

Karen Howden

Interviewed by Aurora Kolar

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Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi

Transcribed by Aurora Kolar

**Aurora Kolar:** My name is Aurora Kolar, it is September 16th, we are in the beautiful city of Corpus Christi, Texas, and we are here with my interviewee Mrs. Karen Howden, to talk a little bit about Old Bayview Cemetery. Mrs. Howden do I have permission to record you?

**Karen Howden:** Absolutely! Yes.

**AK:** All right. Then we will start off with a few questions. Firstly, how did you find your passion for history and teaching?

**KH:** Actually, my first teaching field was government and when I got my job teaching eighth grade history I was excited because I got to teach government with that but it was being with eighth graders who, thirteen years on, they'd never really been taught history. They, well you know they dressed up as pilgrims and such as that, but they were never, they were never taught why pilgrims came and the consequences of their coming. That, that was never, they never made those connections, and so when I was able to teach (grandfather clock starts to chime) with them, teach to them these consequences and reasons. Then they were, they were enthralled and, most of them, and I was enthralled I really enjoyed sharing history.

**AK:** Next question? All right how did you come to be the vice president of Nueces County Historical Commission?

**KH:** Well actually I'm the vice, I was the vice president of the Nueces County Historical Society. The commission is, the Nueces County Historical Commission is part of the Commissioners Court in Nueces County and its they are, they are appointed, and we appoint a chair and a co-chair but I've, I have never held those positions. I was, I was the vice president of the Nueces County Historical Society and um-hm, just being involved with the society the, with the interest in history, and um, Anita Eisenhower, she was the one who suggested I run for vice president. And like in most societies there is usually no one running against you. (Karen laughs) So, I became the vice president. My duties was basically to take over if the president could not be there. I know it is going to sound strange, but I am very uncomfortable in front of a crowd. Unless your eighth graders, then I can sing and dance, stand on my head, whatever. But in a crowd, in front of my peers I, I pretty well clam up, and sometimes I can, when I'm talking about Old Bayview Cemetery my passion for protecting that outweighs my um, my timid (Karen laughs) personality. So, anyway I never did become president, I told them I was not even interested in being president because I did not want to have to sit, stand up and speak. And you can only serve so many terms for us in a particular position as a[n] officer. So, then I became the hospitality chair. I bring the punch and the cookies. (Karen laughs)

**AK:** An excellent job to be sure. Um, how did you first hear about Old Bayview Cemetery?

**KH:** You know I do not remember the first time I heard about it I, I do not remember I, and it was not anything that kind of stuck in my head. I may have read about it in a column in the paper or something like that, but, to read it in the newspaper you know you look at that and you say "oh that's, that's terrible, that's, someone needs to restore someone needs to protect". Whatever group that is doing a good job now they need to be commended or whatever. But it is too easy to be dismissed from it just by reading an article. That is the reason why we do the Voices of South Texas is to actually get people down there. And the first time I was ever in Old Bayview Cemetery was, I was actually in there with eighth graders. We had gone on a field trip to the museum, and Flour Bluff ISD is a very large school and we had almost 400 eighth graders trying to circulate into the, into the museum and the Lexington and such. And we had about 30 minutes of just downtime and I said something to the bus driver, and he was game, and he took us over there. He knew where it was at. And um-hm, we walked through it. I remember that the grass was very high, I remember that you know the tree limbs were pretty shoddy and the kids were walking 'round there, I probably had maybe 60 kids out there. They walked around and I did not know anything the people there, at that time. This is probably thirty years ago and uh, twenty-five, thirty years ago. So, I really could not, share a whole lot with them I knew that it was with Zachary Taylor's troops, I could tell 'em that but I couldn't find those soldiers because it was so overgrown. Uh, one thing I remember about that though, is we looked at the headstone with the two sisters who had drowned in, um, the, off the Island. And that marker was upright. Okay. It was standing up and the kids were just fascinated by that because they never found the girls. And, um, that marker when I became involved with preserving Old Bayview Cemetery, that markers down and it is in really bad shape. So that was something that I remembered just that short of time that that marker had been in there vandalized or erosion, you know, had, had caused it to fall over, you know, but it was, I was just flabbergasted that that's, that marker was down.

