

German Loyalty During the Civil War

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“Civil War,” at least as the term applies to Texas in the period 1861 through 1865, is a misnomer. For Texas it was more the “Second War of Secession,” the first war being the successful struggle in 1835-36 to separate Texas from Mexico. The real civil war for Texas occurred within the confines of the state and was between those who opposed secession and those who supported severance from the Union. Although the majority of Texans clearly supported withdrawal from the Union and entrance into the Confederacy, as revealed by the results of the county by county referendum, still a substantial number of Texans—probably 30 percent—remained Unionists. The governor of the state and hero of San Jacinto, Sam Houston, was, of course, the most prominent of these.

Conventional wisdom has it that the German immigrant community in Texas was essentially unanimous in its opposition to secession and rejection of slavery. Since German immigrants formed a substantial part of the white population of Texas on the eve of the war (approximately 20 percent), a block opposition of this magnitude was a matter of no small consequence.¹

This internal opposition resulted in a kind of low-grade, simmering conflict that became especially pronounced during the last two years of the war as the South’s dwindling manpower led to ever more aggressive efforts to conscript new recruits. Opposition to conscription and the home guard, the so-called “Heel Flies,” became so acute that it led to the imposition of martial law on several occasions in both the main areas of German settlement in Texas.² Resistance also resulted in several spectacular and

unfortunate occurrences. In this connection, I mention the mass hanging of forty non-German Union sympathizers at Gainesville in October 1862 and for the German population the so-called Battle of the Nueces in August 1862, mentioned below.

All this seems to support the generalization that all German Texans were firm Unionists and/or dedicated abolitionists. But what about it? Was it really all that clear cut? Clearly, in the first instance, the majority remained loyal to the Union, while in the second instance, a few were ardent and outspoken in their opposition to slavery, but in making this generalization, we often overlook how complicated and nuanced, how rife with anomalies the story, in fact, was.

The purpose of this short paper is to explore both the anomalies and verities of this generalization by following the stories of two men, or rather, two extended families and their close associations. These two extended families are the von Rosenberg family of Fayette County and the Jacob Kuechler family of Oak Valley near Fredericksburg. Their stories are important because they illustrate two different approaches taken by German immigrants in Texas during the "Civil War." They also underscore differences and similarities in the two main areas of German settlement in Texas, namely the south-central Texas concentration in (mainly) Fayette, Colorado, Washington, and Austin counties, and the more isolated Hill country settlements in Comal, Gillespie, and Kendall counties. The von Rosenbergs came from the first area while the Jacob Kuechler clan hailed from the second. I have chosen these two family groupings because each produced prominent men and women, and each has left an extensive correspondence on which to document their respective situations and attitudes. Finally, at the end of the war, their stories intersect in a most improbable way.

I will begin with the von Rosenberg family. In 1849 Peter Carl von Rosenberg was the aristocratic master of Eckitten, an estate on the banks of the Memel River in East Prussia. In this most conservative region of Germany, Peter Carl von Rosenberg and his sons nourished attitudes distinctly out of tune with most of his countrymen. In the backlash of the collapsed 1848 European revolutions, the family faced social ostracism and professional proscription.³

In consequence the family decided to emigrate *en masse*. In 1849, Peter Carl put his beloved estate Eckitten up for sale and with the proceeds liquidated his debts and financed the move to Texas. Altogether, eleven members in three families made the move. In February, 1850, Peter Carl bought 800 acres of the 4,424 acres of Nassau Plantation from Otto von Roeder. The purchase included the old *Herrenhaus* (or manor house) which had been built by Joseph, Count of Boos-Waldeck, for officers of the *Society for the Protection of German Emigrants in Texas*, the so-called *Adelsverein*, on the company's slave plantation in northern Fayette County. Already we notice the first glaring anomaly to our generalization about Germans and slavery: We find a corporation of German noblemen in possession of a slave plantation in the heart of Texas. For those interested in the history of Nassau Plantation, I refer my audience to my book on Nassau Plantation.⁴

Thus, probably more by serendipity than intent, Peter Carl von Rosenberg and his extended family landed in what might be regarded as the epicenter of Southern sentiment among Germans in Texas. Not only did he purchase his new homestead from the holdings of a German slave plantation, but he also began a close social relationship with the Otto von Roeder family, one of the pioneering and most influential German families

in Texas. This relationship between the two families was eventually cemented by marriage among the members.

