

Pine Cone Profiles (Aug 2020)

Son Mai

Howdy, East Texas Historical Association members--hope you are all doing all right! As you know, Pine Cone Profiles is interviewing a colleague every month to keep us all up to date with each other. This month Son Mai, author of "From Chinatown to Little Saigon: The Development of a Vietnamese Ethnic Urban Center in Houston," in Lone Star Suburbs: Life on the Texas Metropolitan Frontier, is answering our questions.

Where do you live?

I am currently living in Lake Charles, Louisiana.

How long have you been in the East Texas Historical Association?

I have been with the ETHA since Fall 2000.

What convinced you to join?

During my first semester in my MA program at Stephen F. Austin State, I worked as a graduate assistant in the History Department there. One of the duties was to help out with the registration desk at the Fall ETHA meeting at the Fredonia Hotel. After a wonderful meeting I decided to subscribe to a student membership, which I ultimately upgraded to a life membership when I began my professional career.

What is there within the ETHA that has kept you a member?

Even though somewhere along the line, "life happened" and I have transitioned from teaching History to Business Management in my professional career, I still remain active in the East Texas Historical Association. In addition to keeping abreast with the latest scholarship in the field, the ability to network with other Texas history scholars is really what keeps me interested in the ETHA.

What is there about Texas that attracts you?

I was born and raised in Texas, and what piqued my interest about the state began when I took a junior high Texas History class in Arlington, Texas. The class itself presented to me more questions than answers about Texas, which stimulated my interest in learning more about the state. After completing my undergraduate at The University of Texas at Arlington, I had the opportunity to pursue my MA in East Texas (SFA), and my PhD in West Texas (Texas Tech) which allowed me to have greater exposure to a wide range of geographies and cultures, within and outside the state. Interestingly enough, after I completed my doctoral qualifying examinations, I

accepted an offer for an instructorship position in Lake Charles, Louisiana, and overshot Texas by about 30 miles!

What is there about history that attracts you?

As a qualitative area of study, the field attracts me because it allows me to ask a never-ending series of questions about the agents, episodes, and events in history. It is this very open-endedness which is key to opening a world of critical inquiry about how things unfold over the course of time.

How do you usually pursue history?

While I have traded history lectures for business case studies, I still try to keep up to date with the historical literature by reading journal articles and by attending historical conferences and symposiums. Furthermore, when I travel, I like to go off the beaten path and explore the local history in the areas I visit. As a scholar of the Vietnamese diaspora in Texas, I oftentimes find myself looking for immigrant communities whenever I visit a particular area; I try to find the history of how that community came to be.

Why do you love history?

Has there been anything in your personal life that led to this? What was it? Perhaps what brought me to consider academic study in history came from my numismatic hobby. I have been a collector of paper currency since I was in elementary school. I would study the vignettes depicted on Republic of Texas, Confederate, and obsolete banknotes and wonder about their context—why were they depicted on money during that era?

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

My favorite historical movements involve migrations to Texas. As a child of Vietnamese refugees who immigrated to the state after the Vietnam Conflict ended in 1975 (and remained since then), I am interested in knowing more about the motivations to migrate to and remain in Texas.

Who is your favorite historical person? Why?

This is perhaps the most difficult question in this series, as there are too many to mention, and it is difficult to pick just one! I would have to say that my favorite historical person would be someone who is involved in migrating to—and settling in—Texas. This could be the Baron de Bastrop, Stephen F. Austin, or perhaps even a more recent person, such as Father Tran van Khoat, who helped establish the Vietnamese community in Port Arthur during the late 1970s.

If there is one event in history at which you could be present, what would it be? Why?

While many would rather not be at any other historical period than now, I think the current moment (first half of 2020) is a wonderful moment in history to be present at. While there is a lot currently taking place with a pandemic, economic uncertainty, racial tension, and political flux, I believe this is a wonderful moment in history to reflect upon our past, assess its strengths and shortcomings, and work to emerge as a better society.