

Pine Cone Profiles – January 2022

Katherine Kuehler Walters

Anyone who watched Katherine Kuehler Walters chair the “Hear That Lonesome Whippoorwill” session at our last meeting, or heard her preside over “Petticoats, Politics, Prison, and the Klan” in 2015, or listened to her speak about “Fighting the Cultural Wars over the Confederacy in Texas” in 2018 knows Dr. Walters is a dynamic presenter. Those who have submitted entries to the Handbook of Texas Women, where she is primary editor, or to Handbook of Texas where she is assistant editor, know how meticulous and detail oriented she is. The attendees at the 80th Annual Texas State NAACP Meeting President’s Luncheon in 2017 found out how gifted she is, as she presented the story of Richard D. Evans, the organization’s first president.

And everyone who has known Katherine as a dedicated scholar knows how lucky the Texas State Historical Association is to have her on staff. But it’s East Texas Historical Association members who know what a warm and enthusiastic historian she is. Here she is, Katherine Kuehler Walters, in her own words.

Where do you live?

I live in San Antonio, Texas, and work as an editor on the Handbook of Texas so my office (when not working from home!) is in Austin.

How long have you been in East Texas Historical Association?

I first joined when I was a master’s student at Southwest Texas State University in the late 1990s and was a member off and on—when my budget would allow for it—over the next decade. I have maintained membership more consistently over the last 8 years.

What convinced you to join?

Initially I joined as an eager grad student who had submitted a single paper proposal for the program. I remember I really wanted to meet historians that I had read—Bruce Glasrud, Gregg Cantrell, Cary Wintz come to mind.

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

It’s the people and the positive, collaborative nature of the ETHA meetings. This is easily my favorite conference to attend because I’ve met so many people whom I now call friends. It’s a great conference to present research on new projects and to get constructive feedback. I love to listen to everyone talking over meals or between sessions and hear about all the fascinating

work being done by others and talk “shop” about teaching, methods, sources. It’s also a welcoming environment for graduate students and new members.

What is there about Texas that attracts you?

Perhaps I’m biased as I was born and raised here. I love the diversity of the state—its regions, geography, people, politics, experiences, cultures, languages, religions, food, celebrations, etc. Visitors from outside-the-state and, let’s face it, many born-and-bred Texans have so many preconceived ideas about the state that a little bit of travel makes finding something surprising almost inevitable.

What is there about history that attracts you?

Neil Foley asked me this question once. I think my answer hasn’t changed much since I, a junior at UT-Austin, met him in his tiny, dark, book-crammed office in Garrison Hall for a mandatory interview to convince him to let me take his senior seminar. I want to understand how our society—locally, nationally, and globally—became what it is and why.

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

Research, research, research! Whether at an archive or online, it drives most of what I do. Genealogical research has become a go-to tool for me since 2000, when I completed my master’s. I used it to trace the African American civil rights activists and their families who were in my thesis. It is also a regular part of both my work at the Handbook of Texas and was essential to my dissertation on structural racism and the 1920s KKK in southeast Texas. I also attend conferences, read books and articles, and volunteer at the San Antonio African American Community Archive and Museum when time permits. I wish writing came more easily to me—I have a backlog of research to get down on paper.

Why do you love history?

I love both the investigation process—hunting down and exploring primary sources, asking questions, following leads, and finding answers—and the story. Sharing it, whether in a classroom, at a conference, or with family members of those I have studied, is so rewarding. I think I love studying African American history and the civil rights struggle against structural racism in the US/Texas not only because it’s profoundly central to American history, but it’s also a great history to tell—with the strength, perseverance, struggle for freedom, and demand for democracy that someone like me, who grew up on 1970s & 1980s Cold-War era movies, can appreciate as American ideals and aspirations.

Has there been anything in your personal life that led to this? What was it?

Oh, yes! As a freshman in college, I came face-to-face with some undeniable truths about my family and the hometown I loved—all because I chose the family history option as my research paper assignment in Dr. Richard Milk's U. S. History survey at Texas Lutheran. Growing up in New Braunfels, I spent many summer days at the local museum, where my mom volunteered, and at an early age, I knew the exhibits by heart—town founded by a prince (on Good Friday, no less!), settlers landed at Indianola (on Christmas Eve) and survived through hard work and perseverance, etc. The history told by the museum gave me a sense of pride and belonging. I viewed it as my family's history. That freshman research paper assignment started lifting the veil and helped me see what the museum excluded. While standing in the rural family cemetery, segregation of those buried there was obvious—German family members and Mexican laborers who worked in the family's fields were divided by a center gravel path and cross. Fifty-year racial restrictions were written into deed records of land sold in New Braunfels—land that holds two neighborhoods and two streets with my maiden name. I realized later that the museum left out nearly half of its residents, those who were Mexican American or African American, and that my childhood pride and sense of belonging were actually feelings of superiority and privilege rooted in a recognized past.

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

Jim Crow Era/Progressive Era, although the names of both eras are woefully deficient and poorly chosen, because the social, political, economic, and cultural patterns and ideologies define the transition from the 19th century and set the foundation for understanding the 20th century.

Who is your favorite historical person? Why?

Louis M. Sublett of Waco, Texas—he represents to me the countless stories of significant contributions by everyday people in Texas and U.S. history. He and his siblings were born into slavery in Tennessee, then put each other through Fisk University. He was a teacher and minister, businessman, husband, father, and an outspoken civil rights activist in a racially violent city. Few have ever heard of him. I first wrote about him in my master's thesis, and, since then, have researched him and his extended family. I've been lucky enough to have spoken with several grandchildren and great-grandchildren of Sublett and his siblings. One day I hope to get past the 1865 wall.

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

Not a particular event, but I would love to have met Louis Sublett's wife, Anne Fletcher Sublett. She went through everything with Louis and yet I know little about her.