

**FRIEDRECH and MARGARETHA BECK HILLER**  
**3003 North Vine Street**  
**Victoria, TX 77901**

**CONTEXT**

Friedrech and Margaretha Beck Hiller arrived in Texas from Germany circa 1852. One family record written by Georgia May<sup>1</sup>, a great-granddaughter, places them in Victoria “about 1849.” The Indianola Immigrant Database<sup>2</sup> lists members of the family arriving at Indianola on June 2, 1852. The years between 1850 and the Civil War were a period of great growth in Victoria, both population and economy.<sup>3</sup> Most of the residents of Victoria had been advised to leave Victoria in 1836, during the Texas Revolution. Anti-Mexican sentiment was running high, and General Thomas Rusk was wisely concerned for the safety of all the Mexican residents of Victoria, regardless of their chosen allegiance.<sup>4</sup> For ten years the city languished. The influx of German immigrants provided a great boost to the population and diversity of Victoria. The Hiller family, for unknown reasons, decided to put down roots in Victoria. Their descendants still form a vital part of this community.

**OVERVIEW**

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<sup>1</sup> May, Georgia, ABOUT THE HILLER FAMILY, June 9, 1997. Copy on file in the office of Victoria Preservation Inc., 205 W. Goodwin, Victoria TX 77901

<sup>2</sup> Indianola Immigrant Database, maintained at the Victoria College/University of Houston-Victoria Library, <http://vrhc.uhv.edu/manuscripts/indianola/home.cfm>

<sup>3</sup> Rose, Victor Marion, SOME HISTORICAL FACTS IN REGARD TO THE SETTLEMENT OF VICTORIA, TEXAS, ITS PROGRESS AND PRESENT STATE, published 1883 by Daily Times Print, Laredo, Texas. Reprinted 1961 as VICTOR ROSE’S HISTORY OF VICTORIA, edited by J. W. Petty, Jr., by Book Mart, Victoria, Texas

<sup>4</sup> Crimm, Anna Carolina Castillo, SUCCESS IN ADVERSITY: THE MEXICAN AMERICANS OF VICTORIA COUNTY, TEXAS, 1800-1880, 1994. PP. 160-162. University of Texas Doctoral Dissertation printed by UMI Dissertation Services, Ann Arbor, MI, 48106-1346

Countless ancestors of current Victoria families came into Texas through the old port of Indianola. More than any other ethnic group, this is true of Germans. Brownson Malsch, who carefully documented the rise and fall of Indianola, states that, “between the years of 1844 and 1887, Indianola grew from a plague-infested immigrant camp to a cosmopolitan port city”<sup>5</sup> - the second largest in Texas.

In the early years, squalid living conditions, coupled with careless planning and worse administration by those who were luring Germans to Texas, resulted in deaths at a wholesale rate. Promised a place in Paradise, these early emigrants were deposited in a living hell. Typhoid and Yellow Fever ravaged their numbers. With every fiber of their beings focused on the Hill Country of Texas, the survivors began the trek into the interior of the vast state.

Max Krueger, writing somewhat later, describes the land between Indianola and Victoria in these terms: “There were no barbed wire fences in those days, nor were there any tress from which to make fences or enclosures. The boundless prairie, covered with many-colored wildflowers and teeming with prairie chickens, extinct long ago, wild rabbits, herds of deer, and thousands of wild cattle, stretched before my eyes, while human beings and habitations were scarce and far between.”<sup>6</sup> The sprawling coastal prairie, whose waist-high grasses swayed in the constant Gulf breezes, must have astonished the Europeans who came to Texas. Where were all the towns? Where were all the people?

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<sup>5</sup> Malsch, Brownson, INDIANOLA, The Mother of Western Texas, p. 1. Shoal Creek Press, Austin TX 1977.

<sup>6</sup> Krueger, Max, SECOND FATHERLAND, P. 17. Published 1976 by Texas A & M University Press, College Station, Texas.

A sea of grass unfolded as far as the eye could see. There being no hills or mountains, the view was interrupted only by the curvature of the earth. Occasional motts of oak trees punctuated the landscape. Surely they were heartened by what they saw.

As the Hillers moved, on foot, northward from Indianola to the outskirts of Victoria, all the structures they would have seen would have been Mexican-type *jacales*. Vertical limbs and posts - approximately the diameter of a man's arm - were driven into the ground and tied together. The space in between each of the vertical poles was filled with mud and small stones; crude, but effective. Though it would have been imperceptible to the Hillers, they had climbed approximately two feet in elevation for every mile they progressed inland. A quarter mile south from the land where the Hiller house stands today, at the entrance of Evergreen Cemetery, the elevation is the highest in the town: 100 feet above sea level.

For the first twenty-five years of Victoria's history (from 1824) Market Square (where City Hall now stands) was the center of the town. Most of the houses at that time were built around this square, or just off on one of the few side streets. The construction of the first Victoria County Courthouse in 1849 helped moved the center of the city three blocks north, around the public square (renamed De Leon Plaza in the early 1940's).

