

Pine Cone Profiles – August 2020

Roger Raney

Happy late-summer, East Texas Historical Association members, and welcome to our Pine Cone Profile for August—and a very unique one he is! As we all know, finances are not most historians' strong point. Few of us find excitement in the story of Texas thrift institutions or can recount financial escapades as if they were novels. But for those who attended the October 2019 session, Scandals, Skullduggery, Murders, and Suicide: Texans and their Money, and heard Roger Raney talk about a bank doubling as a saloon, there was no doubt this man can make anything interesting! And he has.

From his youth, throughout his time in the Army and civil service, amidst all his years teaching and working as vice chair of the Lavaca County Historical Commission, Roger Raney has stayed excited about Texas. He even makes treasurer's reports interesting—ask any of his fellow board members on the Central Texas Historical Association!

There is an additional quality in Roger, however, that most of us DO share: his intense gratitude to the people who introduced Texas to him. Here then, to tell us about them, is Roger Raney, in his own words.

Where do you live?

My wife, Paula, and I have lived in Yoakum, Texas, for the last forty-six years. We moved here as a job advancement for me, intending to stay only three years. Now, forty-six years later we are still intending to move. Paula is completing a teaching career of forty years in the Yoakum Public school system, and I have retired twice, once from the Department of Defense after twenty years as a Civil Service employee with the United States Army Reserve, and again after twenty years teaching U.S. History in the Yoakum Independent School District. Our two children are grown and gone, and we are “cared for” by our identical twin Boston Terriers and their French Bulldog cousin, who came to visit when the virus struck and has forgotten the way back home in Dallas.

How long have you been in East Texas Historical Association and what has kept you a member?

I finished my twenty-year teaching career in May of 2008. It is then that I discovered the pleasure of reading and researching history, particularly Texas History. I also discovered the East Texas Historical Association and began attending their conferences, a rewarding experience in itself. Through ETHA, I rediscovered Texas State Historical Association and have attended both organizations' conferences in the years following.

There are two things that keep me returning, year after year, to ETHA conferences: the people I have met and the relationships and friendships that have developed over the years. I enjoy visiting with and talking history with these new friends and, above all, learning from their vast wealth of knowledge.

What is there about Texas that attracts you?

What is there about Texas that does not attract me? Except for the two years on active duty in the Army, I have never lived anywhere but Texas, and I have never wanted to live anywhere else but Texas. My attitude stems, in large part, from my own family history. I grew up listening to my maternal grandmother tell about her ancestors coming to early Texas. These stories, I later discovered through research and documentation, to be family lore that had been passed down to her. As with all such stories, there is an element of truth in the original that may have been lost in the retelling. Regarding my grandmother's, although there was no evidence to prove some of her stories, in others her information was right on target but she had the facts confused. Through my research I was able to make corrections. For example, my grandmother was very proud that her mother, my great grandmother, was descended from one of Stephen F. Austin's "Old Three Hundred." In the 1950's she applied for and received membership in the Daughters of the Republic Texas. Her original handwritten application states that she is descended from the "Old Three Hundred." But years after she died, while researching her ancestor, Joshua Abbot, I discovered he was not one of the "Old Three Hundred" but instead a member of Austin's Second or Little Colony. So, she was right, we are descended from an Austin Colonist, but not from the "Old Three Hundred. I am so thankful she died before I made this discovery.

How do you usually pursue history?

Attending conferences, reading works on Texas, and occasionally doing some research on requests from writer friends—that's how I pursue this interest.

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

I was fortunate in having two truly outstanding history teachers. The first was my fifth grade teacher, Mrs. Mary Brooks. In her class, the period immediately after lunch, we had our heads on our desks as she read aloud to us Carol Hoff's JOHNNY TEXAS and JOHNNY TEXAS ON THE SAN ANTONIO ROAD. As she read, I remember imagining I was Johnny Texas and was experiencing his adventures and wishing I could have lived back then. The second teacher with an even greater influence was Dr. Emmy Craddock at Southwest Texas State University. She was one of those rare people who had the ability not only to make the subject interesting, but also to make it all come to life and be enjoyable. She always left me wanting more. When I had my own class, I made a conscious effort to be the kind of teacher she was for me.

What is your favorite historical period? Why?

The single one that influenced me the most was The Civil War and Reconstruction. Why? Because there has been more written about that than about any other period of our national history and because, 150+ years after it ended, that period is still influencing our nation. Also, both sides of my family had soldiers on both sides during the Civil War. Before their deaths, I knew a great grandmother, a great grandfather, and a great-great aunt, all of whom were children of Civil War veterans. I have photographs of even more relatives from that generation.

Who is your favorite historical person? Why?

My favorite historical persons (they are historical because they are no longer living and because they have historical significance to me) are my father, Claud Lafayette Raney, Jr. and my maternal grandfather Sydney Sherwood McKenzie.

My dad was reared in the oil fields of southeast Texas during the Great Depression. Dad married my mother in January 1940 and went to work as a contract welder for the original Dow Chemical Plant at Freeport. When the United States entered World War II on December 7, 1941, he enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps and was sent to the South Pacific Theatre as a sniper. Because he was assigned to the Intelligence Branch of the Corps, he was sworn to secrecy for the remainder of his life. He never told anyone (not even my mother) what happened to him or what he did during the war. He was seriously injured, but even that he never talked about. To me my dad was the living example of the Marine motto: Once a Marine, always a Marine. I refuse to shine my boots and shoes today because he would make my brothers and me spit shine our shoes to go to church when we were children. In 1969, when I was drafted, the drill sergeants did not have to teach me how to shine my boots—I had been doing that all my life.

My other favorite historical person is my maternal grandfather, Sydney Sherwood McKenzie. For me growing up, listening to his stories of his childhood was like hearing the stories of Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn. He was born in the backwoods of North Louisiana in 1896, near the little town of Eros. In 1910, his mother packed everyone up and moved to Brazoria County, Texas. My grandfather and his older brother supported the family by cotton farming on one acre of land. In April of 1918, he enlisted in the U.S. Army and was sent to Panama, where he guarded the Panama Canal. After World War I ended, he returned home, started a trucking company, married, and had a family. Before he died, my grandfather had lived through the Spanish American War, heard of the Wright Brothers' first flight, saw the automobile become the main source of transportation, served in World War I, provided for his family throughout the Great Depression and World War II, and lived to watch on television man's first landing on the moon.

My dad and my grandfather are not just my favorite historical persons, but also my favorite historical heroes.