

## **Pine Cone Profiles (Oct 2020)**

### **Penny Clark**

Happy October, ETHA members!! In the best of all possible worlds, we would be gathering this month to enjoy each other's research and discoveries about East Texas history. Instead we're meeting one of last year's conference presenters, Penny Clark. Her topic then was Larry Fisher, Renaissance Man of East Texas. Today she'll be sharing more about Fisher and other favorites from the past. Here she is, Penny Clark, in her own words:

#### **Where do you live?**

I moved to Texas to work at the Sam Houston Regional Library and Research Center outside of Liberty in the 1990s. I moved to Beaumont in 1999 to work at the Tyrrell Historical Library in downtown Beaumont. I have been working at Lamar University since 2009.

#### **How long have you been in East Texas Historical Association?**

I'm not sure when I joined, but I do know that I gave a presentation on Gwendolyn Wingate at an East Texas Spring Meeting in Beaumont while I worked at the Tyrrell.

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

I appreciate the East Texas Historical Journal. It not only provides a great deal of information but is so readable! The meetings are great, and I especially like seeing historians from all over East Texas.

#### **What is there about Texas that attracts you?**

Texas has a unique history because it is not just another state but was its own nation. Its history goes back farther than my native state, Kansas. What a diverse place Texas is—from the Panhandle to the forests of East Texas! I've attended conferences in cities ranging from Fort Worth to Corpus Christi to Austin to Odessa to Amarillo—and more. Enjoyed and learned so much!

#### **What is there about history that attracts you?**

I am a storyteller and I find it fascinating to learn how people in different eras coped with problems and found ways to better their lives and the lives of others. One example of a person brilliantly seizing an opportunity was when Beaumont's streets were a muddy mess in the late 1800s and a man operated a mud sled and delivered groceries for a fee.

Spindletop was chock full of people who seized opportunities; some were bad such as prostitutes and “psychics,” but they were realizing an opportunity to make a fast buck.

I’ve always wondered if I was fascinated by history because I was born to older parents who already had a wealth of experiences during the Great Depression, World War II, and the Dust Bowl. I’ve always laughed that my dad had an eighth-grade formal education but had a post doc in real life. My father was a drover, a farmer, a banker, and an insurance salesman. He was also obsessed with antique cars and used to joke that he loved to hunt, then he’d pause, “...for old car parts.” Just as he was on the hunt for parts for Packards, I’m on the hunt for historical information.

### **How do you usually pursue history?**

In many ways, mainly because I’ve had the pleasure of working in three different historical libraries in Southeast Texas. The Sam Houston Regional Library was the most colorful. Here I set up exhibits in the 1883 Norman House, processed papers ranging from Marcel Moraud’s papers on Champ D’Asile to Martin Dies’ papers to Jefferson County’s District Court records. I also gave tours and assisted patrons with research. The district court records were fascinating! So much history, both good and bad. So many intimate glimpses of those who came before us.

Then in 1999 I began work at the Tyrrell Historical Library. Here my fascination with genealogy bloomed. My most fascinating ancestor is my eighth great grandfather. He was a highly educated Puritan who often testified at witch trials. As a high-ranking minister, he had a great deal of credibility. He wrote a number of scholarly papers, and I knew he had to be my ancestor when I found that on his death, he had much more money in books than in land!

I also put together many exhibits ranging from the lumber industry to the Jazz Age to Spindletop. I had two exhibits that I really enjoyed, on veterans of World War II. They brought a lot of tears from the veterans and me!

Since 2009, I have worked for Lamar University’s Special Collections. We have many fascinating collections including a wealth of resources on the Big Thicket. Check out a little bit of our holdings here: <https://www.lamar.edu/library/services/university-archive/digital-archive/index.html>

### **Why do you love history?**

I love to write about it. I have written over one hundred articles for local publications. I also co-edited with former Beaumont mayor, Evelyn M. Lord, a book on the celebration of the 100th anniversary of Spindletop. I now have a book in the works on the Civil Air Patrol in Beaumont during World War II. It was a unique organization founded to combat the menace of German submarines destroying ships carrying vital supplies, including Texas oil, to the Allies. It was principally a group of men too old for the military who brought their own single engine planes, which they flew over the Gulf of Mexico looking for submarines or survivors of submarine attacks. Their work was dangerous, and four men made the Supreme Sacrifice.

**What is your favorite historical period?**

I find so many periods in history fascinating, but I seem to always come back to World War II. War is terrible, but it is also a time of technological advancement and social change. The Homefront of World War II was a time of great activity in Beaumont. What was then Lamar College was operating 24 hours a day and training 17,000 people, including many women who had never been worked outside the home! Of course, I wish I could go back in time and see Base 10 of the Civil Air Patrol in action, see all the planes, the pilots, and so many people who made it all possible including mechanics, typists, and cooks.

**Who is your favorite historical person? Why?**

Wow, there are so many! Like Abraham Lincoln, who is the great American success story: rising from humble beginnings to the highest office in the land, serving our nation during her greatest crisis, being mocked for his accent and appearance, dealing with his wife's mental illness and the grief over the loss of his sons. Without his dedication and commitment, we would have split into two nations. Then there is Theodore Roosevelt who was committed to creating the national parks and was a person of so much vigor!

But I'm also intrigued by Larry Jene Fisher who at the age of 15 traveled the country as a silent movie house organist and vaudeville producer and director. He played in many states. Outside of Texas, he was known as the Texas Organist, wearing cowboy attire and playing Western-themed songs. He played at the million-dollar Jefferson Theatre from 1931-1934. It was a demanding job, and he quit to work in aviation, offering everything from flying lessons to aerial photography. While flying he discovered the Big Thicket and moved to Saratoga where he studied Big Thicket flora, fauna, and history. He eventually served in the Civil Air Patrol. After Base 10 closed, he stayed with the Civil Air Patrol and fought forest fires. He later became a film maker and director.

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

Once again, what a great question! I would love to have been in Beaumont during the Spindletop oil boom. So much dirt, and chaos, and action! So much drama. But I think today I would rather go back in time to Beaumont in 1942 and see the shipyard booming with 10,000 employees, Lamar operating 24 hours a day, and the Civil Air Patrol base teeming with pilots before flights over the Gulf.