Shelby: A Rural School in a German Immigrant Setting- 1854-1918

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SHELBY: A RURAL SCHOOL IN A GERMAN IMMIGRANT SETTING — 1854-1918

by Elvie Lou Luetge

Hearing about one specific rural school enlivens the reading one can do about education in Texas during the 1880s and early 1900s when Texas was predominately a rural state. With records scarce, much of the information on Shelby, a school in the northwest corner of Austin County on FM 1457, relies on the memories of individuals and on information from similar neighboring schools.

Shelby, Texas, named for David Shelby, who came to Texas in 1822 as one of Stephen F. Austin's Old Three Hundred settlers, had its real beginning in the early 1840s. Germans, arriving singly or in very small groups, settled in Houston and Galveston and began German settlements in Austin, Fayette, and Colorado Counties in the 1830s. With the advent of the Mainzer Adelsverein (also known as the Society for the Protection of German Immigrants or the Adelsverein), organized in the home country in 1842, emigrants received an additional impetus to move to Texas. Many came to settle the Fisher and Miller Grant, north and west of Gillespie County, purchased in 1844. However, due to financial difficulties that plagued the Adelsverein, rain that caused roads to New Braunfels to become impassable, and disease that caused many deaths during 1846, some of the immigrants chose to remain in the eastern portion of Texas in the lower Brazos, Colorado, and Guadalupe River region. Communities such as Industry, Cat Spring, Frelsburg, and others had previously been established through the efforts of individuals like Friedrich Ernst, Robert Kleberg, and William Frels.

Shelby "had a good percentage of educated men, and it is no wonder ... an effort was made to provide schools for educating their children." The first schoolhouse in Shelby arose with the passage of the school law of 1854 which made provision for the organization of common schools. Whether the law had its influence, whether the public gathering of representatives of German people in 1854 asking for free public schools made an imprint, or whether the residents followed the example set by neighboring communities is unknown. M. Suerth is recognized as organizing Shelby's first school.

One wonders if the activities in Suerth's early school resembled the Millheim School, a German community approximately twenty-five miles southeast of Shelby, where E.G. Elvie Lou Luetge now resides in Washington, D.C.
Maetze taught. Immediately after Easter in 1867, seven-year-old W.A. Trenckmann began his first day of school at Millheim in a schoolhouse capable of housing at least sixty children. “I marched to school with my brother Otto, who carried the rawhide chair for me—school satchel containing slate, slate pencils, and primer hanging around my neck.” Though the Texas law maintained that “only those districts could avail themselves of the state bounty which had ‘provided a good, and substantial schoolhouse with the necessary seats and other fixtures,’” these students supplied their own seating facilities.

Trenckmann continues by saying:

Under her [Mr. Maetze’s daughter Ida] gentle direction I mastered the Reffelt reader in a few months to the degree that long before vacation time I was permitted to read short tales from Schmidt . . .

In my second school year Mr. Maetze, observing that I followed the geography lessons with rapt attention, took me into a class where geography was taught entirely by means of maps and oral explanation. Geography books were not available under later.

Other subjects included arithmetic, English, and penmanship for which the teacher wrote the models in writing books which he himself ruled. English instruction involved translating the reading selections into German and keeping a notebook of the English words which were not understood.

Six days a week for ten full months the students received instruction. Classes dismissed each day at four o’clock. While “the fourth child of a family of children attending school at the same time was given free tuition,” parents paid the regular tuition of a twenty-dollar gold piece per pupil on the first school day.

For recreation the boys and girls played in separate areas. Boys’ games included running games, conscripting, townball, hotball, and rolly-holy. Of conscripting, Tranckmann says:

After they had escaped from imprisonment in the bull pen, the pursued could swing up on the mustang grapevines out of reach of the long switches of the pursuers. Later they could make their real escape in the wide prairies . . . [While] football and baseball were unheard of . . . hotball and rolly-holy, at which one was bombarded with heavy rubber balls, and cotton bolls and which was almost as dangerous as football [were delightful].

