

How Do You Pronounce Kuykendahl? The German Settlers of Northwest Harris County

By Stephanie Gomez



The Theiss family first arrived in Klein in 1846. Descendent Edwin “Butch” Theiss wrote a family history in 1978.

All photos courtesy of Klein, TX Historical Foundation unless otherwise noted.

In the northwest corner of Houston sits the Tomball community, known for its safe suburban feel, old town buildings, and superior school districts. On a quick walk through Tomball, the visitor is exposed to a variety of delights that add to the community’s character: small restaurants with the most comforting southern dishes, antique shops and boutiques full of treats and treasures, over forty historic sites, and its unmistakable German influence.¹ That very same charm is found in towns throughout Northwest Harris County.

While Tomball, Rose Hill, Spring, and Cypress may not be as well known for their German influence as Fredericksburg or New Braunfels, the local German heritage offers a pivotal point of interest, and many efforts have been made to preserve this history. The Tomball Museum Center located on North Pine Street in Tomball and the Wunderlich Family Farm located on Theiss Mail Route Road in Klein aim to educate the community about their town’s heritage. Among the numerous historic

markers located in Northwest Harris County are ones pinpointing the original Trinity Lutheran Evangelical Church and the Theiss House. Northwest Harris County also has many antique shops, museums, and educational centers where locals and visitors can find photographs and other valuable information regarding the community.

Several different groups of European settlers founded these local communities, with one of the largest and most influential being the German settlers who arrived during the nineteenth century. Like others who have crossed borders attempting to achieve a higher standard of living, many German settlers came to America in pursuit of economic opportunity and religious freedom.² Further, Kaiserism, a type of autocratic rule they experienced in their homeland, caused a significant number of Germans to look to North America, where personal freedom replaced an oppressive governing body.

Immigration to Texas proved to be a popular choice among the Germans. Friedrich Ernst is credited with



Charlie Klein hands out mail in a horse-driven carriage.

being the first German to establish a German settlement in Texas in 1831 near present-day Austin. Enamored with his new home, he wrote to Schwartz, a friend in his hometown of Oldenburg, to persuade Schwartz to move to Texas as soon as possible.³ In response to Ernst's enthusiasm, Schwartz took the letter to a local newspaper, which soon published it. Word spread through Oldenburg and several neighboring towns, causing many to consider Texas as a possible home. Texas had a significant African American and Mexican population, but the number of German Texans more grew rapidly, exceeding 750,000 by 1890.

The abundance and accessibility of fertile land were critical factors for many of the immigrants when choosing where to settle. Present day Northwest Harris County contained several booming German settlements, such as Spring, Klein, and Rosehill, which now make up the Greater Tomball Area. Although the community was originally named Peck, the city changed the name to Tomball in 1907 to honor Congressman Thomas Ball who brought the railroad to town, boosting business and economic growth.⁴

Although the prospect of moving to Texas offered Germans a new start in life, albeit under challenging conditions, the availability of affordable land became one of Texas's most captivating benefits. Texas desperately wanted settlers and offered land to them at a low cost. After making the long, hard trip from Europe, many German pioneers took advantage of this offer and started from scratch to build homes and cultivate the land.⁵

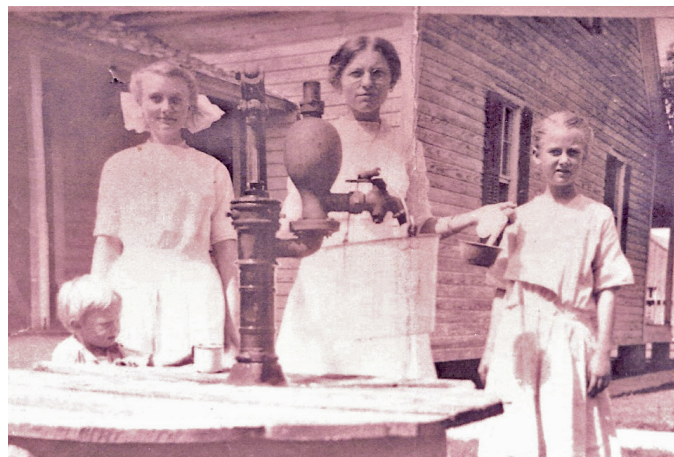
The settlers and their families encountered many hardships. Disease ran rampant throughout the community, and many suffered spells of malaria, yellow fever, and other deadly diseases. These diseases had the capacity to wipe out entire families, if not communities.⁶ Even through sickness, though, the settlers persevered.

