

Troy Nessner

Local History Heroes

[Intro Music]¹

Troy Nessner – Hi, I’m Troy Nessner, a student, amateur historian, and an avid superhero fan. I was once told that historians are like private detectives, looking for clues in old newspapers, letters, books, interviews, and anywhere else they can search and a friend told me this sounded a lot like Batman and I loved the analogy. I loved the analogy so much I decided to use the idea of the summer blockbuster franchise team-up as a framework for this podcast. And so today on South Texas Stories, I’ll be talking to Dr. Mark Robbins about local history advocacy, celebration, and preservation, and the eventual team-up with other local historians, archeologists, and local history groups in the area for community archeological dig and oral history project at Artesian Park.

[Dramatic Music]²

Mark Robbins – You know a key thing I left out of that story is that the park’s history is really contested, it’s really controversial, it’s at the crosshairs of themes of discrimination and who controls the historical narrative of this city, and we found that this project didn’t silence that, it just collaborated to bring that and it wasn’t going to change things in and of itself, but I felt was like a good indicator of the methodology that could really be useful and impactful.

TN – But before we get to that, we must introduce our hero for today’s podcast, Dr. Mark Robbins. To Me Dr. Robbins is one these history detectives, a real life Batman, minus the fighting. He’s trained in multiple areas of history, but who better to introduce himself than him.

Mark Robbins - I went to the University of Michigan and majored in history, minored in anthropology and in applied statistics, and then I did my masters and PhD in history at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, where I met my wife, uh, Dr. Christine Reiser Robbins who is a historical archeologist. Professionally, I should mention, some of those areas I focus on are labor history. I’m trained in labor history, and cultural history, social and cultural history, I’d like to say I look at the political implications of that, even though my training really isn’t in

¹ Screen Saver by Kevin MacLeod (Royalty free music). Accessed October 26, 2020.
<https://incompetech.filmmusic.io/song/5715-screen-saver/>.

² “Dramatic Production Logo by graham_makes.” Freesound. Accessed November 20, 2020.
https://freesound.org/people/graham_makes/sounds/447522/.

political, you kind of have to grasp at it as best as you can with whatever project you have, and then since being here in Corpus Christi I've um kind of become an oral historian as well and I've done a lot of oral history work, a lot of collaborations in that regard with members of the community and other people at Del Mar or other institutions like Texas A&M Corpus Christi for instance. And incorporated that into my own scholarship too.

TN – When I interviewed Dr. Robbins in September or 2020 I had to imagine the tables felt flipped as Dr. Robbins is usually the one doing the interviewing. He's done a lot of collaborations, and we'll hear him discuss some of these efforts, and how they can culminate into one big project with multiple people from different fields. In this, I too am reminded of superhero comics and their big team ups. We also see how different strengths and skills can complement each other and deliver something truly inspiring. And he found this sort of collaboration when he ended up in Corpus Christi, Texas.

MR - Of course I'm from Michigan and I had spent some time living in some other places. I was in California for a little while, Illinois for a little while, even for a short time in Florida, popped into D.C. a bit, also at various points spent time in Botswana since this I was my father and my mother there growing up, at times, especially when I was baby. So yeah Texas is pretty far from each of those locations (laughs) and I don't actually have any family in Texas either. So basically it was the job I wanted it to be somewhere that valued research but also valued teaching and ideally saw a significant relationship between that and I do think for the most part I experienced that among the faculty that I was exposed to at Brown University, and I think that sort of model really did apply at particularly community colleges, but Del Mar also seemed to have faculty in its social sciences department that executed that model so well and so seamlessly and so passionately and naturally and that I could tell this particularly when I went on the interview and was exposed to some of the other faculty that, that are just wonderful teachers and active researchers, and blended these things together, like you know Dr. Jim Klein and Bryan Stone and a number of others that I had a chance to meet at that time. So that kind of, that was alluring to me, the combination of employment in the field that I wanted to work in (laughs) and not just being any job, but a job that involved some people that I had already admired in just meeting them, thinking that this could be the kind of place that would bring out the best in me professionally and that that would allow me to hopefully help students bring out the best in them and what history could do for them even if they were not even a history major.