**AK:** How did you get involved with the upkeep Old Bayview Cemetery?

**KH:** Um, I, I was (chair creeks), I am part of the Nueces County historical commission. I am on the Nueces County historical commission and the last, um, three years before I retired from Flower Bluff in 2009. And if you know anything about teachers in public school, uh, they base your retirement on the last three years' salary. So, I had spent pretty much the last three years going above and beyond with the UIL student council. It was just trying to get stipends up to get my salary up. So, I was not that active with a commission from about, um, 2006 to 2009. I would check in on him occasionally, so that when I did retire and I came back, Anita Eisenhower handed me a pamphlet from a cemetery walk in, um, Amarillo, Texas. And I looked at that and the first, they just clicked that this is what we are going to have to do. We can do this. It sounds like fun. I had just retired. I wanted to be in, you know, get kids involved and stuff. And I still had some connections with schools. And that is when I became interested in really interested in preserving and uh, restoring it it's, it's because I had, I had told Ms. Eisenhower at the time, you know, this is something we could do. You cannot get people interested in something just by putting a column in a paper or reading it in a book. Yeah, you are going to grab some of them, but you got to fire up a community, you got to show them what is there, and you have to make it

real to them. So, our very first cemetery walk took place in, uh, the spring of 2010. Uh, I had called up to Amarillo to the cemetery up in Amarillo that was conducting that walk and talk to them and they, they told me about gentlemen in San Angelo at the Fort Concho that was doing a cemetery walk. So, I called him, and I was really scared you know, my gosh, you know, we are going to have people or invite people out here and I am going to have to talk. And, uh, he said, just do it. He said, they will come, just do it. And, uh, we really had not decided on when was the best time to do this, but he had suggested doing it in spring. Flowers are blooming, you know, that kind of thing. So, our very first one was in the Spring of 2010 and the people who came out, of course the cemetery's in terrible shape. Its overgrown, limbs are down, many, many headstones are down and they, um, but every single one of those people that talk to us and we had about 300 people show up. We are all only out there four hours. So, we had about 300 people just show up. We were amazed. Um, every single one that talked to said, thank you for doing this, we've wanted to come out and see the cemetery, but we either didn't know where it was at, or, you know, we didn't know that much about it and we were telling them about those folks that were there. We settled on our cemetery walk being in November, in honor of Veterans Day, because it was started by the soldiers from the Mexican War and from Zachary Tyler's troops, uh, they were, it was half the United States army that was in Corpus Christi and the summer of 1845. It was about 4,000 troops that eventually showed up here. And they were listed as the Army of Observance, of Observation, Army of Observation because it was no man's land. Mexico was claiming, uh, the Rio uh, the Nueces as their Northern boundary and Texas was claiming the Rio Grande as the southern boundary. So, it was this no man's land in between. And because we are south of the Nueces river, Corpus Christi was in that no man's land. So, when the troops came here, they were, it was to provoke. I mean, there was no other way to describe it. And they were here until March of 1846, when they go south, finally get, uh, Mexico to cross the Rio Grande so that they can have a battle, and while that is their excuse, Mexico invaded Texas. So now, and by March of 1846, Texas is a state, which kind of makes you wonder. When Zachary Taylor's troops were here in 1845, the summer of 1845, Texas is still Texas, a Republic, and it was a foreign country. So, you had half the United States army in a foreign country preparing to invade another foreign country. Anyway. So I mean, it was, it, it, wasn't an, I love saying that too much eighth graders because they, and then they understood that, you know, people just don't go off to war there's little shenanigans going on to try to provoke or to, to, um, (Karen clears her throat) there's an end goal. And, uh, the war with Mexico went on for two years. The reason, goal is we get California, which has all this gold, uh, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, and Texas. And, um, I cannot, I just cannot imagine them going to war for the land between the Nueces and the Rio Grande. I just cannot. I just cannot see that, um, I feel that it was more to get the southwest, um, Gold's discovered in California in 1849, the war with Mexico is over in 1848. Um, that goal did not just pop up out of the ground in 1849. It was there, they knew it was there. And people in California knew that they did not want that goal to go to the, to Mexico, to the government in Mexico. Cause that is who, would've, who would've, um- California did not want to be a slave state. And so, they had to change the Missouri compromise. They came up with a compromise of 1850, which allowed for popular sovereignty, which starts this little miniature civil war in Kansas and Nebraska.

