

Discrimination Against North Texas German Catholics During World War I and World War II

by Caitlin Turbeville

As a young woman on a rural farm in Pilot Point, Texas, Rosina Pelzel Felderhoff often sat with the women in her family sewing a quilt to celebrate a relative or neighbor's significant milestone in life. Whether it was a marriage, a new baby, or graduation, there was a new quilt for every occasion. As the only girl in her family, she was slightly a tomboy and would gaze out the windows wondering what her brothers were doing, or sneak a book under the table to read while she pretended to sew. Her mother Angela, always onto her mischief, would yell at her from across the table in German to put away her book.

For Rosina, it was not uncommon to hear German, especially in a moment like this, but why she never learned to speak her family's native language was a question she carried with her throughout her life. In 2020, at the age of 90, she shared her story with her granddaughter, who shares it here. Rosina, like others in her sewing circle, was part of the greater group of German Catholics in North Texas who lost essential pieces of their German heritage after World War I and into the rest of the 20th century. Muenster, Lindsay, and Pilot Point, Texas all share a rich German history and heritage, and while those of us who are German descendants celebrate what remains of our German culture, there was a time in the United States where the celebration of German customs was considered un-American and unwelcome. During both World Wars, German Americans across the U.S. faced discrimination because of their German connections. North Texas German Catholic communities faced discrimination and prejudice from surrounding towns following the start of World War I, forcing them to adapt to their new American setting.

German Catholics had initially settled in the Upper Midwest, but changed their sights to Texas and Oklahoma once this became challenging. The founders of the Midwestern German Catholic communities in the U.S. were three siblings, often referred to as the Flusche Brothers. This trio consisted of August, Emil, and Anton. Born in Westphalia, Germany, these brothers established numerous German Catholic communities in the Midwest.¹ In 1880, they successfully founded Westphalia, Iowa and Westphalia, Kansas. By 1884 they organized Olpe, Kansas as well. However, once land prices and population in the Upper Midwest soared, and churches could no longer

¹ The History Division of the Muenster Centennial Committee. *Muenster, Texas: A Centennial History*. (Muenster, Texas: Muenster Enterprise, Inc., 1989), 22.

accommodate the massive wave of people, the Flusche Brothers attempted to settle in the Catholic communities of Purcell and Sacred Heart, Oklahoma, but they were turned away since the land had been reserved for French Catholic settlers.² With the influence of August Pulte, a friend from Westphalia, Germany, the Flusche Brothers were encouraged to come to Cooke County in North Texas, which did not have a Catholic presence.³ They were also encouraged to settle in Cooke County with the completion of the Missouri, Kansas, and Texas Railroad, which went through Gainesville, Texas.⁴

In 1889 in Cooke County, Texas, the Flusche Brothers were able to secure the establishment of Muenster, Texas, on the Childers and Fischer Pastures, which spanned about 22,000 acres. Muenster is the western most German Catholic settlement in Cooke County. One of the owners, Jot Gunter, was willing to sell to Catholic immigrants.⁵ To kick start the settlements, advertisements were placed in German Catholic papers in the Midwest and Germany to attract settlers.⁶

A few short years earlier, in 1881, Lindsay, Texas, had already seen German Catholic settlers. Judge Lindsay, the Lindsay Ranch and Hotel owner, had sold land to Anton Flusche. Lindsay is directly east of Muenster by a few miles. Following the settlement of Muenster, Judge Lindsay sold more land to German Catholics who were there under the guidance of the Flusche Brothers, creating the community of Lindsay, Texas.⁷

In Denton County, Pilot Point had a unique founding compared to Lindsay and Muenster. Pilot Point had already become an established settlement by the time the German Catholics arrived in 1891. The first Anglo-American settlers arrived in 1845 before Denton County became organized. In 1891, large tracts of fertile prairie land became available east of Pilot Point for purchase. The landowners were eager to sell it and enlisted bankers A.H. Gee and J.M. Sullivan to find potential buyers.⁸ Hearing of the Flusche Brothers' success, the bankers, invited them to view the land and consider it for another potential community. After an impressive viewing, Emil Flusche left pleased and met with Pilot Point's leading businessmen to ensure a successful

² Joseph P Fuhrmann. *A Golden Jubilee History of the Sacred Heart Parish 1889-1939*. (San Antonio, Texas: Standard Printing Company, 1939), 15.

³ Emil Flusche. Letter, 1914. Cooke County Library.

⁴ Smith, Alex Morton. *The First 100 Years in Cooke County*. (San Antonio, Texas: Naylor Co., 1976), 108.

