

Mark Robbins

Interviewed by Troy Nessner

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Transcribed by Troy Nessner

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Troy Nessner: Hello this is Troy Nessner, interviewing Dr. Mark Robbins for South Texas Stories, today is September 26th, 2020. We are conducting this interview over Zoom because of the pandemic. Dr. Robbins do I have your permission to record this interview?

Mark Robbins: Yes, absolutely.

TN: Thank you and thank you again for joining me this morning. Um, let's get started. Why don't you give me a little history of yourself. Where were you raised?

MR: Well, umm, I should say it is a pleasure to be on South Texas Stories and yes. A history of myself, this is always fun because I'm sometimes the one asking questions as a historian. So I'm a historian at Del Mar College, a professor of history, um and I guess in terms of just the basic history of who I am...I was born in Lansing, Michigan, and the son of an elementary school teacher, my mother, and my father is an archeologist, so that was a pretty cool environment for me to grow up in, and obviously one that valued education and different forms of historical inquiry. So in terms of where then I, uh, let me see, in terms of formal education, 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. So, um, wow, you know, I like to tell people that I'm the son of an archeologist and married to an archeologist, and I didn't even meet them through each other. So that's, that's rather unusual in an awesome kind of way. From there, right out of graduate school I went to start teaching at Del Mar College in Corpus Christi. I've been there for, let me see, about eleven years now. One of the things I really like about Del Mar is it's such an ingrained part of the fabric of the community, so if you're, say, teaching history to students who are required to take it, they're

members of the local community, most of the time they're not coming from too far away and you get to see them at HEB or, uh, you know, walking on the street, or since I live on a busy street, driving by honking the horn and saying hi. You know, all kinds of things like that, but in all seriousness, uh, the field of history is one that is supposed to be the collective analysis of the collective experiences of our heritage, or multiple heritage, it is something that very much relates to, um, the experiences, of course, of those in my own classroom and I've found that Del Mar as a basically, as an institution and as a culture, sees the community and, uh, the classroom and our research for that matter, as all kind of intertwined. So that's been really a wonderful thing and something I've enjoyed over the last eleven or so years is kind of seeing that smooth relationship between each of those parts of my professional and personal life. So here I am now, about eleven years into this, hopefully many more in years to go, but 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 that I look at the political implications of that, even though my training really isn't in political history, you kind of have to grasp that 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. I've done a lot of oral history work, a lot of collaboration 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, so that's something that I wasn't necessarily trained to do, but one of the wonderful things about working at Del Mar is you have the flexibility professionally to adjust your interests to whatever you feel is most interesting and important for the community, for your students. I'm sure I could say a lot more about that, but that's basically where I am now, and yeah, so feel free to ask for elaboration on any of that or other questions. I don't want to talk your ear off about, you know, something you may not be interested in.

TN: No that's fine. What brought you down to Del Mar? It's about as furthest south as you can get from Michigan.

MR: (Laughs) Yes, so I was at, in Rhode Island. Of course, I'm from Michigan and I had spent some time living in some other places I should mention too. When I did historical research 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 I was with 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, so I was looking for employment in 2009, having just finished and, uh, was open to kind of working at a whole different range of institutions whether they were, you know, research universities or community colleges, even some other possibilities, but 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 - it's kind of an interesting place in that the priority really is on undergraduate teaching, even though it's like this major research institution. (laughs) So that's not necessarily true of all of its peer institutions where - don't get me wrong a lot of the other peer institutions in that area are, have great teachers there -but a lot of time the graduate students, the research... so, ironically I noticed that as a grad student 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 it 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. So...

TN: How much Texas history or local history did you know prior to moving to Corpus?

MR: Oh, very little. Um (laughs) I recall nuts and bolts, you know, the kind of thing that you'd have to learn and, you know, I suppose some of that started with even the larger-than-life narratives that are even exposed to elementary school kids in Michigan, you know, probably the same thing here but on steroids, but then you know you go to graduate school and you learn some of what is maybe truly there, what is suspect and, you know, I had a sense of that of Texas history as a larger-than-life narrative with some realities, some myths, some 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. Social history in particular is basically the history of people and their social relationships and power relationships and that plays out in any local area, and I knew it would play out in Texas, especially because just even the power that sense of Texas identity would be at another category to analyze and at least look for in learning these local narratives and certainly that's present in Nueces County (laughs) and the surrounding regions. So yeah, it was, it was kind of ironic, I had very little, I think I wrote in my cover letter that I was something, excited to...incorporate the presence of local history into the lives of the people in my classroom, or something of that nature, uh I don't think anywhere did I say I knew it yet. It was, was probably that kind of creative language that was like a promise without it being delivered on day one, but I did spend a lot of time in the summer before I started teaching really delving into that process, but I can say no amount of books- and I say this with a lot of love for 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 and, you know, kind of situating that within the framework that you have as a, as somebody who just went to graduate school and, you know, you really can't have one without the other for what I'm doing in my opinion. But it's really important to, I think, for anybody to be listening to the community and taking that very seriously and so that's really helped me more than anything, in addition to, of course, reading all the work that I could find out there that seemed relevant. Um so.

