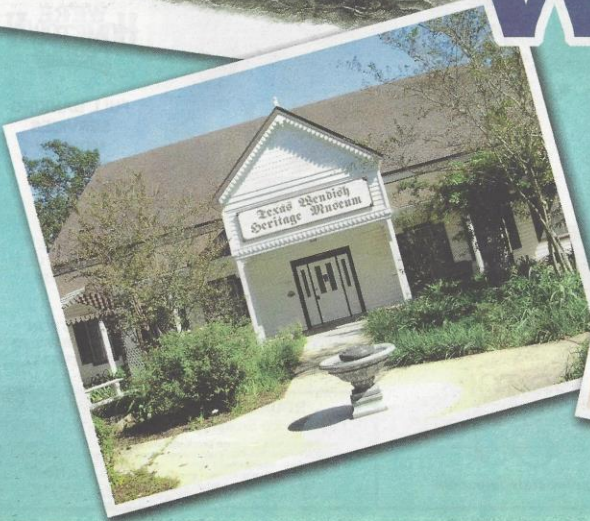




Who Are the Wends of Texas?



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By

Kurt Wilson

Round Top Register

Fall 2013

The Window on the Wends Issue

Driving along Highway 290 west of Carmine, and just a little over three miles from Giddings, I see the blue and white sign again. Its black lettering reads:

Wendish Museum
FM 448 S. of Giddings
Off Hwy. 77 South

On the right side of the billboard there's a drawing of a three-masted ship with a multitude of sails billowing. I've been seeing this sign for a long time, and my mind, ever the steel trap, had deduced three conclusions: there are people who call themselves Wends, they have a museum, and the Wends came here on a big boat. For too long a time that was all I knew. Curiosity finally conquering sloth, I contacted the museum's director, Ms. Jan Slack, requesting an interview. She promptly and graciously agreed.

Surrounded by the Wends

Heading southwest from Giddings, I travelled to that area which forms a sharp point where Lee, Bastrop, and Fayette counties converge near the former town of Serbin. Parking in the shade of an oak, I noticed, despite it being somewhat early, that there were already several other cars present. Upon entering the

museum's central building, I found out why. Ms. Slack had invited a half dozen other people to join us and share their knowledge about the history of the Wends. The gathering consisted of Eunice and George Dunk, Hattie Schautschick, Vivian and Chuck Dube, and Austin Pierce. They all had many stories to tell, and I am grateful to them and Ms. Slack for generously spending the morning with me. We had a lovely visit.

The Wends in Central Europe

Around AD 400, twelve tribes of Slavs moved into what is now eastern Germany. By the tenth century they occupied much of central Europe and shared a common language. However, these diverse groups did not unite to form a single nation. When other people moved into the same region, they began to dominate the Wends. In fact, the name "Wend" is German and was not meant to be complimentary. Wends still living in Germany prefer to be called Sorbs. Sorbian or Wendish, numbers and culture declined as many of these Slavic people were absorbed and began thinking of themselves as Poles, Czechs, Russians, or Germans. This transformation was not always voluntary – particularly in Prussia. There was enormous pressure on them to abandon their native tongue and even to Germanize their names. At the same time, Wends were often denied employment in skilled labor jobs for which they already had training, or in those few instances where they were able to secure employment, they were paid lower wages than their German counterparts. Then, in 1832, the Prussians seized Wendish agricultural lands, which made the Wends vassals on what had formerly been their property. For some of the people, worse changes were just around the corner.