Of his early school days, Trenckmann recalls that “the woods behind the schoolhouse were excellent substitutes for modern toilet facilities.” He also mentions that boys regularly left their shoes under the schoolhouse because they considered it a
disgrace to wear them, even in cold weather. Having completed Ray's *Arithmetic*, having attended school for six years, and having reached the age of thirteen, Trenckmann's schooldays ended Easter of 1873. As Texas A&M College in 1876 would be his next school experience.

How much the Shelby School resembled Maetze's School in Millheim is hard to discern. The clientele may have been similar, for Millheim, too, was known for its intellectual class.

While a newspaper lists M. Suerth as an appointee by the county court to the Shelby precinct in 1864, no one knows how long Suerth operated the school. Since several Shelby residents participated in the Civil War, one wonders what effect it had on the school; for Maetze continued teaching at Millheim. Industry maintained two schools, and New Ulm temporarily suspended theirs from 1855-1875.

Emil Trenckmann (also known as Julius Emil Trenckmann) began teaching in Shelby at least by 1870. He was an educated man, having attended the University of Berlin in Germany. While most of the classes which he taught were probably in German, he knew English, had an English book, and taught some English. Teachers could generally teach what they wanted to teach. However, Trenckmann no doubt included reading, penmanship, and arithmetic. With the absence of printed copy books, Trenckmann, like Maetze at Millheim, prepared his own models of penmanship for the students to use. In general, classes commenced at 8:00 A.M. and ended at 4:30 P.M. However, in the afternoons when he lectured on world history, the younger students left earlier. Very little American history was available at the time. The older students, probably fifth or sixth graders, commonly met with Trenckmann in the evenings to hear him discuss weather and astronomy. Not only did he possess skill in weather forecasting and astronomy, but his talents were also portrayed in his music and drama ability. In the community he organized and directed the Harmonie Vereins, a German singing club, and organized a theater group. Perhaps his students profited from some of these talents in the classroom.

The educational changes in the early 1870s probably had little bearing on Trenckmann's teaching. The changes brought compulsory attendance for ages six to eighteen for four months of free school, allowed a one per cent property tax for the support of schools to be levied, provided district supervisors, and established a state board of education. This state board included a superintendent of public instruction who had the power to examine and appoint teachers, fix their salaries, and define the state course of study. In 1875 the legislature eliminated
compulsory attendance, abolished the office of the state superintendent of public instruction and the district supervisory positions, discontinued local taxation, and changed the free school age to ages eight to fourteen. School districts, which the 1871 law charged the district supervisors to establish within counties, again became boundaryless, and any group could form a school. With control reinstated in the local community, the earlier stipulation that "Spanish, French, or German could be taught, but not more than two hours a day" evidently terminated.

The teaching career of Emil Trenckmann ended abruptly in March, 1880, when he died of pneumonia, but Shelby was in line for another Trenckmann—Emil's brother W.A. Trenckmann. Instead of a normal school (Texas did not have one until Sam Houston Normal Institute was established in 1879), W.A. attended Texas A&M College for three years, 1876-1879. "For my teaching career I was probably better prepared when I left Maetze's school at the age of thirteen."

W.A. Trenckmann's teaching experience began at Hermann's Seminar in Frelsburg, Colorado County, in the fall of 1879, where few attended longer than the four free months. According to Trenckmann, the law required teachers to have a certificate to teach in the public schools. The acquisition of such certificates was probably the only thing that was left from the Republican regime... There was no state superintendent of schools, and the examining board in Colorado County, to which I was to go, consisted of three lawyers. In Austin County too there was no teacher on the board. After boning till my brain fairly smoked to pass the test, I rode off to Columbus. The elderly examiners sent me to their young colleague Mr. Sandmeier. The latter had attended Texas Military Institute [Rutersville]. He inquired about cadets who had transferred to our school. We had a stimulating conversation after which he wrote out a First Class Teacher's Certificate for me without any examination. I had a similar experience when in the next spring I applied for a teacher's certificate in Austin County. District Clerk Thomas, a good politician, gave me some compliments, conversed very interestingly, and I got my certificate without having to answer any questions.