TN: It sounds like you jumped right into the local history, did you, uh, join the Nueces County Historical Commission or the Landmark Commission pretty much immediately, or?

MR: One of them pretty immediately and this goes back to having faculty, especially in the history program at Del Mar, that were just naturally interested in the same kinds of things and thought that would bring them the greatest, uh, fulfillment and success in each of the avenues of their professional life. So, uh, Jim Klein another history faculty member, he had joined the Landmark Commission, I don't know, 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, because they'll have you be a community at large, or an architect, or a historian, there's a certain dynamic for certified local government and this is not to say that you cannot be a historian in the community at large seat or something, but I had a great training in history, maybe not quite as much local knowledge, but that's also how I acquired much of that. So on the Landmark Commission I would learn more and more not just about the process of local governance but how that played out in our very local historical context and (sneezes) excuse me and its connections to broader national concerns. And I'd bring that into the classroom when I could, you know, I don't mean that I brought them all Landmark Commission, but if there were themes or issues that would enhance, say, how we may understand one you know national historical context, that would, that would I feel like be useful to the students - more interesting and engaging and relevant to them, but also useful to me to be a steward of the community, to learn the perspectives of those in my classroom who are part of the local community and who are thinking about history. So it's not just my voice, you know, and I found that to be very useful. On the commission at that time was a somebody that I admired very much, and a friend, somebody you know as well, Troy, Anita Eisenhower. And Anita, I think I was offering an opinion on a historical marker that had some phrasing that maybe could be better in my opinion at the, at one of the Landmark Commission meetings as we were debating a related issue and this was I think a marker that had been developed like years ago, so it reflected its times as I recall. And Anita had talked to me, I didn't know Anita really, except for chitchat before the Landmark Commission meetings and said, "Hey you know you oughta come if you're interested in these things, and you oughta 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 it, and just doing all these great things. And that was one thing that struck me too is these are folks who aren't just, and I don't mean "just" - this is great 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 heritage, its people. They're out there putting on a public history event, they're out there thinking about how we can best preserve the oftentimes 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 and we put in our applications and that was approved, fortunately, by the Commissioners Court, the Nueces County Commissioners Court at that time. Then I think it was about a year where some of the members got to know Christine, my wife, and then she joined as well, I could have the timeframe

off a little bit. So we've been on there since, I termed off the Landmark Commission after six years, but I think about a year later my wife got on it (laughs) so, and then, you know, probably in a year or so she'll term off and who knows, but there's always been a good Del Mar presence on there, she's not [at Del Mar], she's adjuncted at Del Mar years ago, uh, between Jim Klein and Bryan Stone, who's now on it. You can see a pattern here, these are, I am one part of a larger community that cares about local history and about history outside of the walls of the classroom and certainly the pages of the textbook and that's kind of what public history is about. Whether or not we're all public historians, we all kind of do it on one level or another, so, yeah, that's how I got on these commissions. From there, you know, you meet additional people, you know, and I've had a chance to write, uh, often coauthored articles for like the Bayside Historical Commission's historical periodical. I met Herndon Williams who's one of the officers in the Bayside Historical Commission, through, or excuse me, Historical Society, through one of the archaeology trips I think that was set up by Anita Eisenhower and Bill Havelka, a member of the Nueces County Historical Commission, and so you meet one person and another person through them and they're all so wonderful in trying to mutually help each other to bring out the history that we have in our region, so we've enjoyed writing those articles and occasionally going to those meetings, though they're half an hour away. Yeah, there's certainly a lot more I could say there, but that's how we got on these, that's how I got on these commissions.

[18:48]

TN: And during your term with the Nueces County Historical Commission have you worked on any markers, or any memorable projects that you'd like to talk about?