And, um, you know, then we go on into Civil War of trying to balance this, um, legislature and just did not work. Um, just because Zachary Taylor's troops came to Corpus Christi. (Karen laughs) That's, that is, what is going to be the consequences. So, it is, it is, they are really important to be there. And it is, it is the staging area. Um, what we have found is that when I spoke to the gentlemen down in, at the Palo Alto national battlefield, my question to them was where are those soldiers who were killed in the Battle of Palo Alto? Some of them were Zachary Taylor's troops. And he said that they were buried in Brownsville, but the department of the Army disinterred them and moved them to New Orleans. Well, no one moved the soldiers at Old Bayview. They are still there. So as far as we know, Corpus Christi at Old Bayview cemetery are the only location of soldiers who were part of Zachary Taylor's troops who died while they were soldiers and Zachary Taylor troops. Now we have, we have veterans of Taylor's troops here who came back to Corpus Christi lived, die, you know, work, and they are buried over there. But I believe there is about 30, 40 of them at Old Bayview that died while they were the Army of, of Observation. They died of accidents, the Dayton explosion, rattlesnake bites, disease, you know, heart attack. They died of just various things. When you put 4,000 troops together in 1845. So, um, they are still there somewhere in Old Bayview. They are still there. Um, nowhere else in Texas, though, they are all dug up and sent back over to New Orleans. So, the, um, when we started doing the cemetery walks and we, we settled on November, tried to hit Veteran's Day. They, um, we, we discovered that doing it in the spring, we also had the problem of our reenactors. They go and do Goliad, and the Alamo, in San Jacinto and such. So, it was really putting a lot of pressure on them. So, we, we invited the city council when we had our next cemetery walk, which was in the, in November of 2010. And once again, we were out there, and the grass was high. The limbs were down. People thanked us profusely about doing that. And we invited city council to come out there and only one city council member came out and she was just appalled. Well, we had already set up a work day for December. I think it was like December 5th or something to go out there and clean up and trim limbs and such off the headstones and set it up with the city that we would go do that. And when we got out there, it was done. That city council member went back and said, "you're going to go over there and clean that up". So, it was all, it was just great. It was wonderful. And they have done a really good job ever since. They brought, you know, I can call them and say, "Hey, this is, grass has grown up over here getting pretty high. Y'all need to do something about it". And it is on the circuit for downtown Corpus Christi and Cole Park and such. It is one of those. And they do a rotation, but if we have an event out there of historical markers or whatever, and I call them, they will come out there and do it. They will, they will run the mowers over it. Um, but as we, as we just did these cemetery walks and you just became curious, um, back in 2000, there was a grant for a master plan for Old Bayview cemetery. And part of that grant money went for a website that you can go to at the Corpus Christi public libraries and, uh, several Monsignor Howell, uh, Rosa Gonzalez, Geraldine McGloin, and Herb Canales. They researched as many of those that are interred there and came up with this website. And with that, they had obituaries plus some of them had family stories, letters, and such. So that is on that website. And then you just go to that website and you start looking and you think, wow, this is just amazing. These, you know, these people had a life, um, and, and they can just be random. I can, you know, some of them, there is not a whole lot to say about them, but one day I was just clicking around and came across Jessica

