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THE CENTER FOR EAST TEXAS STUDIES

AN SFA '98 PROJECT

The exact boundaries for East Texas are difficult to define. SFA geographer Charles Gardner locates East Texas in the red-land, pine-forest region east of the thirty-inch-rainfall line. He excludes the Red River blackland prairie to the north and the coastal prairie to the south. The Texas Forestry Museum lists thirty-eight "East Texas Pineywoods Counties," beginning with Red River County and dropping south to skirt the Trinity and Navasota rivers, then cutting back east across the top of the coastal prairie to Jefferson County. The East Texas Historical Association – according to the José Cisneros map on the *Journal* cover – expands its membership and East Texas geography from Sherman on the Red River to the Gulf coast, including Dallas and Houston and Crossing the Brazos into Austin County. People generally define East Texas according to their particular needs. They always include the Big Thicket, Devil's Pocket, Scrappin' Valley, and the Redlands. A real East Texan, however, does not need a map to know whether he is in or out of his territory.

The history of East Texas is all the hard living and slow dying that has taken place in these piney woods. The Indians, Spanish, French, and Anglos – the red, black, and white folks and all the shades between – have been exploring and hunting and singing and dancing, raising families, building churches and bridges and cities for 450 years of recorded East Texas history. And this East Texas history has a difference in tone and mood and attitude from the history of the folks that went on west to the Pecos or the Caprock.

This rich history of East Texas needed a place to abide, a home with a parlour to welcome people who wanted to see and hear and learn about the people of its past. Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacogdoches, the heart of the pineys, was the obvious location. As part of President Dan Angel's SFA '98 plan for the university's progress, Liberal Arts Dean Fred Kitterle and a committee consisting of F.E. Abernethy, Al Cage, James Corbin, Archie McDonald, Robert Mathis, Jim Reese, and James Speer prepared a plan for creating such an institution, the Center for East Texas Studies. The Center will be administered by the College of Liberal Arts.

Even though the emphasis of the Center for East Texas Studies will be regional, this does not mean that its point of view will be provincial. East Texas is a small part of a large world in a large time. But just as one can study the science of geology in a grain of sand, he can also study mankind's history in the microcosm of East Texas. The Center wishes to make studies of this particular small space and time in all its infinite variety available to interested historians.

The philosophical purpose of the Center of East Texas Studies is to provide an understanding of how the many cultures of East Texas mixed together over a long time and in a particular piney-woods space and created a modern region and people with their own culture.

A more tangible purpose is to build the principal archive of East Texas primary historical materials, to encourage the collection and preservation of such materials, and to make these materials easily accessible and readily available to the public. These historical materials include personal papers, business records, books, maps, photographs, motion picture films, videotapes, newspapers, periodicals, and oral history collections and transcriptions.

The heart of the Center for East Texas Studies is the East Texas Collection, located on the second floor of the Ralph Steen Library and under the supervision of Library Director Al Cage and Collection Director Linda Nicklas.

The East Texas Collection is already rich in archival materials. It presently houses the business records of regional logging companies in its Forest History Collections. It houses the archives for Stephen F. Austin State University. Among its many collections are the Bennet Blake papers, the Peña-Chireno family papers, and the papers of Tol Barret, who drilled the first producing oil well in Texas. The Collection contains the records and publications of the East Texas Historical Association, which include thirty-two years of intensive and extensive historical research. The Center will increase these holdings through an aggressive policy of acquisition and will assure their easy useability through computer technology.

In addition, large collections of information on East Texas are held by other SFA campus organizations, such as the Texas Regional Institute for Environmental Studies and the U.S. Census Center.

The East Texas Collection already has holdings of works of local writers: Karle Wilson Baker, Charlotte Montgomery, Ardath Mayhar, to mention three. A goal of the Collection is to locate East Texas writers – and writers about East Texas – and to create a repository for future study of these authors and their works. The Collection has campus support for this work through the staff of the university's literary magazine REAL, a publication which frequently features regional writers but is national in scope.

Presently, genealogists are the most frequent visitors to the East Texas Collection. We hope to make the Collection the starting point for all genealogists who wish to trace their families' histories through East Texas and beyond and to establish a computer network with genealogical centers in Salt Lake City, Baton Rouge, and throughout the United States.

The Center for East Texas Studies will work in conjunction with East Texas local history organizations and with the Northeast Texas Museum Association and the Southeast Texas Museum Association to accumulate and exchange materials and information.

The Center for East Texas Studies will be supported on the SFA campus by a large faculty contingent, over sixty professors presently, who have been actively engaged in East Texas research. The research and publications of the Texas Folklore Society, which has been headquartered on the SFA campus

since 1972, will be available to the Center. Archaeology and anthropology research is regularly published from the SFA campus. The schools of forestry and education circulate newsletters from the research and activities of their members. The result of such an accumulation of information and active researchers on East Texas should afford the Center for opportunity to seek research grants and contracts from foundations, governmental agencies, and businesses.

By the SFA '98 date the Center for East Texas Studies should be so firmly and prestigiously established that it will be the obvious repository for all important regional materials. Any study of anything East Texas should have its beginning in the Center for East Texas Studies.

In order to establish an identity and a focus for the Center, a historical exhibit will be mounted near the entrance to the library's East Texas Collection on the second floor of the Ralph Steen Library. The Center's exhibit will be a chronological sequence of displays illustrating the story of East Texas from the geological, archaeological, and historical standpoints. Thus, a walk around the exhibit area would be a tour of Nacogdoches and East Texas history from geologic times to the present.

Each exhibit area will be illustrated by paintings, photographs, and other visuals illustrating the historical episodes and individuals of the depicted time. The pictures will be accompanied by examples of the material culture of the period; by an illustrative enclosed display of books about the period, together with library search assistance; and by push-button recordings explaining the history of the events depicted.

One purpose of the exhibit will be to provide a visible and educational picture of East Texas from its beginning to the present. A larger purpose will be to indicate the historical scope of the materials contained in the East Texas Collection. This permanent exhibit will be supplemented periodically with temporary art and artifact exhibits as well as traveling exhibits from the Institute of Texan Cultures, the Texas Humanities Resource Center, the Witte Museum, and other centers of Texas history and culture.

The Center for East Texas Studies will be more than a collection of primary and secondary materials and more than a museum of area history. It will be the gathering place for scholars, the interdisciplinary meeting place for lectures and programs on East Texas history, culture, and science. The Center will sponsor a variety of activities and publications to disseminate information about the rich heritage of the East Texas area to schools and libraries, community organizations, and tourist information centers. The Center for East Texas Studies will provide services and resources in one place that can be found nowhere else.

A Summary of the Scope of the Center for East Texas Studies

The Center for East Texas Studies will be administered by the College of Liberal Arts, and among its activities will be the following:

- To promote, stimulate, and assist the study of all aspects of the environment, history, culture, society, and economy of East Texas.
- To build and maintain an inventory of the materials available for such studies.
- To encourage and assist with the collection of materials and assist in their deposit and preservation in appropriate entities both on and off campus.
- To serve as a focal point for interdisciplinary dialogue on regional studies by fostering multidisciplinary cooperation and scholarly exchange between individuals whose scholarship and expertise has or could focus on East Texas through a program for visiting lecturers and scholars, support of faculty research and travel, and development of computer technology to enhance communication among various constituencies.
- To develop and maintain outreach programs aimed at scholars, public schools, business and governmental organizations, and others with a need for or interest in information about the region.
- To act as a vehicle for grants and contracts which do not more appropriately fall within the preview of existing departments or programs.
- To enhance the appreciation and application of the concepts of regional studies in the academic and other programs of the university.