MR: Yes, you know, you- One thing we do on the historical commission is put our heads together and try to help each other out on other markers that are in various stages of development. So, I had a chance to just offer another pair of eyes on inscriptions, just in the general sense that everybody else is working on and vice versa too, and, but in terms of markers that I've played a- maybe - a larger role than just another pair of eyes for a meeting or two or an email or something. The Robstown Migrant Labor Camp, so that was one that the commission wanted to address for quite a while and Anita Eisenhower asked Christine and I to take a look at it and this was a migrant labor camp, it was set up as part of the Farm Security Administration during the Great Depression, so part of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal. Of course, this is when you get everything from the WPA to the PWA to the CCC to the AAA, you know the acronyms, the alphabet soup, one of them is the FSA, the Farm Security Administration. And they did a number of things, but one of the things they tried to do is to create a more efficient and, at least in the mindset and interpretation of the operators of this agency, a more just program of farm labor throughout the United States. And of course in a time of great depression so one of the major elements of farm labor meant migrant labor, so people who were on the move, communities on the move, basically following the crops from place to place and that included across Texas. So the Robstown migrant labor camp was one of a number in Texas to be set up basically to create efficient movement of people from place to place where they were needed at harvest time, but also to be a location where maybe the housing would be a little less substandard

than the living environments that migrant workers were often subjected to. And this becomes kind of a complicated thing, because when you look at oral histories, for instance, we've taken a number of oral histories down and put them in the South Texas Archives - of farm workers of South Texas. They'll describe conditions like sleeping in chicken coops, or, you know, no housing whatsoever, and it varies quite a bit, but when you think of some of the worst environments, this was supposed to be an alternative run by the federal government, so then it's not the same employer paying you very little wages to harvest the crops that is also in control of your living environments. That's a lot of control for an employer to have over you, now [with the Robstown Labor Camp] it's the government that controls the living environment, and there they would have these row houses that are segregated between African American and largely Mexican American residents. They had a community center where they had like home economics class, so it was a very gendered environment too, recreational activities, things like that and so on the one hand it seems like it's just, when we're looking at this story, it's not just a place where people are staying, it's not even a place where it takes some of that control out of the hands of growers who were not always the best of employers, it was also a place where the federal government felt they could teach their version of American values and there's where it gets a little more complicated, because they're making an assumption that that needs to be taught. Or that it's not already there on someone's own terms. Perhaps the worst assumption was that the operators of the Farm Security Administration envisioned this camp as being a place where migrant workers would learn community and they would have camp councils where men there - again the gendered part of it - would be able to elect the representatives of a camp council. They're trying to teach democratic values, but the whole assumption here is that people on the move, largely Mexican American people on the move, do not have community and that, of course, is not a correct assumption. It takes about three seconds of an oral history of anybody who actually was working the fields to realize that there was a lot of community there within families, between families, so community doesn't have to be a static stationary thing and this is something that, of course, that has come up a lot in my own research, that knowing that and knowing to look for that, but especially also my wife's research who was working with me and [we were] kind of leading the charge on this project. So her historical archeological research was looking at Native American communities in western Connecticut that maintained strong community, despite the fact that a lot of the groups she was looking at were moving, that were mobile, that were moving around quite a bit. So analytically there was a connection there, so I, as a labor historian, was well suited to do this project, Christine had some background in public history more than me but by this point now I've sort of armchaired my way, you know, to claim some scholarly expertise perhaps, and from there we took a number of oral histories. So we interviewed a number of people who had some connection to the camp, whether they had visited it, worked there, or were politicians who were dealing with say, declining conditions when it shifted from federal control to county control because it lasted a few decades well beyond the depression and it's sort of a fascinating window into politics of south Texas, race and ethnicity here, National Government programs, shifts internationally, so a lot of different themes on display, only so many can you fit on a what, ten or twelve sentences that are on that historical marker. But we tried to make sure that the voices of the people who we interviewed were elevated in that. But oral history, as important as it is, you also want to look at other sources as well, so we used back issues of the *Robstown Record* newspaper, the *Corpus Christi Caller-Times*, when appropriate other newspapers too, we went to a National Archives division, a location up in Fort Worth that had a number of the records of the camp itself, like

