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THE BEST IS YET TO COME

by *F. Lee Lawrence*

Last fall Archie McDonald asked me to write a little piece on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of our revival of the East Texas Historical Association. At the time I didn't think the fact that we had lasted twenty years was worthy of much notice. As historians and antiquarians, we know that two decades is a very short span in the calendar of human experience. In other words, who notices twenty years? But the answer is that while twenty years is brief in the life of mankind, it is a profound amount of our individual lives—almost one-third of our life expectancy. Since September 1962 we have buried an assassinated president of our country, elected four other men to that high office, one of whom resigned from office for the first time in our history, landed Americans on the moon, fought a war in Southeast Asia and watched interest rates go to 25%.

While all of this has been going on, a lot of water has passed under the Association's bridge. We have published thirty-nine issues of the *East Texas Historical Journal* under the careful leadership of our first Editor, the late C. K. Chamberlain, and his successor, Archie McDonald. We have lost our dear friends and stalwarts, F. I. Tucker, Ralph Steen, J. L. Clark, and others, too many to name. Some of our present members were not even born when we began our charter year. Certainly many of our most valuable members have joined our ranks in recent years. It is a comment on the effect of the passage of time to observe that most of our current leaders are not charter members. That gives me some satisfaction.

In order to refresh my memory about the events of our organizational efforts in the summer of 1962, and the first meeting on September 29, I retrieved my old files on the East Texas Historical Association. With the help of a wealth of correspondence, minutes and reports, I wandered back through those days. It proved to be a sentimental journey. The picture that emerges is of a truly grass roots group of East Texans representing a wide range of historical interests and viewpoints. In the picture I see myself as a young, energetic first president who set a lot of unattainable goals for myself and the Association. The board of directors met four times that year which does sound like the work of an overly zealous young president. But we had a lot of work to do, including the naming and publication of our first issue of the *East Texas Historical Journal*, which was well received. We knew much of what we did that first year would set the pattern for the years to come and so it did. We had a spring meeting in an East Texas city (Jefferson

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EAST TEXAS HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION—1962-1963



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that year) and returned to Nacogdoches for our annual meeting, thus establishing a custom which has continued to this date.

Our principal efforts that first year were directed to building a membership base. We were gratified with the results but the following year we were disappointed to discover that a large number of our membership wanted to be identified as "charter members" but did not want to continue their membership and support on a permanent basis.

The clearest portion of the emerging picture is the determined and unflinching support of Ralph W. Steen and Stephen F. Austin State University. When Dr. Chamberlain first contacted me in the summer of 1962 about the organization and revival of the East Texas Historical Association, he told me that he had the support of Dr. Steen, then president of SFA. This proved to be accurate, as we learned at the organizational meeting, when it was disclosed that the University would support Dr. Chamberlain to serve as Editor-in-Chief of the *Journal*. In fact, it can now be told that since the Association had no money, SFA paid entirely for the first *Journal*. It was supposed to be a secret but to everyone's horror, the State printer included in first issue of the *Journal* the announcement that it was "a publication of Stephen F. Austin State University."

In October 1963, F. I. Tucker of Nacogdoches succeeded me as president and in his well-remembered style, requested that I sent him a "HANDBOOK FOR EAST TEXAS HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION'S PRESIDENTS."

Some of you may not know that an earlier East Texas Historical Society was organized in 1926 and had its first annual meeting on April 29 and 30, 1927, in Nacogdoches at SFA. George L. Crockett was its first president and he observed appropriately in the bulletin concerning the proceedings of the first meeting that while other regions of Texas more carefully recorded the history of their past, "equal care has not been taken to record the significant events which have occurred in the eastern section." But the first East Texas Historical Association fell on hard times and discontinued as an organization in the early 1930s. Crockett's comment seemed to be prophetic. Throughout the years our own Association has been haunted by the memory that its direct predecessor did not survive.

However, its continuance now for two decades, coupled with the continuing support of SFA and other old friends and supporters, along with newly found ones, convinces me that the hardest years are past and the best is yet to come. The Association continues to be a source of great satisfaction and fellowship for me. I hope it is the same for you.

F. Lee Lawrence
at Tyler March 1982