

**ETHNIC HISTORY:
A TOOL FOR TEACHING LANGUAGES
AND
METHODS OF RESEARCH***

By

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My own interest in ethnic history, more specifically in the regional ethnicity of the Texas Germans, began in high school with work for a county historical society. This interest developed into extensive genealogical research and later into work on related topics of local, oral, and cultural history. Eventually, from the investigation of German families in eighteen Texas counties, I came to a clearer understanding of the ethnic nature of American studies.

Teachers of history, English, and (particularly German, Spanish, and French) are now in a position to encourage the study of immigrant groups in their own classrooms. Certainly during recent years ethnic studies, led by Black and Chicano studies, have acquired a new vogue in this country. Instructors may utilize this renewed interest in regional ethnicity by providing their students with opportunities to explore the history, customs, and folklore of immigrant groups.

Although it is true that immigrant cultures have assimilated, for the most part, into the mainstream of American life, these ethnic groups now openly accept their distinct and colorful backgrounds and support efforts for its preservation. This interest in cultural diversity has been popularized tremendously by the American Bicentennial.

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Further justification for immigrant ethnic studies in schools can be found in a changing political perspective which has caused a broader tolerance for heterogeneity, as well as in the growing interest for primitive antiques, folklore, and genealogy.

On the basis of my own classes and observations of what is being done in some schools in other parts of the country, I suggest nine practicable classroom teaching units. These instructional units may serve as models for individual directed research on the middle and high school levels, and with deeper analyses, on the undergraduate college level as well.

UNIT 1

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF IMMIGRATION

Objective: To acquaint students with the early history of European immigrants in America.

Suggestions for research: Write general papers on immigration, on the growth of European colonies, or on population origins and patterns of settlement.

Sources: Histories of various ethnic groups, some more suitable than others for classroom use, are available in great numbers. For the German-Americans, some books which can be particularly interesting textbooks on secondary and collegiate levels are Victor von Hagen, *The Germanic People in America*; LaVern J. Rippley, *The German-Americans and Of German Ways*; Mack Walker, *Germany and the Emigration*; Carl Wittke, *Refugees of Revolution*; and Adolf Zucker, *The Forty-Eighters*. Most states have more specific ethnic minority histories, too, like Gilbert Benjamin, *The Germans in Texas*. A basic reference, with which teachers at least should be familiar, is Oscar Handlin, *The Uprooted*. These examples barely scratch the surface for the German-Americans. Two recent titles for other ethnic groups are Thomas Kessner, *The Golden Door: Italian and Jewish Mobility in New York City*; and the revised and enlarged edition of Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants*.

Both of these, however, are too advanced for high school levels.

Language and history teachers, in particular, can find many possibilities for an ethnic history unit as a part of their over-all curricula. English teachers, too, can incorporate the material in preparing students for research papers on folklore studies. "Folk islands" are located in most parts of the country. Besides native Indians and the predominant Anglo-Americans, ethnic groups in this country include Spaniards, Portuguese, Mexicans, Afro-Americans, Germans, Austrians, French, Poles, Czechs, Wends, Norwegians, Jews, Swedes, Alsatians, Swiss, Irish, Danes, Italians, Dutch, Belgians, Greeks, Syrians, Lebanese, Chinese, Japanese, and, more recently, the Vietnamese.

UNIT 2

LOCAL HISTORY

Objective: To focus on the significance of colonization and immigration in specific counties, towns, and communities.

Suggestions for research: Write a paper on the influence of immigrants and their culture on local history.

Sources: Published local histories, pamphlets, newspaper articles, manuscripts, museums, interviews, and census records.

Regional history is a compilation of local histories. Classroom discussion should establish the "place" of the cultural group in local history and the percentage of European immigrants in the total local population, their patterns of settlement, their customs of foreign origin and local modification, and their leaders and educators. In the interest of actively preserving local history, students may obtain permission to make an item index of holdings in a local museum, if an inventory does not exist. An item index identifies, dates, and lists owners of each article in the museum. In which areas are the museum's holdings strongest? What things does it not have, which one would expect to be there? From what decades do most of the

holdings come? Local newspapers are also rich sources of information. Articles of historical interest may be translated if necessary, edited, and reprinted. Very often, this project will lead directly to others.