correspondence that would include like monthly reports on what was going on between the camp manager and some of the higher ups of the Farm Security Administration, even just some really, really tough things to read about like the medical situation of some of the families that were there, you could only live there for a year, if I'm remembering the time frame correctly, and you'd read things like a person who was there because they're, say, helping to pick crops in the Robstown area, goes in and moves to the next place, but the family is still there because they had a sick child, and there's access to a nurse who would come there every now and then, but after a while the family would get kicked out [of the camp] in that sort of scenario and, you know, there are things like that that would show up in the archival record and then a lot of stories that would not show up in the archival records or in the newspapers and, when you think of those kind of sources, they tend to be the sources that are generated by people who were in power, formal positions of authority, anywhere from a camp manager up to a Farm Security Administration official, to you know the President of the United States or something and I'm not saying that any of his stuff was in the records. Or in the case of the newspaper, it's what journalists and publishers see as important in a timeframe that is in the Jim Crow era, so oral histories can kind of make you read important perspectives that were seen as less worthy of being kept or even recorded at the time, because you have, then, the timeframe of somebody's memory or stories passed along generations, and so if you can tap into that as a historian it will balance the historical record tremendously if you're lucky enough, and people are willing to share, and then archive that and write about it. And so kind of connecting back to the previous topics that we're getting into to, that symbiotic relationship between classroom, community, and research, we're doing this historical marker, Christine and I, and we have all this research, we take down all these oral histories, we put those in the South Texas Archives, so any number of other scholars who might be interested could learn from them two hundred years from now hopefully, you know, or now. We, you know, this historical marker is seen by a lot of people, hopefully it's a community resource, it's at what is now the site of that, of that labor camp, the county park, not too far from Robstown High School, and there are other histories I'm not getting in to with, at least, unless you want me to with this marker. But, all told then, so you have that I'm bringing some of this content in my teaching of the New Deal in History 1302, and then in terms of conveying it to scholars, we thought the story of the camp itself, as sort of a microcosm of what's going on in this period in agricultural history and labor history, was important to tell, but also some of the things we learned from it methodologically about the relationship between the camp, how people relate memories and the relationship between these two things, and the story of Robstown as a city. Those connections were important so we sort of theorized a bit what this tells us about space as a category of analysis, and how that plays out in individual memory, so we wrote an article for the main oral history journal, *Oral History Review*, that was graciously accepted with just some revisions and then, so that allowed us to have this story told through the historical marker that did go up, and told at least in some form or another in my classrooms, and told to other scholars through the lens of methodologically what we can learn from it, and also the history itself. And then, of course, maybe most importantly, those oral histories themselves - just transcribed [notes] and the ones that were actually recorded too - will be there in the South Texas Archives for any to learn from who maybe can relate it to some other form of, uh, conclusion, you know. So that was the pretty powerful thing, because it also brought together a lot of different people who had a lot of different relationships to the camp, and it was a great example of seeing historical research play out in an impactful, tangible way that isn't just the abstract, you know - we know our past, or if we see the complexities of it, it makes us more

positioned to think through the present. I firmly believe that too, but this was also like, “Hey, I can see exactly how that is happening when I go to that park, when I teach about this in the classroom, when I think of creating a resource that will last longer than me, and when I think of contributing to the field of history in terms of this scholarship. So all that was- and and we, you know, talked about this in academic conferences too, so it really has reached every arm of what I do. And it also relates back to that county historical commission, this doesn’t happen if Anita doesn’t say, “Hey, you guys need to look into this.” “Okay, sure.”

So that’s one, and, of course, with that experience in knowing how important something like this can be, the next one that I think would be worth of some discussion here would relate to you, so really I should be turning the tables and asking you more about this and Preston Martin, another Del Mar graduate, because I did less here than you all did, but I guess from my vantage point I’ll say a few words about it, a historical marker application for Del Mar College. So, Del Mar College is this wonderful institution that is my employer, and I’m not just saying that for the recording. It is a wonderful institution that has nearly a century of precedent of doing in whatever field the kinds of things that I just described and having that strong relationship between the community and the classroom and oftentimes the fields that we study and try to contribute to ourselves. So that in that same tradition, I’m teaching a course called Academic Cooperative, it’s basically a methods class for history majors. So, history majors are forced to take it [laughs] and then those who are history education majors get to choose between that and Texas history, it’s a good choice on any day of the week, and twice on Sunday. This academic cooperative will typically hit the theory and practice of history, but also involves a project in the end that is supposed to reflect an interest a student, or students would have in the field of history. It could just be, “I’m really interested in the Gold Rush and I never really got a chance to sink my teeth into it and see if I could study and maybe even contribute something new there.” It could be, “I want to intern at this museum and reflect on it,” or really dig deep into a personal genealogy. So, I get a range of projects, wonderful range and some of them do involve public history. But probably none bigger than, well definitely none bigger than the one that Troy Nessner and Preston Martin did. They agreed to work on Del Mar College’s historical marker. This brought them, I should say you, I’m going to say them, since Preston isn’t sitting here, to the archives to first kind of gain a good narrative overview of the broader history of Corpus Christi, Del Mar’s place in it, look at what had been written there, of course, because it’s local history, it’s going to have snapshots here and there and writings that are already out there, but not necessarily good overviews in the way that would be necessary for this kind of marker. And so the process basically works, they did a ton of research, they looked at every back issue of the *Foghorn*, the student newspaper, interviewed individual important people who were associated with the college for either administrative purposes, to get this done, or to gain some other knowledge or tips on where to look next. And that included Dr. Escamilla, Mark Escamilla, the president of Del Mar College, alumni, the historical commission, they looked at oral histories that had already been taken, they looked at old yearbooks, and many other kinds of sources, even trying to ferret out some old Board of Regents minutes, and then, of course, there are silences there too. Like pretty much all of the 1950s of the Del Mar College *Foghorn*, which is when the college was integrated, at times national sources, like the *Harper’s Magazine* article. So they did thorough research in keeping with the type of research that I described with the Robstown Labor Camp. Each project is a little bit different but they were able to ferret out some pretty significant

