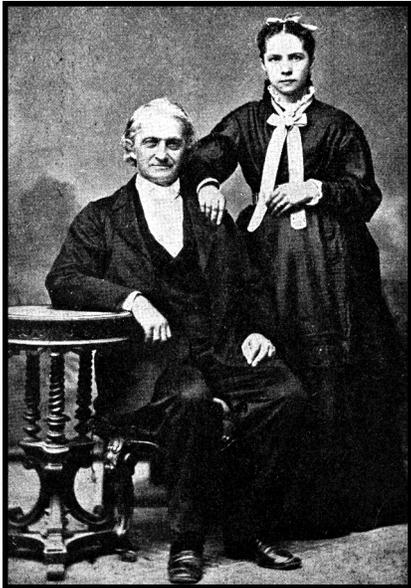


## The Wendish Texans



*Reverend Johann Kilian and his daughter*

The Wends of Texas represent a small Slavic group of people who have never had an independent nation and who have undergone a double assimilation in Texas.

Wends (earlier calling themselves Sorbs) have lived in Lusatia, Eastern Germany, as a recognizable group from the Middle Ages until today. Over the centuries, the Wends endured conquest and restrictions by other cultures and governments. At one time, Prussian governance called for the use of the German language. Wendish was to be abandoned. Then, Wends were barred from skilled labor. Then, Lutheran Wends were required to join Evangelical Reform churches. Plans for emigration were formed.

Just before 1850 some Wendish families emigrated to Australia; then, hearing of German settlement in Texas, a few Wends came to Austin County. In 1853 about 35 Wends entered Galveston to settle in New Ulm and Industry.

The only larger group of Wends ever to leave Europe for Texas was a congregation of Lutherans led by Rev. Johann Kilian in 1854. This group of nearly 500 individuals, decimated by cholera in Liverpool and yellow fever in Galveston, eventually settled in present Lee County. There Johann Dube and Carl Lehmann had purchased a league of land. Johann Kilian's two-room house served as the church, and the settlers initially lived in dugouts. By 1860 a community named Serbin warranted a post office. The settlement grew until 1871, when a new railroad turned Giddings into the population center for the area.

Life for the first generation was hard, and the Wends were conservative. Dancing and secular music were considered inappropriate activities; the main job in life was making a living, not preserving tradition. Since they came from Germany, most Wends considered it natural to live among already-established Germans in Texas.

Even in Europe, the Wends were largely "Germanized" by the 19th century. In Texas they became more so; Wendish families living in German settlement areas were quickly assimilated. Those Wends who spoke only Sorbian learned German as their second language, then English. Wendish was spoken in Serbin until the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, but by World War I most of the Wends in the state had adopted German. The Giddings *Deutsches Volksblatt* contained a few columns of Wendish for a number of years, then shifted entirely to German.

Many Texas Wends simply consider themselves German, but in the Serbin area, considerable identity has been maintained through a revival of interest in earlier Wendish customs. Wendish families also moved to many settlement areas of the state: Warda, Swiss Alp, Giddings, Mannheim, Walburg, Houston, and Austin, among others. In all places, churches were established while customs and the Wendish language died.



*St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Serbin*



*Wedding reception of Emma Jurk and Bernhard Joseph Schmidt, Warda, 1907*

Some individuals today maintain that no intermarriage has taken place in their families since the main Wendish arrival in 1854. But for the most part, intermarriage and an acceptance of German, then Anglo, customs has meant a thorough acculturation for most families.

The Texas Wendish Heritage Society was founded in 1971, when the group began its annual participation in the Texas Folklife Festival of the Institute of Texan Cultures, and the membership maintains a Wendish museum at Serbin. The group has revived interest in European costume, foods, and crafts and is attempting to collect, translate, and publish early Wendish documents. Many were lost during the first years in Texas.

The community at Serbin holds an annual Wendish Fest in September and extends a welcome, *Witajcže K'nam*, to visitors. Some of the local descendants dress in European Wendish costume.

The Wends of Texas represent one of the strongest examples of cultural revival by later generations.



*Texas Wendish Cultural Club members (from left) Frieda Wendland, Laura Zoch, Lillie Moerbe Caldwell, Emma Wuensche, and Gertrude Mitschke, 1971*



*Emma Jurk and Bernhard Joseph Schmidt, 1907—Formerly associated with Texas Wends is the German Lutheran custom of a black wedding dress, The symbolic color was a reminder of the difficulties, pain and grief accepted as parts of marriage. In time, the custom changed. Wedding dresses became gray, then white by the turn of the century. Marriage may have become no easier but later generations of women did not want that reminder on their wedding day.*

# TEXANS ONE AND ALL: THE WENDISH TEXANS

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_ DATE: \_\_\_\_\_ PERIOD: \_\_\_\_\_

The “push-pull” theory says that people migrate because things in their lives *push* them to leave, and things in a new place *pull* them.  
*Instructions: Decide what political factors push and pull people. Complete the graphic organizer below using the word bank.*



## Political Push Factors

## Political Pull Factors



## WORD BANK

War	Discrimination
Acceptance	Peace
Harsh Government	Personal Freedom

## Wendish Settlers in Texas

The Wends are unlike many other groups that settled in Texas. Their history in Europe is long, but their origins are hard to trace. Called Sorbs in most European languages, the Wends are united by their language, customs, and religion even though they have never had a nation to call their own.

The Wends lived as ethnic minorities under the rule of other European nations like Germany. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the Wends were pressured to abandon their native language and culture in order to assimilate into mainstream German culture. Those that resisted faced discrimination, were denied citizenship and were restricted to special sections of the cities.

Many Wends that refused to assimilate could not move up in German society. While some Wends were considered middle class, most were poor farmers that hoped for a better life. They worked as tenant farmers and were dependent on German landholders to make a meager living. Crop failures, drought and other agricultural disasters in the mid-1800s caused Many Wends to seek new places for opportunities. Some found their way to Texas.

How are the Wends different from other groups that settled in Texas?

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Were the Wends accepted for their differences?  
Explain your answer.

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Why did the Wends emigrate from Germany?

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## Digging Deeper

Using *Texans One and All: The Wendish Texans*, answer the following questions about why Wendish immigrants moved to Texas and what their life was like in the state.

Describe the cultural and political restrictions faced by Wends in Europe.

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How did early Wendish settlers adapt to their new life in Texas?

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How did some Wendish Texans preserve their cultural heritage?

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## Geography Skills



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

- Galveston
- New Ulm
- Industry
- Serbin
- Giddings
- Freeport

## Image Analysis

Looks at the historical image of Emma Jurk and Joseph Schmidt from 1907, on page 2 of *The Wendish Texans*.

What occasion is this couple commemorating the in the photo?

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Based on the photo, how do you think this couple feels?

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What does the color of Emma Jurk's dress represent?

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How is this custom similar to or different from customs of other cultures?

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## Summarize What You Learned

Write 2 sentences to summarize what you learned about Wendish Texans and political push and pull factors.

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