The German settlers faced the same challenges as all pioneering peoples. Residents' lives were bustling and busy, leaving little time to become discouraged by the challenges that lay ahead. From the mother and father to the youngest of children, Tomball residents worked as a group to ensure their families' livelihoods and society flourished. In addition to growing crops for food, the set-

tlers kept a variety of animals, which aided their survival and helped make their lives comfortable. Horses, oxen, and mules were used for transportation and pulling wagons. Sheep's wool was turned into yarn for fabrics used in clothing and blankets. Pigs, chickens, and cows provided the settlers with meat, eggs, and dairy products.⁷

In addition to tending to crops and animals, other everyday chores also proved to be burdensome and demanding. The settlers bathed and washed their clothes in a nearby creek, and the women often carried home extra water needed for tasks like cooking or cleaning. Wells had to be dug by hand, making them inaccessible initially. Further, the amount of water available in the well depended on its depth and the amount of rainfall.⁸

Due to the difficulty of obtaining water, clean clothes and bathing were luxuries. Laundry water had to be heated, clothes had to be presoaked, and then manually scrubbed with homemade soap, a scrub board, and human hands. After scrubbing, they were wrung and air-dried. Bathing was reserved for "Saturday nights" to ensure that the settlers were squeaky-clean to attend church or special occasions. Family members shared the water, with young children and women bathing first. On the other days of the week, the settlers partook in a sponge bath



Theiss family members stand in front of the historic family home.

and general foot washing.⁹

Following in the footsteps of their ancestors, today's Northwest Harris County residents retain a sense of community and comradery. Well-aware of their roots and German heritage, families have kept in touch with old traditions. This has allowed them to produce long-lasting friendships and marriages with others in the community. Through good times and bad times, they have counted on each other for support.

For their efforts and good deeds, many of the German families have been honored throughout Tomball and its surrounding area. Today parents who reside in that area probably send their children to a school in the Klein Independent School District, such as Mittelstadt, Benignus, or Hildebrandt. They might purchase their groceries at the Theiss Farm Market, or use Stuebner Airline, Telge Road, and Huffsmith-Kohnrville Road on a daily

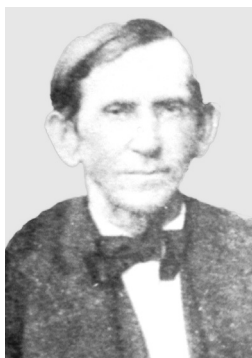


Frederika Klein (middle) seated amongst her family members.

basis. A large number of descendants continue to reside in the Tomball community while serving as influential community figures, beloved by residents. Many descendants who understand the importance of conducting genealogical research and preserving artifacts have made an effort to educate people about their families, especially members of the Klein, Theiss, and Wunderlich families who serve as prominent examples of this enthusiasm for regional history.

Johannes Adam Klein and Christina Frederika Klenk decided to elope and immigrate to North America to take advantage of the opportunities there. Their hometown of Oberndorf was a charming place, although economic hardships and religious differences between the citizens and the national government created repeated problems. After a brief stint in Switzerland Adam and Frederika went to Le Harve, France, a bustling port city with large numbers of Germans who intended to leave. On November 25, 1851, Adam and Frederika boarded the *Elizabeth Hamilton* and set sail to New Orleans.¹⁰

Many of the immigrants who traveled on these ships did so in steerage, with minimal accommodations and unfavorable conditions. Families did not have the luxury of privacy, ventilation, or personal space and had to provide their own food and bedding. Almost all of the immigrants faced terrible spells of seasickness, with nowhere to go to seek relief for their nausea. The voyages often proved deadly, however, no one died on the *Elizabeth Hamilton* during its 1851 voyage. Despite the hardships Adam and



The Klein name is one of the most recognizable in Northwest Harris county. Shown is Johannes Adam Klein who emigrated from Germany with his wife Christina Frederika.

