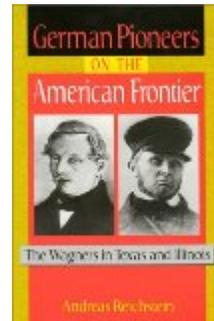


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Andreas Reichstein. *German Pioneers on the American Frontier: The Wagners in Texas and Illinois*. Denton: University of North Texas Press, 2001. xii + 303 pp. \$32.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57441-134-8.

Reviewed by Stan Nadel (Institute for History, University of Innsbruck)
Published on H-GAGCS (January, 2003)



Assimilation or Acculturation? The Wagners of Texas and Illinois

Assimilation or Acculturation? The Wagners of Texas and Illinois

This book is intended to be a contribution to the debate over assimilation versus acculturation pursued via a micro-level examination of the experience of two branches of the same family that arrived in the United States in the middle of the nineteenth century. As such it is an ambitious project and one that achieves mixed results.

Starting with a description of the family of a well connected, but poor, Protestant minister in nineteenth-century Baden, Reichstein focuses first on the third son, Julius. Julius was a great success at fraternity life in Heidelberg, but displayed far more diligence in running up debts than at his studies. In 1846 Julius fell in with a group of young adventurers who had decided to emigrate to North America. The book is particularly good in describing the idealistic network of young radicals, which included Julius and his friends, and their beliefs. It is also clear concerning the preparation, as the well-heeled emigrants set off “more like a hunting party than a group of emigrants.” Indeed, the book’s description of the life of these German emigrants to Texas, as their ideals collapsed in the face of Texas realities and their communal experiment dissolved, is excellent. Reichstein’s attention to the details of everyday life is one of the strong points of this book. On the other hand, it is also one of its greatest weaknesses, as Reichstein introduces the names and circumstances of numerous arrivals, along with their mar-

riages and divorces, until the reader is lost among the details. There are some good stories here, but the level of detail is excessive, even down to a dinner menu (p. 76). Still, Reichstein’s book provides a clear portrayal of the development of German Texas in the 1840s and 1850s as Julius Wagner, in keeping with his earlier social success at Heidelberg, became an active participant in the formation and development of the *Texas Saengerbund*, its festivals, and its anti-Slavery activities up to the eve of the American Civil War. Reichstein closes this section with an evaluation of Julius’ modest success as the 1850s drew to a close.

The next section is devoted to Julius’s much more serious older brother Wilhelm, who had followed his father into the liberal wing of the Protestant ministry. Wilhelm was a liberal elector in the Baden *Landtag* election of 1846 and supported the radical cause in 1848-49 (as did his father). Arrested and convicted of treason in the reaction that followed the crushing of the revolution in Baden, Wilhelm fled to America while he was still free on appeal. Choosing Wisconsin over Texas, he soon moved to fill a pastoral opening in Freeport, Illinois and then founded the *Deutscher Anzeiger*.

Like his younger brother, Wilhelm was active in the creation of the lively *Vereinsleben* of mid-nineteenth century German-America and helped found a *Freeporter Turnverein* as well as a *Freeporter Saengerbund*. Reichstein is particularly good on the social and political significance of these movements. On the other hand, Reich-

stein's explorations of the origins of the American *Turner* movement and of the divisions leading up to the American Civil War are both badly flawed. It is also unfortunate that the book fails to explore why Wilhelm and his *Deutscher Anzeiger* continued to support the Democratic Party when so many other Forty-Eighters and *Turners* became active Republicans in the late 1850s, as this is an area of German-American political history in need of further exploration where Reichstein could have made a significant contribution.

