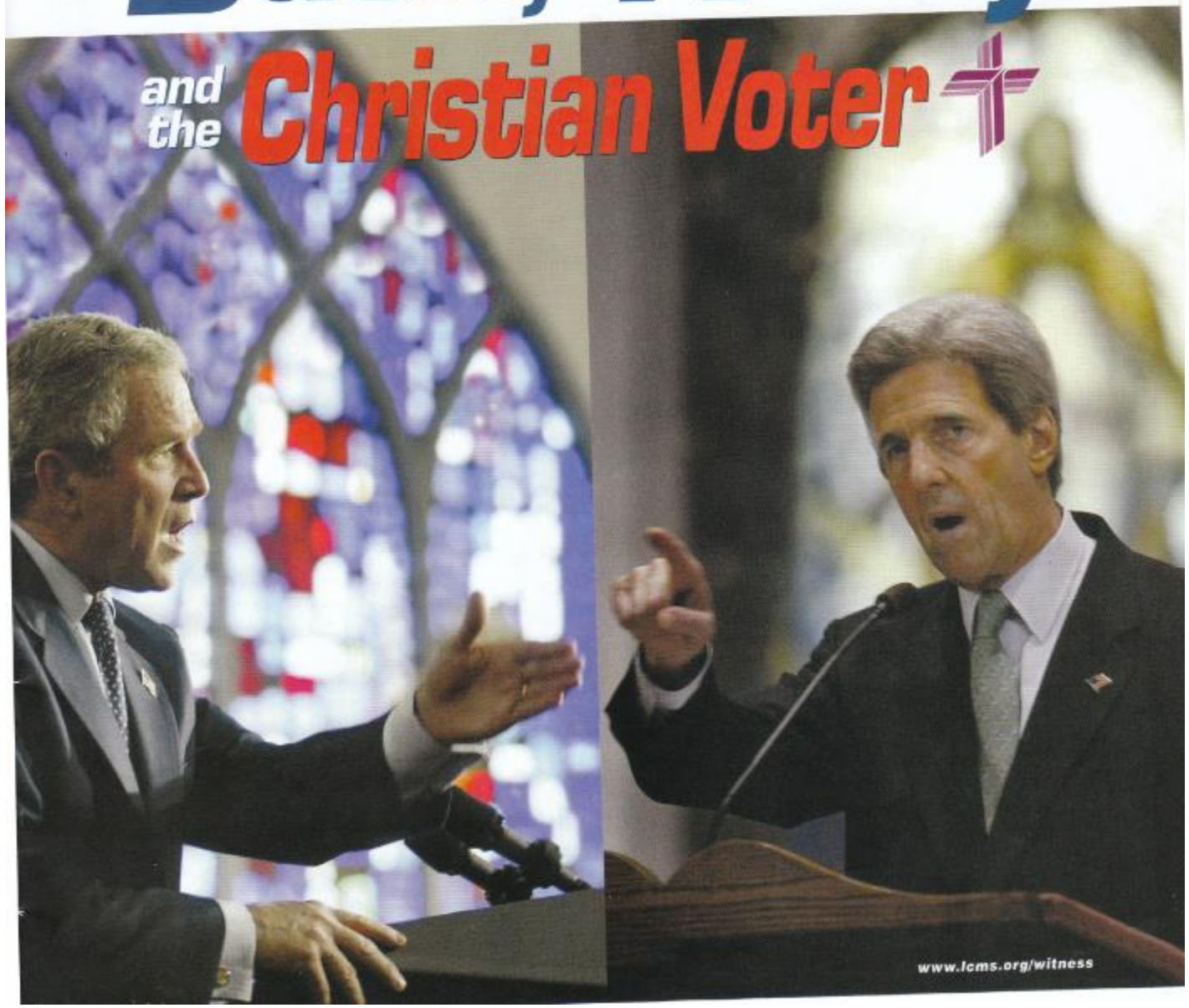


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A little-known but significant immigrant group for American Lutherans is celebrating 150 years of life in the Lone Star state.

THE WENDS OF TEXAS

by David Zersen

Paul Goeke is in his final year at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. Since he and Angie Zoch, now his wife, met in college at Concordia University at Austin, Texas, they have shared many common interests and activities. They also share an important distinction: both are Lutheran Wends.

The Wends of Texas are not well known among immigrant ethnic groups in the United States. But this fall, in Serbin, Texas, and in Austin, sesquicentennial celebrations remember their 1854 arrival in Galveston. That year, nearly 600 of these German natives with a Slavic heritage left Liverpool by ship, on the *Ben Nevis*, to form one of the more significant ethnic settlements in American Lutheran history.

In comparison with other Lutheran immigrant groups from the

Old World, the Wends are impressive from the standpoint of numbers alone. Only the 605 Saxons who arrived in 1845 had a larger settlement—in Missouri—than the Texas Wends. Well over 500 Wends arrived in 1854.

A little Wendish history

At a faculty party in Austin some years ago, one guest naively asked another, who bore an obviously Slavic name, “What really is a Wend?” I remember the reply, “Well, it’s something like a German.”

Indeed, the Wends emigrated to the United States as German citizens, but they were of *Slavic*, not Germanic, origin. Boniface, an eighth-century missionary, said they were gentle in character, in contrast to the barbaric Germans. Ultimately separated into two language groups (Upper and Lower Sorbian), and

commonly known today in Europe as “Sorbs” rather than “Wends,” they have dwindled in numbers from some 250,000 at the beginning of the 19th century to about 60,000 today.

