

## Smithson Valley Cemetery

### I. Context

The Smithson Valley Cemetery is located off State Highway 46 on Farm to Market Road 311 in the rolling Texas Hill Country approximately thirteen miles west of New Braunfels.<sup>1</sup> Begun as a family cemetery for the burial of baby Karl Ohlrich, Jr., the Smithson Valley Cemetery holds the descendants of hardy German immigrants who were among the first citizens of the Republic of Texas and who settled and established the Smithson Valley community.

New Braunfels was settled in 1845 by German immigrants brought to Texas by the Association for the Protection of German Immigrants in Texas (Adelsverein). Additional waves of German immigrants were to follow and while many stayed in and established the city of New Braunfels. The Germans wasted no time in settling close to rivers in the surrounding area to use the water power in running their grist and saw mills. Benjamin Franklin Smithson settled in the area some eleven years later in 1856 to become a rancher and farmer. He was soon followed by nine other families: Henry Busch, Karl Koehn, Ludwig Groenke, William Hillert, Christian Loeffler, Andreas Gass, Christian Spangenberg, Carl Ohlrich and Senger.<sup>2,3</sup>

Initially, the community became known as **Smithson's** Valley with Benjamin Franklin Smithson, born in Alabama, serving as its first postmaster from 1857 until 1860.<sup>4</sup> Later the apostrophe was dropped and the name became

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<sup>1</sup>Smithson Valley Cemetery Map, Exhibit A, No. CM-050.

<sup>2</sup>Herman Seele (translated by Edward C. Breitenkamp), *The Cypress and Other Writings of a German Pioneer in Texas*, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas, 1979, page 42.

<sup>3</sup> The spelling of some names has been corrected from that in Seele's translation.

<sup>4</sup>Charles Deaton, *Texas Postal History Handbook*, 1980.

**Smithsons** Valley. In a 1935 post office application, the “s” was dropped to become **Smithson** Valley which is currently being used.<sup>5</sup>

The next two postmasters were also pioneer settlers of the community: Henry Busch (1860-1866) and Charles (Karl) Ohlrich (1866-1897). Interestingly, the Germans of the community called it “Schmidtsthal” which translates to “Smith’s valley.” At one time, the Smithson Valley Community had a store, cotton gin, blacksmith shop, a one-room school, dance hall, cemetery, post office, a bowling alley, and a saloon.<sup>6</sup> As with many other smaller communities, all of these pioneer community essentials eventually disappeared except for the cemetery. The Smithson Valley Cemetery was certified as a Historic Texas Cemetery on February 20, 2008, by the Texas Historical Commission.

## **II. Overview**

Benjamin Franklin Smithson was the first settler in the valley that bears his name.<sup>7</sup> Born in 1825 in Alabama, he came to Texas in 1837 with his father, a veteran of the War of 1812, and located to Smithson’s Valley in 1851.<sup>8</sup> Benjamin F. Smithson married Auguste Vogel the same year he settled in the area. Auguste was the daughter of Ludwig Vogel, an early settler who lived along the Cibolo Creek. Benjamin and Auguste were not buried in the Smithson Valley Cemetery, but chose to be buried in the Vogel/Voges Cemetery where her parents and siblings were buried.<sup>9</sup>

If Benjamin F. Smithson gave the community its name, many of the German immigrants who lived, worked, and now rest in the Smithson Valley Cemetery, gave life to the Valley. Johann Startz was one of the first two hundred and forty

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<sup>5</sup> Brenda Anderson-Lindemann, *Spring Branch and Western Comal County, Texas*, Omni Publishers, Inc., San Antonio, 1998, pages 237, 241.

<sup>6</sup>Lindemann, p. 150.

<sup>7</sup>John Henry Brown, *The Indian Wars and Pioneers of Texas*, Austin, Texas, L.E. Daniell, 1880, page 539.

<sup>8</sup> Brown, p. 539.