The Fateful Decision

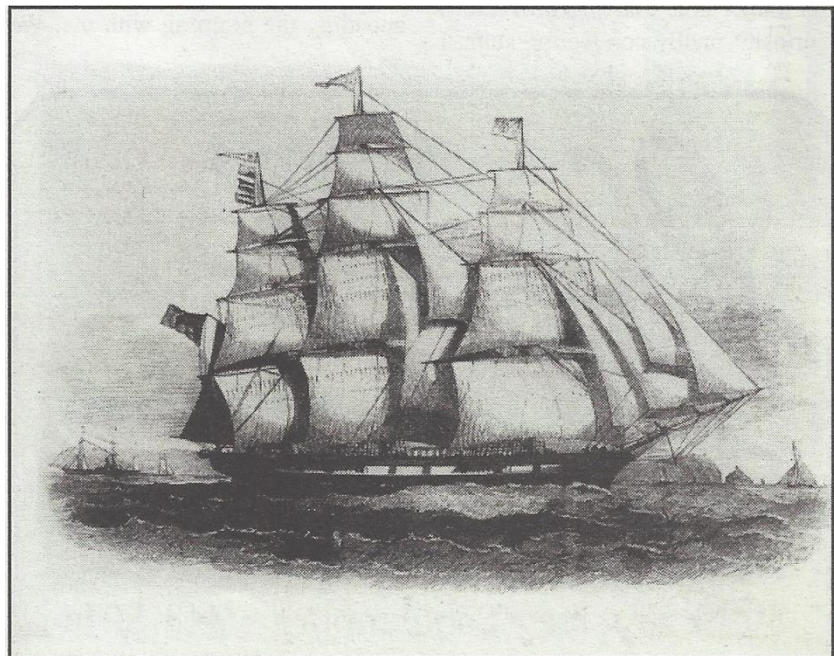
Many Wends were and are Lutherans, but the Prussian government decided they wanted one state – controlled Protestant church wherein they could dictate what people ought to believe. Rather than forsaking their denomination and its tenets, 558 Wends decided to leave Europe for the New World. Their three major goals were: securing freedom of religion, preserving their unique culture, and maintaining their Slavic language. Other immigrants to Texas came seeking inexpensive land and greater prosperity, but the Wends, like the earliest American Colonists, were principally concerned with matters of faith. In March 1854, this group formed an emigration association and called Rev. Jan Kilian to accompany them as their pastor. Kilian was a scholarly man who wrote hymns, poetry, prayer books, tracts, and sermons as well as translating many books into Wendish. He was also acquainted with the beliefs of C. F. W. Walther, who became the founder of the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. This new congregation chose central Texas as their destination. Several families of Wends had previously immigrated to our region, and the reports coming back to Europe were enthusiastic. The people who resolved to take this bold step were under no illusion that everything would go smoothly. They realized not everyone of their number would survive the trek, and one in ten did not.

A Difficult Exodus

In September of that same year, these determined people made their way to Liverpool, England to board a chartered ship, the *Ben Nevis*. Immediately they were struck by a cholera epidemic that killed 13 of the immigrants while in Liverpool and eight more as they sailed from Liverpool to Queenstown, Ireland. The *Ben Nevis* was quarantined in Ireland for three weeks, and thirty-one more Wends died of cholera while waiting to sail for Galveston. The ship was fumigated and eventually, in late October, allowed to depart. However, the dread disease was not eliminated, and another twenty people died during the Atlantic crossing. This was not the end of the hardships. They reached Galveston in early December to be confronted with another epidemic: yellow fever. The Wends did not stay in Galveston but moved slightly inland. Nevertheless, many of the congregation became ill, and there were six deaths from yellow fever while they were in Houston.

A Difficult Arrival

Sending two men ahead of them to scout for a good place to settle, the Wends boarded oxcarts and headed farther away from the coast. Finding a large, contiguous piece of property was not an easy task. Veterans of the Texas Revolution had been rewarded with land. In many cases these parcels were not occupied, yet someone held legal title to them. These absentee owners were sometimes hard to locate, but finally a league of land was secured along the banks of Rabbs Creek in what was then Bastrop County. At that time Lee County did not exist nor would it for another two decades. The exhausting migration had ended, but hard times had not. It was mid-March when transfer of the land title was accomplished. The Wends had no shelter. Food was scarce. There would be four years of drought ahead of them. Faced with such trying circumstances, the Wends did what people of faith have done for centuries: pray and work hard. Until real homes could be constructed, the Wends created dugouts or felled trees and lived in log cabins. Farming, to an extent, had to be relearned. These new Texans were growing different crops in an alien soil while dealing with an unfamiliar climate. They needed everything, so they set aside ninety-five acres to establish a church and a school and then began building the town of Serbin, which they hoped would serve as the capital of their new homeland.