Frederika encountered crossing the Atlantic, family legend has it that they were married en route by the ship's captain.¹¹

The newly wedded Kleins arrived in New Orleans on January 26, 1852, after spending two months on the ship. Initially they made their way up the Mississippi River, where Frederika already had family. After meeting her brother Matthias Klenk, the Kleins made their home in Hermann, Missouri. Adam did not stay long before leaving to search for gold in California. The trip and the time spent in the West took a toll on Adam who experienced illness, hunger, and robberies. Despite this he came back to his wife a wealthy man.¹²

Thanks to Adam's newfound wealth, the Kleins traveled to Galveston in the hopes of moving to Texas and settled in the area near Buffalo Bayou. Seeking to purchase land, the Kleins looked to Reverend Casper Braun, who had emigrated from Wurttemberg, Germany, to help them find housing in Houston. Instead they opted for the fertile farmland available northwest of the city, purchasing more than 300 acres of land for about thirty-three cents an acre near Rose Hill.¹³ Soon other German settlers such as Peter Wunderlich and Heinrich Theiss joined the Kleins.

Peter Wunderlich was the first of his family to arrive in America. A series of family letters, which have been preserved and translated, document the enthusiasm of both Peter and his family. Unlike the Kleins before them, Peter had a rather pleasant voyage to Galveston, and joined up with the Strack brothers (another well-known name in Tomball) who accompanied Peter to Tomball.¹⁴ Unfortunately, he arrived there at the same time that Heinrich Strack's wife and children died of illness. Peter himself became ill with fever "so bad," he said, "I can't remember the next two months [following my arrival]."¹⁵

Nevertheless Peter's letters are brimming with words of admiration and positivity when describing his new life in Texas. In his first letter to his family, Peter writes, "Biding [sic] you farewell was not easy for me, for immigrating to a foreign country was uncertain, too. But I am quite happy that I have done it....Texas is an excellent country in which the people can live very well. I wish you all were here, then you would have a better life than in Germany."¹⁶ He continued to tell his family tales of his work in Texas and of its economic differences and similarities with Germany. Not all talk was business, however, and within a year Peter wrote to his family about how much his life had changed since coming to Tomball.

Peter made a good salary and had the hope of increasing his income with each coming year. He wrote to his parents of his marriage to Katharina Hofius and their lives in the house of Jacob Theis, the son of Heinrich

Thiess who arrived in 1846. Throughout his letters, Peters writes of the good news in Texas, his love of the weather, and the ever-growing opportunities, which starkly contrast to the worries of his parents, who lacked those opportunities in Germany. Peter also updated his parents on the lives of the other citizens in the community. His letters always ended with something along the lines of “Greetings from Hermann Strack and his brothers,” or “Say ‘hallo’ from us to Mr. Head,” reinforcing the sense of connection between the communities in Tomball and Germany, as well as the personal connections between the families.¹⁷ Although they were thousands of miles apart, the German Texans and their families in Germany remained involved in each other’s lives.

The histories of these families exist thanks to the efforts of many of the descendants, such as Edwin “Butch” Theiss, who dedicate their time to unraveling the mysteries of their families’ past. In his books *My Life in Klein* (2009) and *Theis/Theiss Family History* (1978), Butch goes into great detail, retracing the steps of his ancestors and piecing together their stories. These important historical accounts enable people to understand how the community has developed.

