My purpose in this paper is to examine the roots of the German fascination with our Wild West and to suggest why this interest is more intense in Germany today than ever before. The beginnings of this study are personal ones that reach back to my first visits to Europe. As a music student at the Mozarteum in Salzburg, Austria, it did not take me long to discover that the Austrians were much more interested in talking with me after they learned that I was not just another "Amerikanerin", but was rather a "Texanerin". That, however, was not so different from my experience as an undergraduate in Oberlin, Ohio, where people had also seemed to remember me as a Texan, so I just modestly assumed that Texas was a concept which intrigued most everyone everywhere. But when the first snow storm blanketed Salzburg and I dug out my new green felt, high-heeled, pointed-toed, round-topped cowboy boots and started for the conservatory, I discovered that there was a real difference in the Texas interest of the Austrians. People literally stopped me on the street to ask in German where I had bought my green boots and were both amazed and dismayed when I answered: "Austin, Texas." I had more than one opportunity during that winter to sell those boots at a handsome profit.

Two years later, driving through a crowded residential area of Berlin looking for the address of my assigned guest family, I was astonished to round a corner and see crouched next to the apartment building a small German child in full Indian regalia and another peeking out of the next doorway who had on boots, chaps, and a cowboy hat. I, like others before me, accepted this evidence of German fascination with our Wild West without immediately exploring its history.

My next trip to Germany in 1979 produced yet another scene in this general pattern, but one appropriately raised to a higher level of sophistication. This time I was attending a Fulbright seminar for American German teachers in Bonn and in talking with some of the distinguished lecturers of that program I was politely asked to explain where I live. Lubbock, Texas, was not known to the group, although my reference to the "Pfannestiel von Texas" (the Panhandle of Texas) aroused definite interest. As an afterthought I threw in the addendum that the vicinity was known to some Southwesterners as the area through which Coronado had trekked looking for gold and was still sometimes referred to as the Llano Estacado, Spanish for Staked Plains. "Wie, bitte? Sie wohnen auf dem berühmten Llano Estacado?" (What? You live on the famous Llano Estacado?) Several of the Germans were now all ears and bombarded me with questions concerning the flora and fauna of the vast plains where my University is situated. I have always been impressed with the exact knowledge of geography which Germans
frequently display and so it did not occur to me to ask in this conversa-
tion how and why these Germans knew so much about the Llano
Estacado. Today, several years and some research later, I am confi-
dent that had I asked about their source of information and the reason
for their keen interest they would have admitted with a sly smile the
name Karl May. These dignitaries might even have remembered some
nights from their childhood when they read under the covers May's
gripping story of the Wild West titled Der Geist des Llano Estacado
(The Spirit of the Llano Estacado).

Who was this Karl May who started all this? The briefest
biography of the man reads as follows:

May, Karl (Breslau, Saxony, 1842-1912, Radebeul
nr. Dresden) grew up in poverty. Through his weaver-
father's determination to improve the boy's lot, he
became a school-master. He was almost immediately
convicted of the theft of a watch, which, he claimed,
was lent to him, and he was consequently dismissed
from his employment. A psychological crisis marked
by delinquencies followed, and he served prison
sentences amounting in all to seven years. After
writing a few sentimental village stories, he fell
into the hands of an unscrupulous publisher, for
whom he wrote (anonymously) a large number of
trashy novelettes. . . . He then turned his atten-
tion to stories of American Indians after the manner
of James Fenimore Cooper. In the last quarter of
the 19th c. he was perhaps the most popular
author of boys' books in Germany. He described his novels
as Reiseschilderungen, and used the first person
narrative in order to give the impression of actual
experience. His best-known characters were the
Indian Winnetou and the white man Shurehand. 1

Nothing in this brief and rather dry description indicates the
amazing place in German life and letters which will have to be
awarded to this writer: he has done more than any other person to
create and perpetuate the image of the American Wild West in German-
speaking countries. Just as all Americans know the names of Tonto
and the Lone Ranger, so German speakers recognize Winnetou and Old
Shatterhand. The latter is not simply a good white man: he is a visit-
ing German without flaw, a super Teuton, who is perfectly at home on
the American frontier. Statistics indicate that the grip which this Wild
West Image has on German speakers has grown steadily more powerful.
Here are some facts which help to define May's contribution: In an
article in Der Spiegel of September 12, 1962, May was recognized as
the most influential German writer between Goethe and Thomas Mann.
In the same year an article appeared in the Saturday Review by Joseph
Wachsmuth ("Winnetou of the Wild West") in which May was called
"still one of the best-selling authors of all times." 3 The figures to
back up this claim are that even then, in 1962, May's seventy books
May, 1842-1912, Radebeul. 