Clark. And, you know, she was a young woman and she, her and the other, her friends while Corpus Christi was occupied during the Civil War, by Union troops, they would, um, pass messages to Confederate sympathizers about what these Union soldiers and officers were doing. And they were probably about 16, 17 years old, these girls. So, I mean, that's kind of dangerous if you think about it. And, but there was a lark, you know, when they were 17, they were having a good time, young men, you know, it is, it was great. And, uh, uh, if you know about Reconstruction in the South, it, uh, Corpus Christi was really hard hit. We had gone through a drought. Money was not any good, and, and here we are occupied by these soldiers. So anyway, that's, um, as, as we started picking up on these stories and looking at these headstones and the, the um, how vandals had been in there, and, and we probably don't have as much destruction from vandals as we do with erosion and, um, mowers. You know, that is the, the mowers and the, uh, they get in a big hurry. They let the grass get too high up. They just mow over a headstone laying on the ground. And that, that tears them up too. So that that's pretty much how I became involved in the upkeep and the preservation, just because as we were trying to bring attention to it, we needed to, um, you know, we needed, we wanted to fix some things up. Our, our, um, preservation and upkeep, um, back in 2018, the National Center for Preservation/Technology Training, which is part of the National Park system, came in with some Harvey, Hurricane Harvey funds. And they did a workshop on how to repair and reset headstones. And he had called me, I had been in contact with him many times just looking for suggestions. And he called me and said, "Would you like for us to come down there and do this workshop?" And I said, "Oh yeah. Oh, yes, this is, this is what I need". And we did a, um, a two-day, two-day workshop, three-day workshop on, um, resetting and re-repairing headstones. Uh, at that time we had a very, um, pro historic cemetery director of Parks and Recreation- J. Ellington. And we said, "Hey, we want a tripod, aluminum tripod, so we can do this. We've all been training". And there was three of us that had been trained. And we want to do this. We want to put up some. Our goal was to reset the dangerous headstones. All of them are in danger. Every single one of them are in danger, but some of them are dangerous they could fall on top of someone. And you really have to have permission from family to do anything to it. However, if the headstone is dangerous, we could do it. You know, the city does not want a liability suit against them or whatever. So, um, once we got our tripod, I set up a couple of, of work days. My most successful was with the Navy Chiefs. Um, called out to the NAS Corpus Christi and they put me in contact with Navy Chiefs. And the first thing that they did was we reset those veteran headstones there were 16 of them. But, you know, you get a bunch of guys out there and they are digging, and they are resetting, and they are showing off how strong they can be. They got carried away with, "Hey, is there any others we can do?". So, between those two workdays, we probably did 25 headstones, 25 or 30 headstones. And it was just amazing. Uh, then we had, um, a group of, um, contractors, Association of General Contractors. They have, they always want to do a, uh, um, a day of giving and they came out there and they hit probably another, you know, 12. And then the Boy Scouts came out there two times and we did probably another 15. So yeah, we have done quite a bit. Um COVID has we were planning on doing one last spring, but COVID put in halt to that. I just, we just did not think we could get out there and social distance and then summer hit. It is just too darn hot to do it in the summer. But, um, anyway, that is how I became involved with the upkeep and the preservation and such.