After this first experience W.A. received the request from the Shelbyites to take over their school. Living with his sister-in-law and her family in Shelby from the spring of 1880 until August 1883, he taught six grades in German and English, discontinued the spring cotton chopping vacations, and participated in some of the men's activities in the town—pool,
billiards, and card games such as Schafskopf, solo, and skat. With a membership reaching approximately sixty pupils in 1881, Trenckmann obviously did not comb the vicinity for students as he did in Frelsburg, where he competed with the Catholics and the Lutherans. Another school in Shelby, taught by the Lutheran minister Moegle, did not fare as well. Moegle’s Swabian dialect and poor background in the English language caused his school to gradually dwindle.  

For teaching the sixty pupils, Trenckmann received $4.50 per capita from the state. Obviously classes continued beyond the four free months, for W.A. comments on the Shelby custom of parents paying at the close of the year in contrast to Millheim’s practice of collecting on the first day. He also praised the community since all of the parents, except one who could not be expected to pay, paid within a week after he sent the bills.  

To advance beyond the sixth grade education, a student left Shelby. Brenham, connected with Shelby via some twenty miles of very bad roads, established the first municipal high school in Texas in 1875. Operating on a ten month school year, their free public schools functioned as three general divisions—primary schools, grammar schools, and high school—with three grades in each. This nine grade plan preceded the eleven grade plan. Bellville, another town approximately twenty-five miles from Shelby, incorporated for school purposes in 1881 and organized a graded school which operated on an eight month school year. For scholars outside the school limits, the district received $3.50 per capita from the state for allowing the student twelve weeks of free schooling. The time commenced with the entry date—the opening Monday or the first Monday in any month thereafter—and expired twelve weeks hence regardless of attendance. Not until later does evidence indicate that Shelbyites roomed and boarded elsewhere to further their education. Of course, the necessity of additional education did not exist until later.  

In the mid 1880s, the Shelby school consisted of two buildings; one für die kleiner Kinder (for the little children) with Ada McKenny, and one for the older ones with George Schroeder. Both buildings remained till the early 1990s, but no other evidence indicated a two-teacher school. To the joy of some and the consternation of others, Evelyn Sterling, a teacher around 1902, used the smaller building for dancing. In the meantime, another building, located on a three acre plot a quarter of a mile from the school, served as the “Teacher House” for Schroeder, Heimann, and others who lived there with their families. The single teachers roomed with local families.
Schroeder and Meiners both taught in German and English. Some students recall German as the predominant language; others recollect a good deal of instruction in English. The instructors taught geography in English, for some students still smile when they remember answers such as Bay of Biscuit and Norway and Swedenway. Perhaps items covered in English but not comprehended received extra explanation or interpretation in German.

During the forty-five year period, 1854-1899, approximately five teachers served Shelby. They came and they stayed. For many years following, however, they came, but they did not stay. Why?

Near the turn of the century, Shelby, with a population of approximately 300, could boast of three general stores, three saloons, a dance hall, a tin shop, a molasses press, a hotel, two doctors, a veterinarian, a livery stable, a saddle shop, a cigar factory, a blacksmith shop, a wheelwright, a tailor, a preacher, two steam cotton gins, a post office, and two long distance telephone lines. With only one school and one teacher, classes at Shelby from 1898 to 1906 contained over sixty students. Salary: forty-five dollars. Laws—which aided incorporated towns to gain support and control of their schools, to offer higher salaries, and consequently to form graded schools—caused ungraded, one-room teacher units with large classes to appear unappealing.

Large classes, together with irregular attendance, produced many a headache for a conscientious teacher. Attendance varied for two reasons: private or pay school and non-compulsory attendance. Following the five months of frei Schule (free school)—October, November, December, January, and February—parents paid approximately five dollars a month for the remaining three months of private school. As one might suspect, many remained home when school entailed cost. Even during the free-school time, provided for ages eight to fourteen, the law did not require attendance. Texas, one of the last five states to enact a compulsory attendance law, finally passed one in 1915.

