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Flora Wertheim Essay

The Roots of “Welcome”

die Wurzeln des “Willkommens”

How Fredericksburg’s Welcoming Spirit Made the Town Prosper

Nestled in the heartland of the rolling hills of central Texas Hill Country is the town of Fredericksburg, where I have stood since 1882. I have watched the town through my wavy glass windows and read from the many historical books on my shelves. And I must admit, I have frequently listened through uninsulated walls to court proceedings from long ago and, more recently, whispers of the librarians and my patrons. My resources are indeed vast; I consider myself an expert on many subjects related to Fredericksburg, which has, for 178 years, been a welcoming refuge to those in search of respite or just a bit of fun. As every person who has been to Fredericksburg can attest, this town is deeply rooted in its German origins. I have seen the vibrant culture of the German founders of Fredericksburg shape the welcoming nature of the town. In the name of self-preservation, they established peace with the native Americans and friendships with the Mormons. Later, they transformed this community into a hub of celebration with soldiers from Fort Martin Scott; a place of rest for the travelers of the Pinta Trail; and, eventually, a wonderful getaway for modern tourism, with festivals and activities that commemorate Fredericksburg’s roots and rich history, which I know so well.

While you may not care for an old library's reminiscing, I hope the history of Fredericksburg will warm your heart as it did this limestone heart of mine. Or at the very least, I hope to inform you about Fredericksburg's success resulting from its inspiring spirit of welcome. I will explain why the Germans chose to immigrate to Texas of all places and how they made Fredericksburg such a hospitable town.

During the 19th century, most European countries were looking for ways to profit in the unsettled Americas. Germany was no different than the rest of Europe in wanting shares of the unclaimed land. Germany set eyes specifically on Texas due to a series of letters named "American Letters" that were written by early immigrants like Friedrich Diercks (John Friedrich Ernst), who described Texas land as a paradise. On April 20, 1842, a group of 21 German Barons founded the Mainzer Adelsverein, better known as the Verein zum Schutze deutscher Einwanderer in Texas. This society's main goal was to establish German settlements in Texas which would promote German supply markets, industry, and commerce on a global scale (Jordan). One way they sought to accomplish this goal was by taking advantage of the land offered through the Fisher-Miller Grant, which allowed them to purchase land in the Llano River area. However, the plan of the Mainzer Adelsverein had two problems: first, the new land was the territory of Comanche tribes and therefore dangerous; and second, most immigrants brave enough to leave their homeland were in search of religious and political freedoms rather than commercial enterprises (Gold).

The German immigrants, like all early immigrants and pioneers looking to make a home in the Americas, were met with tribulations, many of which were perilous. The settlers of Fredericksburg were not exempt from these trials, but, under the leadership of Baron Ottfried Hans von Meusebach—or as he is better known, John O. Meusebach—they overcame many

settlement challenges (Smith et al.). Meusebach scouted the land himself and found the perfect spot to raise a community. On May 8, 1846, 120 German immigrants founded Fredericksburg, or as they first named it: Friedrichsburg (Gold).

The trials of the German settlers and the leadership of John O. Meusenbach did not end with the founding of Fredericksburg. In order to prevent any budding hostilities between German settlers and the Comanche tribes, Meusenbach met with tribal leaders to discuss a peace treaty that would benefit all parties. On March 1, 1847, only a year after Fredericksburg's settlement, peace was achieved and solidified with the smoking of the peace pipe—I see the statue that commemorates this treaty across the street at Marketplatz. The terms of their agreement were based upon mutually beneficial trade of goods and services. The Native Americans would trade game, honey, and bear fat in exchange for the settler's grain and an open invitation to visit the town (The City).

The Comanche tribes respected the Germans' "willkommens," the old German word for "welcome" that was often spoken in my early days. Unlike the settlers in surrounding areas, those in Fredericksburg invited the tribes into town as equals and partners in trade (Haley). The Native Americans accepted this open invitation to come to Fredericksburg often, taking the phrase "make yourself at home" quite literally. One story that stands out is of a woman named Mrs. Martin Dittmar who regularly had Native American guests enter her home for shares of her freshly baked bread and other home cooking. Similarly, if not more surprisingly, the Klingelhoefers family woke up one morning to find a Native American peacefully asleep in an extra cot (Early Gillespie; Texas Biographies). Even though other non-German settlements around Fredericksburg were at war with the Comanche, the Germans maintained peace. The difference between the German and Comanche cultures could have created great tension between

the two parties, but their peace treaty was upheld. The Germans also proved that they were not only culturally but religiously accepting and welcoming.

Despite differing religions, the people of Fredericksburg, again led by Meusenbach, allowed Mormon settlers to build the nearby settlement of Zodiac in 1847. The Mormons repaid the courtesy by supplying the German settlers with seeds, flour, furniture, and lumber. The people of Zodiac also proved excellent teachers by providing the German settlers tips on how to live and farm the Texas soil (Zodiac). With the aid of the Comanche tribes and the Mormon settlement, Fredericksburg's population and business grew and became quite popular with the soldiers of Fort Martin Scott.

The soldiers of the Fort were stationed in the Gillespie area to ensure the peace and safety of the settlers with the Comanche (Fort History). But when they were given the liberty, they proved good customers to the early Fredericksburg businesses like the Nimitz Hotel, casino hall, and bathhouse (Kohout). With their regular patronage, the soldiers boosted Fredericksburg's economy, giving the settlers the income needed to make the town flourish. But soon it wasn't just locals paying a visit to Fredericksburg.

Fredericksburg became a stopping point on the Pinta Trail, a route used by travelers on their way from San Antonio westward. This road became known as the Upper Emigrant Trail, as Forty-Niners flocked towards California during the Gold Rush for shares in the wealth. Because the soldiers at Fort Martin Scott offered protection from the Comanche on the road west, travelers stopped close by and shared in the comforts that Fredericksburg had to offer (Pinta Trail). Already, Fredericksburg was stepping into its modern-day role as the go-to vacation spot in Texas.

Since my doors first opened, I have seen the many parades march past my doors, the annual Oktoberfest held right across the street from me, and even the weekend bustle as people flock from all over to enjoy the welcoming embrace of Fredericksburg and partake in the festivities. I myself used to host celebrations. Inside my walls, many a happy couple were wed, to include President Lyndon B. Johnson's parents (Anonymous). I met another member of the Johnson family some years later when given my newly-appointed role as the public library of Fredericksburg. First Lady, Lady Bird Johnson was present at my dedication ceremony, thanks to the McDermott family who restored me after thirty years of desertion when a different courthouse was in use (Tinkle). Since 1933, I have seen everyone who travels Main Street as they pass, reading the street names to my east that spell "All Welcome" and to my west that spell "Come Back" (Deming). This fully encapsulates Fredericksburg's rich heritage whose welcoming heart has made the community thrive and has created the pinnacle of prosperity and welcome that we know and love today.

As you can see throughout Fredericksburg's history, this town has been a place of welcome and refuge to all people and travelers of the Hill Country. Even with difficult beginnings, Fredericksburg was quick to prosper because of its welcoming nature. This welcoming nature was a vital part of keeping peace with the Native Americans and becoming friends with the Mormons who would, for the town's early years, be close partners and teachers to survive and thrive in the new land. Later, the town became a social hub to the soldiers of Fort Martin Scott and a restful layover for travelers. In modern times, Fredericksburg has flourished into a sanctuary for families and tourists. It is still a place of celebration, hosting more than 400 social events per year (Major Events). We owe the success and prosperity of this town to its roots

of “Willkommens,” which has, for 178 years, made this town the center of welcome and celebration to so many people, local and visitor alike.

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