



# *SGAS Newsletter*

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Dear SGAS members,

What a fantastic symposium in Columbus! Tim Anderson organized a wonderful event for us, including a bus trip to German American sites in Auglaize and Mercer Counties and a walking tour of Columbus's German Village. The symposium program was full of diverse and thought-provoking topics on German American Studies. Many of us left the symposium exhilarated and eager to connect again. Of note were presentations from six graduate students and recent graduates who received travel funding from our Karl J.R. Arndt Grant. Information on their presentations is included in this issue of the newsletter. Their work gives us excitement about the future of German American studies.

Rounding out the delicious meal at Schmidt's Sausage Haus was the awarding of this year's Outstanding Achievement Award to Antje Petty. Antje has provided our Society with so much guidance and support over many years. Her laudatio by Mark Loudon is featured in this issue.

The membership has decided on a new logo for SGAS which we unveil here. And, lastly, our thanks to Caroline Huey who will be stepping down as newsletter editor with this issue. We are still searching for a newsletter editor, so please be in touch with me if you'd like to serve the Society in this important capacity.

Warmly,

Josh Brown



## Outstanding Achievement Award 2026: Antje Petty

Laudatio by Mark Loudon, Alfred L. Shoemaker, J. William Frey, and Don Yoder Professor of Germanic Linguistics and Griebisch Bascom Professor of German, University of Wisconsin Madison



It is my honor to introduce this year's recipient of the SGAS Outstanding Achievement Award, my colleague Antje Petty. Like most of us, Antje came to work in German American studies not by design but by good fortune. Antje grew up in northern Germany in the small city of Springe, which is located southwest of Hannover. After completing her Abitur, she started university studies at the Georg-August-Universität in Göttingen, with a focus on the law. Her life took a major turn during her time in Göttingen when she met Grant Petty, a study abroad student from California who was studying applied physics. In 1985 Antje joined Grant in Seattle and enrolled at the University of Washington, earning her bachelor's degree magna

cum laude in international studies with an emphasis in Russian and Eastern European studies in 1987. Antje then went on to earn a master's degree in Germanics, also at the University of Washington.

In 1990, Antje and Grant, along with their first daughter, Annika, moved to West Lafayette, Indiana, where Grant took up a position as an Assistant Professor at Purdue University. At Purdue, Antje earned her state teaching license and taught German at a local high school and, for four years, as a lecturer in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature. In 2000, the Petty family, which now included Antje's and Grant's second daughter, Sonia, came to Madison, where Antje joined the staff of the Max Kade Institute for German American Studies, eventually becoming our Associate Director. I arrived in Madison the same year, so Antje and I have been colleagues for twenty-six years. Public outreach has been at the center of Antje's work. She is centrally involved in every outreach initiative undertaken at the Max Kade Institute, from the planning stages to implementation. Since 2002 she has organized twelve symposia, events that bring together presenters from

around the world to UW–Madison to speak on topics grounded in scholarship but accessible to diverse audiences that include students and community members. The impact of many of the symposia Antje organizes is sustained through publications and virtual exhibits on the MKI website developed under Antje’s leadership.

During her time at UW–Madison, Antje has designed and overseen an additional ten multi-year public-facing research initiatives and thirteen physical and virtual exhibits, one of the most successful being “Neighbors Past and Present: The Wisconsin German Experience,” which was inaugurated in 2019. Funded initially by a grant from the Wisconsin Humanities Council that Antje wrote, the exhibit, which combines fourteen poster-banners with local programming, has been displayed in dozens of communities, many of them small, across Wisconsin and other states. Another important way that Antje has extended MKI’s reach beyond Madison is through our lecture series. Before the pandemic, our Institute sponsored one or two lectures on campus per semester, but after Covid hit, Antje suggested we inaugurate the MKI Virtual Lecture Series, which has proved highly successful. We now offer 5-8 virtual and hybrid presentations per year, most of which are recorded and made accessible over our new MKI YouTube channel, which Antje oversees. Each lecture attracts on average over one hundred virtual attendees from around the world, which has not only raised the visibility of MKI, but also helped grow our Friends of MKI organization.

Antje’s engagement with outreach extends beyond the organization and implementation of outreach events and exhibits. She presents at a range of venues on research she herself conducts. Since 2001, she has delivered approximately 170 public presentations on diverse topics related to German American history and culture, many of which are directed to genealogists and family historians. Antje has also authored eight scholarly articles and fifty-four shorter articles and book reviews for our Friends of MKI Newsletter.