Non-graded units meant the teacher classified the pupil according to the books the student used. Some books required more than a year to complete, partly due to the complexity of the book and sometimes due to the lack of ingenuity on the part of the student. At the completion of a book, the student progressed to the next book. In 1913-1914, a class of thirty-four at the Schoenau School can be portrayed in this way:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>No. of Boys</th>
<th>Ages of Boys</th>
<th>No. of Girls</th>
<th>Ages of Girls</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6 - 8 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1 - 8 years</td>
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<td>1 - 7 years</td>
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<td>(entered 6th month)</td>
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<tr>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1 - 11 years</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1 - 12 years</td>
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<td></td>
<td>1 - 9 years</td>
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<td>1 - 10 years</td>
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<td>1 - 8 years</td>
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<td>3 - 9 years</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1 - 8 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>3rd</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1 - 15 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1 - 11 years</td>
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<td>1 - 13 years</td>
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<td>4th</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 - 11 years</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 - 13 years</td>
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<tr>
<td>5th</td>
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<td>3</td>
<td>1 - 14 years</td>
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<td>2 - 13 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6th</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 - 15 years</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The teacher taught arithmetic, language lessons, spelling, and writing in all six grades. Other subjects included reading (grades 1-5), geography (grades 3-6), physiology (grades 4-6), United States history (grades 5-6), and grammar (grade 6). The texts for the first four years of German indicate that the subject received attention although the teacher's gradebook show no marks for its study.

In Shelby, arithmetic involved written problems on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, while the students practiced mental arithmetic on Tuesday and Thursday. Everyone prepared for the spell down on Friday. Another subject, penmanship, stressed in many schools, received attention once a week. The text demonstrated the different motions: circular movements, muscular movements, wrist movements. The student mastered these movements in pen and ink as well as pencil.

With so many classes needing attention, a teacher met with a group for only a few minutes. The group, called to the teacher to recite, sat on the long bench near the teacher's desk like birds on a fence. At their desks the younger ones used slates to practice; the older students used pen and staff and pencils. Having no pencil sharpener, a pupil unraveled his pencil to secure a point. Desks with the ink wells, seats with the slot, the seat of one adjoined to the table top of the next were the patent desks or factory desks. These were replacing the long desks and benches. The old long benches, stacked on the desks for the Friday dusting and cleaning, seated three or four. The newer patent desks formed columns of singles or columns of double desks and seated one or two. Shelby utilized the double variety.
While other groups met with the teacher, pupils at their seats studied the lessons in their texts. Though the State Textbook Board, established by the legislature in 1897, designated a uniform system of adopting books for the elementary schools, the state did not provide free textbooks before 1918. Thus students bought their books or used books belonging to siblings.

To notify parents of their child’s progress, students took a report card home (grades in numbers) every four weeks. After the parents signed the card, the teacher received it. At the end of the year, a certificate indicated pass or fail. The average of the grades might appear, but the monthly report card remained with the teacher.

Since the requirements to teach did not include professional training and few state-supported training institutions existed, many taught as they had been taught. Odel Albers, who secured his second-grade teaching certificate after finishing eight years at the Warrenton School and a summer institute at Southwest Texas Normal in San Marcos around 1915, taught some German reading and writing. “Since I had no training in German, I taught it the way I remembered my teacher had taught me.” Certification requirements, in contrast to W.A. Trenckmann’s earlier experience, did call for a more thorough examination. The law of 1893 required county boards to appoint teachers holding first-grade county certificates or higher and residing in the county to serve as the examining board. At the Industry School, the types of certificates ranged from third class to diploma, with the majority being second class.

The teachers, as indicated earlier, generally roomed with local families or lived in an available dwelling. Tom Banks, one of the few who lived in another town and commuted, rode his horse to and from Willow Springs each day. Not many students, however, had horses. In another school some came with a donkey (Stein-Esel), but that donkey had a tough day. The boys played leap frog with the donkeys. The donkeys just stood there with their heads down, and the boys from behind slid down their necks.

