

# German Immigration Through Karlshafen

by John Foester

## I. Context

The late 1700s began a period of revolution around the world that had far reaching and lasting effects. Not only did it bring the American Revolution, the separation of Mexico from Spain in 1821, and Texas from Mexico in 1835-36, it helped spawn significant changes in Europe as well. In the 1790s, France was the first European country to have its own revolution, with the commoners overthrowing the royalty and nobility ruling class and replacing it with a democracy. In neighboring Germany, tensions built for decades until German citizens had grown highly perturbed with their ruling nobility by the 1840s. This, in turn, caused further government repression of the people: political police surveillance was ordered of hundreds of Germans, the press was gagged, and literature was censored. Equally problematic, German people felt pressures from overpopulation, widespread hunger, and epidemics of disease. By 1844, the harvests were poor and the economy was failing. The Industrial Revolution caused the disintegration of craftsmen's guilds and high unemployment. Serious troubles were brewing in Germany<sup>7</sup>.

Providing a potential escape from this misery was the *Adelsverein*, an association of German noblemen. The *Adelsverein* represented the first significant effort to establish a new Germany on Texas soil through organized large scale mass emigration. Romantic tales of Goliad, The Alamo, and San Jacinto from Texas and the idyllic scenes of life depicted in *The Cabin Book* and *Nathan the Squatter* enthralled these well-read noblemen and drew them to Texas for their colonial efforts<sup>9</sup>. However, naivety, poor planning, under-financing, and just plain bad luck conspired to lead thousands of their German pioneers to their deaths.

## II. Overview

On April 20, 1842, a group of nobles convened at Biebrich am Rhein and incorporated themselves under the title *Mainzer Adelsverein* or just *Adelsverein*. They elected Count Karl von Castell as their president and then pledged to a goal of "the purchase of land in the free state of Texas"<sup>6</sup>.

At this same meeting, the *Adelsverein* voted to send two delegates to Texas to scout the territory and, if possible, purchase land. Chosen were Count Joseph de Boos-Waldeck and Count Victor zu Leiningen, who arrived in Galveston in September, 1842. They moved on to Washington-on-the-Brazos and were greeted enthusiastically by representatives of the Republic of Texas, including President Sam Houston. Shortly after Leiningen returned to Germany in January, 1843, Boos-Waldeck purchased for the *Adelsverein* the 4,428 acre Nassau Farm, a plantation style operation in the Old Austin Colony near present-day Round Top in Fayette County. In September, 1843, a Frenchman, Alexander Bourgeois d-Orvanne, who had a land grant contract with the Republic of Texas, called on Count Castell in Germany with a proposal. His contract was for land just to the west and southwest of San Antonio along the Medina, Frio, and Sabinal Rivers. Bourgeois' contract was due to expire in 3 months but he told Castell that the Texas officials would extend it<sup>5</sup>. Castell purchased the land grant contract from Bourgeois. The Germans now had their land for a colony, or so they thought.

On March 25, 1844, Castell called the society into formal, general assembly at Mayence. The current group of twenty-one noblemen and one noblewoman now re-incorporated under the title *Verein zum Schutze Deutscher Einwanderer in Texas*, or the Society for the Protection of German Immigrants in Texas. The objective of the new society was formally presented as "...to guide German emigration into one favorable channel, to support the emigrant on his long journey, and in his first struggles to assist him in getting a home." They chose Prince Karl of Solms-Braunfels, one of their members and a cousin of England's Queen Victoria, to execute their mission in Texas as their Commissioner General in America<sup>6</sup>.

The *Verein* came up with a slogan, "*Geh mit ins Texas*", or, "Go with us to Texas." They published and widely distributed a brochure ("*handbuch*") proclaiming the benefits of emigrating with them. Immediately, they began placing newspaper ads and recruiting prospective emigrants, who flocked to them by the thousands. By May of 1844 the *Verein* had signed 10,000 prospective colonists for their Texas venture<sup>6</sup>. Only three German newspapers correctly reported the situation in Texas, warning of unsettled political conditions, entrenched slavery, mistreatment of immigrants, and the dangers of Indian attack<sup>6</sup>.

