

Sophia Hammann, An Early Texas Midwife and Herbalist

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About 1874, a little old woman came with her husband, William Hammann, to Rabb's Prairie in Fayette County. She had studied and practiced midwifery and herb medicine for many years in her native Alsace-Lorraine. Since at that time there were but few physicians in the county, and since among the German and Czech populations employment of a physician (*Arzt*) was infrequent, many people, many people were grateful for her care and services. As the nearest physician was stationed at La Grange, some twelve miles away, she labored much in ministering to the sick of her community (often walking five miles to treat some patient), and in acting as midwife to the German farm women. In Fayette County she was affectionately known far and wide as "Mother Hammann". She continued her ministrations until her death in 1885, at an advanced age.

What special training she had for her work in Germany is not known—probably some months at a midwifery school. Her knowledge of simples and their use in folk-medicine she doubtless obtained in part from study of one of the numerous *Arzneibuecher* or herbals that for several centuries have been so popular among European peasantry. One herbal to which she was particularly attached was, at her request, buried with her. She employed many remedies—some brought in the form of garden seeds from Europe, and some adopted from the Texas flora in many cases with efficiency. Some she used in the form of decoctions and some in the form of poultices, as is the practice of all primitive peoples. As we know but little of the folk-medicine of the German emigrants of Early Texas, these fragmentary notes are given from her pharmacopoeia.

William and Sophia (Laguergan) Hammann had three children, all of whom came to Texas about 1870. One daughter, Dorothea (Hammann) Wolfe, came first to Chappell Hill,

in present Washington County. A second daughter, Sophia, married (1873) William Schnell, who bought a farm on Rabb's Creek in Fayette County. Sophia then sent for her parents, who came to Texas a year later; and it was on the William Schnell farm that William and Sophia Hammann spent their remaining years. The third child, Gustav, came to Texas after 1870, and resided at Pflugerville.

"Mother" Hammann brought from Europe an ample supply of the seeds and simples used in her profession. Her grandchildren remember a large trunk which she devoted to storing her drugs and seeds. The latter she planted in a garden which (in Old-World fashion) she assiduously enriched with forest leaves and humus. She did not depend alone upon her European plants, but soon became acquainted empirically with the native plants of the Rabb's Creek region. These were collected at the proper time, and dried and otherwise prepared in a little shed that still is standing.

Some of the herbs were administered in the form of hot potations, freshly prepared; some were used as decoctions. A copper pot was used for the purpose, and often the decoction was percolated and evaporated to a residue that was used in powder-form. Seeds and similar therapeutic agents she preserved in bottles with dry salt. Of her remedies, her descendants remember only a few, such as the following: (a) The wild water-willow (*Salix nigra* Marsh.). The fresh leaves were rubbed up to form a poultice to treat sore and chafed limbs and lips. *Salix* has long been used in medicine (bark or leaves) as an astringent. The German settlers called it by its German name, *Weide*. (b) Camomile (*Anthemis cotula* L.) This South-European plant was introduced into Texas by this and other herbalists. The flowers were used in the form of a tea as a tonic. It was highly valued. (c) Sheeps-wool,¹ Horehound, or *Andorn* of the German settlers (*Marrubium vulgare* L.). This also was used in the form of a tea for colds and intestinal complaints. For rheumatism, "Mother" Hammann put the leaves between two folds of cloth, beat them, and applied the mass as a poultice to the patient, covering the poultice with a hot stone. (d) Madeira vine or *Yerba del buey* of the Mexicans (*Cissus in-*

¹This plant is now one of the dominant weeds on the Edward's Plateau, the great sheep-growing region of Texas. Although its common name is Sheeps-wool, sheep will not eat it.

cisus (Nutt.) DesMoul.) was used as a poultice for ulcers. The thick, fleshy leaves were employed, after being well beaten. (e) When some of the grandchildren smoked poison oak twigs (*Toxicodendron radicans* (L.) Kuntze) by mistake, thinking them to be grapevine, they suffered a very painful general dermatitis. The skin became very much swollen. The use of lard, added to hot milk and drunk by the children, was effective as a remedy.

All other records of her use of native plants have been lost with her passing. Her knowledge was, of course, purely empiric. She had no scientific knowledge of plants. With the application of external agents she even employed little incantations (as did the Roman physicians, before the time of Galen)!

In addition to her medicinal plants, Mrs. Hammann planted many fruit trees, and introduced some varieties not found elsewhere in the county. Peach varieties, for her, ripened from May to October. Pears, apricots, large plums, and apples, were in her orchard. People came from a distance of several miles to secure fruit, and scions and cuttings from her trees. This is of interest, as Geiser, in his work of horticulturists of Early Texas, has not mentioned Mrs. Hammann.

Her husband, William Hammann, died in 1884, and she a year later. They are buried side-by-side in the cemetery at Post Oak. Doubtless Mrs. Hammann was in many respects representative of German and Czech midwives and herbalists in Central Texas in the last century.