In proportion to his importance, Otto von Roeder is one of the most neglected figures in Texas history. This is because he organized and financed corn shipments from Colorado and Fayette counties in 1846 and 1847 that helped keep the fledgling German settlements of New Braunfels and Fredericksburg afloat during their foundation years of 1846 and 1847. ⁵This fact has gone almost universally unnoticed and is beyond the scope of this paper.

What we do need to notice is that Otto von Roeder was intensely proud to be a Texan and that he was an influential man with important connections in both the German and Anglo communities. He emerged as a bridge between the two cultures, and the importance of this cannot be overstated. His loyalties had been forged in the cauldron of the Texas Revolution where his family fielded more members than any other Texas German family, including two members at the Battle of San Jacinto. ⁶ He had become a Texan and a Southerner through and through, albeit with a German accent. Driven by a restless energy and an irrepressible ambition, he watched his fortunes soar. By the outbreak of the Civil War, he was the largest Texas-German slaveholder in the state and one of the wealthiest men in Victoria County. ⁷ He and his family were held in high esteem and exerted tremendous influence on the South Central Texas German communities of Millheim, Cat Spring, Industry, Cummins Creek, and others as well. ⁸ These communities were overwhelmingly Unionist in sympathy as revealed by the lopsided votes against secession. For example, in Millheim, the vote was 99 to 9 against secession.

They were not, however, hotbeds of abolitionist sentiment. Slavery was simply something unfamiliar to them – something they shied away from reflexively, instinctually; a practice incompatible with a centuries long tradition of skilled labor associated with the guild and apprentice system in Central Europe. Thus, the German communities in South Central Texas had developed as little islands of German language and tradition based on a free labor model in a sea of pro-slavery culture. In defense of this assertion, I refer my readers to two important works: Charles Nagel's *A Boy's Civil War Story* and W.A. Trenckmann's *Erlebtes und Beobachtetes*.⁹

Otto von Roeder was very aware of the majority sentiment of his countrymen but counseled restraint and prudence. His standing in both the German and Anglo communities went a long way toward reducing tensions in his part of the state.

With the vote for secession and the outbreak of war, Peter Carl von Rosenberg and his sons unhesitatingly followed the lead of Otto von Roeder. Peter Carl von Rosenberg, a veteran of the Battle of Waterloo, even went so far as to don his old Hussar uniform and ride up and down the streets of Round Top imploring the youth to enlist. Relying on letters and documents from the period, Dale von Rosenberg, has reconstructed the rationale his great-grandfather William von Rosenberg followed when faced with the vote for secession.

In 1861 I had to make a difficult decision. A vote was taken for Texas to secede from the Union. I decided to vote for secession for these reasons: I had left Prussia being proscribed for my political opinions; I selected Texas for my future home with full knowledge of the institution of slavery existing here; I did not come here as a reformer; I came here to live with this people who received the

stranger unconditionally; and, I felt, right or wrong, my place was with the people of Texas...¹⁰

And serve they did, all four sons: Eugen, the oldest son of Peter Carl and Amanda Fallier, was one of the first to sign up with Waul's Texas Legion, which included several all-German companies. He participated in the defense of Vicksburg. William, who by this point had risen to be Chief Draftsman in the Texas Land Office, joined the staff of General Magruder, senior commander in Texas, as a captain and chief topographical engineer. The younger sons, Alex and Walther, joined Ernst Creuzbauer's Light Battery and participated in the Battle of Calcasieu Pass, where both received citations for valor.¹¹

The anomaly of Nassau plantation, as well as the voices of restraint on the part of prominent Texas Germans, associated with the plantation, such as Otto von Roeder and Peter Carl von Rosenberg and his sons, I would argue, helped to prevent any serious outbreak of violence in the South-Central Texas German settlements such as occurred in the Hill Country.

Jacob Kuechler forms a perfect contrast to both Otto von Roeder and the von Rosenbergs. Kuechler had a somewhat different situation in the Hill Country. At twenty-four years of age, he arrived in Texas in 1847 as part of a group of about forty German intellectuals loosely associated with the trade school in Darmstadt Germany.¹² As a group, these men were freethinkers in religion, socialists in economics, and democrats in politics. Their move to Texas, ironically, had been underwritten by the *Adelsverein*. Their first action was to establish a communistic commune, Bettina, on the banks of the Llano River near present Castell. The commune was short-lived. With its collapse the following year, the members spread out through the Hill Country

settlements. From among their ranks emerged many of the leaders of radical abolitionist sentiment in the region.