The *Ben Nevis*

Accomplishing the First Goal

Shortly after arriving in Texas, Rev. Kilian contacted C. F. W. Walther to apply for membership in the newly formed Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. The two pastors had attended the same school of theology at the University of Leipzig, and Kilian chose to affiliate with the Missouri Synod because he was more closely aligned with that group's religious practices and views than he was with other Lutheran synods. Thus, in 1866, Kilian's followers became the first Missouri Synod congregation in Texas. The church building, completed in 1871, is in use to this day, which makes it one of the oldest churches in America in continual use since its construction. Its interior is unique. A balcony rings the entire perimeter. At one time the men occupied this balcony while women sat in the pews on the ground floor. Sermons were and are literally delivered from on high, as the pulpit rises approximately twenty feet above the main floor. St. Paul's is also the only one of our areas' famed painted churches that is Protestant.

During the years he lead his congregation, Rev. Kilian could deliver his sermons in German, English, or Wendish, and he often help multiple services so that people could choose to hear him in the language they best understood. When some Wendish colonists chose to move on to other parts of Texas both near and far, they made planting new churches a part of their plans. Thus, there are Missouri Synod congregations in the Rio Grande Valley, Houston, Austin, and many other parts of our state. The denomination's spread throughout Texas is largely an outgrowth from the original church in Serbin, Although one can no longer listen to services conducted in the Wendish tongue (that ended in 1921) the endurance of St. Paul's, and many other congregations it gave birth to, are proof that the most important goal of the original settlers – freedom to worship as they chose – has been achieved. In fact, when I expressed an interest in attending Sunday services, my new friends advised me to arrive before 8:30 if I wanted to be certain of obtaining a seat. Prussia, the nation that wasnted to commandeer the Wends' religion, officially ceased to be a country sixty-six years ago, but nearly one and a half centuries after its construction, people still throng to St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Serbin. I think we have to credit the Wends with a victory.

Preserving Their Culture

The surest way to pass along a culture is to impart it to one's children. The Texas Wends began this process even before their arrival. Rev. Jan Kilian started a school aboard the *Ben Nevis*, and as mentioned above, the land set aside for a church shortly after arriving in Central Texas included acreage for the establishment of a permanent home for Kilian's school. St. Paul's Lutheran School continues to this day. At present, close to one hundred children attend, and the school extends from day care through eighth grade. The group that met with me at the museum is obviously quite proud of the school and assured me that the students who graduate from it go on to excel both academically and athletically while attending public high schools.

Another institution that preserves the culture is the Texas Wendish Heritage Society (founded in 1977). Originally known as the Wendish Culture Club (founded in 1972), this organization grew out of an event that occurred in San Antonio. A group of five women applied to participate in the Texas Folk Life Festival

(an annual event sponsored by the Institute of Texan Cultures) but were denied because they did not represent a formally organized ethnic group or society. As undaunted as their pioneer ancestors had been, these women decided that if an ethnic organization was what they needed then they would create one. They formed the Wendish Culture Club, elected themselves as offices, and thus were able to participate in the event. The Texas Wendish Heritage Society has gone on to accomplish far more than simply getting into an out of town festival. They created their own festival.

In 1989 the society held their first Wendish Fest. This event has taken place on the fourth Sunday of September every year since.



Raymond Arldt, Texas Wendish Heritage Museum President

Wendish Fest

Anyone desiring to spend a day enjoying the spirit of our state ought to set aside September 22 right now. This year marks the twenty-fifth fest, and it promises to be great fun. There is no charge for admission, and it's a great opportunity to meet new folks. Attendance runs from 1,500 to 1,700. Sunday morning will, of course, be set aside for church services. English services are held at 8:30, and German services take place at 10:30. There will be tours of the church at 12:30, 1:30, and 2:30. At 9:45 tickets for a noon meal go on sale, and lunch is served from 12:00 until 1:30. Snack booths open at 2:00 for those who continue to enjoy Wendish cooking.

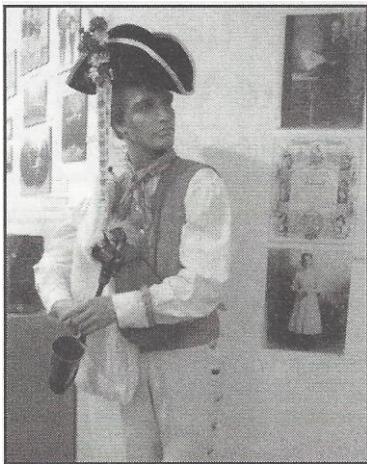
There will be exhibits on Easter egg decorating (a Wendish specialty), quilting, sausage stuffing, stone ground corn meal making, sauerkraut making, and displays of antique farm equipment and classic cars. The thing I most desire to see is the Wendish noodle making demonstration at 1:30. Here's why: this thin, delicious treat is a year round fund raising project for the Wendish Museum. At age eighty-seven, Hattie Schautschick (along with her crew) shows up each week to produce 130 pounds of noodles. When one considers how little a dry noodle weighs, that's an impressive accomplishment. During the fest

Hattie will be busy managing the kitchen while Evelyn Buchhorn demonstrates noodle-making. Any demonstration that produces an edible result gets my vote.