This section continues with a sketchy overview of Wilhelm's life in the decade between the end of the Civil War and his death in 1877, before turning back to Julius and the Texas Wagners. Reichstein is very good on Civil War and Reconstruction Texas, with Julius playing a classic role as a German-American Unionist. He was forced to flee to Mexico and then returned to play an active, if minor, role in Texas Reconstruction and served as a Republican postmaster until he moved to San Antonio in 1883. There he ran a small grocery and participated actively in the German-American *Vereinsleben* of the city for another decade before he retired and went to live with a daughter and son-in-law in Chicago in 1892. The section concludes with his death in Chicago in 1903.

The book then takes up the story of the next generation of Wagners, starting with Wilhelm's family who expanded the *Deutscher Anzeiger* into a printing business that prospered and survived the demise of the original *Deutscher Anzeiger* in the repression of German-America during the First World War. The Wagner Printing Company stagnated under the leadership of Wilhelm's college-educated grandson Frederic (who was reportedly not very interested in business), but it prospered greatly after his widow took over.

Switching back to Texas, the book takes up the story of a later German immigrant named Hermann Paepcke who had a career as a cotton broker before marrying Julius Wagner's daughter Paula in 1878 and moving to Chicago in 1881. Paepcke set up a very successful box-making company there and founded a second Illinois branch of the family. Julius's son William had fallen out with his father over politics in the 1860s, when he joined his friends in supporting the Confederate cause and reviled his father's "treason." He never fully reconciled with his father, but he joined his brother-in-law's cotton brokerage and took it over when Paepcke moved to Chicago. William became a successful small town businessman and banker before finishing his career as county treasurer, an office he held until his death in 1926.

Returning to the issue of assimilation that is supposed to be the focus of the book, Reichstein goes on to assess the assimilation or acculturation of various branches of the Wagner family. William and his branch of the family became the most assimilated when he was removed from his family, thus after he fell out with his father and after his sister and brother-in-law moved to Chicago. Interestingly, Paula's son not only married a fellow German-American, he sponsored a Chicago Bauhaus exhibition in 1937 and a Goethe festival in Aspen, Colorado in the 1940s and 1950s. As a result, different branches of Julius's descendants provide models for both extreme assimilation and an acculturation that maintained a German-American identity. Wilhelm's descendants exemplified a moderate acculturation that gradually shifted towards assimilation by the middle of the twentieth century, though some tenuous links continue to exist between Wilhelm's descendants and some of the German Wagners. Reichstein's exploration of the Wagner family fully supports his main point, that there was a wide spectrum of responses to migration, with no single model of assimilation or acculturation providing an accurate description of the whole experience. In this area the book is most successful in linking theory and experience.

In other areas the book is far less successful. Although it often gets lost in minutiae, sometimes it takes off into global connections of little relevance—as when a discussion of early American migration goes back to the Beringian migrations of the Pleistocene and then digresses into a misguided and disturbing summary of the Euro-American conquest of the Indians. Even stranger is an initially interesting excursion into the weakness of purely economic explanations of migration. It then wanders off into a musing over possible relationships between the emigration of strong-willed individuals and the susceptibility of the descendants of those who stayed behind to demagogues. (Reichstein wonders if both World Wars might have been avoided had there been no emigration from Germany in the nineteenth century). Reichstein concludes with an interesting analysis of the positive value of immigration and the weaknesses of anti-immigration propaganda that has clear relevance to current politics in Europe, but which is only slightly connected to the substance of the book. A final criticism is that the editors at the University of North Texas Press should have encouraged the author to eliminate the frequent Germanisms that mar the text. Reichstein's command of English is very good, but not good enough to stand alone in print. Despite its unevenness and weaknesses, I still recommend this book to everybody seri-

ously interested in the German-American experience. 143 lines] [Not Shown. Use the “V” command to view or
[Part 2, Text/HTML (charset: ISO-8859-1 “Latin 1”) save this part]

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

[/~gagcs/](#)

Citation: Stan Nadel. Review of Reichstein, Andreas, *German Pioneers on the American Frontier: The Wagners in Texas and Illinois*. H-GAGCS, H-Net Reviews. January, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7088>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.