Log Cabin at Fischer Store, Texas.
(Photograph by Glen E. Lich)

UNIT 3

FAMILY HISTORY AND GENEALOGY

Objective: To make students aware of their personal heritage. Suggestions for research: Trace the ancestry and descendants of a pioneer settler or immigrant couple.

Sources: Interviews, letters, family papers, local histories, newspapers, courthouse records, census microfilms, and church records.

Local history is an assemblage of the history of many families. Teachers should stress that students are collecting data never collected before and writing history never written before. They are learning how to employ primary and secondary sources, how to discover and evaluate sources, and how to draw conclusions in compiling information. The individual researcher may begin with himself and continue back in time to the immigrant and then, further, to the immigrant's origin in Europe, or he may begin with the immigrant and discuss that person's descendants. (The former is family history and the latter is basically genealogical research.) Some foreign records are extensive, notably European church records in the German-speaking countries. Sometimes, however, information from other nations may be slow in coming and difficult, but, by no means, impossible to obtain.

UNIT 4

BIOGRAPHICAL RESEARCH

Objective: To focus the student's research on an ancestor, family member, or local personality.

Suggestions for research: Research the life of an immigrant or descendant to write a biographical sketch.

Sources: Interviews, letters, family papers, courthouse records, church records, military records, census microfilms, naturalization papers, family photographs, immigration contracts, newspapers, and any other genealogical sources.

Letters should be written to an immigrant's native country for his family background. Names, dates, and occupations of parents and grandparents are important. The biography should include (as applicable) where the person lived, marriage, occupations, children, religious affiliations, political activities, military service and war experiences, (im)-migration patterns, education, favorite clubs and societies, and talents.

UNIT 5

FOLKLORE PROJECTS: ORAL TRADITIONS

Objective: To collect, on tapes and in manuscripts, the oral traditions of communities throughout America.

Suggestions for research: Tape-record the music, stories, and sayings of various ethnic groups in the community, prepare typescripts from these recordings.

Sources: *Foxfire* and other publications of this nature based upon research done in secondary schools.

Family stories are of primary interest: tales of the family in the foreign homeland, reasons the family came to America, stories of the voyage, and accounts of the first home or homestead. Games, dances, songs, proverbs, rhymes, riddles, superstitions—especially those in the native tongue—should be collected, transcribed, and translated. The students should enjoy collecting fairy tales, stories of local personalities, and local legends. Descriptions of social conventions, celebrations, and activities preserve many customs: births and baptism, confirmation, courtship and weddings, deaths and funerals, anniversaries and birthdays, harvesting, marketing, and shopping.

UNIT 6

FOLKLORE PROJECTS: MATERIAL TRADITIONS

Objective: To explore the material traditions of American ethnics.

Suggestions for research: Identify, photograph, and date folk arts, crafts, and buildings of early Americans.

Sources: *Foxfire* and other folklore publications emphasizing material traditions, interviews, museums, and family artifacts, also Henry Glassie, *Pattern in the Material Folk Culture of the Eastern United States*.

Surviving immigrant homes should be identified, photographed, and dated. This information can be compiled with houseplans and accounts of the building style, construction, and materials. Students may compare their work with descriptions of similar family dwellings in Europe or elsewhere. Folk arts for study include needlework and sewing, home decorations, toys, stencils, and woodcrafts. Artisan skills of early craftsmen are also interesting; among these are furniture making, pottery making, shoemaking and milling. Kitchen utensils, occupational artifacts, and items brought from the homeland should be identified, photographed, and dated. Foods and diets constitute other studies. What foods were eaten during each season? What recipes were brought from the homeland, and also what ways were used to preserve meats, vegetables, and fruits? How were different foods obtained? Livestock brands are often overlooked, but they are the "heraldry" of the American West and their story, too, is fascinating.

