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UPPITY WOMEN RISE UP AND HAVE BREAKFAST: THE EAST TEXAS HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION’S WOMEN’S HISTORY BREAKFAST

By Linda Hudson*

The women of the East Texas Historical Association’s Women’s History Breakfast once saw themselves only as recorders, researchers, writers of history, and preservers of historical structures. They never thought of themselves as history-makers until Association Vice-President Ted Lawe commented at the first African American History Breakfast in September 2007 that the model for such a session was the Women’s History Breakfasts that he and wife Gwendolyn had attended since 2001. When queried further by some of the women members present about how the African American gathering came about, it was evident that there were major differences in how the two breakfast sessions came to be part of the Association’s annual program. Lawe related that member Bruce A. Glasrud, author and editor of a dozen or more publications on African American history, came to him with the idea of an African American History Breakfast. As that year’s program chair, Lawe consulted with other colleagues in African American history and called the Association office to ask if such a session was possible and, if so, could the office make the arrangements with the Fredonia Hotel.¹

Unlike the women in 1991, Lawe and others interested in African American history did not face any obstacles in 2007. Lawe did not go before the Association’s Board of Directors for approval, and no objections were raised. Lawe did not have to explain the expected outcome of such a session, or submit a detailed report of the meeting to Executive Director Archie P. McDonald. When informed of the differences, Lawe offered a word of appreciation for the women and their pioneering efforts. He then wanted to know more about the controversy surrounding the first Women’s History Breakfast. Linda Hudson, with the help of Gail Beil, and other original women breakfast rebels, agreed to make such a presentation at the next breakfast session when the Association met in Tyler the following February.²

At the Women’s History Breakfast in Tyler in 2008, Hudson made a short talk from her memory of events, as well as from personal correspondence concerning the organization of the first women’s breakfasts. In 2008, the earlier experiences of the women members in 1991 seemed more like a Saturday Night Live comedy skit than a statement of historical facts. Those attending the Tyler breakfast session laughed about the objections and barriers thrown in the way of the women in 1991, and they also commented about how times had changed. Newly appointed Association Executive Director Scott Sosebee and others who attended the breakfast urged Hudson to write the history of how the Women’s History Breakfast came to be using the memories of the still-living participants. One suggested that the memoir be presented in the fall meeting and then expanded into a manuscript for publication in the East Texas

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Historical Journal. The goal was to establish an accurate record of the founding of the women’s history breakfast before all the original participants died and the story was lost. Looking back, the women’s breakfast founders realized that history had been made and in an unexpected way.5

It is known that the first Women’s Breakfast made history on Saturday September 14, 1991, at 7:00 A.M., in the dining room of the Fredonia Hotel located in downtown Nacogdoches. National or Texas history was not made when like-minded women had breakfast together, but it was a history-making event in the history of the East Texas Historical Association. Women had never organized anything as a group within the Association and it seemed to frighten and offend some of the more conservative members. The Association’s recognition of East Texas women’s history occurred thirty years after the establishment of women’s history as a sub-field of the historical discipline. The nascent women’s historians of the 1960s began to write a new history of women, one that was more than just a history of “women firsts,” or that of a spouse or a daughter of an important man as reflected in diary entries, or as an account of surviving great distances traveled in covered wagons, or as settlers. Twenty years earlier, Gerda Lerner published The Woman in American History and historian Carl Degler had explained that women historians “perceive important connections in the past that male historians tend to overlook.” By the 1990s, women’s history looked at the role females played in shaping national politics and policies and some of the Association’s women wanted to show the contributions of East Texas women to local, state, and national history.