TN – So Dr. Robbins made it to South Texas and is working at Del Mar College now, we've been briefly introduced to Dr. Jim Klein and Bryan Stone, history professors at Del Mar College. And just like some of the smarter superheroes who learn everything about the field they're in, or the opponent they're researching, Dr. Robbins tackled South Texas history.

MR - I had a sense of that of Texas history as a larger than life narrative with some realities, some myths and in between. But in terms of any detail, not a whole lot, and I did know however that I was passionate about the idea of learning local history and incorporating that and I knew it wouldn't happen overnight you kind of do it a little bit at a time and I knew that I had a solid framework for how to go about that. I did spend a lot of time in the summer before I started teaching really delving into that process that I can say no amount of books and I say this with a lot of love with books and how much I've learned from them in regards to local history,

or even just the framework that I understand it, that none of that could compare to just the process of talking to people and listening of course with a historian's ear, talking to people, listening to those that have been studying local history, whether or not they're officially you know, historians in the higher education sense and learning from them.

TN – Dr. Robbins really immersed himself into the history of the area, and in doing so he was introduced to some of the local groups that specialize in local history, groups that would come into play and help with the Artesian Park project.

MR - Jim Klein, another history faculty member, he had joined the Landmark Commission, maybe about a year prior to when I did and I was talking to him and he encouraged me to consider it and I did and at the time I kind of looked at it as I'm a student of Nueces County history, history of Corpus Christi, I have a lot to learn, but I can contribute the mindset of what an historian and I was one of the official historians on there. On the commission at that time was a somebody that I admired very much, and a friend, Anita Eisenhower. Anita had talked to me and said, "Hey you know you ought to come, if you're interest in these things, and you ought to come to the Nueces County Historical Commission," and so she talked to me a little bit about that and talked to Jim Klein as well and we showed up and when we were there we got to meet all sorts of other people with so much knowledge of the local community and so much passion for and just doing all these great things. And that was one of the things that struck me too, these are folks who aren't just, and I don't mean just this is great, who sitting around talking about history, They're out there, they're trying to put up that next historical marker that they think could help us learn something about our local heritages, these people they're out there putting on a public history event, they're out there thinking about how we can best preserve the often scarce historical resources we have and just dedicated with so much of whatever free time they have and I believe-Jim and I were both officially invited to the commission.

TN – We've introduced the key players, Dr. Mark Robbins—our hero, Dr. Jim Klein, Dr. Christine Reiser-Robbins, and the members of the Nueces County Historical Commission. Each person and organization has its own strengths and weaknesses, and they build off of one another to fill in those gaps. When I interviewed Dr. Robbins for this oral history project, I took the opportunity to ask him if he's ever broke any of the conventional rules of interviewing or had any interesting techniques. He describes to me one such event, a style that we would see used again at Artesian Park. A technique that utilizes the best space for the comfort of the interviewee, even if the space is loud and crowded.

MR – Once I actually took an interview at Whataburger at like a pretty peak time. And I'm a firm believer that you want it to be at somewhere that makes somebody comfortable, produces the most enriching, free flowing memories, but also maybe even a space that helps to contribute to the production of those memories. And I thought hey I love Whataburger too. (laughs) That makes sense to me.

TN – Artesian Park is the site of a multi-discipline project between oral historians, archeologists, students, the Nueces County Historical Commission, and members of the community.

MR - I mentioned my wife is an historical archeologist and back in 2012 we along with Eric Rey who was at the time a researcher on the Labelle Collection, shipwreck collection at the Museum of Science and History in Corpus Christi, later became a curator at the Museum of the Coastal Bend and now works for Texas Parks and Rec. Anyway, at the time we were all sort of talking about public history and we decided to do an archeological, a public archeology project at Artesian Park. This is the site of, where Taylor's troops on the eve of the US Mexican War, Zachary Taylors troops dug an artesian well, it smelled like rotten eggs, sulfur well. There's a whole mythology that goes with that as well as the history. So a big part of Corpus Christi's claim to national historical significance is this is the place of Taylor's encampment on the eve of the US-Mexican War. It's that, but also Artesian Park was really the public square for over 100 years. It's one of the oldest city parks in Texas. So, what a great place to learn about periods where we do have documents, but sometimes archeology, the artifacts tell us stories that the documents don't, or add additional context then.