UNIT 7

PHOTOGRAPHS

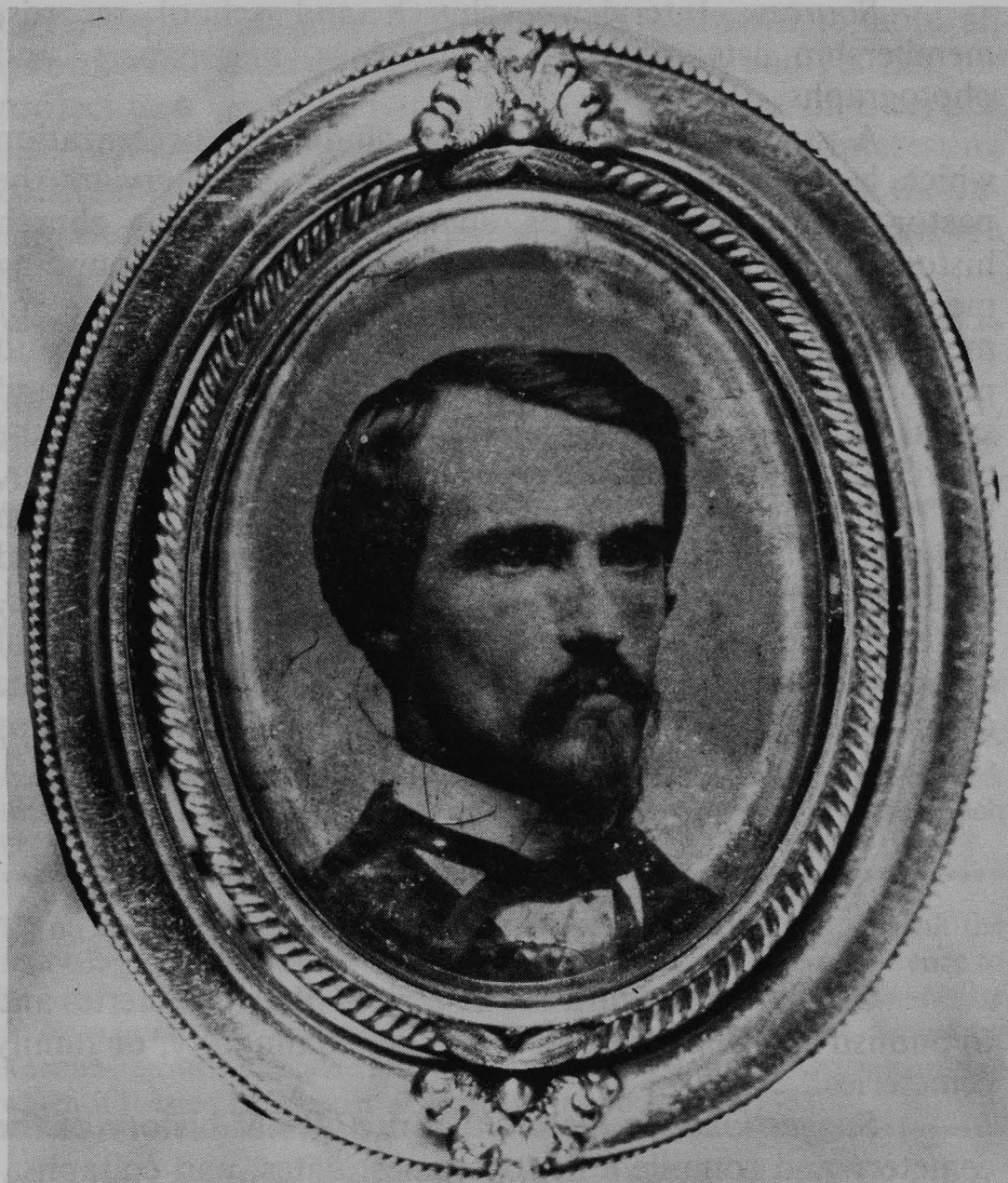
Objective: To preserve photographs dating between 1845 and 1900.

