



Members of the Houston Saengerbund host Oktoberfest at their new headquarters, located in the Houston Heights, in 2023. They spent time throughout their season practicing for the event, which celebrates their German heritage.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Saengerbund.

THE HOUSTON SAENGERBUND: “ONE OF THE BEST KEPT SECRETS IN THE CITY OF HOUSTON”

By Jonas Leon Kaupert

Houston ranks as one of the most diverse cities in the United States, but few know about one of its best-kept secrets: the Houston Saengerbund, a German Texan singing society. The city’s oldest musical society, the Saengerbund is also a community who celebrates singing German songs and honoring German Texan culture.¹ Area residents may be familiar with some imprints of German culture in the city, such as its German street names, Tomball’s world-renowned Christmas Market, or Oktoberfest. However, few people know about the Houston Saengerbund or how it found its way to Houston.

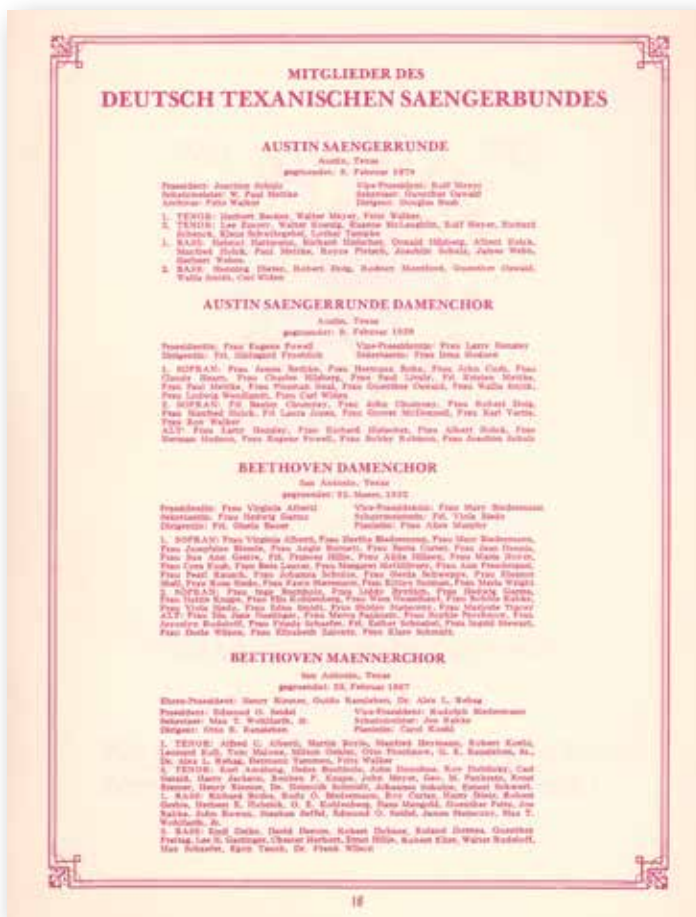
Early Years

German migration to Texas grew steadily in the early nineteenth century, driven by the push for free trade and industrialization that swept Europe following the Napoleonic Wars. As industrialization rose and replaced the guild systems that had protected the artisan and handcraft industries, an economic crisis emerged. Agricultural land in Germany became scarce compared to its high population

density, causing some families to leave their homeland and take a chance in Texas, where land was cheap and available in large quantities. The German settlements that emerged not only enriched the state’s labor force and agricultural industry but also brought cultural institutions like German-language newspapers, gymnastic clubs, marksmanship clubs, and singing societies to the broader community.²

From 1850 to the early twentieth century, nearly a hundred German singing societies emerged throughout Texas. While some singing societies have died out as their villages disappeared, active singing societies still operate in Austin, Dallas, Houston, San Antonio, New Braunfels, and Fredericksburg.³ One of Texas’s oldest German singing societies is *Der Deutsch-Texanische Sangerbund* (the German Texan Singers’ League), or DTSB. In operation since 1853, DTSB serves as an umbrella association of German Texan singing societies and organizes festivities like the *Sangerfest*, a competition between singing groups and a community festival.