TN – The project doesn't end there though, it grows larger, and gains more support from the community.

MR - But why stop there, so we invited the public to come help us dig. This what I mean with that symbiotic relationship between community and research and teaching. We all collectively analyzed our past together as a community, Nueces County Historical Commission, they came out, they did everything from help teach people about history, to set up tables with displays along with us to just you know picking up a shovel and helping people scrape properly in the holes, the pits I should use the real language right (laughs). So we're doing that and members of the public, hundreds of people all told are turning, and anybody from a Boy Scout working on a merit badge, to some of the homeless population in downtown Corpus Christi helping us find artifacts in the sift. I had a bunch of students out there and then they also did some oral history interviews in this archeology project that was also an oral history project. And the idea is that if we are discovering and trying to unearth aspects of our material past in our public square at Artesian Park, or at least which had been, this was a place where everything from war bond rallies to politicians would go there to speak before the age of television, and many other things and also a place that symbolizes a lot of the struggles of downtown Corpus Christi so we're all sort of working together to carefully and responsibly but collaboratively dig that up, not just the experts in some ivory tower. And my students are doing that too, well a number of them picked up recorders or even just did a form of oral history that is sort of just the edges of it, writing down the recollections and putting it in there because at the time I couldn't afford enough recorders. And we're doing this on like a shoestring budget, basically we bought water, and we already had supplies for archeology. But there is something methodologically connected about archeology and oral history, public archeology and historical, or I should say, and oral history. Here we have two sort of methodologies that yield voices that are often left out of the official historical record that captured day to day life.

TN – Dr. Robbins recollection of the events feels like the reminiscing of my favorite superhero comic and movies, when the super heroes are all finally together working to defeat the bad guys, save the city, or in our case, bring the community together in a meaningful way that

explores the history of our community. And not only that, the effort contributes to scholarship as the Drs. Robbins wrote on the subject.

MR - And so there again we wrote an article on this even though this wasn't the main purpose of it, it just was sort of like "Hey let's listen to what we're actually learning from this" not just what we theorized but what we're learning from this additionally to that and share that with people, how this led to so much community collaboration, it was polyvocal, had a lot of different voices in these two methodologies of archeology and oral history, worked very well for community engagement and scholarly purposes. And there again you have my students, you have Christine's students and then you have members of the county historical commission, you've got people from the Coast Bend Archeological Society helping too with some of their expertise in case we got overwhelmed, kids, adults, you know. Just people came out, it was featured in the *Caller Times*.

TN – All the people who contributed to the Artesian Park project are heroes in my mind, not the made-up variety in capes, but the often-overlooked type. The type who work long hours, with limited budgets, digging up history, taking interviews, learning everything they can about an area to make sure that every voice is heard. Their efforts to give voice to those who history has sometimes overlooked or actively silenced is the work of real heroes, and all the people who came out on their free time to create, organize, and contribute to the Artesian Park project deserve our gratitude for enriching our community, and moving us incrementally closer to a real history, where every voice is heard, and the tapestry is seen in full. I'm Troy Nessner, and you've been listening to South Texas Stories.

[Outro music]

Bibliography

Commission, Texas Historical. "How to Apply for a Historical Marker." How to Apply for a Historical Marker | THC.Texas.gov - Texas Historical Commission. Accessed September 3, 2020.

Christine Reiser Robbins and Mark W. Robbins, "Engaging the Contested Memory of the Public Square: Community Collaboration, Archaeology, and Oral History at Corpus Christi's Artesian Park." *Public Historian* 36:2 (May 2014): 26-50.

"Dramatic Production Logo by graham_makes." Freesound. Accessed November 20, 2020. https://freesound.org/people/graham_makes/sounds/447522/.

"Nueces County, TX." Historical Commission | Nueces County, TX. Accessed September 3, 2020. <https://www.nuecesco.com/county-services/county-boards/historical-commission>.

Screen Saver by Kevin MacLeod (Royalty free music). Accessed October 26, 2020. <https://incompetech.filmmusic.io/song/5715-screen-saver/>.

Texas Preservation Handbook for County Historical Commissions. Austin: Texas Historical Commission, 2002.