

## **Pine Cone Profile (Feb 2021)**

### **Richard Orton**

Welcome to Ground Hog Month, East Texas Historical Association members! May the next six weeks of this winter be filled with the same hope and love found in Richard Orton's *The Upshaws of County Line: An American Family*. Anyone who has read this book is aware of Richard's ability to make personal history come alive. Now, as Pine Cone Profile for February, we discover more about this man behind the camera. Here, in his own words, historian/photographer/documentarian Richard Orton.

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

I live in Nacogdoches, the town of my birth... though I didn't grow up here. My family moved to West Texas when I was six back in 1952. I grew up in Midland.

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

I think I joined around 2005 or 2006. At my first conference I co-facilitated a session with Thad Sitton about the recent publication of *Freedom Colonies: Independent Black Texans in the Time of Jim Crow* by Thad and James Conrad. Some of my photographs were in the book and I contributed some of the oral histories.

#### ***What convinced you to join?***

I enjoyed the "academic" approach and I appreciated the genuine interest in African American history as expressed at every conference I've attended.

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

More of the same! And I appreciate the increased interest in Texas women's history over the years. It's also nice to know people who are fun and serious at the same time... people you can laugh with one moment and have serious conversations with the next.

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

I am a curious person. I like to ask "how" and "why" questions. I just finished reading *These Truths* by Jill Lepore... all 780 pages of it. A one-volume history of the USA, it's not like any American History book I've read before. I highly recommend it.

I've written about and photographed several freedom colonies and am making a film documentary on that topic now. My book *The Upshaws of County Line: An American Family* became the basis for a traveling photography exhibit created and sponsored by the Stephen F. Austin State University School of Art. I've also drafted a brief history of the Austin Rape Crisis Center where I worked for eleven years beginning in the late 70's. I feel compelled to document aspects of history that I know about and that are not in the mainstream.

Without an awareness of our history we humans would have no reference to what is happening to us now, and we're likely to be a good deal more confused than we already are! The "lessons of history" may be difficult to discern, but we need to try.

***Why do you love history? Has there been anything in your personal life that led to this? What was it?***

I've always been aware that I am a 5<sup>th</sup> generation Texan from the oldest town in Texas, Nacogdoches. A hill east of downtown Nacogdoches on East Main is named Orton Hill. That's where my great great grandparents acquired a lot of land, coming from Tennessee in 1840, and where they built a house at the top of the hill. I am the last Orton to own and live on a small portion of the land that they acquired back then.

Beyond that, my curiosity has taken me to all kinds of places that a white male would not normally go. I've already mentioned the Austin Rape Crisis Center. Going to County Line and meeting the Upshaw family came from curiosity about my relationship with African American people as a "son of the south."

Most basic of all is my love of classical music and its history! Yes, really. My Master's Degree is in Musicology! That's another story.

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

The early Romantic period in classical music... the very early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The transition between the late Classical Period (Mozart and Haydn) and the early Romantic (through Beethoven) was most apparent to me with the early work of Hector Berlioz. He created a completely different musical world from what had come before.

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

Hard question... there's the art part and the broader cultural part for me.

Frederick Douglass must have led a very singular life. He was arguably the most important American of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Who, more than he in public life, represented the contradiction between slavery and freedom built into the United States Constitution?

Musically speaking there are many possibilities... apart from those mentioned above, I like Gustav Mahler, who bridged the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries with monumental symphonies that lasted forever and had great climactic moments (and wonderful horn parts).

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

Two events come to mind.... I would like to have attended the first performance of Stravinsky's ballet, "The Rite of Spring," more than a hundred years ago in Paris when the music and its portrayal on stage provoked a riot... or so the story goes. In addition... I would like to have witnessed what the Upshaw brothers, their wives and families, endured and dealt with in creating their community of County Line out of the wilderness as newly emancipated humans.