

Pine Cone Profiles (Jul 2020)

Jeri Mills

Greetings, East Texas Historical Association members!!! As you know, our annual October conference will not be held until next year 2021. Since it's going to be an awfully long time before we see each other in person again, we (Mary Jo O'Rear, Gwen Lawe, and Carol Taylor) are initiating something new: Pine Cone Profiles. Each month we'll feature an interview with one of our stalwarts, a member who has dedicated time and love to the association. This month Jeri Mills, author of African Americans in Nacogdoches County, graciously answered our questions.

Where do you live?

My husband and I live in our retirement home built in the country on family property, an area north of Nacogdoches, Texas.

How long have you been in the East Texas Historical Association? I joined this organization shortly after my husband Adell Mills and I retired and returned to East Texas. I had a conversation with the late Dr. McDonald and he recommended ETHA to me. I am interested in history with a special emphasis on my family history and African American history.

What is there within the East Texas Historical Association that has kept you a member? I have kept involved with this group because I admire and respect the leadership of Dr. Sosebee. The conference contents do include a balance of African American history. I would like to see more included in the future.

What is there about Texas that attracts you?

I grew up in Tyler, Texas, where I received a very good education in segregated schools. I attended Texas College and graduated from Jarvis Christian College, both HBCU's (Historical Black Colleges and Universities) located in East Texas. I am proud to be a part of HBCU schools. I love Texas because my family roots are in Texas, I grew up in Texas, received my first education and training in Texas, and returned back to Texas after living in Berkeley, California and Atlanta, Georgia.

What is there about history that attracts you?

I became attracted to history at an early age. A teacher said one day, "Everything and everyone has a history." That statement remained with me and today I am interested in all aspects of history. When one has the complete background or historical facts of a person or an event, then one has the ability to understand that person or event.

How do you usually pursue history?

I love to read publications, watch documentaries, and use computer search engines for various historical organizations. I would rather go online to read cemeteries' contents than to walk around in a cemetery. I love family genealogy research. For the past few years, Henderson, Texas, has sponsored me at the Syrup Festival where I have a booth on African American history and family genealogy. I distribute up to 200 African Americans In Texas publications, sponsored and published by Texas Historical Commission. If it has to do with African American history such as Black History Month activities in the schools, communities, and churches, I will get involved and participate.

Why do you love history?

More African American history should be included in the curriculum of all students' education. The more you know about your own history, the better off you will be. I am a believer in what the great poet Maya Angelou said, "If a person knew better, they would do better." If a young African American student knew more about the positive aspects of his/her history, then they would be prouder and appreciate their history. If other students knew the positive aspects about other minority histories then they would respect them more.

What is your favorite historical period or historical movement? Why?

My favorite historical periods are all positive aspects of history but certainly the ones that tells the truth about the civil rights movement and the leadership of Dr. M. L. King. This includes the white people who were involved and lost their lives as well as the Quakers and their role in the Underground Railroad Movement. Only recent publications are telling the truth now.

Who is your favorite historical person? Why?

My favorite historical person is Mary McLeod Bethune, a daughter of former slaves. She grew up poor with all the disadvantages of being poor and black. Yet, believing in education, she managed to build a school for black students in 1904. This school is now Bethune-Cookman University, Daytona Beach, Florida, still operating today as a successful HBCU university.