<sup>9</sup> Lindemann, p. 153.

founders of the city of New Braunfels. Johann, wife Margarethe, and their six children sailed from Germany on the vessel, Johann Dethardt, on September 16, 1844.<sup>10</sup> They arrived on the coast of Texas with the very first colonists on November 23, 1844 and endured tremendous hardships in settling New Braunfels in April of 1845.<sup>11</sup> Johann's son, Heinrich Startz (1829-1919) would marry and settle in the Smithson Valley area. He and wife, Johanna Louise Artzt (1838-1887), would have 13 children. Six of the Startz's thirteen children, Wilhelmina Startz Wunderlich (1858-1929), Caroline Startz Bose (1954-1933), Pauline Startz Pantermuehl (1856-1933), Martha Startz Ohlrich (1868-1912), Otto Startz (1870-1952), Marie Startz Bartels (1860-1936), and Emma Startz Bartels (1866-1962), along with many members of their families, are buried in the Smithson Valley Cemetery.<sup>12</sup> They are not only the direct descendants of one of the first German immigrants to New Braunfels and citizens of the Republic of Texas,<sup>13</sup> but are among the first residents of Smithson Valley.

Pauline Startz married Heinrich Pantermuehl (1842-1921) and both are buried in the cemetery. A prominent German settler, Heinrich immigrated to Texas at age 12 along with his father, six brothers, and three sisters. He became a prosperous farmer and businessman.<sup>14</sup> Heinrich formally deeded a 140' x 145' plot of ranch land in approximately 1898 to be used as a "graveyard."<sup>15</sup> (see Exhibit B) It appears that a burial site was needed for his nephew, the young son of his sister, Louise Pantermuehl Ohlrich. In 1876, two-year-old Karl was the first to

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<sup>10</sup> Evertt A. Fey, *New Braunfels: The First Founders, Volume 1*, Austin, Texas: Eakin Press, 1994, pages 557.

<sup>11</sup> Fey, page 557.

<sup>12</sup> Smithson Valley Cemetery survey.

<sup>13</sup> Fey, pages 221, 222.

<sup>14</sup> Brown, page 539.

<sup>15</sup>Exhibit B, Comal County Deed Records, Volume Z, page 508, June 21, 1901.

be buried in what would become known as the Smithson Valley Cemetery.<sup>16</sup> (see Exhibit C)

Louise Pantermuehl Ohlrich and her husband, Charles (Karl) Ohlrich (1834-1899), are buried in the cemetery. Karl emigrated in 1854 to Texas from Germany and in 1865, he started and built the first area school -- a log schoolhouse on his family's property where he taught for many years.<sup>17</sup> Interestingly, the current Smithson Valley High School is located a few miles from that first log schoolhouse. During the 1870s, Ohlrich was elected Justice of the Peace, County Commissioner, and he served as Postmaster.

Wilhelm F. Remmler and his wife, Helena, are buried in the cemetery. Wilhelm is the son of another of those first two hundred and forty founders of New Braunfels, Josef Gabriel Remmler.<sup>18</sup> Additionally, the cemetery holds World War I veteran, Private First Class Richard Stapper, United States Army, and Private Elmer C. Teague, Company E, 135<sup>th</sup> Infantry. It is believed that Teague was also a local schoolteacher.<sup>19</sup>

The Smithson Valley Cemetery continues to hold the grandsons and granddaughters of those first pioneers. On September, 27, 2010, Robert Odell Ohlrich, a rancher and a fourth generation descendant of Johann Startz, was buried in the cemetery alongside his father, grandfather, great-grandfather, and great-great grandfather.

The landscape of the Smithson Valley Cemetery is representative of many other German family cemeteries found throughout Central Texas. Dr. Terry Jordan writes, "German burial practices in Texas represent, in site and sanctity, both

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<sup>16</sup> Exhibit C, photograph of Carl Ohlrich headstone.

<sup>17</sup> Brown, page 486.

<sup>18</sup> Fey, page 493.

