

**Archiving Ethnic Voices and Memory: A Roundtable on German Americana**

**Moderator**

**Jana Weiß:** University of Texas at Austin

**Participants (confirmed)**

**Hans Boas:** The Texas German Dialect Project, University of Texas at Austin

**Jana Keck:** German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C.

**Maria Sturm:** Horner Library, German Society of Pennsylvania & Historic Trappe Historical Society, Center for Pennsylvania German Studies

**Participants (requested)**

**Ursula Lehmkuhl:** America Letters, Forschungsbibliothek Gotha & University of Trier

**1-2 open spots**

Ethnic archives are collections documenting migration and ethnic history, serving scholarship and public discourse. Our proposed roundtable deals with the potentials, limits, and challenges of ethnic archives from an interdisciplinary perspective (linguistic, history, digital humanities). A special focus is laid on German Americans, one of the most influential migration groups in the U.S.

German Americans have left an abundance of written, oral, and material records, ranging from letters to meeting minutes, from newspapers to poetry, from churches to beer gardens. Several institutions across the U.S. and Europe collect and curate German Americana. The *Joseph P. Horner Memorial Library* (German Society of Pennsylvania) is a prominent example, housing one of the largest collections of German books in the U.S. The *Texas German Dialect Archive* (TGDA), founded in 2001, is a freely available online archive containing recordings of speakers of Texas German, a critically endangered dialect, which will go extinct in the next decade. Most recently, the German Historical Institute in Washington, D.C. started *Migrant Connections*, a digital research infrastructure for historical research on 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century German migration to the U.S.

Immigration is part of the founding myth of the U.S. Understanding archival collections as social constructions anchored in historical contexts, our roundtable addresses socio-political, economic, and technological factors, which have influenced ethnic archives on the institutional and user level.

The following set of questions are inextricably linked and guide our discussion:

- (1) Institutionalizing: what role do institutions play in collecting, accessing, and researching ethnic history?

For example, the TGDA is used for teaching, research, and outreach. It contains three different data sets: (1) recordings of open-ended sociolinguistic interviews together with transcriptions and translations, starting around the 1960s; (2) translations of English sentences into Texas German; and (3) metadata about each of the 900+ speakers interviewed by members of the Texas German Dialect Project since 2001.

The TGDA has over 6,000 registered users from around the world. Yet, so far, the oral history interviews have mostly attracted linguists even though these are also a treasure trove for historians. Arguably, pooling resources and collaborating among scholars, with other institutions, grassroots initiatives, and citizen scientist might enhance visibility and access.

The creation and evolution of archives has affected scholarship and vice versa, which brings us to the second set of questions:

- (2) Politics of representation and public memory: how have ethnic archives constructed U.S. national identity and how has this affected notions of (non)belonging? How might archival projects contribute to a broader understanding of the complex racial and ethnic histories in the U.S., while balancing the need for inclusion and the risk of reinforcing hegemonic narratives?

Ethnic archives have influenced how we conceptualize and research ethnicity. The archival turn of the 1990s challenged the notion of authenticity, a supposed direct relation of the archival record to the past. The archive is a product of history itself. In the 2014 issue of *Archival Science*, Dominique Daniel has pervasively argued that ethnic archives were “not only influenced by conceptions of ethnicity embedded in scholarly practice and public memory, but that they also contribute to shaping specific conceptions of ethnicity” (p. 171). Accordingly, ethnic archives shape and also (sometimes unintentionally) silence certain voices and heterogeneity (within and of minorities as well as their intercultural relations).

German Americans were a diverse group, which is reflected in every aspect of life in language, foodways, material culture, or civic affairs. Reading archives “against the grain” might allow us to dispel (positive) notions of uniformity and persistent stereotypes and myths such as that of closed-off (white) ethnic enclaves. German Americans frequently participated in multi-cultural contact zones (for better or worse), with the dominant Anglo-American society, with other fellow migrant groups, and with other minorities such as indigenous tribes and African Americans.

Closely related, digital humanities tools may help us shape the representation of ethnic voices in archival contexts to surface marginalized or overlooked narratives, leading to our third set of questions:

- (3) Digitization: how can digital archives offer unique insights into the lives, identities, and cultural expressions of ethnic communities in the U.S.? What are the specific challenges in curating, interpreting, and ensuring equitable access to these voices within larger digital archival frameworks?

Digital archives hold many promises, enabling diversification of content and thus, potentially leading to more complex representations of ethnic identities. Through their decentralized nature, digital archives also allow for bigger outreach. However, digitalization of German American sources does not necessarily trigger more research, especially given the language barriers of Fraktur- and Kurrent-script and OCR (non)recognition. Moreover, digital preservation needs funding and is a labor-intensive task.

Overall, our roundtable seeks to engage critically with archival practices to raise awareness for potentials but also pitfalls and (hidden) biases in researching ethnic history.