Every writer, through his weaving, proves the boy's lot, he was almost immediately watch, which, he claimed, he consequently dismissed: "The novels of Karl May." It has been reported that two very famous Karl May fans, Albert Einstein and Albert Schweitzer, while in Colorado watching an Indian show, discussed the hero of their younger days, the Indian Chief character named Winnetou, created by May. The German playwright Carl Zuckmayer named his daughter Winnetou. Hermann Hesse and both Heinrich and Thomas Mann have all expressed respect for May which has been duly recorded in May's autobiography Ich. However, there was another avid fan whose great praise of May has caused some critics to take a closer look at the underlying implications in the many violent scenes to be found in each of May's western works: Adolf Hitler not only owned and read May's works, he also lifted quotations from May for his speeches, such as his description of the ideal German type as a man "with muscles of iron and sinews of steel." As early as 1940 Klaus Mann identified the influence of May on Hitler as well as on German youth in general. He wrote:

Much enthusiasm was wasted, youthful imagination was tainted and confused. A whole generation in Germany grew brutish and ran wild -- partly through the evil influence of Karl May. For he had deliberately falsified their picture of foreign countries, and, above all of America, of its landscape and people and its moral code. He had poisoned their hearts and souls with hypocritical morality and the lurid glorification of cruelty. He had entangled the simple notions of truth and falsehood. He anticipated, in a quasi-literary sphere, the catastrophic reality that is now before us: he was the grotesque prophet of a sham Messiah.

The Third Reich is Karl May's ultimate triumph, the ghastly realization of his dreams.

A later critic, Arno Schmidt, in a study devoted to Karl May,
also criticized the self-righteous position of the hero and the un-
realistic division between good and bad which runs through the May
works. Schmidt suggests that May's stories thrive on a depressingly
simplistic tension between the white hero and the dark devils.
"Missing is even the simplest of all insights, that humanity consists
of a majority of grey types, mixed with 10% colorful ones" (transla-
tion mine).11 Perhaps the most succinct summary of this line of
criticism is this one sentence describing May's works which is found
in the Lexikon der Weltliteratur:

Frequently spiced with a certain wild romanticism
and detective intrigue, the gripping stories character-
ized by sentimental heroic morality, an unrealistic
belief in ultimate justice, and a primitive psychology
have at their center firmly developed types of heroes,
who morally and physically defeat the enemy, but
offer generous help to the innocent victim (translation
mine).12

An American writer surveying this same topic of hypocritical
morality reported in 1973 that "Hitler even recommended May's works
to his generals. From the German youth of the thirties to Nazi cultural
minister demanded 'courage, initiative, energy, longing for adventure
and the Karl May way of thinking'." This writer concluded that "May
was undoubtedly an important contribution to the myth of Teutonic and
Aryan supremacy."13

It cannot be denied that May's characters fall into the rigid
and unrealistic categories of good or bad Indians, good Germans or
bad (greedy) Yankees, but analysis of the German reception of these
categories is a complex undertaking. For those of us concerned with
German literature and German cultural history the problem of under-
standing and evaluating the influence exerted by Karl May's works is
truly a fascinating one. There are other important moments in German
history when an image of a people far removed in time and space fired
the imagination of Germans; there were the Greeks of Winckelmann
and the Teutonic ancestors of Wagner. This general susceptibility to myth
as "documented" by "experts" was certainly at play during May's
career. When May wrote in the first person as the super-hero Old
Shatterhand, his German readers began to assume that the author had
indeed experienced the incredible deeds himself. And May, who quite
certainly never saw the American West, did little to discourage the
adoration, and in fact clouded fact and fancy. He had calling cards
printed which read "Dr. Karl May, called Old Shatterhand" and had
himself photographed in Western gear. No matter how questions of
authenticity are probed by the scholars, the vast majority of May's
readers did not, and still do not, care what the critics have to say
about his writings. One reporter states flatly, "Many boys in Europe
would choose to believe in Karl May's fictitious description of the
American West rather than a television documentary from Pueblo,
Colorado."14
May became a legend in his time, and admirers wrote to him and flocked to his Villa Shatterhand, in Radebeul, to pay their homage. Since his death in 1912 his works have continued to sell at a phenomenal rate and the fame of his mythical Wild West continues to spread. Today there are two Karl May museums which attract hundreds of thousands of visitors yearly; there is a Karl May Society in Hamburg; there is even an active publishing house, the Karl-May-Verlag in Bamberg, devoted to the printing of May's works. Ever since the 1960s there have been a number of Karl May films, and most importantly, there are now two very successful summer Karl May festivals. Ever since the opening performance in Bad Segeberg in 1952, the festival there has entertained 100,000 visitors per season. A more recent festival in Elspe has grown in popularity due to the original gags woven into the presentation. According to Joachim Schmid of the Karl-May-Verlag, the attendance at this festival in the 1980 season alone was more than 400,000 visitors.