⁵ Joseph P Fuhrmann. *A Golden Jubilee History of the Sacred Heart Parish 1889-1939*. (San Antonio, Texas: Standard Printing Company, 1939), 16.

⁶ Brothers, Flusche. "Pilot Point German Pamphlet 1891." Denton History. Accessed November 13, 2019. <http://www.dentonhistory.net/page65/page23/>.

⁷ St. Clair, Kathleen E., and Clifton R. St. Clair. *Little Towns of Texas*. (Jacksonville, Texas: Jayroe Graphic Arts Inc., 1982), 532.

⁸ The Jubilee Historical Committee. *A Golden Jubilee History of the St. Thomas Parish*. (Pilot Point, Texas: Post- Signal, 1941), 10.

establishment.⁹ Following the meeting, Emil Flusche moved to Pilot Point on September 8, 1891, which was the southernmost settlement. Similar to the advertisements used for Lindsay and Muenster, Emil Flusche wrote an extensive pamphlet and distributed it among German Catholics in the U.S. and Germany.¹⁰ Within a year of these settlements' establishments, the Catholic churches of Sacred Heart Catholic Church, St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church, and St. Peter Catholic Church were constructed—becoming cultural centers of their respective communities.

Before World War I, German immigrants were a relatively large and well-integrated group in the United States. However, following World War I, these groups became the target for “nationalist sentiment and widespread discrimination and harassment.”¹¹ German Americans assimilated to American culture and traditional values by force. Vasiliki Fouka, a researcher at Stanford University, argues that forced assimilation is common in three forms “choices of first names for children, petitions for naturalization, and name changes, among Germans who petition for citizenship.”¹²

The harassment of German immigrants was widespread throughout America. The majority of discrimination against German Americans was not violent and mainly cosmetic. Streets, schools, and towns with German names were changed. German Americans had to show their loyalty publicly to the U.S. by kissing the American flag, buying liberty bonds, and denouncing the Kaiser. The FBI also monitored disloyalty among German Americans. In one of the more horrific cases, there was a lynching of a German American, Robert Praeger, who was declared a German national in 1918 in Collinsville, Illinois, by a large mob.¹³

Some unfortunate German Americans also became detained during the wars. There were approximately 11,507 German Americans interned in the U.S. during World War II. For example, Crystal City Internment Camp housed German Americans during World War II.¹⁴ This camp detained at least 4,751 people of Japanese and German backgrounds. Roughly one-third of this number were captives of German descent. The camp had a mix of German Americans from all over the United States who could have

⁹ Emil Flusche. Letter, 1914. Cooke County Library.

¹⁰ Brothers, Flusche. “Pilot Point German Pamphlet 1891.” Denton History. Accessed November 13, 2019. <http://www.dentonhistory.net/page65/page23/>.

¹¹ Fouka, Vasiliki. “How Do Immigrants Respond to Discrimination? The Case of Germans in the US During World War I.” *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 2 (2019): 405-22. doi:10.1017/S0003055419000017.

¹² Fouka, Vasiliki. “How Do Immigrants Respond to Discrimination? The Case of Germans in the US During World War I.” *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 2 (2019): 405-22. doi:10.1017/S0003055419000017.

¹³ Fouka, Vasiliki. “How Do Immigrants Respond to Discrimination? The Case of Germans in the US During World War I.” *American Political Science Review* 113, no. 2 (2019): 405-22. doi:10.1017/S0003055419000017.

¹⁴ Luick-Thrams, Michael. *Vanished: German-American Internment, 1941-1948*. (Saint Paul, Minnesota: Traces, 2005), 53-100.

posed a threat, German Enemy Aliens (also known as German nationals), and Latin Americans who had German heritage and became deportees from Costa Rica.¹⁵ Overall, German Americans in the United States had to assimilate to American culture to avoid discrimination during World War I and World War II.

While discrimination did occur in North Texas against these German Catholic communities, it was non-violent. The University of North Texas and Denton High School banned all German language programs during World War I.¹⁶ Following national trends during World War I, Josef Franz Bezner changed his name to the more Americanized Joseph Frank. Joseph Frank Bezner worked as the County Commissioner of Precinct Four for four years, from 1938 to 1941. In his first year as County Commissioner, a man from the non-German Catholic town of Gainesville had a badly damaged road that needed to be repaired. The unnamed man put a sign over one of the potholes for Joseph Benzer and his family to read that said, "Fix this Nazi." According to his son, Joseph Benzer opposed Germany during the World Wars. Following his father's example, Joe Bezner enlisted in World War II in support of the American war effort.¹⁷