There will also be a musical extravaganza (county and western, polka, oldies, etc.) and a cross-cut saw contest, and a washer pitching competition. Winners of the coffee cake bake-off will be announced at 12:30 and the first and second place winners will be auctioned off at 2:00. There's a silent auction that runs from 10:00 until 2:30.

Children enjoy face painting, a coloring contest, train rides, "kletternpfosten" (greased pole climbing) and Ptaci kwas (a wedding ceremony for birds in which youngsters dress up in old-time Wendish costumes). I've seen photographs of this ceremony, and I'm telling you the kids look adorable.

While all of this is going on, the Wendish Museum will be open from 10:00 until 5:00 featuring genealogical help. Who knows? You might be a Wend and be unaware of it.



Traditional male Wendish costume.



Intricately decorated Easter eggs

The Texas Wendish Heritage Museum

Another way the Wends are preserving their culture is through maintaining the museum whose billboard I spotted out on Highway 290. It is the only Wendish Museum in the English Speaking world. The museum opened in 1980, but it was much smaller then. Twenty-five years ago Louise Peter funded an expansion, and the complex is now housed in three buildings laid out in a U shape. While helping with genealogical research is a major function, they are also a repository for books (especially family Bibles) printed in the mother tongue. Naturally, there are also artifacts including several clothing items worn by earlier generations. However, the most arresting exhibit is a collection of intricately decorated Easter eggs that can take days and days to make. There are several complex methods including the selective application and removal of different layers of wax, painting with feathers cut into specific

shapes, and multiple applications of dyes. Duck, chicken, goose, turkey, and even ostrich eggs are used to create jewel-like works of art. The museum is open Tuesdays through Sundays from 1:00 until 5:00 and closed on Mondays and holidays. Their address is: 1011 CR 212, Giddings, TX 78942-5940.

They can be reached by phone at: 979-366-2441 or by email at wendish@bluebon.net. They also maintain a website: www.texaswendish.org. Readers can use the above street address if they wish to use a computer or GPS device to obtain a map and/or directions to the Wendish Fest.



The Language Irony

As previously noted, the pioneers who arrived at Rabbs Creek had a third goal: the preservation of their language. This objective proved the most elusive. Because only 501 of the original congregation reached Texas, the number of native Sorbian (Wendish) speakers was small, and they found themselves in a land where it was far more practical to speak German or English. After all, many of the people with whom they interacted commercially and socially could not otherwise communicate with them, and written material, such as newspapers, was not available in their language. It is true there is a lot of German vocabulary in Wendish, but grammar remains Slavic. As anyone who tries to learn a foreign tongue quickly learns, simply knowing a large number of words does not do the trick. One must know how to order those words in a sentence before an idea can be transmitted, and after two or three generations passed, the younger Wends lost the ability to compose sentences. Some basic vocabulary, plus little phrases, hymns, and prayers are still in use, but Texas Wends no longer speak the language of their forefathers.

Ironically, the Sorbian language does still exist in Germany. Fleeing Europe and coming to Texas did not preserve their language. In fact, it had quite the opposite effect. At this time there are approximately 60,000 Sorbs or Wends in Germany, and it is the Catholics – not Protestants- who are struggling to preserve the tongue. However, trying to convince children (for it is the very young who most easily master a language) to work long and hard acquiring a language of such limited usefulness is a difficult task. Furthermore, the Germany government is not enthusiastic about providing funds to promote what is fast becoming an esoteric field of study. Whether or not the Wendish can survive at all remains to be seen.

Štó su Serbja?

Who are the Wends? They are a once numerous people who have survived, even prospered, despite being often disregarded and sometimes victimized by prejudice. They are a people who take pride in their heritage and work hard to preserve it. They are people of strong faith who have overcome many obstacles to become good Texans while retaining in their hearts a love for their forebears who sacrificed, struggles, and taught them to hold on to their ideals. ❁