**AK:** Can you tell us some more about some of the stories you learned while you were working on it?

**KH:** Um, I've, there's just hundreds of them, just a hundred of them, that, 600 of them to be sure. But let me just kind of share some of them with you. Um, probably my favorite one is this, and I have several favorites, is the story of John Marks Moore. And I, I shared that when I was out there with y'all that day, John Marks Moore was born in Georgia and, um, on a plantation, his daddy was owned a plantation. His granddaddy had this plantation, and when he was born, he was given, um, a slave Sam and Sam's about his same age. They grew up together. They learned to read and write together. Um, Sam was, um, he was, they were side by side the entire time. So, Sam was more like a brother. And the more we know about Sam, the more we think he probably was John Mark's brother, um, or cousin. Okay. So, it is, it is, um, you know, that we will never know that story. That is just me speculating. Anyway, when they are 16 years old, uh, daddy buys a plantation in Alabama that has iron works on it. And he sends John Marks up to, I believe it is Pennsylvania to learn the business of iron works. And Sam goes with them. And, you know, hey, they are 16 years old, you know, what are you doing at 16, you know, kind of thing. And they come back and him, and he goes out there and he is the one that is in charge of that plantation in Alabama. And of course, Sam's right there in with him. And, um, he is, John Marks, the only, he only, this is coming from his stepdaughter, um, pardon me from, um, Sam, Sam's stepdaughter. John Marks only personally owned, uh, had only personally had three slaves. Now, he, when he bought the plantation, he had some slaves so that when he went over to the plantation in Alabama, his dad, you know, since I am with him. But he had Sam and he had, uh, purchased a man that was, uh, maybe he had four. He had purchased a man who had run away over and over and over again. And the owner, you know, told him, you know, "Good luck because I can't keep him here. He's gone". But we know he comes back around. And as soon as that man found out that John Marks was now his owner, he came in and worked for John Morris Moore. He bought a blind man, and then he bought a wife for Sam. And that was when they were in Corpus Christi. Melvina was the slave of the Britons who own the Centennial house at the time. And, um, which kind of interesting because the Britain's are ardent unionists during the Civil War, they leave Corpus Christi, but they own slaves. They own Melvina. Anyway, he buys Melvina so that her and Sam can get married. Okay. That is probably a bit later on. Anyway, so while they are in Alabama, um, John Marks and Sam, are an Alabama, Sam gets into a fight. Two, two different stories. Um, he killed the guy, or he injured the guy, but it really did not matter. So, John Marks told Sam, "You need to leave. You need to go to Texas, and you need to go to Mexico. You will be a free man in Mexico". So, John Marks leaves, a pardon me, um, Sam leaves. And he, um, while in Texas, he was, um, he was freighter, um, that took goods into Mexico. And he, um, then in the 1850s, John Marks comes to Corpus Christi and he brings with him a dredge boat that he had an Alabama to start dredging a ship channel in Corpus Christi, him, and a couple of partners. And Sam shows up in Corpus Christi. I do not know if Sam was here first, or if John Marks was here first, but they had been in touch with each other, obviously to both show up at the same time. And Sam, um, works with him on the, on this dredging and other businesses that John Marks has. Um, the, the dredging did not take place until late 1850s

and, um, of Civil War interrupts the dredging. And nothing happens with the ship channel until the 1890s, (Grandfather Clock chimes) but he, um, Sam with John Marks joins the Confederate Army here in Corpus Christi, the defense, because it is port and, uh, we were shipping salt. They had salt flats out by the Laguna Madre and salt is a preservative, very important. So they, um, he was, you know, he was part of the Confederacy when the Civil War is over, uh, John Marks, tells, Sam, and them, of course, Sam probably already knew that, the, about the Emancipation Proclamation, um, prior to the end of the Civil War. And he tells Sam, you take a wagon, go out there and you tell every slave that is out in the countryside that they are now free. And Sam gets in the back of this wagon and he has a shotgun across his lap, and they take off and I do not know who they brought in. I do not know if it was an issue there were not plantations in this area. So, if there was a slave, it was, you know, someone working side by side, the, the land owner, you know, kind of thing. And it was my guess is that they did not come in. What were they going to do? If they had a place to live out there you know, they were not living in, if they were living in the shack, the owner was living in a shack too. That that was just how slave, pretty much, slavery was in Corpus Christi area. You had, um, you know, slaves that worked, um, in Corpus Christi for businesses for business owners, or they were, um, worked for a shipping company in Corpus Christi, but it wasn't, you know, the plantation, the cotton and all that. They were not growing cotton in Corpus Christi in Nueces County at that time. So, you know, those images are out. But, um, that story comes from, um, Malvina's daughter, Anna, and she is, uh, she speaks very highly of John Marks Moore, and she speaks very highly of his wife. When the Civil War is over his wife and, um, couple others, they start a school for these, these freed African American and their kids. And it was actually in the same building as the white kids. Uh, one was upstairs, the other was downstairs, I cannot remember which one was which. And, um, they were, they were taught, um, trades, you know, a skill. The boys were not there because the boys were out working, but there were no white boys there either. They were out working, but the little kids they were there, and they were teaching them how to sew, how to cook, how to do those kinds of things, because that is all that women did. You know, they, they would teach them how to read and write, but there was really no other skill, you know, that, that they, they were not teaching them to load stuff on a ship. You just have to remember that 1970, that's just what women did. And that is the skill. But believe me, sewing without a sewing machine, that is a skill. That is a, you know, that is an, it is a marketable skill. So, um, anyway, when Anna Moore, Anna the stepdaughter, she marries, she has two, two boys, I believe it is. And she sends them to Baltimore to be educated because John Marks Moore's daughter married. I think the guy's name is Conklin and they moved to Baltimore. And my guess is that those two boys were with them. I, I would be really interested to know what happened to those boys. That is why I understand one ended up in California, but I, I have never chased after that lead. That would be a good one to lead to chase after. I guess, another really good story- I mean the reason I liked the John Marks Moore is because it's, it's, it's really tells the story of what life was like. It also has these connections all the way through these of other people that are in Old Bayview. Another story that I find just fascinating is the Nolan brothers, uh, Tom and Matt Nolan, and they came with Zachary Taylor's troops in 1845, one was 11 years old, and one was 13 years old, um, 9 years old. And they were buglers and drummer boys for Zachary Taylor's troops. And they go and join, you know, they go into Mexico and with these soldiers and 9 and 11 years old, and I think what