Founded on October 6, 1883, the Houston Saengerbund celebrates its 142nd anniversary in 2025, making it Houston’s oldest musical society. While there are no



As German immigration increased in Texas, many German institutions like the Houston Saengerbund emerged. This program listed singing societies from Texas towns which met at the Saengerfest to sing.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Saengerbund Records, box 1, folder 11, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

surviving records for the organization's first twenty years, documents from the early twentieth century indicate the first formal meeting occurred on June 1, 1884, with twenty-four singers and fifty non-singers listed as members. That same year, the Houston Saengerbund members formalized the singing society by electing their club officers.⁴

1913 Maennerchor

During its early years, the Saengerbund hosted the DTSB in Houston in 1885, 1894, 1902, and 1913. Moritz Tiling, author of the *German Element in Texas*, described the 1885 Sangerfest, saying: "When the opening day of the Sangerfest arrived everything was spick and span. The city was gaily decorated along all the principal streets, Main and Preston, Congress and Travis Streets, however, wearing the most gorgeous apparel. The public spirited merchants along these thoroughfares seemed determined to outdo each other in promoting the spirit of the occasion, and had draped their house fronts in the gayest attire."⁵

The following years marked an influx of members, as many German immigrants who came to Houston in the early twentieth century were naturally attracted to participating in German cultural traditions in their new home. Membership

continued to grow, and by 1908, the Saengerbund had 176 active members, which ballooned to 407 members by 1913. The club activities during this period not only included singing German folk songs but also staging dramatic plays, participating in gymnastic activities, and giving lectures to German American audiences about the positive impact of German culture on the United States.⁶

In 1920, the Saengerbund honored its beloved choir director, C. C. Lieb, for his twenty-fifth anniversary with the organization. Having served as director since 1895, he became one of the longest-serving choir directors in the history of the Houston Saengerbund. Members showed their gratitude by gifting him a hand-painted anniversary picture signed by notable and active members of the choir, including former Saengerbund president Hellberg, who held the post for about twelve years, and former president Victor Juenger.⁷

Lieb's active role in the DTSB's Sangerfest is often cited as the reason the choir still exists today. One of his notable events was the choir's participation in the 1913 Sangerfest held in Houston. The festivities lasted for three days and included morning and afternoon concerts. Approximately 300 children sang in the *Kinderchor* (children's choir), and the Saengerbund organized parades and picnics for its members. Lieb's dedication to the DTSB and the Saengerbund established continuity for the choir, which he served until his death in 1927.

In 1938, the Houston Saengerbund established the *Damenchor* (women's choir), as prior to that date women had been excluded from singing in the Houston Saengerbund. Although choir men and women worked together harmoniously, one female club member described the gender dynamics of the club as more separated. "We have our meetings and they have theirs," she said with some amusement. "The men, they talk for hours and hours; they argue about things. The ladies, we get our meeting done with and we're out. We are waiting for coffee and cake. We always have coffee and cake!"⁸



Founded in 1883, the Saengerbund is one of Houston's oldest music societies. It began with the Maennerchor (men's choir), shown here in 1913.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Saengerbund Records, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



In 1920, the Saengerbund commemorated their beloved choir director, C. C. Lieb, for his twenty-five years of service. He served as director from 1895 until his death in 1927.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Saengerbund Records, box 1, folder 2, University of Houston Libraries.

World War II Era

Current Saengerbund president Rodney Thorin notes that C. C. Lieb paved the way for the organization's future through the World War II era, when anti-German sentiment made it difficult to celebrate German culture in the United States. As U.S. soldiers fought overseas, having German words on a building's exterior was less than ideal, to say the least. A few acts of hostility occurred at the Saengerbund, including incidents of rocks being "thrown at the building and some of the windows [being] broken." One member later commented that "it was mostly kids' stuff. They knew that those words up there on our sign, 'Houston Sangerbund', were German."⁹

The Houston Saengerbund experienced multiple changes due to the war. First, the Saengerbund stopped conducting its meetings in German and switched to English. A decline in the number of German immigrants meant that the Saengerbund lost members and that second and third-generation German Americans lost fluency in the language. While the Saengerbund's members initially recorded the meeting minutes in both German and English, by 1942, they were in English only.¹⁰

Another change during these difficult years was the loss of the Saengerbund's linguistic definition, including singing in German. In the summer of 1940, the Saengerbund considered changing the club's name to its English equivalent, The Houston Singing Society. Members discussed whether they should ask the local newspapers to explain to their readers what the name "Sangerbund" means or if they should use the English equivalent. Others opposed these plans, arguing that the club had "nothing to be ashamed of," and that changing the name would be disrespectful to the

former members. Ultimately, the group decided to change its name to the Houston Singing Society in January 1942, in part as a public relations measure and outward display of patriotism, and in part because some members felt they were "all 100% Americans."¹¹