It seemed like a reasonable request in 1991 for East Texas women to have breakfast and discuss their mutual interests in history. After all, Stephen F. Austin State University had a women’s historian, Sylvia McGrath, who offered courses in women’s history. Examination of this earth-shaking event in the historical context of 1991 makes it even more remarkable that anyone would object or that it would be a subject of controversy. The Cold War was over, the Gulf War came and went in a few short months. Nelson Mandela was released from prison, and Apartheid ended in South Africa. At the movies Julia Roberts starred as a prostitute who scored big in “Pretty Woman” and Jessica Tandy and Morgan Freeman amused audiences in the poignant commentary on southern race relations, “Driving Miss Daisy.” While a best selling book was Robert Fulgham’s sweet and simple All I Really Needed to Know I Learned in Kindergarten, television networks featured family hour situation-comedies with almost no topic left sacred. Women starred in roles such as the crude working-class “Roseanne,” the out-of-wedlock mother “Murphy Brown,” and featured the mishaps of the sex-starved single women of “The Golden Girls.” Oprah Winfrey won her first Emmy for the most “Outstanding Talk Show” that same year, an hour long program that left few taboo subjects not discussed. Fox Network became the first network to feature ads for condoms in prime time. Women had found their place in American society—except for women of the East Texas Historical Association, who wanted to have breakfast together as a part of the Association’s official program to discuss women’s history.
By 1991, women had served in elected leadership positions throughout the world in such unlikely places as India’s Indira Gandhi, Pakistan’s Benazir Bhutto, and Corazon Aquino in the Phillipines. That year, Margaret Thatcher ended her fifteen-year leadership as the longest serving prime minister of Great Britain in the twentieth century. Six women served in the U.S. Senate, forty-seven women served in the U.S. House of Representatives, and twenty percent of state legislatures in the United States consisted of women. In Texas, Ann Richards began her term as the first woman elected in her own right as governor. The East Texas Historical Association had actually had four women serve as president since 1980—Marion Holt, Jewel Cates, Virginia Long, and Linda Cross. Judy McDonald, the wife of Executive Director McDonald had in 1991 served as the mayor of Nacogdoches for three years of what became an eight year tenure.

In East Texas as elsewhere some people still believed women should be subservient to husbands and the other men in their lives. In 1991, Texas Baptists were in the midst of a colossal battle over doctrinal issues involving the role of women in the church and whether the Bible had been inspired and every word in it was inerrant. That summer saw about one-fourth of all Baptist congregations split and form the conservative Baptist Fellowship of Texas that ultimately created their version of the Baptist Faith and Message. Many Association members were staunch Baptists dealing with this schism in their local churches and did not need any more changes in their lives. The conservatives were sure that if belief in the inerrancy of the Bible ended, American society and the world as East Texans knew it would come to an end.

It was as if the views of England’s Queen Victoria still prevailed when she condemned the “Mad, wicked folly of ‘Women’s Rights.” At least that was what it seemed like when some members of the Association read in the preprinted program that the women planned to breakfast together. No matter that in 1926 Panola County elected Margie Neal as the first Texas woman to serve in the Texas State Senate. This was the 1990s and a line needed to be drawn somewhere in the quicksand of decaying cultural norms and moral values, all caused, they believed, by the women’s rights movement, which some people automatically equated with women’s history.

Religious conservatives waged a political cultural war against feminism in 1991, primarily as a reaction to a “Third Wave” of feminists that emerged when women realized that an amendment to the constitution, a Supreme Court decision, or state or federal legislation could not erase sexual discrimination that was so ingrained within the fabric of American society. Men and women of that year who considered themselves “Liberated,” or whose “conscience” had been raised, or even considered themselves “Enlightened,” did not recognize the extent that sexism still permeated their private and public lives until women challenged the status quo.

The idea for the women to meet for breakfast in 1991 began with no plan for radical politics or changes in the Association, but instead it developed by accident when several people and events converged. The year before the University of North Texas Press, under the direction of East Texas native Fran Vick published, Wanda Landrey’s Boardin’ in the Big Thicket, a delightful
social history of East Texas boarding house life with photos of these estab­lishments and recipes of food they served. Hudson reviewed Landrey’s book favorably in the East Texas Historical Journal and Landrey wrote a note in appreciation for the positive review. Landrey also expressed her desire to meet Hudson and hoped that their paths crossed soon. Although both had attended Association meetings, they had never met. The idea of an East Texas women’s history breakfast gained further momentum since many members had also attended breakfast women’s history meetings during the Southern Historical Association and the Southwest Social Science Association meetings, continental breakfasts sessions with a paper presentation on women’s history.\(^\text{10}\)