Joe Bezner had stated that this man might have been a member of the Ku Klux Klan since they outright despised any Catholic in the area. During this decade, there was a resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in Gainesville, Texas. Although, evidence showing the whereabouts of the Klan in the area is largely undiscovered. There are, however, pictures from the time showing massive parades and gatherings of the Ku Klux Klan in downtown Gainesville.¹⁸

The name change that Joseph Frank Bezner had in World War I was also not an isolated incident. It was typical for German Americans in Lindsay, Muenster, and Pilot Point to make cosmetic changes to the names of buildings and people. Franz Hesse of Muenster, Texas, also changed his name to Frank Hesse during World War I. Mr. Hesse owned a hardware business and painted a large sign on the business that said, "Frank Hesse Dealer in Hardware," which made his business more appealing to non-German immigrants in the neighboring towns of Nocona and Gainesville.¹⁹ In Pilot Point, similar

¹⁵ "Crystal City (Family) Internment Camp." Crystal City (Family) Internment Camp | THC.Texas.gov – Texas Historical Commission. Texas Historical Commission. Accessed November 10, 2019. <https://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/military-history/texas-world-war-ii/world-war-ii-japanese-american-2>.

¹⁶ Reid, Marshall. "Lest We Forget: 100 Years since the End of the War to End All Wars." Denton Record-Chronicle, November 11, 2020. https://dentonrc.com/news/lest-we-forget-years-since-the-end-of-the-war/article_0af97de6-e702-574f-92a8-59636dbadfbf.html.

¹⁷ Bezner, Joseph John, interview by Caitlin Turbeville, October 31, 2019, in Lindsay, Texas, flash drive, Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas.

¹⁸ *Ku Klux Klan March*. Photograph. Gainesville, n.d.. Morton Museum of Cooke County.

¹⁹ The History Division of the Muenster Centennial Committee. *Muenster, Texas: A Centennial History*. (Muenster, Texas: Muenster Enterprise, Inc., 1989), 25.

circumstances occurred with Frank Pelzel and Joseph Pelzel, who had changed their names from Franz and Josef.²⁰

In addition to modifying their outward identities to conform to American expectations, the isolated nature of North Texas' German communities helped them avoid harassment. Joe Bezner believes that the communities were isolated because they "were so independent of any other peoples."²¹ These towns had and still have everything that they need within city limits. There was no need to ever interact with other people from the neighboring towns of Nocona, Gainesville, and Denton. Fischer's meat market, which is still a staple of Muenster, has provided food to Lindsay and Muenster's families for almost 100 years.²² Most of the farms the settlers created allowed families to have plenty of supplies to survive year-round, in addition to the other shops necessary like Frank Hesse's hardware store.²³

Members of the German Catholic communities would also only intermarry with other German Catholics from the area or nearby neighboring German Catholic communities. There is rarely an instance where marrying outside of the culture took place. In one instance, Rosina Pelzel, a member of a prominent German Catholic family in Pilot Point, married Leo Felderhoff, a German Catholic man from Muenster and the grandson of Frank Hesse.²⁴ These trends in intermarrying still exist today. Older generations often encourage matches that follow religious and cultural patterns. As a community member, I find myself under the same influence and have been in a long-term relationship with a German Catholic; the match was encouraged by my great grandmother.

The German Catholics of North Texas also separated themselves from Germany during World War I and World War II by regularly using English. By World War II, the majority of families taught their children English instead of German. Rosina Felderhoff recalled that it was not unusual to hear German, but she never got the chance to learn it, and she never knew why her parents chose not to teach her. It was one of her lifelong regrets not to know German and keep the language alive. On the other hand, her husband, Leo Felderhoff, did know German because his parents could not speak English very well, but they made sure he knew how to speak English and not just

²⁰ Giesst, Franz. Character Certificate Letter, March 28, 1876. Personal Collection of Rosina Felderhoff & The History Division of the St. Thomas Centennial Committee. *A Centennial History of St. Thomas Catholic Church: Its Past and Present*. (Pilot Point, Texas: St. Thomas Aquinas Church, 1991), 106.

²¹ Bezner, Joseph John, interview by Caitlin Turbeville, October 31, 2019, in Lindsay, Texas, flash drive, Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas.

²² The History Division of the Muenster Centennial Committee. *Muenster, Texas: A Centennial History*. (Muenster, Texas: Muenster Enterprise, Inc., 1989), 30.

²³ The History Division of the Muenster Centennial Committee. *Muenster, Texas: A Centennial History*. (Muenster, Texas: Muenster Enterprise, Inc., 1989), 25

²⁴ The History Division of the Muenster Centennial Committee. *Muenster, Texas: A Centennial History*. (Muenster, Texas: Muenster Enterprise, Inc., 1989), 203.

