

NARRATIVE TEXTS

Polish Texans

Polish Texans were, for many years, one of the most isolated, tradition-preserving, conservative, and rural ethnic groups in the state.

Individuals were in Texas as early as 1818, when several Polish soldiers who had served in Napoleon's defeated armies joined the French settlement of Champ d'Asile on Texas's Trinity River. The Spanish saw the colony as an incursion, and the settlement was shortly disbanded.

But Champ d'Asile was somewhat typical of Polish fortune. From the end of the 18th century until World War I, Poland was conquered, overrun, partitioned between stronger neighbors, and suppressed as far as national autonomy was concerned. The country endured typhoid and cholera epidemics and floods, such as a combined disaster in 1854 which wiped out food production. In many years, Poland was not a desirable place to be.

At first, individuals, mostly men, left the country as soldiers of fortune or simply wanderers. After the mid-1850s, emigration of Polish families greatly increased. Emigration to Texas, as a group movement, started largely through the efforts of Father Leopold Moczygemba, a Polish Franciscan missionary who was working in the San Antonio area. He was quickly involved in bringing 100 families from Upper Silesia to Texas.

This group founded the town of Panna Maria in Karnes County on December 24, 1854; the group's first mass was held Christmas morning. The settlement is the oldest permanent Polish colony in the United States and is the location of the first Polish Catholic church and school.

In one year 700 others joined the colony, although most of these people settled at a distance. Later arrivals started or helped settle such towns as Cestohowa, Kosciusko, Polonia, Chappel Hill, and Bryan. Panna Maria itself became a "mother colony," sending people to such centers as White Deer in the Panhandle, San Antonio, Bandera,



Immaculate Conception of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church, Panna Maria



Wedding of Pauline Tudyk and Thomas Kaczmarek in St. Hedwig, 1894

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and McCook in the Rio Grande Valley. New Waverly in Walker County was the first Polish settlement to the east.

The first and part of the second generation of Polish Texans generally remained somewhat isolated in their communities. Their lives centered around the church and rural life. Education—after establishment of St. Joseph's school at Panna Maria—and contact with other communities were considered of secondary importance.

The natural result of this isolation was a preservation of community feeling. A number of fraternal groups and organizations were established in the state, but until the later part of the 20th century, and with the exception of identifiable groups in Bryan, Houston, and San Antonio, Poles lived in rural groups.

Many families spoke Polish at home, but publishing in Polish was not established in Texas, and the language was not generally taught. Only one Polish-language newspaper, *Nowiny Texaskie* (*Texas News*), was published in San Antonio from 1913 to 1920.

Today more than 228,300 individuals in Texas claim Polish descent, and statewide organizations and festivals mark the fact. Urbanization has caught up with most of these people as it has for nearly all Texans. Today, individuals of Polish descent have entered occupations from the state legislature to banking, from ranching to the priesthood, from engineering to art, from writing to medicine.