<sup>19</sup> Conversation with Carmen Beierle Rittimann

radical departures from and stubborn loyalty to Central European custom.”<sup>20</sup> The Smithson Valley Cemetery reflects this. Graves are oriented east to west with the feet to the east -- most probably in the Christian tradition of facing Christ on Judgment Day. In the typical German desire for “orderliness,” graves are arranged in rows, and graves are curbed perpetuating a custom still widely seen in Germany today.<sup>21</sup> Husbands are buried to the left of the wife differing from the Southern tradition.<sup>22</sup> In general, headstones are of granite, marble, and limestone. There are several granite obelisk-type markers. There are no existing wooden markers and there are three wrought iron-fenced graves. There are several unmarked gravesites that are believed to hold the remains of children, including what is believed, two Quarles children.

The grave of young soldier, Herbert Startz (1893-1918), is decorated with a concrete blanket of shells.<sup>23</sup> The use of shell decoration on German graves appears to be a newly adopted “custom”, as this decoration “isn’t seen in the European villages that sent settlers to Texas” but in many communities across the South and in different cultures.<sup>24, 25</sup>(see Exhibit D) There appears to be much discussion about the “significance” of these shell-covers. Interestingly, Terry Jordan cites the work of author Sarah Clark who writes about a German cement finisher named Henry Theodore Mordhorst who lived in New Braunfels in 1900-1928 and built these unique, shell-decorated grave covers during this time period. Perhaps he built this unique blanket for Herbert Startz.

Many of the markers and headstones reflect the German heritage of those who are buried in the cemetery. The headstones of several families, including

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<sup>20</sup> Terry G. Jordan, *Texas Graveyards: A Cultural Legacy*, University of Texas Press, Austin, Texas, 1982, page 90.

<sup>21</sup> Jordan, page 96.

<sup>22</sup> Jordan, page 95.

<sup>23</sup> Exhibit D, Photo of headstone of Elmer C. Teague.

<sup>24</sup> Jordan, page 21.

<sup>25</sup> Jordan, page 100.

those of Marie Startz Bartels and her husband, Heinrich, are inscribed in German and read, “Vater und Mutter” (Father and Mother). Many tombstone are inscribed, “Ruhe Sanft” or “Sleep Softly” (peacefully). The headstone of four year old Tillie Startz reads, “Ruhe Sanft, du gute Engel,” or “sleep softly, (peacefully), you good angel.” Many of the headstones indicate the birth dates and death dates with the German words, “Geboren” and “Gestorben” or the abbreviated “Geb” and “Gest.”

The cemetery is grass-covered and dotted with oaks and cedars. It is fenced with ranch-type fencing and is bordered by FM 311 on the south side and by grazing cattle and pasture on the other three sides. It has a iron gate at its entrance and a recently-installed granite bench. There are currently 125 platted plots in the cemetery including 76 gravesites. The remaining sites have been reserved for future use by family members.

On May 30, 1970, a group of relatives of those buried in the cemetery met and organized the Smithson Valley Cemetery Association for the purpose of maintaining the cemetery.<sup>26</sup> Recently, the Association began paying for the site to be mowed but continues to do maintenance. The Association meets twice yearly, in October and in May, to clean and to conduct the Association’s business. There are no minutes, notes, or documents prior to 1970, because a fire destroyed the old Smithson Valley Store where those documents were being kept.<sup>27</sup> Since 1970, Carmen Beierele Rittimann, great-granddaughter of Marie Startz Bartels, has faithfully kept the Association’s minutes.

### **III. Significance**

Terry Jordan writes that “the Germans accepted very early the southern Anglo-American concept of private, unsanctified family cemeteries. Even in the

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<sup>26</sup>Smithson Valley Cemetery Minutes

<sup>27</sup>Smithson Valley Cemetery Minutes

first half-decade following the founding of New Braunfels, and other major colonies, burial of German dead on privately owned farms and ranches began”.<sup>28</sup> The Smithson Valley Cemetery is one of these family cemeteries. Born in a time when there were no paved roads and when the nearest town was a day’s ride on horseback, “the unsanctified private family cemetery was a practical frontier necessity,” in these remote locations when burial was an immediate need.<sup>29</sup>

