

Pine Cone Profile for January 2021

Herman Wright, Jr.

Here's to a happier new year ahead, East Texas Historical Association friends—and a welcome to our first Pine Cone Profile of 2021: Herman Wright, Jr. Besides publishing a historical novel about his grandmother, producing a documentary about his ancestral lands in East Texas, and speaking with his co-author, Jamie Bullich, at East Texas Historical Association and Texas State Historical Association conferences, Herman is in the midst of writing two more books. Genealogist, researcher, and historian—here is Herman Wright, Jr., in his own words:

Where do you live?

I live in Houston, although I have restored the home my father was born in, near Kirbyville, and I live there when I am in East Texas. (I stayed in Houston from March through August during the summer part of the pandemic). My wife is a school teacher in Houston with Houston Independent School District.

How long have you been a member of East Texas Historical Association?

I have been in East Texas Historical Association since I returned to Texas in 2005.

Who convinced you to join and what has kept you a member?

Scott Sosebee and Perky Beisel convinced me to join, and my desire to connect with people who have similar interests, particularly those of East Texas, has kept me a member.

What is there about Texas that attracts you?

I have been interested in Texas and its history ever since I came here in the seventh grade when my father was stationed in Vietnam. I had been an Army brat, living in military bases all over—Georgia, Panama, etc. I'd never experienced racial segregation in school, although in those military schools I had felt different, in an alien culture, the teachers not used to me.

We knew what segregation was—my family had come to East Texas every Christmas. I knew that Texas was the way it was. But that year when I was living with my grandparents was the best school year I'd ever had. My uncle was principal, his wife—my aunt—was a teacher as were others of my aunts. It was a family school. I took Texas History and that began a lifelong love. While I have a degree in history, I spent thirty years in business, rising to become a senior executive. I credit my degree in history for my problem solving and critical thinking skills.

Has there been anything—or anyone—in your personal life that led to your love of history?

My father, Herman Wright, Sr., was a history buff. He had kept track of the army exercises going on in North Louisiana in 1941 prior to the United States' entry into World War II. His experience of them led to his going to college in 1948, joining the R.O.T.C., and going into the military. My father was one of the first to go into the integrated army, about 1952. Coming from Jim Crow segregation, attending a Black high school and a Black college, and then finding himself in an integrated army was stunning to him—he felt part of something special.

He and I were both fans of Theodore Roosevelt. One reason is his philosophy, "Walk softly but carry a big stick," but another is the number of national parks Roosevelt created—he started all that. For a period lasting ten years, my daughters attended a camp right outside the Rocky Mountains National Park, where they developed the skills that have helped them in their present jobs as executives for Disney films.

Why do you love history? and how do you pursue it?

I love telling the stories and doing the research, finding the story behind the story, seeing how it unravels. I read histories and nonfiction; I study documentaries and actually did a film in 2003 (see www.thelongblackline.org.) It is dedicated to my father and to my grandmother, Arvetta Barnett Wright. And I have been researching my family history for years. I wrote the historical novel *Arvetta* about my grandmother (*Arvetta* is available on Amazon), and I am planning to write more, about two hundred years of our family history which is African American history.

My study of genealogy is part of what led to *Arvetta*. I was driving by the family cemetery and there was a historical plaque nearby, commemorating the Wrights, the first White family in the county. The founder had come from Scotland. I noticed we shared the same last name and put that in the back of my mind.

Then in 2007 a woman, Jamie Bollich, called and said she was looking into the genealogy of the family of Leura Wright Levias, the mother of Jerry Levias. She said that she was a Wright. Were we related? She added that she was White.

We WERE related, my great great grandfather was the son of the Scots founder of the American family (he came in 1793 and brought his family and about seventy slaves with him to Texas in 1835, the year before Texas independence). This son had four children with a bondswoman and deeded each of them land upon emancipation. He did not want them to leave.

Before the pandemic my co-author, Jamie Bollich, and I were presenting at county genealogy organizations and at East Texas Historical Association and Texas State Historical Association conferences.

What is your favorite historical period or movement? Why?

I am also writing another novel about an ancestor, James Frazier, who fought, with his brother, for the Union in the Fifth Colored Infantry—obviously my favorite historical period is the Civil War, Emancipation, and Reconstruction.

The most amazing thing in my life happened when a daughter called one day:
“Dad, I got this movie I’m working on. It’s called *The Free State of Jones*. Dad, this is our family’s life!”