The possibility of a woman’s breakfast session came to further fruition when Executive Director McDonald recommended Hudson as program chair of the Nacogdoches fall 1991 meeting. Anyone who has served as program chair or on the program committee has faced the shock and awe of a blank program template and the realization that you must find at least ten session chairs, thirty history papers, and get notable banquet and luncheon speakers to speak for free and pay all their expenses when they usually get stipends ranging from hundreds to thousands of dollars plus paid expenses. Somehow Hudson completed the fall program in the allotted time but the association had no breakfast sessions, and had never held any previously. Breakfast was the only time left in the program agenda to have an additional session, so that was how Saturday morning came to be the women’s breakfast session.\(^\text{11}\)

Hudson wrote the grand dames of the East Texas Historical Association to learn their response about a women’s breakfast similar to that held by other historical associations. Communication between Hudson, Texas Historian Margaret Henson of the University of Houston, and Texas Folklorist Ernestine Sowell Linck of what was then East Texas State University at Commerce, led to an agreement that the Association women meeting for breakfast would be a good idea. It would allow women to network, share information, and encourage more interest in the women’s history of East Texas. These women in turn talked with and wrote additional women for input and suggestions. Lucille Terry of Jefferson, Jewel Cates of Dallas, Ada Holland of Texas A&M, Gail Beil of Marshall, and Vera Dugas and Sylvia McGrath of Stephen F. Austin State University, offered encouragement. With the backing of these formidable East Texas women, Hudson approached McDonald about having a Saturday morning Women’s History Breakfast session.\(^\text{12}\)

McDonald readily agreed to list the “Womenfolk’s Informal Breakfast Buffet” in the printed program for Saturday morning and sent out a copy of the program with the East Texas Historical Journal mailing. Perhaps his ease in agreeing to such a breakfast was based on McDonald’s newly acquired sensitivity that emerged after wife Judy was elected mayor of Nacogdoches, and since she had more important things to do, left Archie on his own cooking in the kitchen and washing his own socks.\(^\text{13}\)

When some members of the Association received the program in the mail with a women’s breakfast listed on the program, these men and women feared the worst outcome possible from women having breakfast together. Apparently
some called the executive director and complained that he had let things get out of hand. According to McDonald, some feared the women would try to take over the Association. Worse still, the women might file discrimination suits or decide to break away and form their own association, leaving the men to founder in financial mayhem. At that time, after subtracting institutional members, women did make up about half the Association’s members.14

With the initial okay from McDonald to proceed with breakfast plans, Hudson began the process of notifying women about breakfast that eventful Saturday morning in the Fredonia Hotel. Postage was only twenty-five cents for first-class stamps, and Hudson sent letters of invitation, first to women who regularly attended the Association’s meetings, and eventually to about a hundred women members throughout the state who occasionally attended. McDonald’s secretary, Esther Kerr, called the Fredonia Hotel and asked that a few tables be reserved at the back of the main public dining room for the women. There were no advance tickets sold, no reservations, and little publicity other than the listing on the program as “WOMENFOLKS’ INFORMAL BREAKFAST BUFFET—(Women’s History-Men Invited) 7:00 A.M.—(Breakfast Area to be Posted).”15

Before the fateful day, McDonald invited Hudson to attend the Board of Directors meeting to answer concerns some Board members had about the women’s breakfast. On Friday, September 13, 1991, Hudson appeared at the Board of Directors meeting and vouched for the virtue and character of the women planning to have breakfast together—Mrs. Terry, Margaret Henson, Ernestine Sewell Linck, Gail Beil, Pat Kell, and Sylvia McGrath—and stated that none were radical feminists, Lesbians, or women libbers. After little discussion and no irate protests by board members or visitors, the women were allowed to have their breakfast on Saturday morning, but on a trial basis. They would decide then what they wanted to do further as a group. Hudson would report later to McDonald and if he thought anything required board approval then the women would bring their proposals to the next board meeting. After the board meeting, Hudson privately promised to a by then not-too-amused McDonald that these normally sedate and refined church going women would not be emboldened by having breakfast together to burn their bras in the lobby after the breakfast or jump naked into the hotel swimming pool on Friday night during the Nacogdoches Chamber of Commerce Reception that was then held on the patio of the hotel.16

