Center Receives Two Research Grants

Along with teaching and service to UT Arlington, research is one of the Center’s major activities. The Center was recently awarded two research grants:

- The National Park Service has granted $80,000 to the Center, which will prepare a report on the Golden Spike National Historic Site. The report will involve two years’ research in the area of Utah’s Promontory Mountains, where the rails of the first transcontinental railway were joined on May 10, 1869. This is now a designated historic site where the joining of the rails is regularly re-enacted, but it has experienced many changes over a long period. Home to the Shoshoni Indians, it was explored by the early scientists in the West; then became part of the Mormon state of “Deseret”; was temporarily on the route of the transcontinental railroad until the Lucin Cutoff was built across the Great Salt Lake in 1904. By the time the railroad line over Promontory Summit was abandoned in 1942, parts of the surrounding area had become ranches and farms. More recently (1965), Promontory became a historic site that celebrates the joining of the rails. The report will be written as a well-documented book.

- The Summerlee Foundation of Dallas has provided $14,500 for the Center to prepare a report entitled “Thomas Blackstar, Comanche Medicine Man: An Oral History Collection Project.” This project will preserve irreplaceable traditional information and will also begin to map Texas from Comanche perspectives. Thomas Blackstar, the last surviving Comanche Medicine Man who is a native speaker of the Comanche language, is the sole carrier of some of the most significant traditional information of his culture. Mr. Blackstar is approaching his 80th birthday with a strong desire to document and preserve this valuable information. This traditional knowledge is also critical for a more insightful understanding of the Comanche relationship with the Medicine Mounds, a legendary Texas natural feature and Comanche sacred site. A focus on the Medicine Mounds will result in a much better understanding of the significance of this sacred site to the Comanche people. It is also expected that information will be shared that will be relevant to other Comanche traditional cultural properties in Texas, and greatly enhance an understanding of Comanche relationships with Texas landscapes past and present.
The Importance of Improving Texas History Education

By Richard Francaviglia

In 2004, approximately 725,000 students in grades K-12 took Texas history — a subject that has become increasingly politicized in the acrimonious partisan battle over education. To help educators and decision-makers learn more about Texas history education, UT Arlington conducted a year-long study that resulted in a report. The study helped us answer a general question: How important is Texas History? By tracking a typical student through his or her exposure to Texas history classes, we verified claims that learning Texas history serves two important purposes. In addition to broadening students’ knowledge about, and appreciation of, the state’s past, Texas history also provides students: (1) a foundation for learning about other subjects such as geography and political science, and (2) assistance in developing the critical thinking skills so essential for informed citizenship.

We began by defining Texas history and observing discrepancies between popular history and the historical record. Although the popular slogan that “Six Flags” have flown over the state is true, it is also very simplistic. Whereas those six flags do represent major political powers — namely Spain, France, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, the United States of America, and the Confederate States of America — they exclude the Native Americans who lived here for at least ten thousand years. So, too, the emphasis on political powers also tends to overlook the lives and accomplishments of common people. Studying Texas history now involves understanding topics like the environment, business and economy, culture and the arts, as well as politics.

We verified that Texas history is easy to mythologize — and also easy to politicize. On the left, an article by Molly Ivins in The Nation (November 17, 2003) attempted to expose the shortcomings of Texas’s “one party Republican” identity to outsiders. Ivins claimed that the state’s “aggravated provincialism” — or “exaggerated sense of state identification” as she called it — is reinforced by “requiring kids to study Texas history, including [Texas’s] roughly ten years as an independent country.” The left may tend to emphasize certain aspects of Texas history, like racism and sexism, that involve mistreatment of people. On the right, some conservatives romanticize Texas history. They believe that Texas history has become too “politically correct” — which is sometimes a rubric for too inclusive — and are upset that “revisionist history” has trumped heroic deeds and defamed great leaders. Our report concludes that the best history teaching is non-politicized and welcomes complexity rather than dismissing it. In other words, the best Texas history education reveals all sides of issues and events — the good (heroism, vision, success), the bad (chicanery and failure), and the ugly (brutality and abuse).

We conducted considerable research involving teachers, students, and parents. We interviewed teachers from throughout Texas who teach state history and have been recognized for their achievements. These teachers served as teacher-consultants, and they also helped us identify students with whom we could speak about Texas history in the schools. Our methodology was deliberately anecdotal.
In addition to obtaining facts and statistics from the Texas Education Agency, Texas State Historical Association, and other sources, we also actively sought candid opinions about Texas history education. According to the teachers and students interviewed, Texas history prepares students to study broader, related subjects. By beginning "close to home," as one student phrased it, Texas history courses help students "ease into the larger world," as a teacher put it. Effective teachers realize that studying Texas history can help students develop critical thinking skills, appreciate the complexity of historical developments, and understand the cultures and institutions that affect them in the present. We emphasize that Texas history education works from the "ground up" — that is, it is ultimately dependent on what happens in individual classrooms, even though its proper coordination requires statewide leadership.