Victoria Texas was a little over a quarter of a century old when the Hillers arrived here. Were we able to look back to the Victoria of the 1850's we would be surprised at how little there was here. Trees grew mostly along the Guadalupe River and other smaller

waterways. You could see great distances, even in town, because there was little to obstruct the view. Frederick Law Olmstead traveled through Texas on horseback with his brother in 1854. He described Victoria thusly: “(Victoria) is an old settled town, and has about 1,000 inhabitants. About half its population are Germans, many of whom remained at the first settled spot reached during the great immigration.”<sup>7</sup>

The Hillers would no doubt have been impressed to see the Jesse Obadiah Wheeler mansion at the head of Main Street - an Italianate brick villa. Likewise, the Alexander H. Phillips house (700 block of North Craig) had been built in 1851 of brick made on the banks of the Guadalupe River by slave labor, would have been a grand sight.

Tombstones in Evergreen Cemetery record the Hiller's names as Friedrech and Margaretha Beck Hiller. The Hillers had first docked in Galveston, then sailed on to Indianola. A record of the founding of the German Lutheran Church, below, lists Fried. Hiller as a founding member in December of 1851. Family genealogy records and obituaries published in the Victoria Advocate list the children who lived to adulthood, all born in Germany, as (1) Frederick - born 1836; (2) Gottlob Philip - born 1838; (3) Johann Michael - born 1841, and (4) Christoph Adam - born 1842.

It may be that Friedrech and Margaretha simply felt that Victoria seemed to fill all their needs, and decided to abandon the trek into the Hill Country. For whatever reason, they

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<sup>7</sup> Olmstead, Frederick Law, A Journey Through Texas, p.241. Reprinted in 1978 by The University of Texas Press, Austin TX.

eventually (1858) bought land just north of Evergreen Cemetery and decided to call it home.

Though it is not known exactly where the Hiller's first lived in Victoria, we do find Friedrich purchasing 27.89 acres of land *south* of Victoria, just below the CP&L power plant, from the Corporation of the Town of Victoria - indicating that Hiller was the first private owner of this land. The purchase price was \$223.12 or \$8.00 per acre. (VC Deed Records: Vol 7 p. 221) The survey mentions Hardey's Street and Cypress Bayou. John J. "Juan" Linn's brother, Edward Linn, was county surveyor when the land was originally surveyed September 6, 1850. Linn's note, added at the top of the survey states: Sold Aug 7<sup>th</sup> 1855 to F. Hiller - Deed Issued May 20<sup>th</sup> 1857.<sup>8 9</sup> Hardy's Street, Cypress Bayou, and the "community" of Cypress Bayou have all passed into history, but accounts of them is to be found in Edward Linn's Survey Books.

The next land purchase recorded in Victoria County Clerk's Office occurs on March 20, 1858. Frederick Hiller purchases 34.7 acres *north* of town from our first postmaster, James A. Moody. (Vol 7 p. 335) The property is described as "Lot M on the east side of the Guadalupe River above the town proper."<sup>10</sup> On October 8, 1859, Hiller purchased an additional 45.7 acres of land from James A. Moody. (Vol 8 p. 18)<sup>11</sup> The last piece of land purchased by Friedrich Hiller and recorded in Victoria County deed records was

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<sup>8</sup> Linn, Edward, CITY SURVEYS, p. 112. Copy on file in office of Victoria Preservation Inc.

<sup>9</sup> Victoria County Deed Records, Victoria County Clerk's Office, 115 N. Bridge St. Victoria TX 77901

<sup>10</sup> Victoria County Deed Records, Victoria County Clerk's Office, 115 N. Bridge St. Victoria TX 77901

<sup>11</sup> Victoria County Deed Records, Victoria County Clerk's Office, 115 N. Bridge St. Victoria TX 77901

seven acres purchased from Mack Logan for \$100 and filed for record on February 3, 1872. (Vol 10 p. 408).<sup>12</sup>

Discounting the 27.89 acres purchased south of town, the land “east of the Guadalupe River” above town amounted to 87.4 acres. This land was bounded, using today’s street names, by Vine Street, Red River, Independence Drive, and the Guadalupe River.

The land south of town, which was actually an oxbow, cut off from the Guadalupe River during one of that waterway’s treacherous rampages, was sold off in small pieces at different times over the last twenty years of Friedrech Hiller’s life.

