

Who are the Wends?

by Ron Lammert

In December of 1854 an English sail vessel, the BEN NEVIS, docked in Galveston harbor loaded with some 500 immigrants from Lusatia, an area comprising parts of Saxony and Prussia. These immigrants were not the typical lot of Germans, Swedes, Checks, and Poles who flocked to Texas in the 1850's seeking cheap land and economic opportunity. This group was different.

It brought a strange new language to the frontier state, the Wendish language. And even more striking, these Slavic pioneers who were to settle in Lee County made the journey from their homeland, not in search of prosperity, but rather in search of religious liberty and the right to speak their Wendish tongue.

The Wends were descended from a group of Slavic tribes which had developed a common language, in the tenth century, occupied much of central Europe. By the 19th century the Wends had been decimated by conquest and assimilation with other cultures until only a small area along the River Spree was inhabited by true Wends.

The Wendish migration to Texas, was impelled, in part, by the Prussian insistence that the Wends (or Sorbs, as they called themselves) speak and use the German language, even to the extent of Germanizing their names. The oppression of the Wendish minority extended to working conditions, with Wends being denied the right to do the skilled labor for which they were trained. If they were hired at all, they received less pay than their German counterparts. Prussian agrarian reform laws of 1832 dispossessed the Wends of their real property so they were, in effect, vassals to their Prussian lords. But most intolerable was the requirement that the Lutheran Wends join the Evangelical Reform churches in one state-regulated Protestant body. The Wends believed this action would dilute their pure Lutheran faith and, rather than accept this decree, they made plans to emigrate to the New World.

The Wends organized the journey under the leadership of their Pastor, The Reverend Jan Kilian. Rev. Kilian was a scholar and prolific writer who translated from German into Wendish many books such as Luther's Large Catechism and the Augsburg Confession. He also wrote Wendish prayer books, sermons, tracts, as well as hymns and poems. Years later, Rev. Kilian was known to preach the same sermon in Wendish, German, and English on a Sunday morning. Kilian, a graduate of Leipzig University, was a strong leader and a logical choice to be the Moses of this 19th century Exodus.

On March 25, 1854, a new Lutheran congregation was organized at Dauban, to become the cornerstone of a large Wendish emigration. Rev. Kilian was called as Pastor.

Most likely the group chose Texas as its destination because of glowing reports returned by several families of Wends who had previously settled in central Texas. Other smaller groups of Wends also departed during this period to find new homes in Australia.

Knowing the odds favored many losing their lives on the journey, 558 Wends left their homes and many loved ones in the first week of September, 1854, bound for Texas. The group traveled to Liverpool, England, where they boarded the three-masted BEN NEVIS.

They soon encountered their first tragedy as the dread cholera epidemic struck. Fifteen died before the ship reached Ireland. At Queenstown, Ireland, the ship was quarantined for three weeks and thoroughly fumigated. Twenty-three more succumbed to cholera during this time.

At last, October 22, 1854, the Wends again boarded the BEN NEVIS bound for Galveston. Although the cholera had some-what abated, another eighteen died at sea during the Atlantic crossing.

The decimated congregation arrived at Galveston in early December, only to be faced with another scourge, yellow fever. Many contracted the disease, but only one died before the Wends could flee inland to Houston.

From Houston the Wends journeyed further inland by oxcart in early January. Two men had been sent ahead to find a place where they could settle. The epic migration to a new homeland ended on the banks of Rabbs Creek in what is today Lee County, near Giddings. Here the Wends purchased a league of land for \$1.00 an acre. The first winter was hard and food was scarce. Many Wends lived in dugouts and log cabins until proper homes could be built.

The newcomers set aside 95 acres of the land for the Lutheran church and school. About a mile northwest of the church property, the colonists began work on their town, which they named Serbin. This was to be the capital of their "Wendenland" in Texas, where they could continue forever their Wendish language and cultural traditions.

One of the first acts accomplished by Rev. Kilian was to apply for membership into the fledgling Missouri Synod Lutheran Church. St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Serbin became the first of many Missouri Synod churches in Texas and it had the only Wendish school in America.

The current St. Paul's Lutheran Church in Serbin was completed in 1871. It is a beautiful, yet simple structure, the obvious product of pioneer craftsmanship. The unique interior included a balcony extending all around the church with a pulpit nearly 20 feet above the lower floor. Originally the men sat in the balcony, while the women occupied the floor level pews. St. Paul's is one of the oldest churches in America in continual use since its construction.

Many groups of Wendish colonists struck out for other parts of Texas in the latter 1800's. Wends formed sub-colonies in such places as Austin, Houston, Warda, Fedor, Swiss Alp, Giddings, Port Arthur, Manheim, Copperas Cove, Vernon, Walburg, The Grove, Bishop, and the Rio Grande Valley. In each case the Wends built a new church and affiliated with the Missouri Synod, thus helping spread Missouri Synod congregations throughout Texas.

In the new congregations the Wendish language and culture soon died out. Only in Serbin did it survive, where Wendish services continued to be held until 1921. Today, only a few elderly Wends still know the language.

The great irony of the Wendish emigration was that in the effort to establish a pure Wendish colony where the language and culture could be preserved, these very things were lost due to the economic and social realities of the frontier.

Throughout Texas, particularly on the church rolls of Missouri Synod Lutheran /Churches , can be found the Wendish names from the passenger list of the BEN NEVIS, names like Lehman, Moerbe, Schatte, Fritsche, Becker, Schubert, Dube, Teinert, Wukash, Kiesling, Prellop, Kasper, Zoch, Miertschin, Urban, Wenke, Knippa, Noack, Groschel, Wuensche, Melde, and many more. Strong emphasis on biblical religious faith and basic education is evident today in families' descendant from the Wendish pioneers.

Today thousands of Texas and other Americans, many unaware of their background, can lay claim to the courageous and fascinating heritage of the Wends.