

Pine Cone Profiles (Nov 2020)

Jack Duncan

We are approaching the end of 2020, East Texas Historical Association members—truly one of the most memorable years of our collective lives!!!! Helping to commemorate it is this month's Pine Cone Profile, Jack Duncan. Scholar, researcher, and writer, Jack has contributed over thirty biographical entries to The Handbook of Texas. His article on Luis Alfonso Jiménez, Jr., Tejano sculptor and artist, was recently featured on Legacy of Texas: Especially Texan.

Where do you live?

I live in McKinney (north of Dallas).

How long have you been in East Texas Historical Association?

I'm not sure. Probably at least a decade, and maybe quite a bit longer than that.

What convinced you to join?

My interest in Texas history pulled me into the organization, and the spring and fall meetings, the Journal articles, and the friendships keep me in.

What is there about Texas that attracts you?

I am a native Texan; I have never lived anywhere else, and I enjoy researching and writing about Texas history and Texas folklore.

How do you usually pursue history?

Reading books and articles, writing newspaper and magazine articles, writing and editing books, taking graduate history courses, attending conferences, watching documentaries, doing research, pursuing genealogies of eccentric, colorful Texas characters.

Why do you love history?

Has there been anything in your personal life that led to this? What was it? My maternal grandfather, Ross Estes, was a great storyteller; I grew up listening to his stories. Later I used a tape recorder to collect many of them. After I edited them and set them in context, the manuscript was accepted by Nortex Press (the first publisher that I submitted it to). It was published in 1977 under the title I Remember Things: An Informal History of Tioga, Texas.

As a child I had read some books by J. Frank Dobie, so I became interested in Texas folklore. That led me to take history and folklore courses as a university student. Then one of my professors invited me to attend an annual meeting of the Texas Folklore Society, and I have been attending for half a century. Eventually I discovered the Texas State Historical Association and the East Texas Historical Association.

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

The mid-twentieth century, probably because I grew up in the 1940s and 1950s.

Who is your favorite historical person? Why?

Pioneer Augustus Meredith Wilson, who is still fondly remembered in many Collin County families as “Uncle” Gus Wilson because of his philanthropy, humanity, work ethic, and eccentricity. Gus was a shrewd investor. He never married. He lived in the same log house for almost all of his long life. When a salesman convinced Gus that installing linoleum on the floor of his cabin would make the place warmer in winter, Gus decided to have it put on the walls as well. He gave away several rich black-land farms to his sharecroppers that he deemed to be industrious. Sometimes he would have supper with a sharecropper family. In several instances, after Gus had left for home and the wife was clearing the table, she would find under Gus’s plate a deed to the farm, signed by Gus and marked “Paid in full.” He liked automobiles and gave away about two dozen of them to friends and neighbors. Uncle Gus was born in 1845. He attended the world fairs for many years. In the late 1920s, Gus bought a tombstone for his future grave in the small family cemetery near his home and had the stone placed. He correctly estimated that he would die sometime in the 1930s, so he had the numbers “1845-193” cut into the stone. Years later when he died, a stonemason took his tools to the cemetery and cut the final digit—a “5”—into the stone; the font style does not quite match the other digits. Gus had not only predicted the correct decade of his death, he hit it right in the middle! He rated a New York Times obituary. In today’s dollars, he had given away well over twelve million dollars.

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

Several years ago I ran across an article about Lieutenant George E. Dixon, the commander of the H. L. Hunley, a Confederate peddle-driven submarine named for marine engineer Horace Lawson Hunley. The Hunley had been sunk twice in 1862, each time killing several crew members. By 1864, it had been salvaged and refurbished, and it was helping to defend the South. On February 17, 1864, the submarine, manned by a crew of eight, including Dixon, attacked the USS Housatonic, a warship that was conducting a blockade of the harbor in Charleston, South Carolina. When the sub rammed the warship with a torpedo attached to a long spar, the torpedo successfully blew a hole in the Housatonic’s hull, causing it to sink. However, there was a problem of unintended consequences: The Hunley was too close to the warship, and it, too, was disabled and sank, killing the eight members of its crew, including Lieutenant Dixon.

Down through the years there had been a legend about George Dixon. He had a sweetheart, Queenie Bennett, who lived in Mobile, Alabama. A few years earlier Queenie had given George a \$20 gold piece as a good-luck charm. He always carried it in his pants pocket. Every time he put his hand in his pocket, he would rub the coin with his thumb for luck, and he would think of Queenie. George fought in the Battle of Shiloh. He was shot at close range, but the bullet hit the coin, bending it, and possibly saving both his life and his manhood. The legend survived for 137 years that the gold coin had been in George's pocket when the Hunley sank to the bottom of Charleston harbor.

Now fast forward to the year 2001. When the wreckage of the Hunley was brought to the surface, and its contents were excavated, the gold coin was found next to Dixon's remains. The article titled "Lt. Dixon's Gold Coin: The Legend of the Gold Coin," by Friends of the Hunley, on the website www.usrarecoininvestments.com/coin_articles/dixon_gold_coin.html contains close-up color photographs of both sides of the coin, and the following text:

[The coin] was deeply indented from the impact of a bullet and traces of lead were discovered on the coin. The coin, a \$20 dollar [sic] gold piece, was minted in 1860. One side bears an image of Lady Liberty. The other side, which has a federal shield-and-eagle symbol, had been sanded and inscribed by hand. It clearly bears four lines of cursive script with the following words:

Shiloh
April 6, 1862
My life Preserver
G.E.D.

Maria Jacobsen, Senior Archaeologist on the Hunley project and the one who actually first found the coin, said shortly after her amazing discovery, "Some people may think this is a stroke of luck, but perhaps it's something else. They tell me that Lt. Dixon was a lady's man, perhaps he winked at us yesterday to remind us that he still is."

I would have enjoyed being present when Ms. Jacobsen discovered that coin, proving that once in a while an unlikely legend can turn out to be a 24-karat fact.