themes, which seemed to be recurring a lot. And then, of course, touch on many others, and this meant from the building of the college infrastructurally, to especially the students, who they were, what kind of lives they had, the theme of the strength of the music program here, the theme of integration where Del Mar is at the crosshairs of national and local civil rights discussions and, speaking of everyday life, athletics. So each of these areas Del Mar would be seen at one point or another very much arguably nationally historically significant, and with these historical markers, the blend is basically making sure you're telling a meaningful local story, which will matter to the local people who see it while touching on those aspects of local history that are kind of exceptional, by that I mean just not typical of any day to day, run of the mill thing. So to tell both of those stories, they did a wonderful job producing a robust narrative that the Texas Historical Commission, then it's their job in the collaborative tradition of history - goes to the historical commission, so another pair of eyes there, Troy and Preston, with myself helping a little bit here, [it] was sent to some community stakeholders, even a couple Social Sciences Department members for any input that they might have. I believe we sent it to Jim Klein and Brian Hart and Liz Flores, who are all great faculty members at Del Mar, as well as Dr. Escamilla and August Alfonso, and I hope I'm not leaving anyone out, including the historical commission, it goes through them, it goes through the Texas Historical Commission, and then they write the narrative, they synthesize the thirty odd pages or so into ten, twelve sentences, one of these days I should actually count so I don't just say that, but it's something close to that. And you judge and say okay does this look like it is the, and this is what was actually sent around to all those folks, I misspoke a minute ago, the trial narrative, what phrasing, what narrative, or what themes, what errors, we found a few errors in that and then, you know it's a hard job the THC has, they just take, they read one sentence a little bit differently than it's intended and can change it totally. That may not be big deal buried in thirty pages, but in ten sentences it's bigger. But they're excellent at responding to whatever points you want to make about suggested phrasing changes, and as far as I know, did it. So the marker then got delayed for a number of reasons that we could get into here, but one of them is that the foundry changed hands and so it has actually has been made now, and it has been delivered to the county offices and in the pandemic it is kind of difficult to navigate, so I can't see it because I'm not leaving the house unless I have to, unless it's for the yard or whatever. I think now it has reached Del Mar, so that's where we are now, but we'll see, this is a multi-year, many stage project and we may wait a little longer now just because the pandemic, but there's - the last time we were talking about this, as Troy was there for this too, or I think you were there for this. It might be incorporated into a redesign as part of the college, and then really given greater prominence than being on a large pole, which is still pretty great prominence, but we'll see, but that might mean waiting for that process to totally reach fruition. So yes, I'd say that's another great example of the kind of work that commissioners, or members of the historical commission do, and sometimes in this case my role was to try and be a helpful steward of it, I'm by no means the one who did anything more than make suggestions, or try to work some of the governance structures that are involved in the college, and the college has been so supportive there and yeah, so that'll be very exciting, but that narrative, the bigger one is, has been given to the Del Mar College Library. I need to follow up on this to make sure it's in there, catalogued and all that. They're doing a renovation too, so maybe they're waiting, so that way future people at Del Mar College should be able to learn from the broader narrative, as well as the historical marker that's there, that hopefully gives them a sense of the rich history of the place they're standing in, the college they're attending. I hope it's very empowering for them to see that they're part of a very proud tradition. Yeah,

those are a couple of the historical marker projects that I would most like to mention, there are other projects that I've done or been a part of relating to other things but those are some big ones.

TN: I wanted to double back a moment to the Robstown Labor Camp, do you remember any particular interesting oral histories that stuck with you?

