

Pine Cone Profile, April 2021

Bob Reitz

Welcome to April, East Texas Historical Association members, and welcome also to one of our most delightful session presenters: Robert (“I like to be called Bob”) Reitz! Throughout the years, the happiest sessions at our conferences have been those on music. At different times, Anne Jordan with her wonderful guitar has sung of the labor movement, L. Patrick Hughes has brought “Big Rock Candy Mountain” to life, and Harold MacMillan has portrayed the color and warmth of Texas blues musicians. This year’s Plenary Session will feature music, and Bob Reitz will be a presenter. Here he is now, to share some of his observations about music, art, and the things that make Texas real.

Where do you live?

I was born in the Bronx and moved to Texas in 1954 when my dad's insurance company transferred him to Dallas. I live there today, a Dallas Public Historian, Independent Scholar and Museum Curator.

How did you become a member of the East Texas Historical Association?

In 2014 I presented a paper at West Texas Historical Association which pulled together a lot of pop culture traditions: “Sputnik and the Atom Bomb, Flying Saucers and the Red Scare - Cultural Anxieties of the 1950's and 1960's Expressed in Popular Music.” It was a light-hearted look at an era filled with tensions. Someone heard me present at West Texas and asked me to submit a paper for the East Texas History Association group. I have now presented four papers in Nacogdoches and Galveston and have met a new set of friends, both warm and encouraging.

What is there about history that attracts you?

I have always been interested in history. In high school I was in an historical research group which met with teachers in the afternoons after class. In addition, I had a good experience in Scouting while growing up in Dallas. I received my Eagle Scout award in 1962. I was on the camp staff of Camp Wisdom in Dallas 1963. The Camp started in 1923 and is now the oldest existing Scout camp in Texas. I got to hear all the old stories and am now documenting them, having been the curator of the museum at Camp Wisdom for the last twenty years.

In 1970 I went on a six-week long archeology field course while enrolled at the University of Texas at Austin. We were excavating at what would become the Caddo Mounds State Historical Site near Alto.

I also became interested in Early Texas Art while as a freshman at the University of Texas, especially the work of Dallas artist Frank Reaugh (1860-1945) whose work was on display. Reaugh was born in 1860 in Illinois and his family moved to Terrell in East Texas in 1876. He finally moved to Dallas to create an art studio in 1890. For forty years Reaugh would take his students from Dallas on a three weeks-long art lesson, sketching trips to West Texas and beyond. He passed away in 1945, and his whole family is buried in a Terrell cemetery with a Texas State Historic marker on his grave.

How do you usually pursue history?

I've presented twelve papers for the West Texas Historical Association and in March presented a paper at the Texas State History Association in Austin.

I was the "content consultant" on the recent Marla Fields documentary "Frank Reaugh - Pastel Poet of the Texas Plains" which appeared two years ago on our Dallas PBS station. Gardner Smith and I spent twenty-five years researching the land and places Reaugh painted. We also created a series of handmade string-bound Japanese style books which contained history, travel narrative and haiku

poetry. Copies of these books are in the Wittliff Collection - Southwest Writers Collection at Texas State University in San Marcos. We also created several string-bound books on the sketching trips of Frank Reaugh, which are in the Dallas/Texas Archives of our downtown Dallas Library.

I'm interested in the library as a cultural institution in our city and was on the board of directors of the Friends of the Dallas Library for six years. All of the research Gardner Smith and I have done on Reaugh has been donated to their archives. I've also created thirty exhibits for the library, ranging from music to art, popular culture and photography, all from my personal collection. The twelve music exhibits were under the general title "Got Arrested for Forgery, and I Can't Even Write my Name - The Rise of Dallas Blues and Other Texas Music."

Why do you love history?

I like to go where history was made, to become imbedded in a sense of place. In 2017 I did a paper on the life of African American itinerant street musician and hobo Henry Thomas "Ragtime Texas" (1874-1930), who was born in the small town of Big Sandy north of Tyler. I wanted to see the general location of where he was born and the circumstances of his early life.

I arrived in the small town late in the morning. I asked a group of volunteer firemen who were cleaning equipment in front of their station where the African American neighborhood was located in Big Sandy in the 1870's. They looked at each other and called their captain, who suggested I see the mayor, whose office was one block away. The secretary said he was sick but you could call him at home and gave me his cell phone number. We had a great talk, but he didn't know either. He suggested I go to the bank a block away and talk to the lady who is a bank officer but in charge of the Big Sandy historical group. She knew Henry Thomas' name but nothing specific. But she drew me a map of the neighborhood and the conditions rural farmers faced until just recently.

As a teenager Thomas saw no future as a tenant farmer picking cotton. He could sing, play a guitar and accompany himself on the panpipes. He hopped a freight, literally in his front yard, and spent the rest of his life singing and riding the rails. He recorded twenty-three songs in Chicago in the late 1920's. Bob Dylan recorded one of his songs on his first album, and he was a big influence on the life of bluesman Taj Majal.

In three hours and only walking three blocks, I completed all my field research. History takes you in so many directions, and East Texas is a special place with unique stories to tell.