World War II caused the singing society's members to fear that they might never sing again. Members began voicing their concerns, many of which echoed the question, "When will we start singing again?" One member predicted that "attendance [would] fall off more and more" if they did not do something to spark public interest. Suggestions included doing "minstrel show[s]" or a "musical sketch," or that the club should sing both English and German songs, once again shifting focus to language and public perceptions of German Americans. Despite the difficulties, the club survived the war years unscathed and began to prosper again. Nevertheless, the club continued to use its English name until 1952 because the membership believed people needed time for healing before reintroducing the public to a more traditional German Saengerbund.¹²

Post-War Era

By the 1950s, membership had fallen to just 133 singers, well under the club's pre-war numbers. In the mid-1950s, they attracted a wave of post-war German immigrants and resumed hosting events like showing German-language films. Other notable events from the decade included participating in the DTSB's 100th *Sangertag* (singing day) in New Braunfels in 1953, and a celebration on the club's seventy-fifth anniversary in 1958, which included a "Friday evening dinner, a Saturday night dance, and [its] Sunday singing program."¹³

Club activities picked up again in the 1960s and 1970s, as the Houston group travelled to their companion singing societies in San Antonio, Austin, and Dallas for the annual *Sangertag*. In August 1963, Gunther Pflingsten founded the Sangerbund Soccer Club as an avenue for bringing in younger members and fostering community engagement. When Pflingsten came to Houston in the mid-1950s, he found himself isolated. "I lived for a year in a boarding house," he said in an interview, "and did not meet any Germans." After saving to purchase a car, he "went to Memorial Park and... saw a few people playing soccer. I had to go over there!" The players turned out to be German members of the Saengerbund, who invited Pflingsten to join the club. "And that's how I began to sing." Aably assisted by Horst Gerbert, a fifty-plus-year member of the Saengerbund Kickers and the current team coach, Pflingsten's enthusiastic leadership led to two team championships. Although the Sangerbund Soccer Club never became a "focal point for German players," it is still active today.¹⁴

As the 1960s drew to a close, the Saengerbund began to have real estate challenges due to decreasing membership. To recoup the loss of revenue, they leased some of their grounds on Feagan Street to *Der Bier Garten, Inc.*, which ran the popular beer garden, Bavarian Gardens. In a club history, Theodore Gish wrote, "under the terms of the lease,



In addition to singing, the Saengerbund has group activities for its members, including the Saengerbund Kickers, a soccer team that participates in local tournaments and won a championship in 2005. Coach Horst Gebert stands at left.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Saengerbund.

the Sangerbund [had] access to its property and building on specific occasions,” which included “its anniversary celebration [each fall].” This arrangement alleviated some of the club’s hardships for the next decade until a fire damaged the old Saengerbund hall on September 5, 1980. Several hundred patrons at Bavarian Gardens had to be evacuated, thankfully without injury. Unfortunately for the Saengerbund, the fire caused considerable damage to the roof, interior, and furnishings, leading to costly repairs. Additionally, the decade was marked by a decrease of German migrants to Houston, which understandably influenced the Saengerbund’s membership.¹⁵

Changing Times

In 1983, there was much to celebrate. President Reagan declared October 6th “German-American Day” in commemoration of the 300th anniversary of the establishment of Germantown near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, in 1683. The year also marked the centennial of Houston Saengerbund’s founding in 1883. Celebrations of the tricentennial took place in Texas, in other cities throughout the United States, and the Federal Republic of Germany (West Germany). As part of the observations, the Houston Saengerbund “sang on several public occasions...which were coordinated by the German Consulate-General’s office and the Houston regional office of the Institute of International Education.” For its own celebration, the club threw a party that included “an excellent portable photographic and text exhibit on the history of the Sangerbund.”¹⁶

The decades after the centennial have been a period of change. Most notably, the organization now has four choirs.

Along with the original Maennerchor and Damenchor, which the group added in 1937, the Saengerbund also includes a *Gemischter Chor* (mixed-voice choir), formed in 1987, and the recently reestablished *Kinder Chor* (children’s choir). The performance season, which runs from August through the following May, generally includes one or more Oktoberfest performances in September and October, a *Weihnachtskonzert* (Christmas concert) in December, a *Fruhlingskonzert* (Spring concert) around Easter, and participation in the annual *Deutsch-Texanischer Sangerfest* (German Texan singing fest) each May. In addition, the choirs are often invited to perform at festivals and events in the Houston area.¹⁷