Jacob Kuechler ended up sharing a farm with the noted landscape artist, Hermann Lungkwitz, in the Live Oak community on the Pedernales River not far from Fredericksburg. He married a sister of the pioneer artist Richard Petri in 1856.

Lungkwitz had married another sister of Petri and thus was also a brother-in-law.

Kuechler served Gillespie County as a surveyor until the outbreak of the Civil War.¹³

Kuechler is probably best remembered as one of the pioneers of the science of dendrochronology, or the study of tree rings. His analysis of tree rings in the Hill Country were published in the 1861 Texas Almanac and clearly demonstrated the cyclical and recurrent nature of Texas droughts.

Due to both a conscious policy of exclusion on the part of the *Adelsverein*, as well as the natural unsuitability of the area for plantation culture, the Hill Country settlements emerged essentially slave free. The intellectual force and leadership qualities of men such as Kuechler insured that the area would become a nursery for pro-Unionist sentiment in the first instance and anti-slavery agitation in the second.

These people organized themselves in various *Vereine* and openly agitated for abolition of slavery. The high-water mark of this agitation occurred in May of 1854 in San Antonio when *Der freie Verein* passed a resolution declaring that, "Slavery is an evil, the abolition of which is a requirement of democratic principles."¹⁴

Once released to the public, this proclamation provoked a storm of controversy among both the Anglo and German communities. Voices of moderation in the German communities were quick to react. For example, Dr. Ferdinand Lindheimer, the editor of

the *New Braunsfelser Zeitung*, used his paper as a forum of rebuttal. The whole episode, however, underscored the deep divisions and the vigorous nature of debate within the German community during the *ante bellum* period.

With the outbreak of war the naïve period of public discourse and debate ended abruptly. The war brought to the boiling point tensions that had simmered underneath the surface for a decade, tensions remaining mainly in the realm of discussion, though at times becoming quite acrimonious.

Confederate authorities alarmed at reports of growing unrest and a possible brewing insurrection in the Hill Country ordered their field commander, Captain Duff, to lead his cavalry command into Kerr and Gillespie counties to compel an oath of allegiance; to enforce the conscription laws; to investigate currency abuses; and to gather a list of names of those suspected of treasonous activities. *Habeus Corpus* was suspended and Duff was ordered to use “any means necessary” to accomplish his mission.¹⁵ Many of the more ardent German Unionists, who had organized themselves as a Union League, stubbornly refused to take the Confederate Oath of Allegiance or obey the conscription laws. Many took to the hills. Rumors of a large and organized party of mostly disaffected Germans somewhere in the hills west of Fredericksburg fed the paranoia of the military authorities in San Antonio.

The ill-will, thus generated, culminated in a spectacular and bloody confrontation, the infamous and endlessly dissected Battle of the Nueces, where approximately sixty Texas-German and a handful of Anglos from the Hill Country communities under the leadership of Jacob Küchler and Fritz Tegener were intercepted on their way to Mexico by a larger and better armed force of Texas Partisans. The Germans, though surprised and

outgunned, put up a fierce resistance but in the end felt compelled to withdraw and escape as best they could. Once the battle was over, the survivors were executed and the wounded shot. The troops continued to scour the countryside and summarily hanged on the spot those whom they succeeded in capturing.

Jacob Kuechler was one of the survivors. He spent the war years in Mexico where he supported himself with various odd surveying jobs. While in Mexico, Kuechler began an extraordinary correspondence with his wife and his brother-in-law, the subsequently famous artist Hermann Lungkwitz, who had remained on the family farm on the Pedernales, until 1863, when they felt compelled to remove to San Antonio because of the escalating violence in the Hill Country between the German settlers and roving bands of thugs – a state of violence which came to be termed the Bushwacker War. This correspondence offers an extraordinary window into these events as well as the mindset of the Germans who felt trapped by their circumstances. Lungkwitz's observations are the most poignant, for the situation had produced in him a general despair which had grown to include all things American:

However this war turns out, I cannot see a future for the German population here. I carry around inside me a hatred for all things American; a contempt for both the North and South; this nation carries within it all the ingredients for a slow but sure decline. We, the detested Germans, on the other hand, despite our bad reputation, have demonstrated a resilience and viability, which the Americans cannot match... is this attitude correct; is my hatred justified?¹⁶