Clearly Karl May was a phenomenon. There are certain historical factors which have been examined to help explain his success. May was turning out fantasy material for masses precisely at the time when technological progress in printing had brought the price of books within reach of the vast majority. 16 It has also been pointed out that Buffalo Bill toured Europe in the 1890s with enormous success and the excitement generated by his tours could only enhance May's popularity. But still the content of May's stories found such rich resonance within his readers, that the vibrations which continue today with incredible frequency and intensity cannot be explained by such historical orchestration alone. If we look at some trends in Germany over the last several decades I believe that we can begin to appreciate a larger pattern into which the Karl May phenomenon fits.

According to an article from Newsweek in 1963, West Germany was being swept then by a "Wild West Welle" (Wild West Wave). Evidence of this was the Western gear craze which caused a surge in American exports of such items as cowboy boots and hats and Levis.

Munich's Western Store, called "The Latest from Texas," supplies gun-slinging Bavarians with everything from ornamental Western saddles to sheriffs' stars and sends dude duds to mail-order customers as far away as Hamburg. Autobahn drivers have become hardened to the site of cowboys in full regalia spurring Porsches toward a weekend roundup in the Black Forest.17

During a "Fasching" carnival it was estimated that half the revelers in Munich were dressed in some concoction of Western gear. Apparently many astute members of the German business world cashed in on this fad because it was reported that dozens of Western saloon-type bars had sprung up in major German cities. And movie theater owners have long been guaranteed a success with almost any Hollywood Western.

Although this "Wild West Welle" has been good for those in the
business world, it is only the froth above a stronger and deeper
current. To gage this current one needs to look beyond the flashy
Western trend to facts documenting the existence and history of an
unbelievable number of Western-type clubs in Germany today. The
following five news excerpts from 1963 to 1980 give an indication of
the Western network throughout Germany which few of us Westerners
would have expected:

1. “Wild West–Germany” (Newsweek, 1953). Members of more than 40 Western clubs meet to
study American history, and to practice lassoing, fast-drawing, sharpshooting, and trick riding at
weekend ranches; they put out their own magazine, the Dakota Scout, and hold an annual council
attended by more than 1,000 delegates. The oldest group is the Munich Cowboy Club, organized 50
years ago during an upsurge of enthusiasm for the Westerns of Karl May.

2. “Out West in West Germany” (New York Post, 1970). West Germany has an estimated 120 Western­
lore clubs with membership totalling 3,500 persons.
At annual spring powwows, German Indians and cowboys come together to swap pelts and costumes
over evening campfires.

visitors from Lubbock, Germany, got their first look at West Texas Wednesday. Decked out in new hats
and boots, nine members of the Indian and Western Friends group that has created an Old West town in
Germany, toured the Ranch Headquarters outdoor museum at Texas Tech.

4. “Cowboys and Indians Rekindle the Old West” (Time, 1979). Throughout the year, in more than
100 clubs in West Germany, devotees of the Old West spend thousands of man-hours and deutsche
marks preparing their costumes or polishing such arcane skills for the council competitions as
tomahawk throwing, quick-drawing, and tossing lariats. Then, at the three-day camp-out, they
can relive the American frontier days in full dress with almost complete historical veracity.

5. “In Freetime: Cowboy” (A German newspaper clipping included in a 1980 issue of the German
Texas Heritage Society Newsletter, translation mine). In the open fire juicy steaks are sizzling,
Mac is cooking up red beans, Benny sings to guitar
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accomplishment his newest Western song and
a third rings the Mexican bell: Western Romantic
the "Quarter Horse" Ranch. However, the
ranch isn't in the Wild West, but rather stands
a green meadow in Ratingen, and the cowboys
are Mac, Benny and whatever else they are called,
only in their free time. "Quarter Horse" belongs
to the Western Club of Düsseldorf, one of over
50 societies in the Federal Republic in which there
are organized about 15,000 "freetime" cowboys.