At the registration desk in the lobby, a small sign laying flat on the table instructed women to go through the breakfast buffet and sit together in one area of the dining room on Saturday morning. On the morning of September 14, 1991, much to the amazement of the breakfast organizers, the hotel staff, and others trying to have breakfast and conversation, twenty-two women showed up and took tables and chairs along one whole side of the dining room. The “uppity women,” as McDonald called them, ate and planned their rebellion amidst the clatter of busboys clearing tables, waiters serving juice and coffee, and conversations of hotel guests and Association members getting louder and louder as they competed to be heard over the women getting louder and louder as they introduced themselves and discussed their history inter-
ests and planned for a breakfast at the next meeting. Based on feedback from initial responders, Hudson distributed a survey that asked, “What do we want to do as women members of the ETHA? What are other women’s history groups doing? Do we want to organize as a sub-unit of ETHA? Do we need to make any proposals that require ETHA Board of Directors action?”

Women introduced themselves and told of their interest in women’s history as best they could under the circumstances. They presented examples of work in women’s history in other organizations. Some suggestions from the group included one session on women’s history during each meeting; a grant for research of women’s history; a scholarship for the study of women’s history; a clearinghouse for study of East Texas Women, as well as encouragement of articles for publication, and perhaps the formation of a speaker’s bureau. Distinguished professional women from career fields such as business, education, journalism, photography, and folklore, with research interests ranging from Native Americans to post-WWII, all attended the meeting. Financial limitations meant the grants and scholarships had to be deleted, but some of the women volunteered to coordinate future breakfasts, chair sessions, present papers on women’s history, edit a newsletter, and most importantly, they agreed to have another breakfast at the February 1992 spring meeting in Beaumont. Marion Holt, professor at Lamar University and the first woman president of the Association in 1980, volunteered to handle arrangements for a separate breakfast meeting room so as to not disturb other guests and so attendants could more easily hear one another. McDonald requested a detailed report of the first women’s meeting to check if anything required board approval, but also to soothe the ruffled feathers of the objectors who saw the women’s meeting as divisive.

After the fall meeting in 1991, Hudson compiled a report to McDonald after Mary Ann Chapman, of Argyle, sent informal minutes of the women’s informal breakfast. In a letter consisting of part news about members and feedback about response to the general meeting in September, Hudson gave McDonald an informal report of a dozen decisions made by “the uppity, high-toned, and feisty women,” as McDonald referred to them variously when he was in a good mood. “You men are lucky that we are not radical feminists, yet!” Hudson warned. “The mood is not to overthrow the present leadership at this time,” Hudson assured him. “All the women want to do is eat breakfast together for goodness sake!” she had told McDonald and the Board of Directors earlier. In essence, the women made no plans to sub-divide as a group, create a separate organization, or have separate meetings. They only wanted a separate meeting room for breakfast in which they could hear one another without yelling. Men were even welcome at the breakfast if they wished to come. When he received the report and minutes of the women’s meeting, McDonald saw no need for board actions on any of the women’s requests.

One goal of the women’s breakfast group was to enhance the Association’s visibility and mission through networking and encouraging research, writing, presentations, and publications about the women of the East Texas area. The general consensus of the women’s group was to be an asset to the Association and not splinter off in any way and weaken the organization,
or be categorized, isolated, and ignored as an insignificant area of women’s
despite the significant contributions they have made. Chapman and Hudson created the first newsletter that was included
with the next general mailing of the East Texas Historical Journal. 20