Unlike many rural cemeteries, the Smithson Valley Cemetery is not neglected, but its history is in danger of being forgotten. The rural place that used to be Smithson Valley is changing rapidly and development in the area is steadily increasing. Subdivisions dot the countryside, and it is important that new citizens to the area have a permanent marker that explains the history of “that little cemetery off 311.” An official Texas Historical Cemetery Marker for the Smithson Valley Cemetery would preserve the story of Smithson Valley and the history of those hardy German pioneers to the newest “settlers” arriving in the area daily.

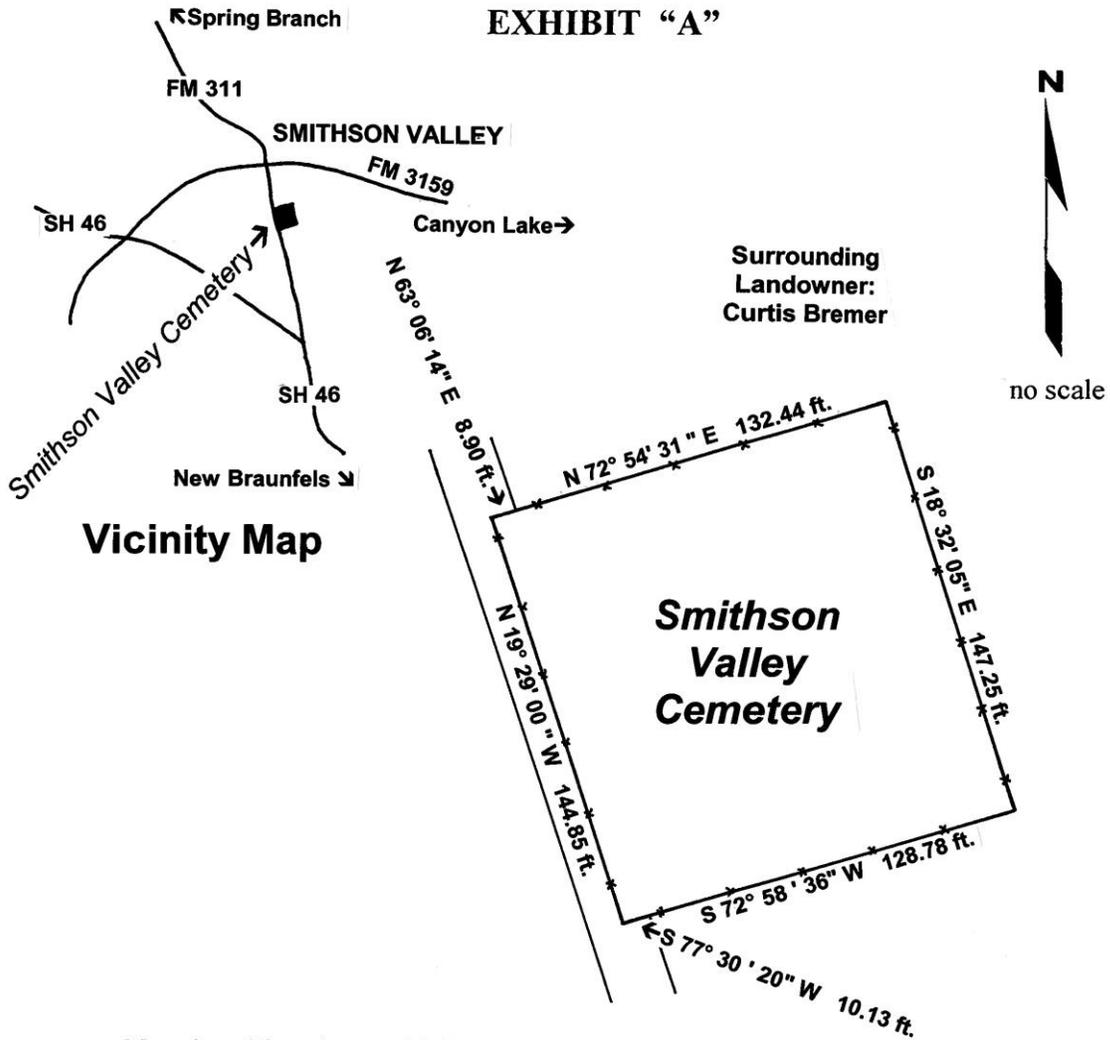
Compiled by Teresa Ohlrich Johnson

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<sup>28</sup> Jordan, page 91.