Another significant change for that organization has been a change in location. Despite the damage to the Feagan Street property in 1980, the club did not sell it until 2004. After the sale, the Saengerbund continued to meet at the historic First Lutheran Church (FLC) in Midtown, the oldest German-Protestant congregation in Houston. In 2022, the club acquired its permanent home at the former Heights Christian Church, located at 1703 Heights Boulevard. Now called the Houston Saengerbund Saengerhalle, the building has ample rehearsal and performance space and has been rented out to other organizations for events such as opera performances, chorale collaborations, and holiday celebrations like the Juneteenth Celebration Concert.¹⁸

Gemutlichkeit

As a German University of Houston exchange student in 2021, I had the chance to speak with Rodney Thorin, the president of the Houston Saengerbund, who received me warmly and asked if I would like a *Kostritzer*, a German beer made in Bad Kostritz close to my hometown in Germany. When I had the pleasure of visiting, the Saengerbund was still located at the *Sangerbund Haus* (singing society’s house) at



As a sign of the changing times in society, the women’s choir merged into full membership, yielding a *Gemischter Chor* (mixed choir), in 1987. Today, anyone with a love for singing can join one of the many choirs the Houston Saengerbund has to offer.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Saengerbund.

3410 Austin Street, which was decorated in an authentically German style. I felt like I was at home the moment I stepped through the door. The house served as a gathering place for its members, such as after a rehearsal or when they want to watch an Astros game. It includes a library with donated German books, a comfortable living room, and accommodations for the costumes, uniforms, performance equipment, and the jerseys of the Saengerbund soccer kickers.

Rodney Thorin was born in Montana but moved multiple times due to his father's Navy career, before settling in Houston in 1999. He found the Houston Saengerbund through a Facebook ad for its annual *Frühlingskonzert* in 2016 and became a regular member a few months later. Thorin, who is of German background and has visited the country, loves the country's language and traditions. Thus, he wants to continue fostering Houstonians' love of German culture through the Saengerbund.

Thorin emphasized that the Saengerbund is not only about German culture, it is about German Texan culture, too. He explains, "We are not a choir that is in Germany. It is different. We still have to appeal to American taste. It is a mix of both." Part of the group's growing diversity can be seen in the languages used in its performances. "Not all of our concerts are in German," Thorin continued. "The *Weihnachtskonzert* will be mostly in German, but we will also have other songs. We have a little bit of everything. One song is in French, other songs will be in English. A couple of years ago we had two choir members from Puerto Rico, so we had a Spanish song, too."¹⁹

Balancing the diversity of the membership while maintaining its German roots is something the group is mindful of, and has done successfully. In rehearsals, the Saengerbund tries to use as many German phrases as possible, as well as when they are at the Saengerbund Haus. The organization includes a Language and Culture Committee that



The Saengerhalle, located at 1703 Heights Boulevard, is home to wonderful events such as the group's *Frühlingskonzert* (Spring concert), *Oktoberfest*, and *Weihnachtskonzert* (Christmas concert).

Photo courtesy of the Houston Saengerbund.



The Houston Saengerbund Kinder Choir performs at the 2023 *Staatssängerkonzert*. Photo courtesy of the Houston Saengerbund.

coordinates regular German language meetups.²⁰ Although some members are fluent in German, others do not speak German at all but still enjoy singing in the Saengerbund, as German is a phonetic language.

When comparing the Houston Saengerbund to other German Texan singing societies, Thorin believes "[the Houston Saengerbund has] to work harder at maintaining the historical tie and we are doing it through what we do, not where we are. It is truly about the music and the concerts."²¹ He contrasts the Houston group with singing societies like the *Beethoven Männerchor*, which has its own restaurant in San Antonio's historic district, in addition to its performances.

For the future, Thorin wishes to create a German cultural center in Houston, as there is for French, Italian, or Czech culture. He would like the Saengerbund to take a leading role in its creation with other local German organizations, like the Texas-German Heritage Society, the Houston-Leipzig Sister City Association, the Deutsche Samstagsschule Houston, The German Institute for the Southwest, and the German Consulate Houston. Although many Germans live in Houston, and German immigrants shaped the city, it has no focal point for German culture.²²

As a German exchange student, I enjoyed learning about the Houston Saengerbund, which I had never heard of before. Getting to know German culture in a different country was fascinating to me, as I had never expected to learn about German Texan culture in Houston. Being in Houston changed my views on the United States and Texas in particular, considering the diversity of the city and its friendly people. Not only did I learn about American culture, but I also had the opportunity to experience a combination of both cultures within the Houston Saengerbund. Keeping up the German Texan culture makes the Houston Saengerbund one of the best kept secrets in Houston, and as a German, I can only say this: Keep up this wonderful tradition! 🇩🇪

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