The typical student in the Lone Star State takes Texas history courses twice in his or her K-12 school years — once in the fourth grade, and once in the seventh grade. At the fourth grade level, social studies emphasizes connections between the environment and human inhabitants (normally under the rubric "Texas Studies"). At this level, Texas history provides an introduction to the state's diverse natural habitats as well as its earliest inhabitants — the Native American Indian tribes. In seventh grade, Texas history is more formalized. Subjects covered include political institutions and major events such as Texas independence and the Civil War (emancipation, etc.). At this grade level, under the more straightforward title of "Texas History," the course helps lay the groundwork for future courses in other disciplines, including political science.

Particular aspects of Texas history seem to engage students consistently, especially "the stuff with lots of action," as a student put it. These include conflicts and wars such as the Texas Revolution and the American Civil War. Historical events involving storytelling and narratives, such as the challenges facing a rural Texas family in the 1870s, were also very important as this approach humanizes history. Studying an event like the U.S.-Mexican War (1846-1848) reveals the impact on the lives of the people of Texas and Mexico. When students use original documents — diaries, journals, and historical maps — teachers observed that the students' level of mastery increases and their retention of the material improves. The students confirmed that they learn history from many sources outside of the classroom lectures.

We also sought to answer a second question: How is Texas history faring in schools today? To answer this question, we again met with teachers, students, and parents. This revealed that many challenges face Texas history teaching and learning. Not all students who enter history classes come from supportive home environments. Next, consider the competing messages that students may encounter from the educational system itself. For example, some critics claim that history education should "stick to the basics" — that is, stress facts such as dates. However, other critics may claim that students are required to memorize too many facts (such as dates of historic events), criticizing schools as "uncreative" and "dull" when they encourage students to learn those same facts.

Next consider the challenges facing teachers. First, some teachers are simply not as well prepared as they should be — that is, have not kept up with changes in both factual material and historical interpretation. Moreover, some teachers are simply unaware of the rich primary source material, historical maps, for example, that can help history come alive. Some teachers may have learned how to teach, but not what to teach because they are trained in pedagogy but not solidly trained in history, or in historical interpretation. Teachers often have little time in which to prepare for classes as they are asked to handle so many additional duties. In some cases, teacher morale is low due to overbearing or micromanaging administrators. On the other hand, some teachers are not only uninformed and overworked, but simply uninspired. They lack the passion and the enthusiasm that characterizes excellent history teachers. Some teachers fear addressing certain controversial subjects in Texas history because those subjects might be disapproved of by parents.

Generally, the best students repeatedly mentioned that their interest in history was nurtured by parents who enjoyed stopping at historical sites, recommended historical books and films for their children to read and watch, and encouraged a dialogue between the generations in their family. The teachers and students stated that the next most important determinant to good history education is the quality of teaching. Superb teachers possess several skills — intellectual adventurousness, inherent curiosity, ability to engage listeners, and a willingness to take risks. The best teachers engage students to discover the meaning — or meanings — of what happened. The best teachers teach history as a subject that is constantly changing through new interpretations, and are not afraid to inform students that the facts of one generation may be revised as new information is discovered. History teachers, in other words, need to be as flexible as any person who encounters challenges and is able to adapt to those challenges. Another bright spot: We were generally pleased with the textbooks — as were the teachers who used them. Despite an occasional error upon which critics avidly pounce, there is a tremendous amount of accurate historical information, and even fine (careful and balanced) interpretation, in text books used in Texas history classes.
General Recommendations

In light of the above, our report makes ten recommendations on how the teaching of Texas history can be improved:

1. **Encourage Greater Recognition of Texas History Education**
   Although the public has a strong interest in Texas history statewide, the subject is rather marginalized in the curriculum. In schools, Texas history needs higher visibility and greater recognition for its own intrinsic value, rather than simply as an adjunct to TAKS preparation. As noted above, understanding Texas history can help lay the groundwork for appreciating other subjects.

