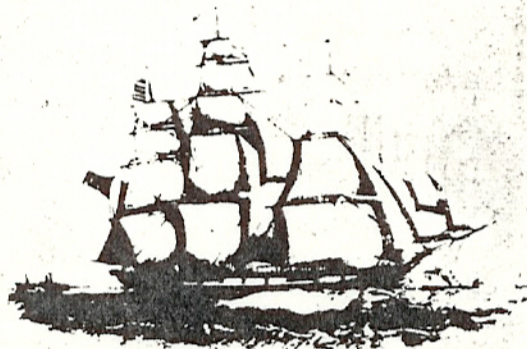
Most worshipers are descendants of those early Lutherans, a group of Europeans known as Wends, who left German persecution in the mid-1800s for religious liberty in America.

The spot they chose became Serbin, Tex., a fine crop and pastureland area in the east-central part of the state, snuggled among gently rolling hills and shaded by cedar brakes and gnarled oak trees.

The Wends, of Slavic origin, do



The red sandstone pioneer structure of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Serbin, Tex., completed in 1871, is a classic example of Wendish architecture.



The *Ben Nevis*, a three-deck, Australian packet-ship, carried the Wends from Liverpool on Sept. 26, 1854 to Galveston, Tex., Dec. 14, 1854.

not occupy a prominent place in European history, although they were influential for a thousand years before the Germans subdued and ruled them.

Early in 1854, meeting in homes in various Wendish villages in Saxony, Upper Lusatia, Germany, near the Polish and Czechoslovakian borders, the Wends expressed their disfavor with governmental practices that forced them to worship with Reformed groups. The government required that there be only one state-regulated Protestant body.

The Wends organized one congregation on March 24, 1854, in Daubin, Prussia, from many congregations—588 souls—and called Rev. Jan Kilian as their pastor.

They first thought of emigrating to Australia where other Wends had gone. Yet stories persisted of fine farming land and grassy fields for cattle in Texas.

So in September 1854 Kilian and his followers began a hazardous journey to their new home. According to John Socha, Texas Lutheran historian, the Wends traveled by rail to Hamburg, Germany, and by steamship to Hull, England. From there they went by train to Liverpool. There they hired an Australian sail-

ing ship, the *Ben Nevis*, for the Atlantic voyage to America.

Tragedy overtook the little band of Lutherans before they could sail. A cholera epidemic broke out on the ship, and more than 30 of the group died. They were buried in Cork, Ireland, where the *Ben Nevis* was quarantined. The ship resumed the journey but cholera broke out again, and 73 men, women, and children died before the *Ben Nevis* sailed into Galveston Bay on Dec. 14, 1854.

The decimated congregation arrived only to be faced with another scourge—yellow fever. Many contracted the disease, but only one died before they could flee inland to Houston.

By wagon and oxen the immigrants plodded across the coastal prairies in January 1855. Two men had been sent ahead to find a place. The migration to a new homeland ended on the banks of Rabbs Creek in what is today Lee County (named for Robert E. Lee, the Confederate leader), near Giddings. The Wends purchased a league of land for 50 cents an acre. They called their settlement Serbin, because in Germany they had called themselves *Serbske*, or Sorbs (another name for Wends).

Kilian, a contemporary and a



Rev. Paul Hartfield, pastor of St. Paul, and Evelyn N. Kasper of Warda, Tex., president of the Texas Wendish Heritage Society, visit the gravesite of Rev. Jan Kilian, leader of the Wendish immigration, who served as pastor of the Wends for 30 years.