is a nine-year-old and 11-year-old doing today? They are not fighting army. They, um, hang out with Texas Rangers and that is, they become after the war, they come back to Texas they are wranglers for the Texas Rangers, of Texas Ranger groups and a company. And, um, eventually become Texas Rangers and eventually ended up in Corpus Christi. They go into law enforcement one is a sheriff, one is a deputy they are both killed in the line of duty. Not at the same time, one before the Civil War and one after the Civil War. Is, but just there, their whole story of what in the world is a nine and a, you know, an 11-year-old doing? Another story that I, I liked is, um, um, Alexander, Alexander Hamilton. He is a doctor. Alexander Hamilton, he is from Canada and during the yellow fever epidemic, um, Corpus Christi lost all their doctors. They all died. And Alexander Hamilton comes down here and he brings with him a student. And that is, that's student's name is Arthur Spohn. And, uh, Hamilton was Spohn's preceptor, his mentor, and, um, of course Spohn goes on. He leaves Corpus Christi eventually, but Alexander Hamilton he is here, and he is in Old Bayview cemetery. But he, you know, they worked with, with, uh, everything, you know, yellow fever and because it resurrected itself over and over, it just does not go to that epidemic portion. Um, he is down there. Um, the last person that was buried at Old Bayview cemetery is Perry Boone. And, um, I, I have come across him by accident. It was, um, a newspaper article that I came across with the Collar Times. And Perry Boone was 104 years old when he died in Corpus Christi and I think it is 1989. And his mom and dad had been slaves and they have markers at Old Bayview cemetery. And Perry Boone, um, he was, um, he at one time he was a, um, deputy, um, deputy with the Sheriff's department. And I understand that that's pretty common that you would have, you know, you do part time deputies type of thing, just depending on what the what's happening in society at the time, but that was in the 1920s or so. Yeah, it would have to because he would have to be pretty young man then. And, um, but he becomes a longshoreman. He is one of the founders of the Negro Longshoreman Union here in Nueces County, which eventually merges to the, with the AFL, CIO. And then he, uh, was the first person to grab the first line off of the first ship that came into the port of Corpus Christi in 1926 when it opened. Um, he, um, when he dies, he is wants to be buried in Old Bayview cemetery prior to his death. And the Parks and Recreation said, no, you cannot do that, it is closed only if you can prove that you are, have family there. And he said, well, my mom and dad said, they bought me a plot. Of course, there is no record of it, but they are there. And after getting some newspaper attention, publicity, the city decided, yeah, let us do that. Let us go ahead and let him be buried there. And we thought he would be right next to his mom and dad. But when we did the ground penetrating radar, he is not there at least there is no detection of it. And my guess is, uh, I called Maxwell Funeral Home because they are the ones that did it. And they said, yes, he is there, but they do not have the location that would go with the records of Old Bayview cemetery, which there are no records of Old Bayview Cemetery. Our Parks and Recreation would be the one that was in charge of that and they don't have anything. So, um, he is there. We do not know where, but he is there. That is, you know, four of them. I mean, I can go on for hours, but you know, you just have to come down there and walk it and see it. It is just, there is just too much to tell as far as the individual stories. And, um, my battery is at 15%, so I do not know how much longer- I could probably do another question.

**AK:** Um, let us, let us take a break. Let us stop the recording and have you pause it or, okay.

**KH:** You're going to pause it right? Cause you are recording, right?

**AK:** Yeah. I am going to stop recording now. Okay.