MR: Yeah, a number did. Now, people's relationship to the camp varies based on, you know, who you were and, you know, because of the time frame of this, it was a while ago, and sometimes it was childhood memories so there are a number that stand out to me. One would be Pedro Maldonado when we did this project I worked with the Robstown Historical Museum, great folks there, and they helped me and Mr. Maldonado was involved with the museum too, he lived there as a child and talked about what it was like from a kid's point of view, but also as an adult, he knew, you know, what his parents were doing to try to make ends meet, and everything. He was able to sort of incorporate that perspective as well as that of his childhood mindset, what he remembers about that, and he remembered even specific things like the shape of the houses, we have pictures of some of them, he remembered despite the sort of segregation of it, the ways in which people there, the residents, found ways to kind of cross the boundaries that were established, that were supposed to be the so-called normative boundaries of early to mid-20th century America, including segregation. Like informal economies, people sharing, trading this one thing you have, maybe it's molasses for something else, or people playing baseball together. So those sort of powerful memories that said something different than what the documents were telling us, that it wasn't always going play out the way that the planners had imagined - in what I would call - they're trying to maybe create a resource for people, but with their assumptions they are also trying to shape their cultural practices in a way that you don't always get to do that, people will do what they want to do, and create their own form of community, or maintain it and express it. So that was very powerful, I think also in meeting with some of the officials who were involved in various stages of this camp's history. We had a chance to, this one wasn't recorded but we took notes, whereas Mr. Maldonado's was, we took notes, good notes, and those notes are also in the South Texas Archives at A&M Kingsville. But we sat down Sam Keach who had been the publisher of the *Robstown Record*, Representative Solomon Ortiz, and County Commissioner at the time Oscar Ortiz, and also a couple of friends who had connections to the camp space there. And we learned everything from some very detailed accounts of what it was like working in the fields, to the nature of some of what happens after this ceased to be a camp. There is American GI Forum housing there, and then one of the things that really struck me too, in regards to Congressman Ortiz's memory and Commissioner Ortiz's memory, they were involved in the transformation of the end of the camp, when the camp was already substandard living environment, that bottom line that's what it was, it maybe was better than what, in some cases, it was certainly better than what was available from the growers, what they offered for housing. But it was still, if you looked at some of the photos for it, it was a lot of people crammed into a pretty small space, ultimately with not a lot of resources. And those resources deteriorated under county control after federal government shifted it over near the end of the 1940s and was there until the late '60s. And this is also the same time frame, that moment, and in the next few decades, where the county was starting to see more - on the basis of civil rights activism and courageous actions of many people here - starting to see more actual Mexican American representation in positions of formal authority and the camp was right at the crosshairs of some of the accusations and politics when Congressman Ortiz was working more on local politics before he became a US Congressman. He and his brother were at different times

assisting in this transition to make it ultimately a county park, something that really stuck with me on what they said is, when you look at where it began, and what it became, and then I'll add to that, looking at, they were conveying this too, looking at how it became more of a voice of people who weren't just white men and this process it's very powerful, because it came from being this place where it was basically formal white male authority figures saying "This is what Mexican American, or African American migrant workers need to do and learn and all that" - and subjected to still substandard conditions now on and off the job, this had been the case, but still just different degrees of that. To then now Commissioner and Congressman Ortiz being very well versed in experiencing these forms of discriminatory treatment, making it into a public park that is widely used by a lot of people. And where they could tell me about that history and tell Christine and I about that history and their role in that shift in trying to transform this space to one of greater opportunities for the era that we now live in. And that kind of stuck out to me, because it was a comment that appreciated the kind of long term significance of what they did and they, of course, in collaboration with others too, and when you walk on that space, in that park, you can kind of through that overview get the richly layered history of that space, of what it was, what it became, and why it became that, and who largely did that. And there's where there's just a whole lot of things coming together and I'm not even really doing it justice. But that is a good example of how you learn from community, none of that is embedded in the document, or even a whole box of documents from the Farm Security Administration records, that's conveyed collectively through the oral histories, but even individually from particular ones like that. And then that it gives greater meaning to the documents as well, and what they do and don't say, to put that in context. So that, those are the ones that stood out to me off hand the most right now, but they all really did, they were all part of a broader process where you try to tell the most comprehensive history you can and in the most meaningful way, hopefully accurately too. So yeah.

TN: Thank you. One of the kinds of funny things I've noticed this semester is I'm reading this book about oral history interviews and it stresses the importance of in person interviews and we're doing this over Zoom. Had you had any kind of unconventional oral history interviews that you know strayed [laughs] from what the textbook said you should do?

MR: Yes, absolutely. So some, in some ways I feel like I've pushed the boundaries of what some how-to guides would say you should do in good ways, and some ways I've learned from mistakes, like for instance, when I should always have a recorder on me. You know, I just described a situation when I could have probably recorded something and I don't believe I had it on me, you know, you have those kinds of mistakes. Or, you know, even having consent forms that say things that you don't think, back then, I don't know how I didn't think to do this, like only ten years ago, but to have like, "this might also be available through the web." So, on the other hand, a lot of people don't want that, so you can always say check a box if you don't want it there, only in the archive. So, I've done things like that that were, that maybe if I had been more formally trained, that I might not have done. But I don't want to sell short my training, I've read all these, well not all, but a lot of the literature on this, the scholarship on this so even if you don't go to graduate school for oral history in particular I probably would characterize myself as knowledgeable or more so than many people who do at this point. And a lot of the