Much of what Antje presents and writes on is based on materials in the MKI Library, especially German-language books published in North America as well as handwritten documents in the old German script, Kurrent. There are only a small number of researchers anywhere, including in Europe, who can decipher these documents, most of which in the MKI Archives were produced in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Shortly after joining MKI, Antje taught herself to read Kurrent

and began transcribing and translating personal letters, journals, and other documents for use by herself and other researchers, including family historians. In 2022, together with Maria Sturm, a member of our Society and Friends of MKI Board, Antje inaugurated the MKI Kurrent Transcription Group, which meets weekly on Zoom. The group, which includes about ten people from the US and Germany, collectively deciphers documents selected by Antje from the MKI Archive, an excellent example of crowdsourcing research. One of the tangible products that the Kurrent decipherment work under Antje's leadership has yielded is the virtual exhibit "Anna Seifert: Letters in German from a Wisconsin Farm."

Antje's work to advance the field of German American studies extends beyond her quarter-century plus of service to the Max Kade Institute to her work on behalf of our Society. Antje led the organization of four annual symposia between 2019 and 2023, including during the pandemic. For three years, she served as our Society's Webmaster and completely redesigned our website. She has been a member of the SGAS Executive Committee in her role as Membership Chair, and worked with colleagues on the committee to revise the Society's bylaws to make the EC more inclusive by adding representatives for graduate students and early career scholars. To be sure, Antje has received accolades in her career. In 2020, she was recognized by UW-Madison's College of Letters and Science with a Mid-Career Award. In 2024 she earned Distinguished status, the highest recognition for academic staff at our university. And this evening we celebrate her as the recipient of this year's SGAS Outstanding Achievement Award.

Congratulations, Antje!



# 2026 Karl J. R. Arndt Symposium Grant for Graduate Students and Recent PhDs

## Symposium Winners and their Presentation Summaries

### **Ellen Jones Schoedler, The University of Texas at Austin**

"Plattdeutsch in Texas: Investigating the Origins of Low German Speakers in the Texas German Belt"

The immigration patterns of members of the Low German-speaking community from northern Germany to the United States, and North America more broadly, has been investigated widely (recent studies include, for example, Burns, 2022; Rocker, 2022; Heeren, 2023; Cox, 2025). In the United States, Low German speakers are often concentrated in, for example, regions around Illinois, Iowa, North Dakota, South Dakota, Minnesota, and Nebraska. There is, however, little research into Low German speakers in the German Belt in central Texas. A number of factors have made such research, including research into the donor dialects of Texas German, difficult.

As attested in studies on Texas German (Gilbert, 1972; Boas, 2009), there is little known about the potential donor dialects of Texas German as a linguistic variety, which traces back to often limited information about where the ancestors of Texas German speakers first immigrated to Texas from. Gilbert (1977: 21), through investigation of census data beginning in 1850, does note that “tabulations of the immigrants' origins within Germany indicated a strong preponderance of North and Middle Germany over South Germany, Switzerland, and Austria.” Friedrich Ernst, who played a role in bringing many Germans to Texas, was from Oldenburg in northwestern Germany. However, many census conducted after 1860 included the assimilation of all Europeans into one “white” category, and while certain counties in the German Belt provided a finer distinction between settler origin than others, exact origin of these immigrants is difficult to pinpoint. Nonetheless, during Gilbert’s data collection for the Linguistic Atlas of Texas German (1972), speakers of Low German (and not just Texas German) were part of the community interviewed. My paper addresses the following: (1) immigration of Low German

speakers to North America broadly, (2) what is already known about immigration from Low German-speaking northern Germany to Texas in the 19th century, and (3) which information about area of origin can currently be gleaned from Gilbert's small group of Low German speakers. This includes discussion of the demographic data Gilbert did collect, as well as further investigation into historical census data. The question remains as to how the Low German language and identity potentially played a role in the formation of the Texas German community generally; linguistically, there appears to be "nothing left" of Low German in Texas.

### **Armin Langer, Congregation Shir Hadash in Milwaukee**

"German American Reform Judaism and Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan's Critique"

German American Jews profoundly shaped the religious, institutional, and cultural development of American Judaism. Rooted in nineteenth-century German Reform and its American adaptations, this community championed rationalism, universal ethics, civic patriotism, and a modernized synagogue aesthetic. Yet it was precisely this German-American Jewish milieu that provided Lithuanian-born American rabbi Mordecai Kaplan (1881—1983) with both an intellectual foundation and a polemical foil for developing a program of a reconstruction of American Judaism for the 20th century.