The Theiss/Theis family arrived in Klein in 1846, when Johann Heinrich Theiss and his wife, Katherina, immigrated to the Tomball area from Bottenhorn, Germany, after getting permission from their local government to come to Texas. Sailing out of Antwerp on the *Bohemia*, they came with help from the Adelsverein, an organization founded in Braunfels, Germany, to assist the German immigrants who “were sent to get things ready” for the thousands of immigrants coming into the United States. Although Butch originally thought that his family stopped at Indianola, Texas, at Matagorda Bay with the intention of heading towards New Braunfels, his new, ongoing research indicates that they actually stopped at Galveston due to numerous difficulties settlers encoun-

tered at Indianola after the Mexican government began buying those lands.¹⁸

Throughout the Tomball area, Theis is seen with two different spellings, Theiss and Theis, although they refer to the same family. The change in spelling resulted from confusion amongst Butch’s ancestors, William Theiss from Klein and William Theis from Rose Hill, both of whom were cotton farmers. Butch explains that when the two men took their cotton to the Cotton Exchange in Houston, a clerk mailed checks to them and often the Theis in Klein received the check that belonged to the Theis in Rose Hill and vice versa, requiring them to travel to each other’s homes to exchange checks. He adds, “That happened pretty regular, so they made a gentleman’s agreement. The one at Klein added another ‘S’ to his name, and the one at [Rose Hill] stayed with the single ‘S.’”¹⁹

The Theiss family owned a large portion of the land from Huffsmith-Kohrville to Spring Cypress and throughout the Rose Hill and Klein communities, which they farmed from generation to generation. The family continued to grow as children were born and later married, having their own children. Today thanks to Butch’s efforts, they hold a Theiss/Theis family reunion every two years. Although he no longer serves as the chairman, he continues to play an active role in its management. The reunion is no small event, evidenced by an effort to draw out a Theiss family tree that grew to 120 feet long with about 3,000 names. The Theiss/Theis family reunion has caused descendants of other German families to the area to start their own family reunions.²⁰

In addition to his dedication to recording his family’s history, Butch served many years as a school board member for the Klein Independent School District between 1967 and 1985, and worked for the district from 1985 to 2002. Upon graduating from Klein High, Butch enrolled in an extra semester of course work to join the Bearkat football team when it started



Peter Wunderlich built this home in 1891. His homestead at Wunderlich Farms in Tomball offers educational tours for all to enjoy.



Local high school students dress in traditional German outfits and perform at the Tomball German Heritage Festival. The festival is held in Old Town Tomball during early April and celebrates the town's heritage through music, costume, and food.

Photo courtesy of Tomball German Heritage Festival.

in September 1947. Butch continued to be an important member of the football team, serving as an on-call member and helping the team in whatever way he could. Along with the duties working for Southwestern Bell Telephone Company, Butch helped take care of the stadium lights by climbing up the poles to change out the light bulbs for twenty-five years, and he remains highly involved with the team. To show its appreciation, the district honored him

in 2010 by renaming the Klein Memorial Stadium, which he had taken care of all those years, **Butch Theiss Field**.²¹

Without the efforts of individuals like Butch Theiss and his colleagues, the German heritage of the quaint, suburban town of Tomball would be completely lost. Even so, some people who have spent their whole lives in the town are unaware of the German roots. Through the research of regional and genealogical history, individuals can gain a personal understanding of what it means to be German, Scottish, Mexican, or a mix of ethnicities. When asked what he wants younger generations to know about this history, Butch replied, "I want them to know about the hardships they [immigrants] went through when they came to this country....These were ships that carried cotton to Europe...Then after they got here, coming to a new country, not knowing anybody was a very hard thing to do...suffering through all the perils and conditions... it had to be very hard...They were pioneers, they struggled, and they helped build this country."²² To show their appreciation for the efforts of the German settlers who built Tomball from the ground up, modern residents have memorialized them throughout the community. Those hard-to-pronounce names that decorate the local schools, streets, and businesses stand as a testament to the struggles, achievements, and perseverance of Tomball's early German settlers. 🌀



*Klein Independent School District renamed its stadium **Butch Theiss Field** in recognition of Butch's many years of service.*

Photo courtesy of Butch Theiss.

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