ways in which I've crossed into the gray area of what is good oral history practice, is in a positive way. So, of course, never cross boundaries with ethical consent and knowing exactly what's happening with them, and the range of uses and all that. So I don't mean anything like that, but a lot of the oral history textbooks will emphasize and for good reason, to use not just this kind of equipment, but to find a quiet area, make sure you don't have any clocks ticking or anything like that, right down to the detail and that is for good reason because it is awfully hard to transcribe something that you can't hear perfectly and it's hard to get the full meaning of it. If you're the one doing the interview, you might remember it, but somebody else might not. That being said, as you know and you kind of led into this, oral history is a lot about rapport, a lot about context, and it can be the context of who is the interviewer, what kind of questions are they asking, about what part of your life, you know, all these things, but also literally where you're sitting. I mean you mentioned if you're sitting across a table from me that can be different than if it's over Zoom or over the phone. Sometimes you don't have the choice, even outside of a pandemic, you know, oral historians don't necessarily make the big bucks, so say you want to interview someone who lives up in Kansas, well you may not be able to just hop on a plane and do that so you make these judgment calls. But also if you're sitting across a table from me, are you in my living room? Am I in your living room? Are we at the library of Del Mar College? Are we doing these kind of things, you want it to be, and I'm a firm believer, you want it to be somewhere that makes someone comfortable, produces the most enriching free flowing memories. But also maybe a space that helps contribute to the production of those memories, so I will throw out the playbook a little bit in terms of the quiet space, even the perfect equipment if it's something where you're putting it in a place where it shouldn't be, I don't want to get into that. I'll give you some examples where we've done this deliberately. Well, first I want to give you an example where it wasn't deliberate, but I made a judgment call. Once I actually took an oral history at Whataburger, at like a pretty peak time. I was talking to a gentleman who was graciously willing to share his memories as part of the South Texas Hispanic Farm Labor Communities Project. It is a project that my wife and I co-directed, an offshoot of some work we've done, studying and trying to help preserve with students from both Texas A&M-Kingsville and Del Mar a historic cemetery and from that we moved to kind of taking broader histories, oral histories of those who worked in the fields in South Texas, or migrated from here to other places. Seeing that it's often an underrepresented part of the historical record. So it's part of that broader project, and those oral histories by the way go to the South Texas Archives at A&M Kingsville. I was interviewing a gentleman who I could kind of read between the lines, thought it would be comfortable doing some at Whataburger. Hey, I love Whataburger too [laughs] so that made sense to me. And I didn't want to press it too much and be like, "Hey why don't we go to the library where it's quiet as a mouse, you know, what the heck, let's go to Whataburger." So I'm taking the oral history interview and he's sharing some really important memories and I'm very grateful for that, and if you listen to the recording you'll hear, "Order 5 coming up, order of fries" while he's describing what it's like working in the fields and traveling around South Texas and his broader life history. "Anybody order some fries," something like that, yeah, that was untraditional, but I would also like to think the place of comfort maybe contributed to the rapport and maybe not. I don't know, maybe if I'd insisted I don't have a comparison to make it definitive, but I can say it was an excellent oral history interview, and it was a challenge to transcribe, but it was transcribed, and I think accurately and I'm very confident accurately, and there may be a few places where you say inaudible if the noise is too much. That's the risk you run, that can happen even in a normal interview setting. But there are