While Prince Karl was already en route to Texas, Henry Francis Fisher (Heinrich Franz Fischer), a native German and a former real estate broker in Houston came calling on Castell. He was in Europe peddling a contract that he and Burchard Miller (Burkhardt Mueller) had struck with the Republic of Texas for an enormous land grant of 3-4 million acres on the upper reaches of the Llano and Colorado Rivers northwest of San Antonio. With some "fast-talking", Fisher convinced Castell that his land grant would be much better for the *Verein* than Bourgeois' land. On June 26, 1844, Castell entered into an agreement to colonize the Fisher-Miller Grant and cancel the previous agreement with Bourgeois<sup>6</sup>.

Prince Karl finally arrived in Galveston on July 1, 1844. He immediately noticed that Galveston was very primitive with few amenities and landing facilities and was full of "Americans" whom the Prince did not hold in high regard. He decided he would find a better place to debark his colonists, but there were higher priorities. He first traveled to Washington-on-the-Brazos to meet with Texas officials where Sec. of State Jones promised that the Congress of the Republic would "secure everything for us that we might desire". Next, the Prince inspected the Nassau Plantation and then traveled on to Industry, an existing German settlement. Soon after, Prince Karl inspected the Bourgeois grant. In August, 1844, Sec. Jones told Bourgeois that he would not grant the required extension of his contract. Bourgeois informed Prince Karl, who was actually relieved the contract was annulled after inspecting the grant. On August 23, 1844, a courier informed Prince Karl of the *Verein's* acquisition of the Fisher-Miller Grant, who quickly returned to Washington-on-the-Brazos to confer with Texas officials. Here, Prince Karl was informed of the truth about the Fisher-Miller Grant: the land had not been purchased from the Republic, the settlement had not taken place by the deadline, the hardscrabble land was more than 300 miles from Galveston and over 90 miles west of any settlement, and it was right in the middle of Comanche & Lipan Apache Indian territory<sup>6</sup>. Prince Karl recommended to find other land but *Verein* directors in Germany were determined to continue with Fisher<sup>9</sup>.

Prince Karl arrived at Nassau on September 1, where a messenger finally caught up with him bringing news that almost 2 months earlier, the brigantine *Weser*, arrived in Galveston from Germany carrying about 90 colonists that Fisher had recruited prior to his agreement with the *Verein*. With nowhere to go, the immigrants

were still aboard the ship in worsening conditions. The first cases of typhus had already broken out. Prince Karl journeyed to Galveston and made arrangements to debark the Germans and put them up in Galveston at *Verein* expense, until a final decision could be made about what to do with them<sup>6</sup>.

In November, 1844, Prince Karl began exploring the Texas coast nearer the Fisher-Miller Grant. He arrived at (Port) Lavaca on Nov. 22 and boarded a small vessel to find the best site for a harbor. He selected Indian Point as his debarkation point for the colonists and made an agreement with the owner of the land, S.A. White, on Nov. 28. Indian Point is a shell beach separated from the mainland by a chain of lakes and marshes. This harbor had good deep water access, an all-weather surface in the shell beach, and its location provided the shortest overland route with the fewest river crossings on the route to the colony site.

Prince Karl had made his acquisition just in time. Six days before he had struck his agreement with White, the ships began arriving at Galveston from Germany with the first *Verein* immigrants. First came the *Johann Dethart* on November 22, 1844; then the *Ferdinand*; the *Herrschel*; and finally the *Apollo*, which made Galveston on December 20, 1844. The number of immigrants arriving in the *Verein*'s first wave in Galveston, including those off the *Weser*, totaled somewhere between 439 and 700<sup>6</sup>. When these immigrants reached Indian Point, of course, there were no permanent campsite, no housing, no sanitary facilities. Some of the *Weser*'s passengers came ashore already suffering from typhus; many had already died. Soon, the first cases of malaria broke out. The Prince did not have wagons or oxen to transport his charges and, even if he had, there was as yet no place to take them. To make up for the lack of shelter, the Prince spent generously to feed these first immigrants, providing meat three times a day to a generally-peasant populace that had been fortunate to see meat on the table once or twice a week in Germany<sup>6</sup>. The Prince even arranged a *Weihnachtsfest*, or Christmas party, at Indian Point which was held in the open, on the beach on December 23, 1844. The Germans named their little beach *Karlshafen*, or Karl's Harbor<sup>6</sup>. The last of the *Verein*'s first wave of immigrants arrived at Indian Point from Galveston on December 29, 1844. Around January 1, 1845, the Prince began moving the immigrants to the campsite at Agua Dulce Creek, the first "depot" on the route to the Colony. On January 20, 1845, the Congress of the Republic of Texas extended the settlement deadline on the Fisher-Miller contract to September 1, 1847. On March 15, 1845, with the wagon trains en route, the Prince purchased land on the

Comal River at Las Fontanas (now New Braunfels) from the Veramendi family to set up that colony as a halfway point to the Fisher-Miller Grant<sup>1</sup>. The wagon train of those first settlers arrived at Las Fontanas on March 21, 1845.