But most pupils walked to school, some as far as three or four miles one way. As the home-to-school path met a barbed wire fence (the expression sounds more like bob wire), croaker sacks (burlap sacks or gunny sacks), wound around the barbed wire, enhanced the fence crawling. If it rained, the students rode in buggies or buckboards or remained at home. With no bridges, creeks became impassable in rainy weather.

For the hour noon break, those who lived near went home; the others brought their dinner in round tin buckets or Karo cans.
Butter bread, jelly, boiled eggs, or sausage could be found in many of the buckets. With soft drinks a luxury, water from the cooler in the schoolroom provided their liquid refreshment. Except in emergencies, students rarely bought crackers and cheese from a nearby store, for money was scarce. Anyone who noticed dents in the cans or buckets knew that an argument had ensued, for the buckets provided good weapons. 61

When recreation time came, baseball reigned. Other games mentioned included Drop-the-Hankerchief, Blinde Kuh, croquet, and mumblety peg. By the second decade, basketball began to be played. At the Industry School, in 1911, the principal prepared a basketball court and taught the girls and the boys the rudiments of the game. 62 The boys at Shelby worked on their court a little later. Filled with enthusiasm, they ventured out and played other schools. Jumping in the buckboard—the station wagon of the day—they traveled to the neighboring schools to compete.

With the onset of World War I, the government ordered the teaching of German to cease. 63 Though its inclusion in the school curriculum at Shelby had varied according to the ability and background of the teacher, the termination of its teaching ended an era in the life of the Shelby School. 64 The war ended, but the teaching of German did not resume. Indeed, November 11, 1918, rings loud and clear in many an ear. In Shelby, the school bell, which never rang except for a fire, tolled. Despite the rope breaking, it kept ringing and continued ringing while a youngster shinnied up and tied the rope on the moving bell. 65 Yes, the bell tolled; the war was over, but German had left the elementary grades in Texas.

FOOTNOTES

1“Shelby, David,” The Handbook of Texas, Walter Prescott Webb (ed.) (2 vols; Austin, 1952), I, 600.


3Cat Spring Agricultural Society, The Cat Spring Story (San Antonio, Texas, 1956), 17; William A. Trenckmann, “History of Austin County, Texas, Edited and Published in 1899 as a Supplement to the 'Bellville Wochenblatt’ ” (unpublished translation by his children William and Else Trenckmann and Mrs. Clara Studer, n.d.), 24. (Typewritten.) This selection called Shelby a Lateiner Settlement (Latin Settlement) due to its intellectual class.

4Frederick Eby, The Development of Education in Texas (New York, 1925), 116, 130.

5Trenckmann, “History of Austin County, Texas,” 24.

6The German method of beginning the school year on the Tuesday after Easter was followed in Milheim. W.A. Trenckmann, “Erlebtes (Experiences) and Beobachtetes (Observations)” (unpublished translation by his children, n.d.), 41. (Typewritten.)
Trenckmann, "Erlebtes," 17-18. On page 10, Trenckmann mentions that it was rare for schools to have wall maps and a blackboard.

The Cat Spring Story, 17.

Bellville Countryman, July 12, 1864.

Trenckmann, "Erlebtes," 9, 44.

"History and Record of Our School, Industry, Austin County, Texas, 1896," handwritten account.


Mrs. Ida Mae Pirtle, granddaughter of Emil Trenckmann, personal interview in the home of Mrs. Birdie Luetge, near Industry, Texas, June 28, 1970.

Pirtle interview.

Eby, The Development of Education In Texas, 158-162, 170.

Trenckmann, "Erlebtes," 36.

Eby, The Development of Education In Texas, 187.

Trenckmann, "Erlebtes," 29, 32.

Ibid., 33-35. The state paid $1.50 a month per pupil for the four months. Mr. Trenckmann received approximately $40 a month.

Ibid., 34-35.

Ibid., 35, 37, 39-40.

Ibid., 42-43.

Eby, The Development of Education In Texas, 243-244.

"Bellville: Her History and Her Hopes," Austin County Times (Bellville), September 15, 1883, 3.

"Bellville Schools," Austin County Times (Bellville), September 15, 1883.

"Opening of the Schools," Austin County Times (Bellville), September 15, 1883, 5.

