



An ETHA Pine Cone Profile

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Mark Robbins

Corpus Christi, TX



*It's not often that a university press publication about life after The Great War starts with, "The doctor sat patiently with a revolver in his hand." Yet, that's how Mark Robbins began his 2017 book *Middle Class Union: Organizing the 'Consuming Public' In Post-World War I America*. In it he covers everything from onion boycotts to tenant activism, showing how the middle-class dynamism of post-World War II began late in the nineteenth. This breadth of vision—demonstrating not simply events but also their source—is a characteristic of Mark's. In his depiction of the growth of Corpus Christi, he has recorded numerous oral histories from the city's oldest living residents. In his investigations of labor in early-to-mid-century South Texas, he and his wife Christine Reiser Robbins preserved the memories of the migrants who kept the fields fertile. Mark finds the personal and makes it part of history, whether it be in podcasts or in classes at Del Mar College or during East Texas Historical Association conferences. Here, in his own words, is our East Texas Pine Cone Profile for Mark Robbins.*

Where do you live?

I live in Corpus Christi but am originally from Okemos, Michigan.

What convinced you to join the ETHA?

I was guided to join the ETHA by my friends and fellow historians on the Nueces County Historical Commission. I first learned of the association from Mary Jo O'Rear, who described its vibrant work. I had already been familiar with a few of the excellent articles published in the *East Texas Historical Journal*, and the more I learned about the ETHA, it became clear that it engaged with historians and historical topics from all over the state.

What is there about Texas that attracts you?

The diversity of the state and its citizens, histories, and landscapes. It is remarkable that within the same state there is the grandeur of Big Bend (I will always have a special place in my heart for purple prickly pear cacti!), the serene beauty of its barrier islands, the piney woods of East Texas, rolling hills, and beyond. Each place has its unique cultural practices and histories.

What is there about Texas history that attracts you?

I am fascinated by the power of different versions of Texas identity in shaping political, cultural, social, and economic life in the state. Like many historians, I am interested in how historical narratives have figured into this identity and how that has influenced power relationships in the past and present. Most recently, I have enjoyed researching and writing about the connections between ideas about Texas identity and the politics of meat during mid-twentieth century meat boycotts in the state.

How do you usually pursue history: reading books/articles? writing columns? attending conferences? watching documentaries? doing research? exploring graveyards? teaching classes? developing exhibits? organizing programs? pursuing genealogies? administering courses? writing books? what else?

As a professor at Del Mar College, I pursue history through each of these methods. In particular, I seek to draw connections between existing scholarship in the field, my own research, my teaching, and the local community. Though the COVID-19 pandemic paused a number of my activities, in the past I have collaborated with students, faculty, and community members on a number of projects, including an oral history project on South Texas Hispanic farm labor communities; a project that aims to document and preserve a local farm labor cemetery; an Historic American Buildings Survey of a local theater; an “undertold stories” historical marker on a local migrant labor camp; and a community archaeology and oral history project at a local historic park (among other projects). Many of these projects have involved collaboration across disciplines (particularly collaboration with my wife, Dr. Christine Reiser Robbins, an anthropology professor at Texas A&M University-Kingsville) and have resulted in publications or conference papers. I have learned a great deal from these projects by listening to the perspectives of community members, students, and a wide range of historians and other scholars.

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

I love the excitement of discovery and lens through which you come to see the world around you by studying history. I find great value in using history as laboratory for critical thinking, in which we examine different perspectives, place them in the context of their times, and develop meaningful narratives from them that help us make sense of the past and present. I can trace my interest in history to my parents, who encouraged me to think like an historian, without ever

putting it in those exact terms. My father is a retired archaeology professor. When I was a child, he brought me along on digs. He and his colleagues let me excavate, screen for artifacts, and sort them. Under his guidance, I learned to ask questions about what the artifacts meant in relation to one another, and what they told us about the people who lived by these sites many years ago. My mother spent decades documenting, through oral history and oral tradition, the history and culture of Pokot communities in East Africa. Her example and mentorship helped me to develop an interest in people's cultural practices across different places, times, and generations. Lastly, in high school and college, I had great teachers. They really made the subject come alive and exposed me to the sub-disciplines of social and labor history, which are areas that guide my research to this day.

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

I am most fascinated by the Post-World War I period as a moment in which the United States encountered the transformative impact of World War I and the long-term implications of industrialization, progressivism, and a growing consumer society. It has been interesting to study how this affected people's lives and identities, and their relationships to American democracy in the postwar period, amidst a massive wave of strikes, the first red scare, and an unprecedented political mobilization of the middle class.

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

With this question, I will follow the lead of a previous Pine Cone Profile and choose a place – or places. I grew up next to the Red Cedar River in Okemos, Michigan. As a kid, I would wade through the river, fish, canoe, and run along the banks, often wondering who was there before and how they used the river where I lived. Now, as an adult historian, I have been able to find some of this information but would love to witness snapshots across time of the place where I lived as a child and now visit each year with my own children. In recent years, I have come to feel the same way about Doddridge Park, a spot on the Corpus Christi Bay near my house. It is another place I would enjoy seeing over time.