

From Seeds to Siedlung: How Agriculture Grew Fredericksburg

**By
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In the 1840s the shared vision of being a free man in a free land with the promise of land ownership and prosperity motivated Fredericksburg's German settlers to uproot centuries of their heritage and set sail for a new land. Landing on the Texas Gulf Coast and facing a strange land of unknown potential, the German immigrants immediately set on finding a place to put down new roots. Arriving at the wooded forested area of the future Fredericksburg the Germans halted their ox carts and declared their travels finished. Fredericksburg's original 120 settlers were able to plant their seeds of hope into the hillsides of the Texas Hill Country with the vision of creating a sustainable, thriving Siedlung (small community).

While living in tents and huts¹, the first year was a real struggle of survival for the first two groups of settlers who had arrived in Fredericksburg. Their first order of business was to clear trees to create a community garden and use the timber for their first log storehouse to protect provisions given by their sponsors the Adelsverein (Nobles Society).² "Meat, corn and coffee remained the dietary staples"³ that could barely keep them alive. During this time settlers suffered great losses due to disease and poor nutrition. My own fourth Great-grandfather Heinrich Strackbein lost his wife and the mother of his four children. Before his journey to Texas, Heinrich had been a "cotton weaver in Frohnhausen"⁴; a skill which couldn't currently help him feed his family. In 1847 the town lots were distributed and Heinrich received lot #167 on San Saba street (now Main Street).⁵ This new property allowed Heinrich the ability to combine his family with that of the widow Elisabeth Aurand; who's previous husband was a farmer.⁶ Heinrich and his new wife would set their family up for success by merging the two families together, sharing agricultural knowledge from the homeland, and having additional family members to

¹ Morgantaler, p.62.

² *ibid.* p. 58.

³ *ibid.* p. 64.

⁴ Hatzfeld, p.208.

⁵ Gillespie County Historical Society, *Pioneers*, pp.XVII, 261.

⁶ Hatzfeld, p.178.

labor on the farm. During this time, the settlers also began building the Vereins Kirche (community church) which additionally served as their school, town hall, and fort.⁷ Hot and dry weather conditions challenged their old-world agricultural farming practices as they struggled to keep their communal garden alive.⁸ The Mormon settlement of Zodiac helped the new immigrant settlers by giving them grain from their mill.⁹ But it wasn't until the rains of 1848¹⁰ that things turned around for Fredericksburg. Ten-acre plots were distributed to the settlers for individual homesteads¹¹ and the rains created a successful harvest of crops that year. A bountiful harvest gave the settlers the ability to not only eat better but to also engage in agrarian commerce with the soldiers of the new Army post, Fort Martin Scott.¹² Favorable weather continued to provide successful crop yields and Fredericksburg residents began looking to expand their homesteads into larger spreads with income earned from transactions at the fort. Additional trade opportunities came along with the 49ers. Fredericksburg was the one of the last supply stops before El Paso on the way to the gold claims in California.¹³ Although the 49ers brought much needed trade to Fredericksburg, they also brought cholera; starting a deadly community wide epidemic.¹⁴ With the help of the Native Americans, who brought them meat and honey¹⁵, the settlers proved once again to be resilient. Soon thereafter the Gillespie County 1850 census reveals a very complete and thriving community after only four short years. There were now 227 households with an additional 102 Texas born German children. The settlers had successfully created a "Siedlung" (small community) that included a school (1 teacher & 1 headmaster), religion (2 ministers), healthcare (1 doctor, 1 midwife, 1 apothecary), government (1 court clerk, 1 tax collector, 1 postmaster), law

⁷ Penniger, p.33.

⁸ The Portal to Texas History, The Texas Almanac for 1861. p.137.

⁹ Gillespie County Historical Society, Pioneers, p.XVIII.

¹⁰ The Portal to Texas History, The Texas Almanac for 1861. p.137.

¹¹ Penniger, p.32.

¹² *ibid.* p. 33.

¹³ Gillespie County Historical Society, Pioneers, p.XVIII.

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.* p. XVII

enforcement (1 sheriff, 1 Ranger), businesses (shops, bars, hotel, bakers, butchers, tailors, soap maker, and saddlers), trades (blacksmiths, carpenters, plasterers, stonemasons, surveyors, bricklayers and an architect), and 76 German farmers.¹⁶ Heinrich Strackbein was listed as one of those farmers and continued his new vocation until his death in 1868.