My paper examines the complicated relationship between German American Reform Judaism and Kaplan's evolving thought through a close reading of Kaplan's major works — including *Judaism as a Civilization*, *The Meaning of God in Modern Jewish Religion*, and his essays on Jewish peoplehood — where he engages directly with the values and legacy of German Jewry in the US. Kaplan both appreciated and sharply critiqued the German Reform tradition: he praised its rationalism, community organization, and commitment to ethical monotheism, but rejected what he saw as its over-assimilationist tendencies, its abandonment of Jewish peoplehood, and its discomfort with collective identity and ritual particularism.

By situating Kaplan's analysis of German Jews alongside the lived experience and institutional imprint of German American Reform Jews in the United States, this project illuminates an underexplored tension at the heart of early

twentieth-century American Judaism: how a movement rooted in German modernity became the ideological backdrop against which Kaplan's Reconstructionist program sought to redefine Jewish civilization. This study contributes to broader reflections on German American religious influence and the evolving landscape of American Jewish identity as the United States approaches its 250th anniversary.

### **Ayla Gray, Washington University St Louis**

"'Reverence for the Mother Never Detracts from Love for the Bride' – Richard Bartholdt's Role in Shaping Public Opinions About National Identity and Loyalty During Anti-German Sentiments"

For over two centuries, the United States has undoubtedly provided millions of immigrants with opportunities for a new and better life. However, the current political debates over birthright citizenship and dual citizenship offer us a valuable chance to also reflect on the challenges German Americans once faced while living in a country they sought out in pursuit of liberty, opportunity, and equal rights. The questions of who qualifies as American and, more importantly, what it truly means to be "a good and loyal American" have been debated throughout United States history. For German Americans, these discussions were especially important in the first half of the 20th century, as xenophobia and mistrust were increasingly directed specifically at them.

German-born U.S. Congressman Richard Bartholdt, an American public figure with close ties to his birth country, recognized the malleability of national identity and publicly sought to challenge prevailing conceptions of Americanism. While his initiatives to promote inclusivity and support international peace have been commended, his reasoning is flawed by his own prejudices and personal circumstances. Analyzing his autobiography, *From Steerage to Congress* (1930), and his personal papers offers valuable insights into how he, as an immigrant, addressed issues of national identity, thereby emphasizing both the opportunities and the challenges faced by Americans of German descent. Furthermore, it enables us to acknowledge the enduring significance of complex subjects such as

national identity and belonging, not only within the contemporary United States but also across different periods and national boundaries.

### **Alexis Wilson, Claremont Graduate University**

"Faith Under Suspicion: St. Paul's Walther League in Wartime Fort Wayne, 1917-1920"

Religion and German heritage are identifying attributes of Fort Wayne, Indiana. Nicknamed "the city of churches" and "a most German town," Germans and German Americans in the city faced harsh scrutiny during the onset of World War I in 1917. As a harbor of German language and culture, St. Paul Evangelical Lutheran Church faced intense public examination as the most prominent and oldest Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod (LCMS) church in the city. St. Paul's responded to xenophobic pressures and anti-German sentiment by relying on lay organizations, such as the Walther League, to navigate the crisis. The Walther League was the LCMS youth organization, with each church hosting a chapter. Mirroring the church's reputation, several members of St. Paul's Walther League held leadership positions at the organization's national level. Through community service, positive public relations, military service, and fundraising, the St. Paul's Walther League was a driving force behind projecting a positive image of German Lutherans in the LCMS during World War I.

### **Joren Somers, The University of Texas at Austin**

"Word order Variation in Texas German Subclauses"

Despite the wealth of literature on Texas German phonology and morphology, hardly any work has been done on the syntax of this critically endangered language. This study bridges that gap by offering an analysis of Texas German word order. The focus is on linearisation in subclauses introduced by *weil* 'because', *dass* 'that' and *bis* 'until'. In Standard German, each of these conjunctions triggers verb-final order, but in Texas German, the preferred order of constituents has not been scrutinized in detail yet. One notable exception is a pilot study by Boas (2009: 220–221), who finds that New Braunfels German tends to associate

*weil* with verb-second clauses, *bis* with verb-final-clauses, and *dass* with either of these structural patterns.

The aim of the current study is to falsify Boas's (2009) results, while also offering a comparison with word order patterns in earlier stages of Texas German and other German heritage varieties spoken in North America. The data for this study principally stem from the Texas German Dialect Corpus, which comprises over 1.25 million tokens of informal spoken data representing the speech of 600 informants. For each of the three conjunctions under study, I collected the first 100 eligible tokens after running lexical search queries. The results are in line with Boas's (2009), in that (1) *bis* strongly correlates with verb-final clauses, (2) *weil* strongly correlates with verb-second clauses, and (3) *dass* instantiates verb-second and verb-final structures in approximately equal measure. Other structural patterns, such as verb-first or verb-third, are attested only marginally. Interestingly, nearly half of all verb-second tokens for *dass*-clauses stem from a mere two individuals.