In fact, as luck would have it, there was a future for both men. The war ended. Kuechler returned from exile in Mexico and became a leader in Republican politics in the

state, and Lungkwitz resumed his career as an artist and photographer. In 1869, Kuechler ran and was elected commissioner of the General Land Office and served until 1874.¹⁷

While there he secured employment for many of his friends and former comrades as cartographers and photographers, including his brother-in-law, Hermann Lungkwitz. After 1874, he found lucrative employment as chief surveyor for various railroads surveying routes across West Texas.

In an odd twist, the paths of two of the families intersected in a most improbable way. After the war William von Rosenberg resumed his former occupation as chief draftsman in the Land Office. However, upon Kuechler's election in 1869, he resigned. The former staff officer of General Magruder could not stomach serving under the erstwhile ringleader of pro-Unionists in Texas. Then, in December 1878, Hermann Lungkwitz's daughter, Helene Waleska, married the first son of William von Rosenberg, Carl Wilhelm. Thus the two families whose different stories illustrate the complexity of German loyalty during the real Civil War eventually found reconciliation through love and marriage.

¹ This a guess based on the U.S. Census of 1850.

² *War of the Rebellion*, vol. IV, series 2, 585; *Ibid.*, vol. IX, series 1, 708, 709, *ibid.* 735-736. Kampfhoefler, OR.

³ The von Rosenberg family has privately translated and published letters from Peter Carl von Rosenberg, his wife Amanda Fallier, and other members of the family of the period. Collectively they are known as *Ancestral Voices* and as a body represent an invaluable primary source for the historian of the period. Most of the von Rosenberg family papers are housed in the Archives of the Fayette County Library in La Grange, Texas.

⁴ James C. Kearney, *Nassau Plantation; The Evolution of a Texas German Slave Plantation*, Denton: University of North Texas press, 2010.

⁵ *Ibid.*, Chapter 11, "Otto von Roeder," 152-164.

⁶ See: Flora von Roeder, *These are the Generations*, Waco: Baylor College of Medicine, 1978.

⁷ Ralph Wooster, "Notes on Texas' Largest Slaveholders," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 65, no. 1 (July 1961), 61-70.

⁸ See Amanda Fallier von Rosenberg to Emma Fallier, Nassau-Rosenberg, May 25, 1850, *Ancestral Voices*, 27, 30; August 24, 1850, 48.

⁹ Charles Nagel, *A Boy's Civil War Story*, St. Louis: Eden Publishing, 1936; W.A. *Trenckmann's Erlebtes und Beobachtetes*. "Experiences and Observations." A translation by his children of W.A. Trenckmann's autobiography which appeared in German in serialized form in *Das Bellville Wochenblatt*, Bellville, Texas,

September 17, 1931, until February 16, 1933; see also: *Die Lateiner am Possum Creek*. A novel about the dilemma of educated Germans in Millheim during the Civil War serialized in the *Bellville Wochenblatt*, Bellville, TX, starting December 25, 1907 (13) and continuing through the next forty-seven issues, concluding on November 19, 1908 (8).

¹⁰ From a private letter from Dale von Rosenberg to the author.

¹¹ See Paul Boethel, *The Big Guns of Fayette County*, Austin: Von Boeckmann-Jones, 1965.

¹² See Andreas V. Reichstein, *German Pioneers on the American Frontier: The Wagners in Texas and Illinois*, Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2001.

¹³ James Patrick McGuire, "KUECHLER, JACOB," *Handbook of Texas Online*, accessed September 09, 2011. Published by the Texas State Historical Association.

¹⁴ See R. Biesele, "The Texas State Convention of Germans in 1854," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 33, 217-266.

¹⁵ See Mary Jo O'Rear, "Reckoning at the River: Unionists and Secessionists on the Nueces, August 10, 1862," in: *The Seventh Star of the Confederacy*, Kenneth W. Howell, ed., Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2009, 85-109.

¹⁶ "Hermann Lungkwitz to Jakob Kuechler," April 6, 1863, 8, Jakob Kuechler Papers, Briscoe Center for American History Studies, University of Texas, Austin.

¹⁷ See "Jacob Kuechler," Texas General Land Office, *The Land Commissioners of Texas*, 35.