Twenty women attended the second Women Folk Breakfast in Beaumont
at the February Association meeting in 1992. Because of teaching and a heavy
Ph.D. course work load at the University of North Texas, Hudson did not
attend this meeting. Pat Kell took minutes and recorded that women voted to
provide a session on women’s history for each future program and wanted to
keep the breakfast informal, aside from having a chair and secretary who
would offer continuity from meeting to meeting and be responsible for organ­
izing a session on women’s history for each meeting. Also, the women voted
to have the breakfast as a session of each subsequent meeting and for it to
begin at 7:30 A.M. They wanted to set guidelines on how to choose these East
Texas Women of Distinction whose archives were fertile ground for research
and publication. Priscilla Benham and Ernestine Linck volunteered to work up
guidelines and present them for approval at the next meeting. While most
women at the breakfast talked about their research or local interests, such as
Mamie Bogue’s research on women in the Beaumont area during World War
II, Lucille Terry was concerned about people coming to Jefferson and remod­
eling houses without following historical preservation guidelines. She was
working to create interest in more accurate preservation of these homes. 21

When Hudson was late in reporting the women’s February breakfast activ­
ities to McDonald in April, he was in a testy mood. McDonald responded to
Hudson on April 21, 1992, and also sent copies of his two-page letter to
Association President Bill O’Neal and Vice-President Audrey Kariel. He
informed Hudson that if the women wanted their own women’s history sessions
they would have to organize it themselves. He would have a breakfast meeting
room arranged for the meetings and collect money for breakfast, but the women
needed Board of Directors approval for an exclusive women’s history session
to be included in each Association meeting. McDonald informed Hudson that
someone would have to request an exclusive bi-annual women’s history session
at the Board Meeting the following February 1993 in Huntsville. He apparent­
ly misunderstood and thought that the East Texas Women of Distinction was an
award that the women wanted to create to honor individual women and not a
list of notable women that were in need of research.

“What qualifies one as being distinct that is different from the award struc­
ture in place?” McDonald asked. “Who judges it, what award is to be given, who
will pay for it?” he continued. He informed Hudson that “all awards presently
given are available to women on an equal basis with men,” yet he admitted that
“the women have fared less well than men in some categories,” and explained
that he did not think that “it is the result of prejudice.” To prove women had
played a role in the Association McDonald had his secretary or some hapless
teaching assistant comb ETHA file cabinets for past records and programs and
compiled data on women’s participation in the Association. McDonald reported
on the number of women presidents, vice-presidents, and how many women had
chaired sessions and had given papers. He then listed the awards: Steen, 14
males, 4 women; Chamberlain, men 13, women 2; Fellows, men 14, women 3. He did not have the results of the Lock awards but women had fared better in the teacher awards than in the others. Nowhere in McDonald’s list of women’s accomplishments was there evidence of sessions devoted solely to women’s history in the history of the East Texas History Association.  

McDonald seemed irritated that the “woman problem” had not gone away and perhaps he was still getting flack from some of the more conservative members. Hudson and Vista McCroskey had already organized and sent to McDonald a Women’s History Session for the fall meeting in Nacogdoches in 1992 with papers by Gail Beil on women civil rights workers, Sylvia McGrath on what women were researching in other parts of the country, and Janice Luebbenhussen about Fort Worth’s first woman postmaster in the 1880s. “We have had sessions on women’s issues right regularly and that can continue unofficially until you all make it official,” he announced. Although the spring 1993 February session was not due until September 1, 1992, he asked Hudson to, “Get whoever will arrange your next session in gear so they can get their session over to James Olsen at Sam Houston as soon as possible.”  

In September 1992, Hudson found herself at yet another Board meeting, this time to defend a separate women’s history session at each meeting and explain the plans for a possible publication in ten years or so that would be the fruit of these sessions. “East Texas Women of Distinction” would be a list of Texas women culled from the annual list of Who’s Who that had been published for decades. Pricilla Benham attended the board meeting and explained that she would collect the papers and edit such a biographical collection.  