German.²⁵ The same is said for Joe Bezner of Lindsay, Texas. He had to learn German when he was young, but as soon as he went to school for the first time, his parents made him stop speaking German and learn English.²⁶

The outside towns in Cooke County did not bother to include German Catholics in important recognition for the war efforts during World War II. The 1946 book titled *The Men and Women in World War II from Cooke County* failed to mention numerous veterans from Lindsay and Muenster. However, they did include those who had more interaction with the citizens of Gainesville, like Joe Bezner, because his father was County Commissioner during the war.²⁷ The citizens of Muenster, Lindsay, and Pilot Point had a considerable amount of enlisted men and women, which further separated them from Germany during World War I and World War II. From Pilot Point alone, 102 German Catholic men fought in World War I and World War II.²⁸ The numbers for Lindsay and Muenster nearly double numbers in Pilot Point, with a rough estimate of about 250 men and women who participated in the wars.²⁹ At least four siblings from the Felderhoff family were excluded from the book; one of them, Lawrence Felderhoff paid the ultimate price and was killed in action in the Pacific Theater.³⁰

After World War II, most German Catholics in North Texas did not speak German, and if they did, it was only on rare occasions. Instead, these families chose to assimilate to American culture. Since the majority of the German language died out with younger generations during World War II in North Texas, the Texas German dialect is nearly gone today, but those that are left from Rosina Felderhoff's generation continue to speak this dialect. Parts of the German language still live within most families. Little phrases and sayings are still common. For example, *schmutz* is a common word frequently used among my family and most people in the German-populated areas of North Texas. It means dirt or a similar unpleasant substance.

While the majority of the German language has died out among the German Catholics in North Texas, portions of the culture managed to survive. The Catholic faith is still of considerable significance to the community, and the churches continue to flourish. Traditional German foods are popular, and families even cook the same dishes

²⁵ Felderhoff, Rosina, interview by Caitlin Turbeville, November 18, 2019, in Gainesville, Texas, flash drive, Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas.

²⁶ Bezner, Joseph John, interview by Caitlin Turbeville, October 31, 2019, in Lindsay, Texas, flash drive, Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas.

²⁷ Bezner, Joseph John, interview by Caitlin Turbeville October 31, 2019, in Lindsay, Texas, flash drive, Texas Woman's University, Denton, Texas.

²⁸ The History Division of the St. Thomas Centennial Committee. *A Centennial History of St. Thomas Catholic Church: Its Past and Present*. (Pilot Point, Texas: St. Thomas Aquinas Church, 1991), 32.

²⁹ The History Division of the Muenster Centennial Committee. *Muenster, Texas: A Centennial History*. (Muenster, Texas: Muenster Enterprise, Inc., 1989), 40.

³⁰ The History Division of the Muenster Centennial Committee. *Muenster, Texas: A Centennial History*. (Muenster, Texas: Muenster Enterprise, Inc., 1989), 203.

their families made when they first arrived in Texas. My family, for example, regularly eats *bierocks*, German sausage, and *wiener-schnitzel*. Oktoberfest is also a popular celebration in North Texas. While most of the celebration is in Muenster, Texas, the Pilot Point and Lindsay German Catholic communities join in the festivities.³¹ The churches also regularly have events that showcase German culture and parades are common occasions, especially for a significant anniversary of a community's founding. The people of German descent in North Texas are very proud of their heritage today.³²

The discrimination of North Texas German Catholics during World War I and World War II is a piece of my family history. As a member of this community, I feel a responsibility to preserve those experiences for future generations. While those who lived during the World Wars had to Americanize for the sake of their families, they managed to save portions of the culture. We may not speak the language today, but we continue to honor our loved ones through memories and the celebration of our heritage. Rosina, or as we call her, Granny, taught her granddaughters to quilt, even though, as a young child she'd rather be doing anything else, and the quilts crafted in those sewing circles are now family heirlooms. She also shared her love of uncouth German phrases which her mother, Angela, often yelled at her from across the table to continue sewing. As her husband, Leo Felderhoff, would regularly say, "here we go," which is an encouragement to keep moving forward and continue to connect the dots in this largely untold story of Texas history.

³¹ The History Division of the Muenster Centennial Committee. *Muenster, Texas: A Centennial History*. (Muenster, Texas: Muenster Enterprise, Inc., 1989), 166.

³² The History Division of the St. Thomas Centennial Committee. *A Centennial History of St. Thomas Catholic Church: Its Past and Present*. (Pilot Point, Texas: St. Thomas Aquinas Church, 1991).