

# Wends of Change

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Even as their language disappears, descendants of Slavic immigrants still embrace their cultural and religious freedom in tiny Serbin

BY [ELAINE ROBBINS](#)



A granite monument honoring the Wendish immigrants who died en route to Texas sits near the cemetery in Serbin.

IMAGE: JOEL SALCIDO

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In Serbin, a tiny settlement on the windy, post-oak plains of Central Texas about six miles southwest of Giddings, the strains of a Czech polka band emerge from a pavilion. Inside, hundreds of people sit at long tables tucking into plates of sausage, sauerkraut, Wendish homemade noodles, pickled beets and baked desserts and talking boisterously above the music.

In the food line, a man in front of me turns around and quips, “You can’t eat unless you can speak Wendish.” We both laugh. Although historic Serbin is the mother colony of Wendish immigrants in

Texas, the Wendish language pretty much died out in Texas in the 1920s. One of the state's last known fluent speakers and readers of Wendish, Carl Miertschin of Serbin, died in 1996.

The man, 63-year-old David Goeke of San Antonio, introduces himself, and we sit down to chat about his Wendish roots. Like many Texas Wends, Goeke grew up thinking he was German. That wasn't a surprising conclusion: After all, his great-great grandparents immigrated to Texas from Germany, and his grandparents and parents spoke German.

But at the age of 23, Goeke found a book about the Wends on his pastor's bookshelf. He turned to the book's appendix and was stunned to find several of his ancestors on a list of Wendish immigrants to Texas. The most notable find was that his maternal great-great grandparents, Joseph Birnbaum and Magdalena Pilak, as well as another maternal great-great grandfather, Johann Kieschnick, sailed to Texas in 1854 on an English ship named Ben Nevis. They and their fellow passengers were pioneers, descendants of a group of Slavic tribes that had developed a common language and, in the 10th century, occupied much of Central Europe. But by the 19th century, invading armies had squeezed them into a small area called Lusatia, comprising parts of Saxony and Prussia near modern-day Dresden, Germany.

Clinging to their culture as a Slavic island in a German sea—their language is closely related to Polish, Czech and Slovak—the Wends lived under German rule and were forbidden to own land and were denied admission to professional guilds. They faced increasing pressure to abandon their language and merge their beloved Lutheran church with the Calvinists. The Wends feared that unifying both Protestant bodies into a single state church would dilute their pure Lutheran faith.

“Suddenly, I realized that the Germanization of the Wends had directly affected our perception of who we are,” says Goeke, whose great-great grandparents were trilingual, fluent in Wendish, German and English. “I was as much Wendish as German.” That awareness set him off on a lifelong journey to learn more about his heritage.

In 1854, in search of religious freedom, almost 600 Wends traveled to Liverpool, England, and boarded the three-masted Ben Nevis ultimately bound for Texas. (Another group sailed to Australia.) It was a treacherous journey: A cholera epidemic struck, and 15 people died before the ship reached Ireland, where 23 more passengers died during a three-week quarantine. Another 18 died at sea en route to Texas. When the ship finally reached Galveston in December 1854, many more Wends succumbed to the yellow fever scourge sweeping the city. The approximate 500 survivors quickly moved on to Houston and then made a two-week journey on foot and by oxcart to Central Texas, where they founded Serbin.

In Texas, they planted corn and cotton and lived the hardscrabble lives familiar to many early settlers. A scarcity of fertile land and squabbles over what language to conduct religious services in—Wendish or German—led splinter groups to establish new communities, each with its own church, including in nearby Fedor, Warda, Lincoln, Manheim, Thorndale and Winchester.

Ironically, what centuries of pressure in Europe couldn't accomplish, the American melting pot did. The Wends conducted business and intermarried with their German neighbors in Central Texas—whose language and ways they knew from their homeland—and quickly assimilated. In just two generations

after their arrival, their language had mostly died out, along with many of their customs. Today, it is estimated that Wendish is spoken by fewer than 50,000 people worldwide.

These days, the Wendish culture lives on in Serbin, home of St. Paul Lutheran Church, which was built in 1871. Every Sunday morning, some 400 parishioners pack services at the church, where sermons are still delivered from a pulpit that rests about 20 feet above the congregation. About 100 preschool to eighth-grade students attend the adjoining St. Paul Lutheran School.

Also on the grounds is the Texas Wendish Heritage Museum, which tells the fascinating story of the immigrants' journey to Texas and life in the new settlement. Nearby is the church cemetery and three log cabins, including the original home of The Rev. Jan Kilian, built in 1855. The names and ages of those who died en route to their new home in Texas are engraved on a granite monument near the cemetery.

Every year, on the fourth Sunday in September, hundreds of Texans—many of whom, like Goeke, have rediscovered their Wendish roots—gather in Serbin for the Wendish Festival. If you go, don't be surprised if you meet people who drink beer like Germans but paint Easter eggs like Ukrainians, and who speak German but can sing hymns in a language that sounds more like Czech. Now perhaps those contradictions will start to make some sense.

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Elaine Robbins is a frequent contributor to Texas Co-op Power.

Further Reading: *In Search of a Home: Nineteenth-Century Wendish Immigration*, by George R. Nielsen (1989, Texas A&M University Press) Note: The book was first published in 1977 under the title *In Search of a Home: The Wends (Sorbs) on the Australian and Texas Frontier*.

#### Wendish Festival

At the annual Wendish Festival, scheduled for September 25 this year, you can enjoy lunch, listen to a live band and witness Easter-egg engraving, noodle- and sauerkraut-making demonstrations and a stone-ground corn-mill demonstration.

Serbin is about 55 miles east of Austin and six miles southwest of Giddings. From U.S. Highway 290, turn south on County Road 448 and then west on FM 2239. Go six-tenths of a mile, turn west onto County Road 212 and pull into the parking lot of the Texas Wendish Heritage Museum. The museum is open Tuesdays through Sundays from 1 to 5 p.m. and is closed on certain holidays. For more information, call (979) 366-2441 or visit the Texas Wendish Heritage Society's [website](#).



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