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In her September 29, 1992, letter-report on the women’s fall breakfast meeting activities to McDonald, Hudson sounded more amused than irritated about the ruckus caused over having separate women’s history sessions. The women had first talked of integrating women’s papers into other sessions, but then decided it would be simpler to find a session chair and papers from networking with other women and submit it all together as one package. “I want it on record that I will hold out for some things to be kept women’s and some things to be kept men’s to the bitter end, like restrooms,” Hudson wrote. “I don’t even share a bathroom with my husband at home. We get along better that way,” she concluded. She outlined what exactly the women wanted and added, “I hope that this does not pose a threat to anyone. Ignorance is an ominous thing and I hate to see people forming opinions without knowing what is going on.” In closing, she suggested that McDonald ask McGrath about her presentation that fall on a woman named Samantha Allen “who ‘rastled’ with the woman question back in the 1890s” and found it “rather tiring to climb up and down off of her pedestal” to do all her chores. McGrath had introduced the women to nineteenth century author Marietta Holly’s “On Sculpting the Figger of Liberty.” It was delightful satire, especially when juxtaposed against the hollow barriers being thrown up in the path of East Texas women wanting to have breakfast together and share their interests in women’s history. The “uppity women” had set the stage for other groups who might wish to meet and discuss history such as those interested in East Texas’ black history.
Twenty-seven women attended the women’s breakfast session the fall 1992 and adopted a constitution that Pricilla Benham and others had put together. It outlined election procedures for officers to rotate up from secretary, to co-chair, and to chair. The chair would host the breakfast meeting, oversee election of a new secretary, and would be responsible for organizing the next women’s history session. The Co-chair would assist the chair as newsletter editor, gather attendance information, and collect session papers on women for the Texas Woman’s University archives that archivist Dawn Letson would accept and house. The secretary would collect breakfast tickets, read minutes of previous meetings, and take notes of the present meeting and give a copy to the newsletter editor, at that time, Ouida Dean. Until Pricilla Benhams’s husband’s fatal illness in 2000 and after 2005 when her Parkinson’s disease interfered with her activities and travel, the University of Houston history instructor kept the women’s breakfast group organized and on task. Since her retirement the women have been less well organized and have had only a secretary to record attendance and interests and a chair to organize the next women’s history session.26

Networking at the breakfasts provided support and encouragement for research and publishing women’s history, and helped broaden the sphere of East Texas history. Barbara J. Rozek of Houston chaired the spring women’s session in Huntsville in 1993 where Jane Guzman of Dallas talked about “Dallas Businesswomen of the Barrio: From Kitchens to Boardrooms,” Beverly Rowe of Texarkana gave a paper on “Listening For Women’s Voices: Civil War in East Texas,” and Linda Hudson of Kilgore presented a paper on “Women in Our East Texas Past: A Source of Discovery,” in which she explained that the “problem confronting East Texas women is not a lack of significant women in our area, but an overabundance of them.” She admonished, “Women of our generation have a duty to preserve women’s history through women’s eyes and women’s hearts for future generations of women.”27

In Huntsville at the breakfast, the women again voted to accept the constitution they had adopted at the previous meeting and made plans for the fall meeting by electing Marion Holt chair, Gail Beil, co-chair, and Marnie Bogic, secretary. Dean created a one-page newsletter for the next two breakfast meetings, which was included with the Journal mailings. Thirty-eight different East Texas women, their husbands, and Doug Barnett of the Texas State Historical Association attended four women’s breakfast sessions between 1991 and 1993. The spring meeting in Huntsville in 1993 was a milestone for the Association’s Women’s History Breakfast, for the women were accepted into the fold as harmless rebels and they faced no more inquisitions in front of the Board of Directors. The breakfasts and women’s session have since become a regular part of the routine of Association meetings.28
Benham eventually gave up on creating a publication on "East Texas Women of Distinction" because of difficulties in finding a publisher. In January 1995, she considered asking the Board for sponsorship of such a publication to help give the project more validity. Instead of one publication on East Texas women, the various research projects generated by the Women's History Breakfasts have led to session presentations. Encouragement from those papers led to a wide variety of publications. The *East Texas Historical Journal*, and the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, both have published papers originally presented in sessions, and while some were expanded into book chapters, others became book-length publications.9

