

## Pine Cone Profiles, February 2022

### Judy Botson

*It's not every Texan who gets quoted in the New Bedford South Coast Today and in the Asheville (North Carolina) Citizen-Times on one day and in the Midland Reporter Telegram ten days later. Nor is it usual that said Texan was originally an Ohioan who'd migrated to the Lone Star State in the very early eighties. Yet it was the opinion of ETHA's Judy Botson that reporters wanted—her observations on the Clinton-Obama Democratic Primary being held here in the spring of 2008.*

*They were wise to ask her. Arriving with her husband at the very beginnings of the Reagan Recession, Judy was able to mark the rise and fall of her adopted state's economy along with its effects upon its people. Moreover, her work as a nurse, ranging from the operating room through obstetrics to long-term post-operative care, gave her insight into the most pressing physical and medical needs of the ordinary person. Finally, her forays into long-buried records of labor activity as far back as the 1930's provided Judy with a humanitarian viewpoint as wise and enduring as the activists she studied. It is therefore our privilege to present our Pine Cone Profile for February, Judy Botson—in her own words.*

“My husband and I moved to Houston forty-one years ago from Cleveland, Ohio. Our move to southeast Texas exploded the myths and legends about the state conjured up in our imaginations by Hollywood movies and television shows. As we drove south on Highway 59 we kept looking for cowboys, Longhorns, arid sunbaked plains, and cacti. Instead, we found ourselves surrounded by the lush, green East Texas Piney Woods and wondered what happened to all those romantic images! Did we make a wrong turn?

Regardless of culture shock, I still aimed to continue my career as a registered nurse. I had come from the old school of nursing—what was called diploma programs. Many hospitals sponsored diploma nursing programs in an effort to have enough trained nurses for their patients. The programs were three years long, heavily weighted toward clinical training. After successfully graduating, a diploma was awarded. However, state boards still had to be passed before one could begin their nursing practice. I received my RN after successfully passing state boards in the late summer of 1972. I always identify myself as a proud diploma grad!

Not long after we arrived in Houston, I started working at Tomball Hospital, and later had positions at Houston Northwest Medical Center, Doctor's Hospital Airline, and Triumph Hospital North. Coming full circle before retiring in 2017, I spent my last five years at Tomball Hospital. Additionally, in the early 1980s at Houston Northwest Medical Center I worked as a union organizer! It was an exciting time.

By the early years of the new century, however, we had joined the East Texas Historical Association. We have always had a curiosity about where we have lived, and we try to learn more about it. It really helps foster a sense of place and belonging. By 2003 my husband Michael had succeeded in making the transition from unemployed steelworker to historian and teacher. The ETHA was a perfect organization to learn more about our adopted home state and city.

Initially, I was just going along for the ride. Learning about East Texas history seemed a nice diversion from my career as a nurse and I wanted to learn something too. However, after attending ETHA's semiannual and then annual conferences over the years, and after learning more about the endlessly fascinating and diverse nature of East Texas history, I was hooked. All involved with ETHA welcomed us, making us feel right at home despite being a couple of transplanted snowbirds with funny accents!

My curiosity to learn more about the complex and diverse nature of East Texas history has been wonderfully answered thanks to the many panels I have enjoyed over the years. A multitude of topics have been examined, with a fine eye for the narrative history as well as an acknowledgement and critical examination of the violent and racist history of the region.

Mexican Americans, African Americans, Native Americans, immigrants, sharecroppers, cattle, lumber, oil, and an increasing focus on what our dear friend Kyle Wilkison calls the "plain folk" have now taken center stage in an increasing number of papers and panels when the ETHA meets and in the East Texas Historical Journal. My husband and I both come from blue collar families which makes the increasing emphasis on "plain folk" East Texans all the more meaningful and enjoyable for us.

Learning about the past certainly helps making sense of the present a bit easier since whatever we are living through at the moment has its antecedents from what has been done before us. Although my interests cover a wide historical range, it is the 1930s and 1940s that have a special interest for me.

My parents lived through the Depression and World War II. Dad served as an army combat engineer and landed at Omaha Beach on D-Day, fought in the Battle of the Bulge, and battled through the liberation of Western Europe. After his death in 2011 we learned he was decorated for valor. My father was an unassuming man who retired as a postal worker. Discovering his war record is another reason why history fascinates me. Ordinary people doing extraordinary things is what makes this country special.

Almost thirty years ago we interviewed an elderly Houston couple who were union organizers for the CIO during the 1930s and 1940s at the Hughes Tool Company. As I listened to the enormous risks they took in their battle for industrial justice at the company—such as being on constant lookout for spies and stool pigeons, keeping membership lists confidential, doing the grunt work of contacting fellow employees and persuading them that the CIO would bring them

shop floor dignity—I was moved because if they were discovered before they succeeded, it meant their jobs and being blacklisted.

As is evident from my above remarks, I am not an enthusiast of the “great man” interpretation of history. Perhaps because of my innate suspicion of authority, family background, and maybe just my plain “cussedness,” my interests and sympathies have always veered towards those without a voice.

Though I don’t write books, papers, or present at conferences, I am a heck of a research assistant. In the summer of 1993 on our first research trip, we travelled to Penn State University in Happy Valley, Pennsylvania, to research the documents in the United Steelworkers of America Archives housed there. Spent a marvelous week being an archive rat!

In addition to the research work, we did some family history as well. My husband’s paternal grandparents migrated to Center County, Pennsylvania, from the Austrian-Hungarian Province of Slovakia in the early twentieth century and worked the coal mines. My husband took me to the former home places and, despite being ninety years on, vestiges of the stark poverty his ancestors suffered in the company-dominated coal patch still lingered.

In the ensuing years we have travelled to the National Archives in College Park, Maryland and Washington, D.C., to the Regional Archives in Fort Worth, and to the Center for US History at UT Austin; we have spent a great deal of time at the Houston Metropolitan Research Center. All in all, being the research assistant has been a great gig—I get to enjoy going through all the old documents, photos, and memorabilia and not worry about doing all the writing!

In closing, our membership in the East Texas Historical Association over the years has been a joy. Some of the many things we value in the Association are fellow members’ high standards of scholarship, collegiality without stuffiness, enthusiasm for our particular historical interests, and—when the rigors of panel discussions are over—enjoying bourbon and branch water with dear friends.”