The numbers quoted here are impressive and, I believe, sur-
prising to most Americans, but the motivation behind the numbers
which appears in these articles again and again is even more
astonishing: these German Westerners are devoted to the careful
study of authentic details of life on the Western Frontier. They shun
the trigger-happy cowboy of the movies as a figment of the Hollywood
imagination just as they have long since discovered that Karl May
never saw the Wild West. Said one German "Sheriff": "The authentic
cowboy was a poor fellow, who usually didn't even own his own horse,
who rode for months with the gigantic cattle herds, was underway in
blizzards or in scorching heat and had to swallow a lot of dust until
he finally reached his destination" (translation mine). Another
German Sheriff indicated that Americans are not necessarily welcome
at councils: "Most Americans don't know enough about their own
history to make a contribution. They think Wild Bill Hickok's real
name was Bill." 19

Why do West Germans want to spend their weekends recreating
their approximation of authentic frontier life? Friedrich Ullman, a 37-
year-old sculptor who specializes in creating hand-made replicas of
Blackfoot tribal costumes, gave an answer to this question when he
told a reporter: "We are German romantics. Our own German history
is too narrow, and so we go elsewhere, to the American West for our
hobby. By dressing like the frontier people and living their customs
we feel we are participating in their history."20

Vicarious enjoyment as a correction or addition to limited daily
life is surely a common experience for the thousands of Germans, who
ever since the time of Karl May, have been swept away in their fantasy
to the Wild West. Where reality is restricted by crowded conditions,
confining boundaries, imposing bureaucratic regulations and is pres-
sured by complexities of modernization, by alienation from nature and
by demands of material profit and gain, what could be more comforting
than the image of the lone cowboy on the vast, open, rolling prairie,
independent of all law except his own, self-reliant in his simple
existence in nature and above all free from the power of the dollar?
It may well be this last characteristic, the freedom from profit and
property, which emerges today as the foremost attribute of "der Cowboy"
from the subconscious of a society which has produced the "Wirtschafts-
swunder". It may indeed be an ironic truth that somehow the idea of
freedom from a materialistic reality directed that German cowboy in
his Porsche to head for his rather expensive cowboy club outside of
town. The strongest written support for this view of the cowboy
through German eyes appears in a book entitled Der Cowboy: Legenden
und Wirklichkeit von A - Z; Ein Lexikon der amerikanischen Pionier-
geschichte. As closing material I have translated here two paragraphs
which reveal the German perspective on our cowboy which I find to be
the essential one:

Although, at first glance, there seems to be a vast
difference between the type of the wild trappers and
the mountain men, who perfectly adjusted their ways to
those of the wilderness and that of the later puritanical
settlers and city builders, yet, the characteristic of
the striving Yankee seeking only profit is as similar
to them both as it is to the gold seekers and the rail-
road builders, the saddle bag doctors and priests,
the bandits of the dollar, officials, judges and lawyers.
For all human types which the new world pressed into
the corset of her moral with an unparalleled sweep, the
Dollar was the Almighty Letzsch, which caused them
to risk everything, to win or lose everything and
finally which allowed the primary impulses to be pro-
grammed in such a way that today controls the moral
and pseudomoral of half the world.

The single exception in this development was the
cowboy, to whom personal freedom was everything
and money was nothing. He was really a type of
anti-American. That the cowboy as a symbol of
freedom has stood for decades as an equal beside
Uncle Sam, the symbol of Pragmatism, is one of
the many paradoxes in the accepted score of the
American, who not only is as much an extreme
Puritan now as before, but who also tries in all
the pseudo-historical presentations of the cowboy
to present him as the prototype of Puritanism. 21

I conclude that this German interpretation of our cowboy as
an opponent of Yankee greed goes a long way toward explaining the
idea which fires the imagination of those German cowboys speeding
down the Autobahn today to their Western clubs. Even though the
writer quoted above goes so far as to call the cowboy a type of anti-
American, there is at least the assumption that he is an American anti-
American and this is surely a step forward into the complex grey tones
of reality from Karl May's German anti-American, Old Shatterhand.
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NOTES

16. The following statistics are translated from the Elspe Festival program booklet for the 1979 season: “Audience numbers as they have been registered at the Karl-May festivals in Elspe are totally unprecedented in theater records. Together with the guest appearances in Ratingen and in Vienna, the attendance last year for the Elspe production was about 600,000 people. That is the highest attendance record set by a single production of a German stage show within a year. Even the largest theaters with changing productions
reach only half that number within a year" (translation mine).


18 "In der Freizeit 'Cowboy',' *German-Texan Heritage Society Newsletter*, July 1980, p. 50.