The Women's History Breakfasts have settled down to a routine of women and men introducing themselves and sharing briefly their current research or history interests. In 1997 Rozek had women bring their favorite quote by a woman, and in 1998 Pat Kell organized a quilting project and the "Lone Star" Quilt, when raffled, raised almost $2,000 for the Association's endowed account. Beginning in 2000 the women began mourning the death of the breakfast founders. Margaret Henson died suddenly late in 2000, Ernestine Linck in 2001, and Lucille Terry in 2002. Beginning in 2001 and until her death in September 2006, Sylvia McGrath sent out the newsletter via email from Stephen F. Austin State University. Like the dedicated historian and beloved teacher that she was, the Radcliff and Michigan State trained professor died at her desk after thirty-eight years of teaching women's history at the Nacogdoches university.10

Men attended the Women's Breakfasts from the beginning. Doug Barnett came seeking entries on women and authors for the *Handbook of Texas*. Max Lale, whose authoritarian voice was like the voice of God, blessed the women's breakfasts and came with his wife Cissy Stewart Lale, who introduced the organization to the primitive art of Fort Worth's Sweetie Ladd. Charles Linck, who came with Ernestine (who always dressed as if she had stepped out of a page in *Vogue Magazine*), recalled how intimidated he felt by all the accomplishments of the women. While most men came with their wives, one man, Melvin Mason of Sam Houston State University, introduced himself by announcing that as a recent widower he was there looking for a wife, which brought laughter but no volunteers. Ron Ellison of Beaumont has been a regular attendee. R.G. Dean, whose wife Ouida was a founder of the breakfasts, suggested the name be standardized as "Women's History Breakfast" when he was Association president in 2005. Up to then the women did not have a standard name for the Saturday morning breakfasts and had used various names according to what the program chair sent into the office for the program.11
The Women's History Breakfasts have been held at every spring and fall meeting since 1991. In addition to the thirty-six Women's History Breakfasts where women networked and shared research, by 2008 the breakfast group had organized thirty-six sessions on Women's History. By September 2008, Association women and men members have made a total of 105 historical presentations on women associated with the East Texas area. In the early days of the breakfasts these papers were placed in the archives of Texas Women's University, the East Texas Research Center at Stephen F. Austin State University, Rice University, and other repositories where they are available to researchers.  

As a result of encouraging research in the history of East Texas women many presentations have been made. Jean Stuntz spoke on women in Spanish Texas, and Carolyn Norgaard on women in old Nacogdoches; Beverly Rowe and Vicki Betts enlightened the audience on American Civil War women; Francelle Pruitt wrote on divorced and abandoned women in the nineteenth century; Mary Kirby and Bettie Kennedy made presentations on African American women; Cynthia Devlin talked on women land men and airline stewards; Sarah Jackson spoke on women poets and writers; Blanche Brick researched her aunt, the first woman mayor of Longview; Carol Riggs told about women in the lumber industry; and Sarah Greene, an editor herself, presented women editors and publishers of small town newspapers. Marie Alsmeyer, a regular breakfast attendee and retired Navy WAVE who once told of her experiences in World War II, recalled the most memorable women's session she ever witnessed. That was when former Woman's Air Service Pilot Marion Stegeman Hodgson of Fort Worth appeared in uniform as did Janet Brantley of Texarkana College. Brantley, who was dressed in coveralls, brogans, and bandana, repeated the words that she heard from the oral interviews that she conducted with WWII women defense workers in the Texarkana and Karnack defense plants. To share this knowledge of East Texas women with a wider audience, presenters should expand their papers and submit them for publication in the East Texas Historical Journal. Since 1980 there have been eleven women Association presidents and seven of those have served since 1991. Women have become more active in all areas of organization leadership, partially as a result of their increased encouragement at the breakfasts. In the seventeen years since the first Women's Breakfast, time has taken several women members of the East Texas Historical Association who held the living memory of events that shaped the Women's History Breakfasts and the history of the Association. The sanitized official Minutes of Board Meetings contain none of the controversy surrounding the first Women's Breakfasts. Furthermore, the official records of this era are boxed away in the East Texas Research Center and need cataloging before they are available for examination. Much of the personal correspondence between the members about those early breakfast meetings has been lost It did not seem important to keep letters about ordinary events. The East Texas women who planned and met for breakfast in 1991 did not think of themselves as history makers until their experiences were compared with the case with which the African American historians held their first breakfast ses-
The controversy surrounding the women's desire to breakfast together was reflective of the early stages of the post-feminist era, a backlash against the women's rights movement that had begun at the peak of the women's movement in 1977 when the National Women's Conference met in Houston. This conference was the first meeting of its kind for women since the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. As a result of her attending the meeting and getting little response John Birch Society attorney Phyllis Schlafly and other conservative women organized groups such as the Eagle Forum, Right to Life, and the Conservative Caucus in opposition to the Equal Rights Amendment and other agendas of the radical feminist movement. It was in the midst of this controversy that the ETHA women first decided to have breakfast together and thereby raised fears and concerns about their disrupting the smoothly operating ETHA organization.35