Suggestions for research: Locate, identify, and date family portraits and photographs of buildings, interiors, and people at work and play.

Sources: Family collections from the past, general histories of photography, histories of clothing, and local histories.

Teachers may introduce photographic processes (daguerreotypes, ambrotypes, ferrotypes, and cardboard-mounted photos) as methods of dating and identification. When the student researcher locates old photographs, he should identify the present owners; establish names of the

subjects; further identify them as sons or daughters of, husbands or wives of, mothers or fathers of; and date the picture approximately on the basis of the apparent ages of the subjects and also the photographic process. The best way to preserve the history contained in interesting photographs is to have inexpensive negatives and prints made of the originals.



Courtesy of Ada DePass Patterson, New Orleans.

(Photo by Glen E. Lich)

UNIT 8

CHURCHES, SCHOOLS, SOCIAL CLUBS, AND SOCIETIES

Objective: To investigate the histories of churches, schools, clubs, and societies.

Suggestions for research: Select a local group and write a brief history of it.

Sources: Interviews, church and school records, membership lists, minutes of meetings, newspapers, and photographs.

A student should visit the church or organization which is the subject of his investigation to interview the pastor, custodian of records, and older members. A church history includes the date of founding, names of the founding members and their backgrounds, the clergy, size of membership, a description of the church buildings, and photographs. It can mention favorite hymns, religious and social functions, interior inscriptions, folk arts on or in the church. School histories can be treated in a similar manner, but the researcher should also note languages of instruction and titles of textbooks. Furthermore, a variety of clubs and societies—singing and shooting clubs, literary societies, athletic clubs, agricultural organizations, and fraternal associations—have been popular in all immigrant ethnic communities. The purposes and activities of these groups should be included in the student's history.

UNIT 9

CEMETERIES

Objective: To learn the history of older cemeteries and to publish lists of the graves in public, community, or family cemeteries.

Suggestions for research: Write a brief history of the cemetery and compile a list of names, dates, and epitaphs.

Sources: Interviews, cemetery and church records, newspapers, and local histories.

The student should describe the location of the cemetery: how to get there, on whose property it is situated, along with the landowner's mailing address and telephone number when applicable. A history should date the cemetery on the basis of the earliest and latest death dates. Stories told about the cemetery may be recorded, with a list of the names, dates, and epitaphs from each gravestone. Many genealogical and historical quarterlies publish cemetery records. Because larger cemeteries may be simply too extensive to note all information from every grave, the student can restrict his project to a list of surnames only, or to graves of a certain era. Gravestone rubbings can provide an interesting collection, especially if the stones are homemade, if the inscriptions are given in foreign languages, or if the designs are reminiscent of folk patterns.

GERMAN-AMERICAN GENEALOGICAL NOTES

Norddeutsche Familienkunde, 27. Jahrgang, Januar-März 1978, Heft 1, contains an article on the German-American family Rumsfeld: "Zur Amerika-Auswanderung der Familie Rumsfeld".

Adler, Zeitschrift für Genealogie und Heraldik, 11. (XXV.) Band, Heft 5, Jänner/März 1978, contains an article on the German-American Hecker/Heckert families entitled "Über die Hecker und Heckert in den Vereinigten Staaten von Amerika".

Quellen und Forschungen zur Ostfriesischen Familien — und Wappenkunde, Jahrgang 27, contains a series of article on East Frisian emigrants to the United States (E. von Reeken, "Ostfriesische Auswanderer nach USA").

If you are looking for a German town now located in Poland, consult the following gazetteer for the German name and you will find a reference to its present Polish name: *Müllers Verzeichnis der Jenseits der Oder-Neisse Gelegenen Unter Fremder Verwaltung Stehenden Ortschaften*. Edited by Kaemmerer, it is available from the publisher, Post- und Ortsbuchverlag which is located in Wuppertal-Barmen. It appeared in 1958.

Ethra Inc., 2052A Northwest Miami Court, Miami, Fla. 33127, has reprinted *First Settlement of Germans in Maryland* (1896).
