

The Danish Texans



The Carl Jensen family home near Danevang

Danish Texans, perhaps, are the best example of a small cultural group going through the acculturation process—that is, becoming Texans and adding to the concept of what it is to be Texan.

Never numbering more than one in 3,000 Texans, persons of immediate Danish heritage are nevertheless notable in the last 170 years. Danish immigrants came for varied motives, but for most the reasons were land and economic prosperity. They are often known for their individuality...in some cases, eccentricity.

A young Danish painter, Charles Zanco, left no record of his motive for coming to Texas in the summer of 1835. He designed one of several early Texas flags: the blue, single-star "Independence" flag of the revolutionary Lynchburg company. This flag, "Captain Scott's Flag," was carried at the battle of Concepción and the siege of Béxar. Zanco died at the Alamo.

Christian Dorbrandt served in the Mexican War, then was transferred by the U.S. Army as quartermaster sergeant to Ft. Croghan near Burnet. He retired about 1855 but stayed in Texas. His marriage to Annie Dunlavy of Ireland and their 14 subsequent children did not remove the warfare in his blood: they perhaps contributed. While Dorbrandt served in the Civil War, Annie kept armed guard at home against Indian threat. Dorbrandt delighted in serving as a Texas Ranger until he was past 60.

Christian Mathisen and his wife, Emily Striegler, of Fredericksburg became known for their storytelling. Emily told fairy tales in the manner of Hans Christian Andersen, and Christian recounted stories of the Norse gods in resounding verse.

Informal groups of Danish families settled in northern Lee County, known as "Little Denmark," as well as in Williamson County and in Rocky Hill near Fredericksburg, but the rural Wharton County colony of Danevang, the Danish Field, is the only coherent Danish colony in the state.

In the late summer of 1894, the first settlers of Danevang, mostly Danes who had spent some years on the United States' northern plains, arrived in Texas, finding land south of El Campo.



The P.J.A. Peterson family on their farm near Danevang, C. 1906.



Ansgar Lutheran Church in Danevang, 1908

In the face of adverse weather, Gulf hurricanes, and the necessity of raising unfamiliar crops, the colony did not initially prosper. The Danes came with the idea of showing off their north-country farming skills and preserving a distinctly Danish way of life. They did neither. But they stayed, eventually a hundred families strong.

Two questions were posed, in Danish verse, by P.J. Agerskov-Petersen for the 50th anniversary of Danevang in 1944:

Er der ikke Spor tilbage fra de gode, gamle Dage?

Er der mon et lille Minde, om en enkelt Mand og Kvinde?

Is there nothing left whatever from the good, old days?

Is there, I wonder, a small reminder of any single man or woman?

The questions can be raised not only of Danevang but of all settlement in Texas. And the answer is yes, there are many reminders: accomplishments and memories.

Hans Peter Nielsen Gammel

Hans Peter Nielsen Gammel became one of the most well-known Danish Texans.

Hans married Anna Marie Andersen in Denmark when he was 16. Facing a lack of opportunity after 1874, he followed his sister to the United States “to dig some gold and send for the family.”

Gammel found no literal gold mine, but he and his brother Niels saw much of the central and western United States. Gammel mentioned later, “What we did and how is a dead letter. I never killed anybody and never robbed anybody and I hardly ever carried a gun.” And he did send for the family; they eventually caught up with him in Austin.



Over the next few years, Gammel set up a retail shop selling stationery, jewelry, lemonade, and books. The books took over. In the words of the locals, Gammel’s store changed from a “lemonade stand with books and trinkets for sale” to a “bookstand where lemonade was sold.”

When the state capitol building burned in 1881, Gammel contracted the salvage job and rescued thousands of pages of charred, water-soaked state records. He entered the publishing business, became state printer, and produced, among many titles, the Laws of Texas, 1822-1897. This 10-volume set, preserving the records saved from the destroyed capitol, was an instant classic and remains the fundamental collection of Texas law.

Gammel’s letterheads became legendary, graced with such headings as: “The Oldest Book Store in the State, Established in 1877. The Proprietor, Gammel, was born in Denmark, rich and good looking—not so now” and “Capital Stocks \$000,000.00.” In fact, Gammel did a good business and became internationally famous.

His desk, topped by an antique pistol, was home to a trained mouse. Close by lounged his dog, Bill, who had a charge account at the nearby market and drugstore. And Gammel’s infamous Copenhagen Punch, served at home, remained a secret composition which could stop anyone in his tracks.

But Gammel’s “jollities” did not obscure his reputation as The Texas Bookman. His store invoices bore the line “If it’s a book...Get it at Gammel’s.” One could. Many of his collected rare books are now in the library of the University of Texas at Austin.

The Danish Texans & Assimilation

Name: _____ Date: _____ Period: _____

What is Assimilation?

The many immigrants to Texas brought their unique cultures with them. The people of Poland spoke Polish, the Germans knew how to make sauerkraut, the Norwegians built log homes like those they had built in Norway, the Japanese planted rice as they did in Japan, and the people of India built Hindu temples in Texas.

As immigrants from different cultures made Texas home, many changed or lost some of the cultural traditions they brought with them. This process known as *assimilation* happens when people living together merge, or combine, their cultural traits. Through assimilation, some cultural traits are lost and others are adopted. People may change the way that they dress, the language that they speak and even the food that they eat based on the cultures of others they live near.

Assimilation is not always an easy or welcomed process. Sometimes it happens by force because immigrants and their cultures are not accepted by the majority. Through political and social pressure, some groups have been forced to give up their language and other cultural traditions.

The population of Texas today is one of great cultural diversity with more than 400 different cultural groups represented. Although many groups have assimilated and adopted other cultural traditions, the ongoing arrival of new citizens continues to create Texas anew, enriching us all.

Directions: In the frames below, draw a cartoon to describe the process of assimilation.

List five cultural traits that new immigrants bring with them to a new place.

How does *assimilation* affect culture?

Describe one example of how a person or group has been forced to assimilate to be accepted.

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Danish Texans

Using *Texans One and All: The Danish Texans*, answer the following questions about why Danes moved to Texas and how they assimilated.

Danish immigrants came to Texas from what European country?

Why did most Danish immigrants move to Texas?

Danish settlers lived primarily in three Texas counties. What were they?

What was the name of the only major Danish colony in Texas?

Why did Danish settlements in Texas fail?

Geography Skills



Use your textbook to find the locations mentioned as significant to the Danish experience in Texas, and label them on the map below.

- Lee County
- Williamson County
- Rocky Hill
- Fredericksburg
- Wharton County

Globalization

The world is more connected than ever before! Changes in technology and political policies in the last several decades have led to greater increases in international trade, made migration easier, and put information from around the world at the tips of our fingers. This process called *globalization* has created an increasingly connected world culture and economy. Some fear that globalization may erase traditions and customs of smaller cultural groups. While we have more access to information, products and movement, globalization may also decrease the diversity that makes cultures unique and interesting.

What examples of globalization do you see in your home or community?

How do you feel about globalization? Explain your answer.

Summarize What You Learned

Write 2 sentences to summarize what you learned about Danish Texans and assimilation.