My paper invites a three-part conclusion. First, Texas German seems to exhibit a drift towards verb-second, but, crucially, the process affects different types of subclauses to different degrees. Rutten & van der Wal, having observed a similar phenomenon in the history of Dutch, have termed this process 'constructional diffusion' (Rutten & van der Wal 2014: 305). Second, Texas German seems to occupy a syntactic position in between more entrenched German heritage varieties, such as Pennsylvania Dutch, and less entrenched heritage varieties, such as Moundridge Schweitzer German: while the former hardly features any verb-second structures (Stolberg 2014), the latter robustly prefers verb-second in both *weil*- and *dass*-clauses (Hopp & Putnam 2015). Finally, the data point towards the role of individuals in propelling language change. Future research might use additional data from the Texas German Dialect Corpus to test this prediction on a larger scale.

## **Bradley Weiss, Indiana University Bloomington**

### "Two 19th-century Roadside Crosses in Clinton County, Illinois"

A few miles north of Germantown, IL, in the predominantly (Low) German Catholic community of Clinton County stand two 19th-century crosses, both erected by immigrants from northern Germany. The first of these is the so-called "Cholera Cross," a 25-foot cross on a dairy farm along the Germantown Road. The current concrete cross is just the latest iteration of a series of wooden crosses, with the first having been constructed by Joseph Altpeter in 1850 in fulfillment of a pledge he made to God should his family be spared during the 1832-1833 Illinois cholera outbreak. The cross bears the inscription "IM KREUZ IST HEIL" or "In the Cross is Salvation".

The second cross, a 14-foot stone cross known variously at "The South Walnut Street Cross" or the "Faith Cross," is located nearby. It was erected in 1888 by Theodore Huelsmann, reportedly "in the shadow of the struggles of life in general (illness, poverty, the uncertainty of the future)." After immigrating to Clinton County at the age of 21 in the first half of the the 19th century, Theodore is reported to have missed the small shrines that dotted his native German landscapes, and thus this cross provided him "a significant remembrance of his homeland." This cross bears the inscription "GEHST DU AM KREUZ VORBEI / ERWEKE WAHRE HERZENZREU" or "As you pass by the cross, awaken true contrition (in your) heart," a line from a larger poem that can also be found on similar *Marterl* or "wayside shrines/crosses" in German-speaking lands.

Due to their similar nature and proximity, the two crosses have often been conflated, and many erroneous local myths surrounding them have arisen, such as that there is a condition in the deed to the land which obligates the current owner to keep the Cholera Cross in good repair. This paper traces the role that these crosses have played, and continue to play, in the consciousness and collective cultural identity of the local (Low) German American community, traced through newspaper reports dating back to the first half of the 20th century, local archival materials, and interviews which have been conducted with both the current property owners on which these crosses stand as well as the descendants of their original erectors.

## In Memoriam: Prof. Dr. Reinhard Doerries

**Reinhard R. Doerries** died at the end of 2025. He was Professor Emeritus of History at the University of Erlangen–Nürnberg and was President of the GAAS from 1987-1990.

Doerries was truly an Atlantic citizen, equally at home in Europe and the United States. He earned a B.A. from Concordia College, an M.F.A. from Ohio University, an M.A. in History from Yale University, and an M.B.A. from INSEAD in Fontainebleau. He initially pursued a career in business consulting in Paris, but his enduring passion for history ultimately led him back to Germany, where he completed his *Dr. phil.* at Ruhr-University Bochum. His dissertation—later published in English by the University of North Carolina Press as *Imperial Challenge*—was pivotal in establishing the field of intelligence history in Germany, a research area that at the time was still viewed with considerable suspicion within German academia.

Doerries' scholarly interests were notably wide-ranging. In addition to intelligence history, his work encompassed Irish history as well as nineteenth-century social, religious, and immigration history. His engaging teaching style and openness to new ideas attracted a large number of students, whom he supported tirelessly and generously throughout their own careers.

Following his *Habilitation*, Doerries was appointed Professor at the University of Kassel and, a few years later, Full Professor of Modern History at the University of Erlangen–Nürnberg. An influential voice in international scholarly debates—particularly in the field of intelligence history—he authored numerous important works, including *Prelude to the Easter Rising: Sir Roger Casement in Imperial Germany*; *Diplomaten und Agenten. Nachrichtendienste in der Geschichte der deutsch-amerikanischen Beziehungen*; and *Hitler's Last Chief of Foreign Intelligence: Allied Interrogations of Walter Schellenberg*.

<https://dgfa.de/obituary-for-reinhard-r-doerries-1934-2025/>.