Prince Karl, perhaps feeling that his job was done or maybe that it was a good time to leave before the enterprise goes bankrupt, resigned and left for Germany on May 15, 1845. He was replaced by Baron Ottfried Hans von Meusebach, or just John O. Meusebach. His first task at hand was to reconcile the poorly managed, and empty, financial accounts of the *Verein*<sup>10</sup>. Needing a stopping point for settlers closer to the final destination at the Fisher-Miller Grant, Meusebach purchased on credit 10,000 acres on the Pedernales River, (now Fredericksburg) in October, 1845. However, problems on the coast would soon overwhelm the managers.

On November 1, 1845, Meusebach was informed that an additional 4,304 immigrants were currently en route<sup>9</sup>. Though Meusebach had requested a \$140,000 line of credit from the *Verein*, they extended him a mere \$24,000, meaning funds were insufficient to care for the expected arrivals at Karlshafen. The problem was exacerbated when not 4,000 arrived, but between October 1845 and April 1846, an estimated 36 to 50 ships arrived at Galveston carrying between 5,257 to more than 8,000 German men, women, and children...far more than the underfinanced *Verein* was expecting or capable of handling<sup>6</sup>. Most carried on to Karlshafen, where they soon found themselves stranded with little food or shelter with thousands of others.

The winter of 1845-46 was particularly harsh and wet, with one blue norther after another bearing down on the hapless immigrants on the windswept beach with bone numbing, frigid winds and rain<sup>4</sup>. The repeated onslaught of rain turned the primitive trails into quagmires and the streams into impassable torrents, bringing travel to a standstill. By January 1846, between 3,000 and 4,000 people had squeezed onto the little shell beach<sup>6</sup>, with an ocean of water on one side and an ocean of mud on the other. Indian Point now boasted a population as large as any city in Texas. Sanitary conditions quickly became unspeakable for the crowded thousands there. Local residents did their best to offer aid: helping erect some modest barracks to house a relative few of the immigrants and caring for the sick. Meusebach tried to obtain tents for the remainder<sup>6</sup>. The people huddled in crude shacks, in dugout holes, or in the open, wrapped in whatever cover they could

scavenge. As people began dying from hunger, exposure and respiratory diseases<sup>4</sup> in increasingly large numbers, ultimately several hundred in the winter<sup>10</sup>, lumber for caskets could no longer be spared, and the dead were placed in mass graves<sup>6</sup>. Meusebach donated his own wooden chests to serve as the last caskets<sup>6</sup>.

By March, 1846, Meusebach had finally contracted with the Torrey brothers of Harrisburg to begin transporting the immigrants the 165 miles from Indian Point to New Braunfels by wagon. The rains along the coast had continued all winter and the wagons soon mired in oceans of mud. No one could ride in a wagon, since almost everyone was required to help push the wagons along. Many men, women, and children, already sick and worn out from their ordeal, collapsed and died; often the mud simply swallowed them where they fell. The wagons would grind to a halt at rain-swollen creeks, providing the only reprieve from the effort. Still, they somehow inched ahead, reaching New Braunfels in late March<sup>6</sup>. After only a brief layover in New Braunfels, sixteen wagons and 120 people, under the leadership of Louis Bene, headed northwest out of New Braunfels and became the first settlers to reach Fredericksburg on May 8, 1846<sup>6</sup>.

