KATHRYN HUNTER

LEGACY

East Texas' Lost History

Finding the stories of real people through personal narratives.

By Kathryn Hunter

When my grandparents bought a house and 18 acres of land in Nacogdoches County in the early 2000s, an old barn came with it. Several contractors said it would cost as much to fix as to build a new one, and my grandparents chose to repair the old. From the front it looks much the same as it did, but the back was replaced with steel siding, and a new floor was put in.

"I hate to see old stuff done away with, destroyed," Pappy tells me, "and I just liked it."

He liked the way it looked and the way it was made. Woodworking is his hobby, and he didn't want to stand all day on a hard concrete slab. The 1930s-era barn's foundation is pier and beam.

Old things and old places like my grandparents' barn spark my interest in history, but the stories are what draw me above all else, the rich and varied and often fragmentary tales told over a cup of coffee or, better still, left written down and happened upon suddenly as if they were messages in a bottle.

"Why do some things stay in your mind all through the years, and thousands of others escape?" Willa Mae Trotti Bailey, 1905–98, writes in her unpublished memoirs titled *Things I've Remembered*. Bailey was married to my great-grandmother's brother. I never met her or her descendants, but at times her words, which were distributed as handmade copies among the family, feel like a personal letter.

She describes in lovely, minute detail her childhood in early 1900s Louisiana near the Texas border — the swept-earth yards, the syrup and turnip greens and ham, the childhood pranks, the sowing of cotton and corn and the many family and friends who, like her, watched the world change so much and so quickly.

I spent many summers of my own childhood in Deep East Texas. I grew up thinking of it as a nowhere place that had always been what it was, not recognizing that the first large migrations to Texas occurred in the east, and that these rich, cotton-focused farmlands were the "civilized," cultural heart of the state decades before western parts were thought of as anything but wilderness outposts.

My grandparents now live near the town of Cushing, which was founded in 1902 as a stop on the Texas & New Orleans Railroad — the midpoint between Dallas and Beaumont. Today the rails are long gone, and the city limit sign lists a population of 612. For every old storefront or house that still stands in town, a half-dozen or more have tumbled and gone. The dollar store is the main center of commerce now, and most residents drive to larger towns like Henderson or Nacogdoches to work and shop.

But small towns like Cushing were more headwaters than backwaters in their heyday. A center not only for the townspeople but for the surrounding rural communities of farmers and sawmill workers, they held the staples and services necessary for life.

"Years ago, we were almost isolated from the rest of the world by the muddy, slick roads in the winter and dusty and bumpy ones in the summer," Beatrice Rohrbaugh writes in a 1949 edition of the Cushing newspaper. "We seldom traveled more than 30 miles from home."

This excerpt I've found in another rare, spiral-bound gem called *A Tale of a Railroad Town*, along with other newspaper clippings, short essays and tales of Cushing's feudal murders and well-known characters. Janet Nelson, a Cushing resident, had worked to compile these scraps of history into a book that my grandparents purchased at city hall.

I have questions, so I keep looking. I stumble onto a memoir published by John Mixon, law alumni professor at the University of Houston Law School, in which he includes a chapter about his childhood growing up on a farm a few miles outside of Cushing during the 1930s and '40s. A passage he writes about the *de facto* prevention of African-Americans from voting — Mixon listening in as his father discusses with a black neighbor and friend whether the man's vote is worth the risk of lynching — reminds me that there is no perfect version of the past here. Slavery, the Klan, segregation ... all of it must be remembered and understood along with the good. One small cemetery I visit still has a stark-looking chain-link fence separating the black cemetery from the white.

There aren't many people left to ask about the old times, but my grandparents direct me to Betty Nichols, 87, who stands tall and smiling to greet me — if her hair was not pure white, she could easily be mistaken for a woman a generation or two younger. Her voice has a songlike lilt to it, like a Southern preacher's. I find out

The author's grandparents restored this 1930s barn (left), turning its interior into a woodworking shop; the nearby town of Cushing (right) was founded in 1902.

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she and my grandmother, though there's less than a mile of county road between them, have been exchanging long, handwritten letters for years.

She answers my questions about who had lived down the road, and what Cushing was like, and the changes that have come to it. When she was a child, they drew water from the creek to fill a tub for bathing in the yard, letting it warm in the sun; the nights had been lit by coal-oil lamps, and later the brighter "Aladdin" lamps. She remembers electricity coming to Flower Mountain, the large hill where her family's homesite was, when she was a young girl.

Laughing, Nichols tells me: "One man didn't want to take it because he said, 'My wife will want refrigerators and everything else.' He wouldn't let them put the poles up on his place."

But even this stubborn holdout — he kept families farther up the hill from getting electricity, too — eventually acquiesced.

Nichols cannot tell me much about the time before hers, though both her people and her husband's people have deep roots in the area. I find their surnames, like a handful of others, running like a thread through the many cemeteries I visit, some quite far apart.

One cemetery is much more isolated than the others. My cousin Jake, who went to high school in Cushing, introduces me to Tim Denny. We stand on his land in a small grove of trees where the shadows are deep and cool. A new, large headstone stands where there used to be many smaller, very old ones — the names are Nichols and Fullers, the last name of Nichols' mother-in-law. Denny points to an adjacent group of trees and says a Native American chief was said to be buried there; the grave, marked with a pile of rocks, has disappeared, and Denny thinks they simply sank into the earth. Jake shows me a concrete channel just below the hill, of unknown age and origin.

Denny takes us by UTV to the site of San José de los Nazonis Mission, founded on Shawnee Creek in 1716 near a village of the Nasoni Indians, a Caddoan tribe. Unsuccessful, the mission was moved for a short time to present-day Zilker Park in Austin, and then later to San Antonio, where it was renamed Mission San Juan Capistrano (the restored mission is currently overseen by the National Park Service).

On the original mission site, there's only a stone marker, placed there by the Texas Department of Transportation in 1926. We have permission to visit the site, on private property, but it still takes a great deal of work to locate it, like having to find the right haystack before you even start looking for the needle. Pine saplings grow thick as walls. The light is starting to go and I'm beginning to give up hope when Jake finds it at last. The marker offers little, however, to describe the village or the roughly 1,200 years of Caddoan presence in East Texas. So many stories that took place on these lands were unwritten; so much has been lost.

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Cushing was once an important stop on the Texas & New Orleans Railroad; a marker shows the approximate location of San José de los Nazonis Mission, founded in 1716.

When you're traveling the back roads that snake through the trees for mile after dusty mile, and the road that starts in a nowhere place seems to end there too, look closer. Look beyond the vines and shadows, beyond what has long gone to what little remains — the dogtrot houses with their glassless windows and rusty tin roofs, the corduroy fields overtaken by brambles and sweetgum, the countless cemeteries with their leaning headstones and gloomy old cedars.

See this and write your story down — as much as you can remember.

Kathryn Hunter is an Austin writer who grew up in East Texas.