

## **Pine Cone Profile, July 2021**

### **Brenda Matthews**

If there is one person in the East Texas Historical Association who is both perceptive and a history dynamo, it is Brenda Matthews, our Pine Cone Profile for July! Receiving her Ph.D. from Texas Christian University in the nineties, she has been a Fulbright Professor of American Studies in Germany, is at present the A.M. Pate Chair of History at Texas Wesleyan University, and is serving as both secretary and board member of the Tarrant County Historical Society.

It is her role as New Deal specialist, however, that shows her insight into humanity and her love for history. Not only has Brenda brought that period to life in her classes and writings, she and her university, Texas Wesleyan, have hosted ETHA's unique New Deal Symposium for several summers. Here, in her own words, is Brenda Matthews, our Pine Cone Profile for July.

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

I have lived in Fort Worth for four years since my husband Jack and I sold our home in northern Erath County. We still have thirty acres there that he goes out to work in and I go out to sit in! We miss having space around us, so as soon as I retire from teaching, we will be resettling where we can see beyond the street or back yard fence.

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

I joined nine years ago when George Cooper recruited me to present a paper on Dalworthington Gardens at the Waco 2011 spring meeting. I had been a member for several years in the 90s when I presented a paper after graduate school at TCU.

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

I immediately found members of the ETHA to be welcoming. I love the annual October meeting and look forward to hugging my friends!

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

I have made so many friends through the New Deal Symposium and East Texas meetings. There is not a better group of historians around. The opportunity to present or chair a session keeps me interested in doing research and writing.

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

I was born in Durant, Oklahoma, and my father moved us to Texas to make a better living when I was two. Although he was born in Durant, he went to high school in Dallas, and he said he knew he couldn't make a good living in Oklahoma. When he joined federal law enforcement within a few years, we lived on the west coast and in Florida, but Dallas was always home because my grandparents lived there. When I was fifteen, he finally transferred to Dallas and I graduated from DeSoto High School. Except for a two-year exile to Yukon, Oklahoma, Texas has been my home since I was an adult. I love Texas because it is big enough to accept all newcomers!

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

History is exciting to me because I have been enticed to accept Carl Becker's "Everyman is His Own Historian." No longer is it the great man who determined the course of events, but happenings were influenced by unknown individuals either alone or collectively. It is the historian's responsibility to discover these singular actors and bring them to life. I can only hope I can do enough to excite my students in this pursuit.

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

Since finishing my doctorate in 1994, I have taught at Texas Wesleyan University where I am the primary modernist in American history. I also teach Latin American courses, especially history of Mexico and United States Borderlands. To stay current with the historiography, I am an avid reader of book reviews, especially in journals and the *New York Review of Books*.

Since starting at Wesleyan, I have pursued various research projects. I was lured off into local history in 2000 when I was asked to do an oral history of a nun at the Sisters of Saint Mary of Namur convent in Fort Worth. That interview resulted in a

multi-year research project that resulted in chapters in *Grace and Gumption: A History of Fort Worth Women* and *Grace and Gumption: The Cookbook*, both by TCU Press.

Finally, in 2011, I got back into my research into New Deal programs for farmers and laborers. I have since presented seven papers and published a book chapter and two articles from this pursuit.

I love attending conferences because they energize me to go back to the classroom and convey that excitement for history that I absorb from my colleagues and friends. I often go home with new ideas for research and classroom teaching.

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

Although my parents did not have college educations, they were big readers. In our travels they always took us to historical sites. I also grew up reading mysteries, Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys. And what is history but a mystery to solve?

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

That is a hard question as I enjoy so many eras. I think, of course, I have to say the New Deal. It was the great culmination of all the reform ideas of the populist and progressive periods and revealed what government could do in a time of great hardship. The insertion of government programs to improve American lives and the acceptance of that intrusion prepared Americans to embrace the federal framework necessary to gear the United States up to fight totalitarianism in World War II and defeat it. The resulting economic growth continued post war, extending the acceptance of government programs in poverty and education up through the Great Society.

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

I love Franklin D. Roosevelt for several reasons. Although he grew up in a privileged environment believing the world was his oyster, his being afflicted with polio changed his outlook profoundly. He was flawed in his personal life with Eleanor, but they seemed to come to an acceptance of each other while pursuing

the Presidency and while in the White House. She became his legs to explore the horrible conditions wrought by the Depression and his conscience on civil rights and women's issues. I believe two of his best attributes were his willingness to try anything he thought might work to eliminate the hardships faced by Americans and his strength and resolve in leading the country to victory in World War II.

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

Although there are so many, I concluded that the French liberation of Paris on August 24-25, 1944, supported by the U.S. Fourth Infantry Division, would have been an exciting event. Having taught World War II over the years, many battles of that great conflagration came to mind, but they were too terrible to envision. As I continued to think, images of American GIs being kissed by Parisians brought a smile. What better scene to think about after the horrible cost of D-Day?