One hundred wagons had left when the outbreak of the U.S.-Mexican War in May, 1846, depleted all the available wagon teams for military use, again stranding the colonists<sup>2</sup>. Seeking higher wages, the Torrey Brothers terminated their contract with Meusebach to work for the Army. The war soon drained just about all of the remaining food and medical supplies the State could muster. The abnormal cold of the past winter was quickly gave way to the heat and humidity of Texas' spring and summer. The standing water of the winter gave rise to enormous hatches of flies, mosquitoes, and other biting insects that emerged from the marshes and prairies. With the lack of food and medicine, overcrowded and inadequate housing, poor sanitation, and plagues of disease transmitting insects, germs brought in with the arrivals became epidemics of typhus, cholera and meningitis that took the lives of 400 to 2,000 people at Karlshafen in the summer of 1846 by various estimates<sup>4</sup>. Entire families were wiped out. The enormity of the epidemics at Karlshafen again forced the burial of the dead in mass graves wrapped only in blankets<sup>4</sup>. Many tried to escape the area and walk to the colonies on the Comal and Pedernales. It is estimated that over 200 died of exposure, exhaustion, sickness and hunger en route<sup>8</sup>. Meusebach felt his pleas to the *Verein* were falling on deaf ears. He had Galveston agent

Klaener write to the newspapers in Germany in hopes that the public outcry would move the *Verein* to assist. Due to the public outcry in Germany from this news, Castell quickly arranged additional funds which reached Meuseback in Texas in September 1846. Meusebach used some of the money to feed and transport the colonists. By the end of September he was able to relocate all the remaining immigrants inland except those who chose to stay at Karlshafen. Tragically, they brought the diseases with them to New Braunfels and Fredericksburg, leading to the deaths of as many as 1,000 in those towns<sup>8</sup>.

On May 9, 1847, the Germans signed a peace treaty with the Comanches that finally allowed settlement of the Fisher-Miller grant. However, by 1848 the bankrupt *Verein* ceased to exist. The German Emigration Company was formed to handle remaining business. On September 13, 1853, the company transferred its property to its creditors, however the Texas Legislature passed an act giving it to the colonists on Feb. 3, 1854.

### **III. Significance**

From 1821 to 1910, over 5 million Germans emigrated, more than any other European country<sup>11</sup>. The Adelsverein accounts for 7,380 of those during three years of operation from 1844-1847 but their advertising enticed many other German immigrants who utilized the footholds that the Verein had established to come to Texas. With the revolutions of 1848 in Europe many additional Germans, as well as other nationalities, continued to pour into the German infrastructure eventually established by the Verein at Galveston and Karlshafen, despite the early setbacks. Many followed the route to the Verein settlements of New Braunfels and Fredericksburg in the Texas Hill Country but some settled other areas of Texas including Calhoun County itself. The city of Indianola, born of Karlshafen, became a major port that helped settle the west.

This marker is intended to commemorate these multitudes of forgotten souls in unmarked graves from Galveston to the Hill Country who died of hunger, exposure, disease, and sheer exhaustion, in particular at Indianola, in pursuit of a better life in Texas and the contribution to the culture of Texas by their brethren that did survive. They helped push the frontier further west and brought a number of skills sorely needed in the wilds of Texas including farming, politics, trade and manufacturing.

#### IV. Documentation

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- <sup>3</sup> Kitchen, Martin. *Cambridge Illustrated History of Germany*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press, 2000.
- <sup>4</sup> Malsch, Brownson. *Indianola, The Mother of Western Texas*. Austin: State House Press, 1988.
- <sup>5</sup> Morgenthaler, Jefferson. *The German Settlement of the Texas Hill Country*. Mockingbird Books Digital Edition, Copyright 2011.
- <sup>6</sup> Schulz, Bob. *From "The Germans: Geh Mit Ins Texas"* <http://davecrane.info/txgenweb/vereinproject.html>
- <sup>7</sup> Kingston, Mike, editor. *Texas Almanac, 1990-1991*, Book, 1989; digital images, (<http://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapht162512/> : accessed August 11, 2013), University of North Texas Libraries, The Portal to Texas History, <http://texashistory.unt.edu>; crediting Texas State Historical Association, Denton, Texas.
- <sup>8</sup> Tiling, Moritz. *German Element in Texas*. Houston: Moritz Tiling, 1913.
- <sup>9</sup> Benjamin, Gilbert G. "Germans in Texas" Article in the *German American Annals (Continuation of the Quarterly 'Americana Germanica')*. Volume VII, No. 1, January & February 1909. Philadelphia: The German American Historical Society.
- <sup>10</sup> Meusebach, John O. *Answer to Interrogatories in Case No. 396, Mary C. Paschal et al vs. Theodore Evans, District Court of McCulloch County, Texas*. November term, 1893. Austin: Pemberton Press, 1964.
- <sup>11</sup> Barraclough, Geoffrey, editor. *Collins Atlas of World History*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: Border Press, 2003.