Despite the previous four years of drought¹⁷, more than three times the number of farmers were then listed on the 1860 census.¹⁸ They grew because of their willingness to try new things and to diversify their livestock and crops. German farmers were willing to raise unfamiliar southern crops like corn, sweet potatoes, cotton¹⁹ and livestock. Cattle and sheep were the staple livestock crops before the Civil War which then shifted to include pigs and goats after the war.²⁰ Cotton was first planted in Gillespie County in the 1870s, becoming a major crop.²¹ The Germans had to adapt to the very harsh and unforgiving Texas climate. The creeks and streams were not a dependable source of water so the farmers had to try different methods of cultivation. The dry-farming method was almost completely opposite of old-world farming and consisted of “autumnal plowing, deep plowing, early and deep planting, widely spaced planting, weed removal, and loosening soil between rows.”²² Another farming method that set our Hill Country German farmers apart from other settlement communities was the fact that “not a single one owned slaves”.²³ Slavery had been a staple requirement of agricultural success in the South which our farmers avoided by keeping all labor on farms a family effort. Women and children worked alongside the men, much to the astonishment of travelers to the region.²⁴ Hired help was also a

¹⁶ Gillespie County Historical Society, *Pioneers*, pp.267-286.

¹⁷ The Portal to Texas History. *The Texas Almanac for 1861*. p.137.

¹⁸ Gillespie County Historical Society, *Pioneers*, Vol.II, pp.186-255.

¹⁹ Jordan, p.195.

²⁰ Penniger, p.84.

²¹ Gillespie County Historical Society, *The Second Fifty Years*, p.14.

²² Jordan, p.176.

²³ *ibid*, p.180.

²⁴ *ibid*, p.185.

critical component to a successful farm. With greater success more help could be hired. When those laborers saved up enough, they could then buy their own land for farming.²⁵ New immigrants were told to bring plows, scythes, sickles, hoes, manure forks, and anything they could in order to avoid relying on American made products which they deemed of “poor quality”²⁶ Although the new waves of immigrants were told to bring these farming implements with them; there was limited room on the ship for such items. This in turn created more business opportunities in town for agricultural supporting trades. With the money tradesmen earned from their crafts they were able to purchase additional land that would be used for ranching. These tradesmen were then able to increase the amount of ranching in the region while still holding onto their original professions. Heinrich’s son Christian was a successful stone mason who was helping establish a new generation of ranchers. With his earnings that he had made from masonry and farming he was able to help his children buy over 300 acres each.²⁷ In turn Christian’s son August was a store keeper and carpenter while still maintaining his ranch. Agriculture was still a necessity for the community to thrive and grow so German farmers in Gillespie County founded three agricultural societies where they shared knowledge, skills, and camaraderie with one another.²⁸ One such society was the Gillespie County Association for Agriculture and Live Stock Raising (Farmers Assoc.) who sponsored our first county fair in 1881, showcasing the bounty of our farmers and ranchers.²⁹ The bounty celebrated at the fairs was the product of our farmers’ willingness, throughout decades of harsh struggles, to try new things with a resolution to succeed. Exhibiting local agricultural products is still a proud tradition that continues today as the “Oldest Continuous County Fair in Texas”.

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²⁵ Jordan, p.187.

²⁶ *ibid*, p.186.

²⁷ Harper History Committee, p.387.

²⁸ Jordan, pp. 107,178

²⁹ Penniger, p.65.

³⁰ Gillespie County Fair & Festivals Association

With the 50th celebration of Fredericksburg in 1896, followed by the turn of the century, agriculture maintained its roots within the soil of Gillespie County. Little did our ancestors know that generations later we would still be cultivating their piece of Texas. Continuing through the seasons; the growth of Fredericksburg will flourish with future generations pursuing agricultural advancements. Cattle, sheep, goats, peach orchards, and vineyards now dot our hills and grow our population. As the dust from droughts settle and the rains renew our pastures, we continue our Siedlung from the seeds our pioneers sowed with hope and determination. Fredericksburg's namesake Frederick the Great once called agriculture "the first of all arts" and believed that "true wealth is only what the earth produces."³¹ The German farmers of Fredericksburg have proven those sentiments throughout our 175-year history. Their legacy is now ours to cultivate.

³¹ UNESCO World Heritage, Frederick II: A King with a Botanical Vision.

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