<sup>29</sup> Jordan, page 23.

# EXHIBIT "A"



**Vicinity Map**

Map adopted from data provided by the applicant, Comal County Appraisal District and Hollmig Engineering, New Braunfels, Texas

See Deed Records of Comal County, Vol. Z, Pg. 508

Located in Survey 394, Comal County School Land, A-95, Comal County, Texas.

UTM: Zone: 14 Easting: 564308.0 Northing: 3297442.0

Latitude: 29.80568° N Longitude: -98.33455° W (NAD83).

## SMITHSON VALLEY CEMETERY

Cemetery No. CM-C050

Comal County

EXHIBIT B

GENERAL WARRANTY DEED.

Henry Pantermuehl, Sr.

To

August G. Startz, Mrs. Louise  
Ohlrich and others.

Dated June 21st, 1901.

Filed for Record June 29th, 1901.

Recorded in Vol. 2 page 508,  
Comal County Deed Records.

CONSIDERATION: \$5.00 paid.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT is in statutory form. Taken by A. G. Startz, Notary Public,  
Comal County, Texas, June 21st, 1901.

DESCRIPTION.

Conveys all that certain tract of land, situated in Comal County, Texas,  
about 16 miles N.W. of the City of New Braunfels, known as a part of Sur-  
vey No. 394 Subdivision No. 7, Comal County School land. Beginning at a  
Black Jack 12" dia. marked for corner, standing S. 64° E. 68 vrs. from a rock  
pile, the same being the Western division corner between Subdivision No. 7  
and 8, survey No. 394 from which a Black Jack 12" dia. brs. S. 2° E. 23 vrs.  
Thence S. 18° 20' E. 52 3/5 vrs. to a pile of rocks, from which a L.O. 1 1/4" dia.  
brs. S. 19° E. 16 vrs. Thence N. 71° 40' E. 51 3/5 vrs. to a L.O. 2" dia. marked for  
corner. Thence N. 18° 20' W. 52 3/5 vrs. to a rock pile. Thence S. 71° 40' W. to the  
place of beginning, containing 2714 square varas.

The land herein conveyed to be used for a grave yard and the said  
Henry Pantermuehl, Sr. also reserves the right in the same to be used by  
him and his heirs and assigns as a grave yard, and only for a grave yard,  
and that neither any of the grantees or their heirs and assigns shall  
have any right to convey said land for profit, for it is only conveyed by  
him the said Henry Pantermuehl, Sr. to the within named grantees for a grave  
yard, and it shall be used only as a grave yard.

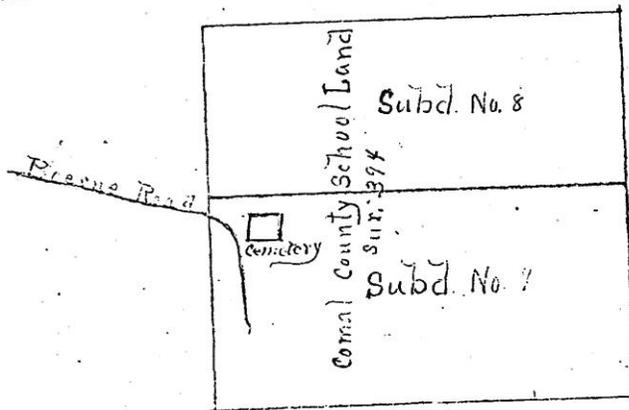


EXHIBIT C



EXHIBIT D