Edgar Mayer, personal interview, La Grange, Texas, July 15, 1970, at which time he relayed information from a conversation with Mrs. Hedwig Spiess, student in Shelby in the 1880's, Hallettsville, Texas, July 7, 1970.

Mrs. Mattie Voelkel, resident of Shelby since the late 1880s, personal interview, Shelby, Texas, July 14, 1970.


Renate Schulze, daughter of a student in Shelby in the 1880s, personal interview in the home of Mrs. Elise Boelsche, Industry, Texas, July 13, 1970.

Leon Hale, "Everything Will Be the Same for Voelkels on Reunion Day," Houston Post, [ca. June, 1957].
Advertisements in "Austin County": Beilage zum Bellville Wochenblatt (Bellville, Texas, 1899), 40-41, 44, 66-68, 71, 74; Bellville Times, January 18, 1895.

Oscar Voelkel, resident of Shelby since 1890, personal interview in the home of Mrs. Birdie Luetge, near Industry, Texas, July 13, 1970.

Eby, The Development of Education In Texas, 195, reveals that the law of 1884 specified six months.

Sometimes it was two; sometimes, three. It depended on the money. Harry Wagner, student in Shelby, ca. 1905-1912, personal interview, near Burton, Texas, July 15, 1970; Oscar Voelkel interview, "Many students stayed at home, but we went the entire time." Mattie Voelkel interview: "We were too many in our family, so we only went the five months."

Eby, The Development of Education In Texas, 230, indicates that 60 days was the minimum for 1916, 80 days, the next year, and 100 days, thereafter.

Information compiled from records kept by J.A. Ahlhorn, "Texas Teacher's Daily Register for Public School: For Schoenau School, No. 4, County of Austin, State of Texas, Industry, District No. 10, Classification of School - Intermediate, for Year 1913-1914." (Handwritten.) His salary, nearly sixty dollars, came from $437 (about $290 state money; the rest, from the patrons).

Eby, The Development of Education in Texas, 199, points out that the law of 1893 required the teaching of physiology and hygiene in all schools.

The author located the four grades of German readers belonging to her father, Otto Luetge—a fourth year student of Mr. Ahlhorn's in 1913-1914—and his two younger brothers. Perhaps German was not taught every day.

Edgar Mayer interview, student in Shelby.


Kenny Krebs, student at Willow Springs, ca. 1912-1918, telephone interview, Austin, Texas, July 8, 1970.

Kermit Voelkel interview.

Edgar May interview, student in Shelby.


Minutes of the Meeting of the Austin County School Board, meeting of August 2, 1915. (Handwritten.): "The county superintendent was authorized to order 10,000 monthly report cards." Since the teacher kept the returned card, this could explain why none of the interviewees could show the author old report cards. Awards of good attendance were the items saved.


Donna Lee Younker, "Teacher Education in Texas, 1879-1919" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Texas, 1964). 158. On page 105 she indicates that teachers needed a certificate under the law of 1879. Eby, The Development of Education in Texas, 237, says the 1903 provision was the first time for state certificates. Evidently, previous certificates were issued by the county.

"History and Record," 31-32; Younker, "Teacher Education in Texas," 159-160.

Oscar Voelkel interview.
Edwin and Thurnelda Raeke, residents in and near Schoenau since the 1900's, personal letter, received July 13, 1970.

Oscar Voelkel interview. The author recalls her grandmother, Mrs. Anna Mayer, nee Guettler, saying: "We got our exercise walking to school. Now they take the children to school and build gyms to give them exercise."

Mrs. Birdie Luetge, resident near Shelby since 1910, personal interview, near Industry, Texas, June 7, 1970.

Oscar Voelkel interview.

Edgar Mayer interview, student in Shelby.

"History and Records," 157.

Trenckmann, "Erlebtes," 114; Mrs. Emma Krebs, student at La Bahia, ca. 1915-1922, telephone interview, Austin, Texas, July 7, 1970, said: "We couldn't even talk in German. Sometimes we'd hide in a corner to speak it."


Kermit Voelkel interview.