

Sixty Years of The East Texas Historical Association

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

Scott Sosebee is Executive Director of the Association and can be contacted at sosebeem@sfasu.edu.

Learn more about ETHA by visiting the website at www.easttexashistorical.org.

(October 4, 2022) Normally this column deals with how history was made, the specific details of people, places, and events. For most, this is what history represents, a chronicling of the past, an acknowledgement of what went on long ago. In a sense that is correct, but the study of history is much more than that; it is an interpretation of how the past has helped develop the present, and how by understanding the past we can better understand how we function as a people. Professional historians serve as one way such analysis occurs, but they cannot and do not accomplish such a goal alone. Interpretation requires the aid of genealogists, independent researchers, journalists, commentators, and anyone else who has a passion for understanding the importance of the past. One way these disparate groups can come together to share their interest and information is through organizations, and one such assembly is the East Texas Historical Association, which this week will once again hold its Annual Meeting in Nacogdoches.

The beginning of what is now the East Texas Historical Association came in 1962, with the impetus from two attorneys—F. Lee Lawrence of Tyler and Francis Ingerham Tucker of Nacogdoches. Both men were history buffs, collectors and chroniclers of historical events, documents, and ephemera. The two lawyers called on Stephen F. Austin State College president Ralph W. Steen to engage him in helping them begin an association that would allow them to practice and pursue their passion. Steen “enlisted” (many people will say that he “directed”) the help of college history department chair C.K. “Dick” Chamberlain, and those four men founded the East Texas Historical Association in 1962.

In many ways it was a fortuitous time for such a founding. The college enjoyed not only Dr. Steen’s and Dr. Chamberlain’s fine leadership, but also had two very notable historians, Robert Maxwell and James Nicholls, on its faculty. Both men took on leadership roles in the new organization. Chamberlain became the first editor of the Association’s publication, the East Texas Historical Journal, and quickly made it into a very

well-respected scholarly periodical. Maxwell and Nichols became mainstays at early meetings, and Dr. Steen provided office space and some money to pay for printing the Journal, paper clips, and envelopes.

The academics were important to the organization, but the true driving forces were Lawrence and Tucker, along with the many “lay” historians they brought to the group. Lawrence and Tucker’s financial beneficence helped keep the new Association afloat in the early years, and the many people they brought into the Association gave it a unique “character” that exists today. The East Texas Historical Association is an effective mix of professional historians and lay practitioners, a mix that presidents, editors, and officers have consciously maintained. In its earliest years the presidency alternated between the two groups, and first editor Chamberlain and his successor Archie McDonald made it a point to always include articles by lay historians with equal stature to and right alongside those of professional historians. The result is one of the most egalitarian historical Associations in the nation. Granted, I am biased, but such a revelation doesn’t diminish my ardor.

From the outset the Association held two meetings a year, one in the fall and the other in the spring. The fall meeting was, and is, always held in Nacogdoches, while in the spring it alternated between various East Texas locales. Because the initial meeting in Nacogdoches in 1962 was an organizational one, the first that actually included papers and the presentation of research was held at Jefferson in February 1963. At that meeting Lawrence became the first president and one of the most distinguished guests was John Ben Sheppard, the former Texas attorney general from Gladewater, although he lived in Odessa at the time of the meeting.

Texas’ mandatory retirement age for state employees forced Chamberlain to leave SFA in 1971. University president Ralph Steen had determined that if SFA was to be the host institution, then the editor of the Association had to be a history faculty member. After interviewing two men in the department, he decided to appoint Archie P. McDonald to the post. He also decided to make a few changes. He called McDonald into his office—and Archie always told me that this meeting “scared me to death”—and told him that SFA was no longer going to pay for the printing of the Journal. But, in exchange for the Association taking on the charge, the university would agree to provide McDonald a secretary. Archie always considered this a fantastic trade.

McDonald and the subsequent leaders of the Association would steer the organization to new heights. The meetings grew from half-day affairs to a full day and then to multiple days. Max Sims Lale of Marshall gave a gift that continues to this day—the funding of the Georgiana and Max Lale Lecture Series. McDonald added the title of executive director to his label of editor, and the Association grew to be the largest regional historical association in the nation, larger than some state organizations. In Texas, only the Texas State

Historical Association boasts more members. The East Texas Historical Journal gained a reputation for publishing cutting-edge scholarship. For example, other than the Journal of Negro History, no publication in the nation has published more scholarly research on African American history than the Association's Journal.

Archie McDonald moved from his executive director/editor position in 2008, which he left to me. I have been fortunate to have such dynamic, able, and visionary predecessors; they left an organization that is viable and progressive, one that continues to fulfill its mission sixty years later. Some things have changed, but most of what was established years ago remains. I invite the readers of this column to come and experience the East Texas Historical Association and visit with the wonderful scholars and history lovers that turn out for our annual Fall Meeting. As always, it is held at the Fredonia Hotel in Nacogdoches, this year from October 13-15. Our Georgiana and Max Lale Lecture this year will be at 7:00, October 13, at the Grand Ballroom in the Baker Pattillo Student Center on the SFA campus. It will feature the last three Texas State Historians—Light Cummins, Bill O'Neal, and Monte Monroe—and promises to be a great evening. The meeting sessions will all be in the convention center at the Fredonia; registration is a nominal fee and can be done at the door. I hope to see many of my friends and neighbors there to see this worthy legacy for F. Lee Lawrence, F.I. Tucker, Ralph Steen, C.K. Chamberlain, and Archie McDonald. And for all of East Texas as well.

#