In his history of Victoria County, published in 1883, Victor Marion Rose writes of the ***GERMAN EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH***: “We are indebted to the Rev. W. Krapf, the pastor for the following facts in regard to the above named religious denomination, now one of the most numerous and prosperous in the county. As early as the year 1846 the few German citizens of protestant views, residing in Victoria, were accustomed to meet every Sabbath at the residence of one another, and listen to the reading of the scriptures, and other religious exercises. This they continued to do until the year 1851; the people being a few in number, poor in worldly goods, and suffering much from the sickness which usually precedes acclimation. But the emigration being large that year, and the older residents feeling more able to do so, a congregation was organized December 14, 1851; a constitution adopted agreeable to the Word of God, under the name of the "German Evangelical Lutheran Trinity Congregation." Rev. W. Strobel was

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<sup>12</sup> Victoria County Deed Records, Victoria County Clerk’s Office, 115 N. Bridge St. Victoria TX 77901

the first pastor of the church, and the first Lutheran minister to celebrate the holy eucharist in Victoria. Among those who organized the congregation were Anton Lenz, F. Hansz, **Fried. Hiller**, T. Seibel, Louis Zirjacks, Henry Ganz, C. Beck, T. Heck and others.”<sup>13</sup>

The 1860 Census, lists Friedrech Hiller as being a farmer, having real property valued at \$2,600 and personal property valued at \$300. Some accounts indicate that Friedrech Hiller was a baker. Whether he baked bread near the home or at a bakery in the town, is not known.

### **Significance**

At some undetermined point subsequent to 1858 the Hiller “house” was built. It is typical of “hall and parlor” houses: two rooms wide and one room deep. Simple side-gable, hall-and-parlor houses were first built of heavy timber framing in the Tidewater South and then with hewn log walls as land was settled toward the west. After the expansion of the railroad network this form, now executed with light framed walls, remained the dominant folk housing over much of the rural Southeast until well into the 20th century. Careful examination of construction techniques during recent restoration, reveal that the dining room and kitchen “ell” were later additions.

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<sup>13</sup> Rose, Victor Marion, p. 186

Directly over the front rooms of the house is a room extending the full width of the house, and was no doubt the boys' bedroom. Access to this room was from a reverse stairway in the center hall.

The Hiller's son oldest surviving son, Gottlob Phillip Hiller (1838-1912), was a noted carpenter and cabinet maker in Victoria.<sup>14</sup> It is possible - and easily believable - that this son may have built or helped to build his parents' house. Gottlob Hiller purchased land and built his home - circa 1867 - at 502 East Church Street. This house is still standing today. The next oldest son, Christoph Adam, was a farmer. He served in Company B, Sixth Texas Infantry in the Civil War.<sup>15</sup> "Adam" raised sugar cane and had a sugar mill near the present location of the golf house in Riverside Park. Adam (1842-1930) lived at an address today known as 108 East Hiller Street. Johann Michael Hiller served the Confederacy in Company C, Fourth Regiment of Texas Mounted Volunteers. "Mike" was also a farmer. All were married and raised families. "Mike" (1841-1909), and his family moved into the old Hiller cottage after his parents' death.<sup>16</sup> The oldest surviving members of the family have always referred to the Hiller cottage as "the Mike Hiller house."

According to Desmond D. "Des" Hiller, the Fowler family moved into the old Hiller cottages some time around 1930. One of the Fowler children, Wick, was Des's age. They were close friends and played together in the area. Wick came to be known as the Texas Chili King. His special chili mix can be purchased in stores today.

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<sup>14</sup> Victoria Advocate, Obituary, November 28, 1912, copy on file in office of Victoria Preservation Inc.

<sup>15</sup> Victoria Advocate, Obituary, December 14, 1930, copy on file in office of Victoria Preservation Inc.

<sup>16</sup> Victoria Advocate, Obituary, January 21, 1909, copy on file in office of Victoria Preservation Inc.

The Hiller house was situated so far north of the original townsite of Victoria that it was referred to as being part of the Spring Creek Community. At the time the historic resources survey was conducted by Victoria Preservation in the early 1980's, the house had sat empty for decades, the roof, doors and windows were covered with tin. Miraculously, the house survived a long period of benign neglect.<sup>17</sup>

Much of the original Hiller land north of town has been purchased by the City of Victoria. These transactions began around 1935 and continued through 1998. In 1998 alone, the City purchased thirteen parcels, a total of 61.29 acres of the land originally owned by Friedrech and Margaretha Hiller. The southernmost portion of the original Hiller land now comprises the Athey Nature Reserve. Much of the original Friedrech Hiller land is a part of Riverside Park.

Essentially unaltered over the years, the Hiller cottage is a window to the early settlement of Victoria. The scale and placement of windows, and the proportions of the house are textbook examples of an early Texas house, much favored by German immigrants. Because of its architectural significance and the Hiller family's involvement in the development of Victoria, the Hiller cottage was listed on the National Register of Historic Places December 9, 1986. The area behind the home became known Hiller's Mott, due to the proliferation of Anaqua trees on the crest of the hill. To the north and west of the house lies Riverside Park and the Guadalupe River. The area boasted, among other

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<sup>17</sup> Historic Resources Survey, Original Documents on file in office of Victoria Preservation Inc.

things, ruins of a Spanish mission, a dance hall, plumbing business, sugar mill and farmland worked by mules — and a favorite community swimming hole.

The Hiller house is currently headquarters of Keep Victoria Beautiful, a 501(c)(3) organization headquartered in Victoria County, Texas with offices in the historic Friedrech Hiller house, 3003 N. Vine. Keep Victoria Beautiful, previously associated with the City of Victoria and the Victoria Chamber of Commerce, is now an independent nonprofit organization.

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