



Fading Music

Relics of Central European immigration, community halls are threatened by disuse

by STEVE DEAN

(top) Appelt's Hill Gun Club, built in 1909 and located near Hallettsville in Lavaca County, features a gable fronted cruciform plan with two side 'round' apses. (right) Interior T-pole of the Nordheim Shooting Club, built c. 1927 in DeWitt County, supports the immense and complex roof structure. A simple system of ropes and pulleys open and close the cupola windows to allow air circulation. Both halls are still used for local community gatherings.

IN MANY SMALL TOWNS ACROSS CENTRAL Texas, settled along the well-worn paths of nineteenth-century Czech, Polish, and German immigration routes, one of the most prominent landmarks is the dance and/or community hall. These émigrés from Central Europe brought with them traditional, artisanal building crafts and, just as importantly, a powerful desire to reproduce and maintain their cultural heritage, from language to vernacular architectural styles. That desire is reflected in the halls they built to house cultural institutions and practices central to their community (*Gesang Vereins* or *Saenger Halls*), to hone their marksmanship (*Shuetzen Vereins*), to build and maintain their bodies through exercise (*Turn Vereins*), to organize community insurance associations (SPJST halls), to practice their faith (KJT halls), as well as to provide a locale for other organizations related to agriculture and so on. These halls were as important to community life as court-

houses or churches, and consequently were often one of the first buildings constructed in the new townships.

The halls were erected with building techniques and skills learned in the old country but adapted for Texas' sometimes harsh environment. This meant, for example, an emphasis on windows and cupolas to keep air circulating and to facilitate the venting of heat through the roof.

Cat Spring's Agricultural Society Hall (*Landwirth Schaftlide Verein*) was built by German immigrants at the turn of the twentieth century as a 12-sided hall. Located in rural Austin County at the junction of FM 949 and FM 2187, Cat Springs' building is one of the rare "round" halls constructed by a renowned local craftsman named Jochim Hintz.

Just east of Cat Springs is another example of Hintz's mastery, the Peters Schuetzen Verein Hall, an eight-sided "round" Shooting Club

Hall built in 1900 in Peters Community on County Road 370 just off State Highway 36 south of Bellville in Austin County. Although Peters Hall was built for shooting competitions, dancing eventually became its primary function. Dancing was an important social practice for German residents, as for all of the Central European settlers, and several generations of families typically attended regular events that enacted and affirmed the community's stability and continuity.

The Millheim Harmonie Verein (Singing Hall) Society was organized in 1873 and built its first hall in 1874, the same year the community was established. Originally called Muehlheim ("Home of the Mill"), Millheim is located on FM 1088 just south of Bellville in Austin County. The area had previously been part of the original Spanish land grant to Stephen F. Austin in 1823. Like Millheim, the surrounding settlements of New Ulm, Industry, and Cat Spring were founded by mostly German immigrants in the 1830s and 1840s. As was often the case with early halls, Millheim hall's patrons benefitted from a bowling alley and a local brewery located on the same property. Millheim's hall was the location for the Singing Society, Agricultural Society, political rallies, barbecues, Maifests, Christmas tree festivals, New Year's parties, masquerade balls, and Leap Year dances. It is located on FM 1088 just south of Bellville in Austin County.

Historic structures such as those in Cat Spring, Peters, and Millheim are only a few of more than 80 halls I have documented in adjacent Austin and Fayette counties. Surprisingly, there has been very little research on Texas' dance halls although many have been decimated over the years by natural disasters, neglect, urban sprawl, and other maladies. Only recently has there been any development of interest in and knowledge about them. One of the driving forces in that interest is Texas Dance Hall Preservation (www.texasdancehall.org), a nonprofit group with the mission of saving historic Texas dance halls and the music and culture that still center around them.

Texas is slowly losing these iconic buildings. In the last two years, two major and active halls have burned down: Gruenau Hall, located on County Road 2980 just a few miles northeast of Yorktown in DeWitt County; and Bill Mraz Hall in Houston on W. 34th Street. Even though Gruenau Hall was insured, the coverage was not adequate for replicating the building in its

original form, but the owners have made great strides in reproducing the general appearance of the original. Many organizations struggle with the rising costs of repairs, new construction and ever-escalating insurance rates. Additionally, many of the halls tend to lose their most loyal constituencies to age. Their children and grandchildren, especially those born after the 1950s, typically spend their leisure time away from dance halls and live in communities that no longer use the halls for centralized social functions. As a result, rural depopulation and changing cultural mores have left the halls without the populations that animated them from the mid-nineteenth to the late-twentieth centuries.

Apart from the architectural and historical rationales for the continued care and preservation of Texas dance halls, it is evident that they have also been incubators for a rich culture of popular music styles, the diverse forms of "Texas Music" as it is known around the world. From the earliest nineteenth-century brass

bands, string bands, and fiddle-oriented ranch dance ensembles, a unique mix of musical genres and styles was nurtured in these halls and cross-pollinated with the state's varied ethnic cultures. Strains of German polkas were assimilated in the music of the Tejano community, producing the indigenous form we now know as Conjunto music. Later in the 1930s, when string band leaders such as Bob Wills or Milton Brown started traveling through these halls, they picked up influences as diverse as Dixieland jazz, Mexican boleros and rancheros, and cowboy and Tin Pan Alley pop styles to create another Texas indigenous music known as Western Swing. With Texas' vast landscape, bands and musicians could earn a living without ever leaving the territory. By the 1920s there was a dance hall in virtually every small town or village.

Dance halls provided the necessary contexts and audiences for the development of unique "Texas" sounds and thus helped to propel this music into the forefront of the rapidly-developing twentieth-century commercial music industry. From early blues and Bob Wills, the entire country and world has known the special sounds that emanate from the dance halls "Down There in Texas." Of course, many of the legendary names of mid- and late-twentieth-century American pop music – from Bob Wills and T-Bone Walker to Buddy Holly, Roy Orbison, Buck Owens, George Jones, Willie Nelson, Stevie Ray Vaughan, and George Strait – honed their craft in these splendid halls.

Notable "outsiders" also developed their musical careers in these halls. Hank Williams played his final dates in Texas at the tiny McDonna Hall and at the more established Skyline in Austin. Elvis Presley literally learned to perform in Texas, with his early career consisting primarily of touring the Texas halls from Lubbock to the Louisiana border.

In several ways and on several levels, dance halls are crucial elements of Texas' cultural heritage. Courthouses, lighthouses, ranches, and other historical landmarks have been preserved and have become the object of study and tourism-related development. Now, perhaps, the time has finally come to put Texas dance halls in the spotlight for their long and overwhelming contribution to Texas culture and its mystique. As Bob Wills sang, "I Can't Get Enough of Texas."

Steve Dean is a co-founder of Texas Dance Hall Preservation.