At the time of the Reformation, most Wends became Lutheran. Some 30 Wends are known to have studied at Wittenberg. Wends also were instrumental in bringing the Lutheran faith to Slovakia, facilitated by similarities in language. Following the Lutheran trend to worship in native languages, the first

books translated into Wendish included the Small Catechism, the Bible and a hymnal.

Luther’s wife, Katherine, was from Lippendorf, a village in the Wendish area. Her maiden name, von Bora, is a Wendish word meaning “fir,” although there is no definitive evidence that she was of Wendish descent.

Wends have always had to fight hard to maintain their linguistic and cultural heritage within Germany—their lands are in the east, near the border with the Czech Republic and Poland. Often, they were forcibly prevented from using their languages and customs. During the Nazi era, their leaders were at times imprisoned and their books confiscated. Today, they struggle to maintain their ethnic identity essentially through language instruction, folk singing and theatre.

In the 19th century, Wends were having a difficult time establishing themselves financially. With the end of feudalism, it was often difficult for independent farmers to make ends meet. Emigration seemed a solution to many. One group of Lutherans who opposed the state-mandated union of Lutheran and Reformed churches in Brandenburg invited a like-minded pastor, Jan Kilian, to be their spiritual leader. Nearly 600 people joined this particular exodus, seeking economic opportunity in the New World as well as the chance to practice more freely their Wendish Lutheran heritage.

The journey was a precarious

Some people of Wendish heritage dress in European Wendish costume when the community at Serbin, Texas, holds its annual Wendish Fest with church services in German and English. The Texas Wendish Heritage Society has revived interest in European clothing, foods and crafts.



one. En route from Germany to Liverpool, England, and then to Galveston, Texas, on to Serbin, 81 fellow travelers died from cholera, yellow fever, childbirth or other maladies. Arriving in Texas in December 1854, their leaders were not able to finalize the purchase of land until late spring, which did not allow enough time for a season of planting and harvesting.

Rev. Clarence Dube, a retired LCMS pastor, once told me how he wept at his great-grandmother's grave in Serbin, remembering how she lost her husband at sea, then struggled to survive in a makeshift cabin with several small children on an unknown frontier. He wondered whether he would have had such courage and faith!

In the New World

During the first 75 years, the colonists struggled against enormous odds to establish themselves. They had to master new farming techniques, cope with crop failure and adapt to new languages. A democratic openness in the community led to differing points of view—structural and theological. The congregation split over language and doctrine, and the arrival of new immigrants turned their focus in different directions.

By the turn of the 20th century, Wends comprised significant percentages of the Lutheran congregations in nearly two dozen Texas communities. Although there were also Swedish, Norwegian and German settlements in Texas, the Wends had the earliest significant impact on Texas Lutheranism. When 13 congregations met in 1926 to form what is today Concordia University at Austin, they were largely of Wendish heritage.

Important in the midst of all this

was Pastor Jan Kilian. In Europe, he had been an ambitious scholar, poet and pastor. He had written more than 50 hymns, many of which are sung in both Roman Catholic and Lutheran Churches in Germany today. He had translated the *Book of Concord* into Upper Sorbian.

In Texas, however, life was overwhelming for Pastor Kilian. He had only a one-year contract, which he had to fight to renew. He taught school in Wendish for 30 years and served the Serbin congregation faithfully, mostly from a two-room building that was his home and that served the congregation.

He is remembered as a loving husband and father of five. A Wend who championed his heritage, he was pliable enough to lead worship in three languages—Wendish, German and English—by the end of his ministry.

Kilian seems never to have written a poem or hymn once in the New World. His American legacy at St. Paul Lutheran Church, Serbin, is the stately and serene building he dedicated in 1871. And, in Austin, there is the university's grand Old Main building, Kilian Hall, where generations of LCMS pastors and teachers have been prepared for ministry.

Over the years, Lutheran Wends in

Texas have sometimes forgotten their heritage, or wondered if it is valuable to be anything other than just generically American. On the one hand, painting Easter eggs, consuming Wendish noodles or remembering Ptaci Kwas—the Wedding of the Birds—on Jan. 25 may seem old-fashioned and unnecessary. America is for Americans.

On the other hand, the signifi-



The Wendish Fest at Serbin, Texas, each September celebrates the Wendish heritage of the area and recreates their unique customs and dress from Europe.

cantly Slavic names from Texas tell of a noble tradition that braved insuperable odds and through the years provided great leadership in the church. Long is the roll call of LCMS pastors and teachers whose Slavic names tell a great story—among them is the surname of the current Missouri Synod president, Dr. Gerald Kieschnick. Significant are the stories of faithful Wendish families who raised their children to be solid members of congregations not only in Texas but throughout the United States.

Paul and Angie Goeke look at their one-year-old daughter and wonder what treasures they will pass on to her. Paul remembers appearing in Wendish costume at San Antonio Folk Life Festivals, and Angie remembers Wendish family reunions of the Zoch clan. Ava deserves to have her memories too.

Most important for all of us are those experiences that help us appreciate how we become who are, as individuals and as people of faith. The traditions of the Lutheran Wends have always had a great deal to say about that and will continue to do so for a long time to come.



Rev. Johann Kilian (1811–1884) shown here with his daughter.



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