2. **Reaffirm the Importance of Texas History in the Curriculum**
   Not as simple nostalgia but rather as a rich, complicated, and sometimes unpleasant story that reveals peoples' changing relationships to place and each other. Texas history can help students better understand the environment, business, government, cultural identity, cultural conflict and resolution. If students learn that history has always offered examples of behavior we see today — such as visionary ideals, partisan squabbling, intercultural tensions, and even excesses and abuses — then they will be better able to put the present in perspective.

3. **Involve Parents More Actively in Texas History Education**
   Parents and grandparents can relate their recollections of historical events, visit historical sites, and discuss historical films and books. In that way, students can learn the value of consulting numerous sources to obtain answers. They may also learn another valuable lesson: history is not only "facts" but also interpretation. Even members of one family may disagree as to what happened — and what it meant/means.

4. **Continue to Demand Better Teaching — and Better Teachers**
   Teachers need to know more about the substance of what they teach. This appears true for all subjects, but especially so in Texas history, which exposes students to so many potentially controversial themes and topics. Teachers need to keep abreast of the new and exciting books constantly published about Texas history. They need to use more themes and topics than simply those presented in the TEKS and students' textbooks. They also need to be passionate about teaching rather than conducting class robotically.

5. **Begin Recruiting Prospective Texas History Teachers From Non-Traditional Environments**
   Our report concludes that there are many talented prospective Texas history teachers in the state who are currently involved in other careers. They should be actively recruited at meetings of historical societies, such as the annual TSHA meeting. Even though they may be "natural" teachers, they can always benefit from exposure to pedagogical and classroom management training.

6. **Encourage Experimentation and Innovation in Texas History Education**
   Texas history should be taught using varied techniques. The use of hands-on projects, dramatization, field trips, and students' genealogical research into their own family's history should be attempted. Teachers (and students) should be encouraged to understand history using methods that make it come alive, and become more relevant.

7. **Make Texas History More Challenging**
   If we teach Texas history as a dead subject (that is, one with a fixed content and unchanging interpretations) it will be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Rather, students need to be taught, especially in the higher grades, that understanding Texas history involves new approaches. For example, the study of Stephen F. Austin in light of what we now know about how good managers function (as was done by Gregg Cantrell in the book Stephen F. Austin: Empresario of Texas) can shed much light on Austin's successes and failures as an empresario. It can also help students better understand management. The term "metahistory" is used for the integration of broader themes, and students deserve to experience how this exciting subject works to show the interconnected nature of history.

8. **Continue Demanding High Quality Academic Performance**
   Despite vocal criticism of TAKS/TEKS and testing, we do not urge abandoning them. Rather, the TEKS should be reviewed periodically, perhaps every three to five years. Testing can and should be used more creatively. For example, although there is only one correct answer to the actual date on which General Santa Anna's troops began their assault on the Alamo, there are many explanations as to how and why it happened. Testing needs to measure a student's ability to reason, not simply regurgitate facts.

9. **Bring Texas History Education into a Closer Partnership with Various State Agencies and Organizations**
   Many of these agencies and organizations have educational missions. For example, the Texas State Historical Association (TSHA) is a natural partner in this process. Our report concludes that TSHA's current emphasis on educational programming and products should be continued, and, where possible, expanded. This could be accomplished through expanded private fund raising or possibly through university funding derived from the legislature, and identified for the Center for Studies in Texas History.

10. **Explore How Techniques and Methods Used in Private Schools May Benefit Texas History Teaching in Public Schools**
    Our report focused on public schools, but we suggest that private schools and charter schools may be able to offer suggestions about especially effective teaching/learning techniques (and vice versa). We recognize that not every private school or charter school is exemplary, but some are very innovative. We further recognize that comparisons between public and private schools is one of the highly politically-charged areas of education; however, we feel that dialogue can lead to better understanding and respect for the merits of both public and private education.

We concluded our report by noting that all Texans benefit when students learn about the state's history. For those who think that this issue affects only primary and secondary schools, consider this: Higher education in Texas also has a stake in improving Texas history education in grades K-12. The reason? By so doing, we ultimately improve the skills of students who enter our colleges and universities, and therefore also strengthen higher education — which in turn improves the state's ability to compete nationally and internationally.

