



## Hill Country town remains deeply split by Civil War-era monument

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COMFORT, Texas — Inside the old Comfort State Bank, Anne Stewart whiles away her time sifting through old letters, documents and personal artifacts not found in the many antique shops nearby.

She looks for clues to how pioneering German families survived a campaign of terror during the Civil War, which began 150 years ago.

Stewart, a descendant of Germans who arrived in Comfort in 1861, is a self-taught archivist and historian determined to shed more light on a Civil War event that many of her neighbors would just as soon keep hush-hush: the fatal decision by a group of Hill Country Germans, loyal to the Union, to reject the Confederacy and head to Mexico.

The journey ended in what some call the Battle of the Nueces and others the Nueces [Massacre](#). August will mark the 149th anniversary of the battle, and even now in this sleepy Hill Country town, strong passions lie just beneath the surface. Shouting is “only an eye blink away,” Stewart said. “There are people here who think that we’re making too much of a thing that’s really not that good. Some of the folks here just adamantly feel, ‘Let’s just let it lay.’”

Stewart was a girl when she first heard about Wilhelmine Stieler, who went crazy after her son was killed by the Confederates. “I wanted to know more,” she said.

The old bank, a hand-carved stone building erected in 1907, houses the Comfort Heritage Foundation. The nonprofit’s mission includes preserving the Treue der Union (“Loyal to the Union”) monument, dedicated in Comfort in 1866, a year after the Civil War ended. The limestone obelisk honors 36 Union loyalists killed by Confederate forces during and just after the Battle of the Nueces.

The memorial holds a unique place in Texas history as the state’s first Civil War monument — and one of only two dedicated solely to the Union in a state that overwhelmingly voted to join the Confederacy. (In 1906, a statue was erected in Denison honoring Union veterans who lived in Grayson County, which voted to keep Texas in the Union.)

The Comfort monument is also a reminder of the Civil War’s bitter legacy. Confederate Texans viewed the pro-Union Germans as traitorous. Even in the Hill Country, the monument stirred conflicting emotions. While many here honored their fallen neighbors as heroes, others saw them as radicals whose actions ignited a reign of terror by Confederate-partisan mobs.

According to historical accounts, several dozen to several hundred Germans in the Hill Country were lynched or shot, and their farmhouses burned, on the mere suspicion of treason.

The passing of 150 years has done little to dispel the conflicted feelings.

A few years back, Comfort residents met to discuss a proposal to paint a mural depicting the monument in the old bank building. Stewart recalled how one woman stood up and shouted: “I will burn the building down before I let a mural go up with that monument on it, because it caused trouble then, and it’s caused trouble now.”

Recently, Stewart’s cousin went to get a haircut in the town of Center Point, in the next county over. When the barber found out his customer was from Comfort, he called him a “damn Comfort Unionist” and refused to cut his hair, Stewart said.

“When we moved back here in 1977, nobody wanted to say” whether their family had been loyal to the Union or the Confederacy, said Stewart. She traces her heritage back to the Karger family, which moved to Comfort just before the Civil War.

That secrecy passed from one generation to the next. “I’d ask about it, and nobody in the family seemed to know much,” said Brenda Seidensticker, another descendant of Hill Country pioneers.

Only in recent years have local families started donating personal records to Comfort's historical archives, said Stewart, the town librarian in the late 1970s. "It took a long time for people to realize that they weren't going to be castigated for what their families did or did not do during that time."

## Seeking freedom

Some of the early German settlers were peasants who'd never owned land before. Others were intellectual idealists seeking to form communities based on freedoms they couldn't enjoy in their old country.

Germans mostly opposed slavery, but it wasn't a burning issue in the Hill Country, where farmers grew wheat and not cotton, said Melvin C. Johnson, a historian at Angelina College's Jasper campus.

Germans embraced U.S. citizenship and the presence of federal troops to defend against hostile Indians on the frontier, Johnson said. When Texas seceded from the Union, the newer immigrants in the Hill Country voted to oppose the Confederacy. They included a group called Freethinkers, who helped found the Hill Country towns of Comfort and Sisterdale.

The Freethinkers had immigrated to Texas after a failed democratic revolution in Germany in 1848. They disliked organized religion and believed in civil liberties. They also opposed slavery.

Though the Freethinkers' beliefs did not reflect the views of longer-established Texas Germans, they fed the growing distrust of Confederate authorities toward the Hill Country communities, which had formed militias to defend against Indian raids.

The Confederates feared that these militias could provide help to federal troops that might invade from the west. So authorities declared martial law on May 30, 1862, and required all white males over age 16 to take a loyalty oath.

Sent to enforce the decree was Capt. [James Duff](#), a ruthless Confederate officer from [San Antonio](#). Duff was aided by vigilante mobs the Germans called *hangebund* — "hanging gangs." These mobs hunted down and hanged any Germans suspected of being pro-Union.

Stewart said she even saw a tombstone near Fredericksburg that read: "Beaten to death with bullwhips by Capt. Duff's men."

## Terror campaign

The violence persuaded some Hill Country Germans to leave Texas. They included the founder of Comfort, Ernst Altgelt, who returned to Germany. A group of about 70, led by Fritz Tegener of Comfort, refused to take the loyalty oath and set out for Mexico. Some of them planned to wait out the war there. Others hoped to join federal forces in New Orleans.

Tegener's group was betrayed by a spy, and Duff ordered about 100 Confederate troops to pursue the Germans, according to historians.

On the night of Aug. 9, 1862, scouts spotted Tegener's group on the Nueces River in Kinney County, about 40 miles east of present-day Del Rio on the Mexican border.

## Corpses in a pile

The Confederates attacked the next morning. Afterward, 19 Germans lay dead. Nine others, who were wounded, were executed shortly after being taken prisoner. The 28 bodies were stacked in a pile near the river and left unburied.

[The rest](#) of the Union loyalists fled in different directions. Two months later, eight more were killed by Confederates while trying to cross the Rio Grande into Mexico. It wasn't until the end of the war that relatives of the dead could safely recover the remains, which were buried in Comfort.

A year later, on Aug. 10, 1866 — the fourth anniversary of the Battle of the Nueces — a 20-foot-tall limestone monument was dedicated at the [burial](#) plot, inscribed with the names of the victims and the words "Treue der Union." The monument was erected on High Street, under a majestic live oak that still stands today.

Restored and rededicated in 1996, it is part of the Comfort Historic District and the [National Register of Historic Places](#). A 36-star flag — representing the number of states after the Civil War — flies permanently at half-staff.

Stewart, who has written several historical brochures, is determined to keep the story behind the monument alive. She knows others wish she would put the story to rest. "People ask me why I keep at this and I say, 'Comfort would not be what it is today if it wasn't for the Nueces battle.'"