Despite its rocky beginning, the ETHA Women’s History Breakfast has remained non-political and non-controversial. It is a quiet non-activist, networking group much the same as it was with its first meeting. Women and men introduce themselves, share news of their research projects and recent publications on East Texas Women. Men come and visit and men go, and as far as anyone knows, Melvin Mason never did find that wife.

NOTES


9“Jones and Winegarten, Capitol Women, 55-60.


11ETHA Fall Program, Nacogdoches, Texas, September 13 & 14, 1991.

12Margaret Henson to Linda Hudson; Ernestine Sewell Linck, Summer 1991, Hudson, Personal files.

"Personal interview, Archie P. McDonald to Linda Hudson, September ETHA meeting, 2007.

"Fall ETHA Program, September 24, 1991.

"Linda Hudson, Personal Recollection.

"Survey form and results, Hudson, Personal File.

"Minutes and Newsletter, Fall Breakfast 1991, Hudson, Personal File. Attending first ETHA Women's History Breakfast; Ernestine Sewell Linck (dec'd), Commerce; Linda Hudson, Kilgore; Ada Holland (dec'd), Kennard; Patricia Wallace, Burkeville; Mary Appleberry, Ouida Dean, Vera Dugas (dec'd), Sylvia McGrath (dec'd), Nacogdoches; Jewel T. Cates (dec'd), Dallas; Gladys Mesenheimer (dec'd) and Mrs. W.S. Terry (dec'd), Jefferson; Linda Cross, Tyler; Mary Ann Chapman, Argyle; Patricia Kell, Baytown; Jo Ann Stiles, Marion Holt, Mamie Bogue, and Wanda Landrey, Beaumont; Elizabeth Huff, Carol Riggs, Lufkin; Martha Moore.


"Linda Hudson to Archie P. McDonald, October 6, 1991, Hudson Personal File.

"Pat Kell to Linda Hudson, February 23, 1992, Hudson Personal File; Women's Breakfast Minutes, February 1992, Attending, Audrey Kariel, Marjorie Perkins, Marshall; Barbara J. Rozek, Marilyn Reinhardt, Margaret S. Henson, Pricilla Benham, Houston; Lennijo Blair, Hurst; Jewel Cates, Dallas; Patricia Kell, Baytown; Wayne and Mamie Bogue, Wanda Landrey, Terry Heath, Cynthia Weller, Beaumont; Richard and Ada Holland Life. Kennard, Carol Riggs, Lufkin; Mary Ann Chapman, Argyle; Mary Appleberry, Vera Dugas, Nacogdoches; Lucille Morgan Terry, Jefferson.


"ETHA Program, September 18, 1992, Nacogdoches, Texas.

"Hudson to McDonald, September 29, 1992; East Texas Women's History Newsletter, Spring 1993, Ouida Dean, editor. Hudson Personal Files; Marietta Holley, Samantha Rastles the Woman Question (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1983).


"ETHA Spring Program, February 20, 1993, Huntsville, Texas.


"Linda Hudson, Personal Recollection.

"Minutes, ETHA Women's History Breakfast, Fall 2005, Hudson Personal Files.