Note: Richard Francaviglia is Professor of History and Geography and Director of UT Arlington's Center for Greater Southwestern Studies and the History of Cartography. Copies of "Improving the Teaching of Texas History: A Report to the Sumnerlee Foundation of Dallas" may be obtained by contacting the Center at 817-272-3907 or e-mail to jsweener@uta.edu.
Map And Discoveries Societies To Meet On East Coast

This fall, two organizations with close ties to UT Arlington will meet on the East Coast:

The Texas Map Society (TMS), which normally meets at UT Arlington on the first weekend in October, will hold a joint meeting with the Washington Map Society in our nation's capital. According to TMS secretary Kit Goodwin, TMS meeting registrants will be able to attend: dinner and the Thursday evening, September 29th, meeting of the Washington Map Society (the speaker is UT Arlington's own David Buissere); a mini-symposium of "America's Birth Certificate," the 1507 world map by Martin Waldseemuller recently acquired by the Library of Congress for ten million; once-in-a-lifetime Behind-the-Scenes tour of the Library of Congress, including the fabulous vault where the very rare items are housed as well as the incredible Conservation Lab where the Waldseemuller map is undergoing treatment; exhibits at the James Madison and Thomas Jefferson Buildings featuring a selection of American Treasures and the Waldseemuller map; and tours of the many wonderful museums and galleries on the Washington Mall via guided Tourmobile buses. For more information, contact Kit Goodwin at 1701 Silver Leaf Drive, Arlington, TX 76013, Phone 817-861-1425; e-mail goodwin@uta.edu or consult the TMS website at http://libraries.uta.edu/txmapsoct/.

Less than a week later, the Society for the History of Discoveries (SHD) will meet in Williamsburg, Virginia on October 6th through the 9th. Williamsburg's rich history is associated with transatlantic migration and early settlement of the American colonies, and conference attendees will have an opportunity to tour historic sites there. Individual presentations will cover many subjects of exploration and discovery worldwide, though some will focus on the Eastern Seaboard. Additionally, there will be a special tour of The Mariners' Museum in Newport News, Virginia. Anyone interested in maritime exploration and early maps will want to attend this informative meeting; better yet consider attending both the TMS and SHD meetings and enjoy the many historic treasures in the area between meetings. For more information on the SHD meeting, contact SHD Vice President Ralph Ehrenberg, 3117 Beechwood Lane, Falls Church, VA 22042, (Phone 703-538-0948; e-mail rehrenberg@aol.com).

UT Arlington Joins The Ancient Cross Timbers Consortium

In the spring of 2005, the University of Texas at Arlington joined numerous educational organizations as part of the Ancient Cross Timbers Consortium. The Cross Timbers is a forest consisting mostly of Post Oak and Blackjack Oak trees, but the Post Oak Savanna also forms a significant part of the ecology of the south central United States. According to the Ancient Cross Timbers website, these rugged old-growth woodlands were not commercially important, but have high ecological integrity and preserve vital components of our eroding biodiversity. The Ancient Cross Timbers Consortium was established to unite educational institutions, government agencies, conservation organizations, and individuals around the research, educational, and conservation opportunities presented by the extensive old-growth forest remnants in this ecosystem. The Consortium has organized a unique network of cooperative research natural areas in ancient Cross Timbers remnants extending across 700 miles from southeastern Kansas to southern Texas. Through a memorandum of understanding (MOU), UT Arlington now joins other universities in Arkansas, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas with The Nature Conservancy and other federal, state, municipal, and private agencies as part of a consortium that is devoted to understanding and sustaining the natural environmental dynamics of this native ecosystem.

To learn more about this important historical landmark and ecological region in the south central United States, see the website at (http://www.uark.edu/misc/xtimber/).
Meet the Center Faculty

Pat D. Taylor is Director of the Program in Landscape Architecture at UT Arlington, where he has served since 1992. He holds the B.S. and M.S. degrees from Texas Tech, and the Ph.D. from UT Austin. His career includes seven years in private practice in Dallas, and he has held teaching appointments at Texas Tech, Michigan State and Texas A&M, as well as numerous associations with universities abroad. Taylor is a co-founder of ISOMUL (International Study Group for the Multiple Use of Land) based in the Netherlands, and was an intern/consultant for former President Lyndon B. Johnson and Lady Bird Johnson on the LBJ Ranch. He was a founding member of the Board of Trustees of the Lady Bird Johnson Wildflower Research Center in Austin. His interests include urban design, park planning, research methods and cultural landscapes. Taylor has participated on cultural landscape and resource management projects for the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department and the U.S. National Park Service on sites in Texas, Oklahoma and Alaska. Among his recent publications is a paper and ISOMUL keynote address entitled, “Merging Past and Present in Landscape Planning: The Value Question.”

Correction To Spring 2005 Issue

Note: We neglected to mention that the beautiful color photograph of the Texas State Capitol that appeared on page one of the Spring 2005 issue of Fronteras is from the website of the Texas State Preservation Board. Images from this website may be used for educational purposes, according to the permission information available on the website (http://www.tspb.state.tx.us/).

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