other times where we've actually done this on purpose, and that's because I mentioned my wife is an historical archeologist and back in 2012 we, along with Eric Ray, who was at the time a researcher on the La Belle 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 U.S.-Mexican War, Zachary Taylor's 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 U.S.-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 sometime archeology, the artifacts, tell us stories that the documents don't, or add additional context to them. So, we could get a snapshot of daily life in the public square in downtown Corpus Christi through the lens of archeology at the park. But why stop there? So we invited the public to come help us dig. And I have some background in archeology, as the son of an archeologist, and the husband of an archeologist, I am not trained as an archeologist, but I know how to follow orders confidently and even maybe give a few if there is nothing too complex. I minored in anthropology and all that in college, so I could be useful there too, to a point and Eric and Christine were both trained archeologists. Eric actually mostly in marine archeology but his experience is certainly broader than that too. So, we invited the public to come out and help us dig. This is what I mean with that symbiotic relationship between community and research and teaching. We all collectively analyzed our past together as a community. The 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, you know hundreds of people all told are turning [out], 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 sieve. I taught summer that year and I taught it exclusively because I wanted students to have this experience. I don't normally teach in the summer, sometimes maybe, but this time I was like, this is going to be an awesome History 1301 class because they're going to go dig, and see how history and archeology are, how they work together, so 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 at 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. I'll give you an example of this. I'm interviewing a gentleman who was telling me about some things ranging from remembering political speeches in the 1930s there to how after the dances he remembered learning about discrimination for the first time as a little kid in the 30s at that park where they were going to rope the park up in two, and have Mexican American residents dance on one side, and the Anglo American residents on the other. I mean he remembers stories about playing with an African American child at the park and when they'd see a white person he'd have to go run, because there was this sort of understanding that they weren't supposed to be in the park, so segregation of that time. These types of memories that would connect to something even like somebody finds a clay marble in one of the pits and then, you know, "Oh yeah," in no particular order [and he would say things kind of like] "We used to roll these down the bluff" and "here's something else that would happen when we're doing that" "And I remember this store, and how my mom would do this" and so the archeology would serve as a memory device that would bring out oral history recollections. And the oral history, in the tradition of it being empowering - saying my narrative matters - that then you [the participant] take on the sort of, even if it's extemporaneous, expertise to then be another voice and another shovel, or I should say trowel, digging up that history. 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 even 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, and that 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 Kingsville or Del Mar - actually she was at Del Mar then - and then you have members of the county historical commission, you've got people from the Coastal Bend Archeological Society helping too with some of their expertise in case we got overwhelmed, kids, adults, you know. Just people came out, you know, it was featured in the *Caller Times*. Another good place if you want publicity is right next to the *Caller Times* [referring to the location of Artesian Park]. So that was a place where people have protests too because they knew the newspaper's building was right [laughs] so yeah it's a kind of work that historical commission brings out in us that we as historians or archeologists can offer the expertise that we have academically in those areas, that our students can enrich so much and experience, the community members can teach us. So the oral history I was referring to, for instance, I believe I even brought - I think I had an excerpt of that even in the Academic Cooperative class as a lens into trying to teach the class about oral history and as a nature of a source. I've included these sorts of interviews in other forms of teaching and beyond. I'm just speaking for myself, they too were at multiple archives, what came out of that at least in transcriptions. But that does mean that we were doing that when there was a whole lot of noise, if you've ever been to Artesian Park, there are a lot of cars that drive by and even in some of the larger-than-life historical retrospectives in the *Caller Times* they'll even make reference to how someone's political rival would have the fire department come out and have all the sirens go off when he was speaking and trying to get some votes [laughs] so we had people gunning the engine when I was interviewing, and stuff like that. 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 it was like a good indicator of the methodology that could really

be useful and impactful. We did something similar a year later in Victoria. Eric had moved to the Museum of the Coastal Bend and had developed some good relationships with the Victoria historical community and even though I was not an expert by that point in Victoria history, I read up on it as best as I could and tried to do justice to it and come out, and we did the same thing virtually in Victoria, and there we even got to create some ambiance to make it more of a festival atmosphere, we had Eric set it up with a blue grass band. So, I have some oral history recordings where there is some blue grass in the background, so that wasn't even an "Aww man, I'm trying to take an interview!" No, it was on purpose and it's to feed the sensory memories that can come from it that can run counter to this idea of the quiet space and so we, fortunately, have been able to convey some of these conclusions, though we haven't really written about Victoria yet. We did have about the Artesian Park one in scholarly settings, maybe we'll do that sometime [with the Victoria project]. They, you know, this was something that we had a chance to comment on both locally and in these broader journals, um, in historical inquiry, in oral history. That one on Artesian Park was published in the *Public Historian*, the National Council on Public History's periodical, so I've enjoyed things like that even when I was helping the Corpus Christi Public Library with an oral history project as a humanities advisor. Some of my students interviewed local veterans, and one of them did the interview at a Veteran's Memorial in Molina. And when he asked about that setting - you know, it might be kind of loud - my opinion was go for it. That is an important story to tell and if he is comfortable telling that onsite at the place of remembrance that in and of itself is historically important. This gentleman was also involved in the creation of that place of remembrance and had, of course, his own experiences as a veteran. That interplay is something that we can all learn from. I've been known to stretch the guidelines a little bit, but I do also believe that at least a lot of oral historians would look at this and say they wouldn't necessarily disagree. Like any field, there's probably some saying that's a little too far, others might say, no, that's great. These are just sort of general ideas, we don't want every oral history taken out, you know, next to a highway, or something like that, and for good reason. But there are times when maybe, adjust.

TN: It does seem that there is some benefit to having that noise or sound to create recollection for some people.

MR: Yea.

TN: Well Dr. Robbins, I would like to say thank you for doing this interview.

MR: My pleasure, yeah let me know if there's anything else you'd like me to share. And yeah, I should mention also just for the record that Troy has been a great steward of local history and - as well as serving on the county historical commission and engaging in, and supporting, and helping to shape a number of projects even in addition to the aforementioned one of the Del Mar historical marker. So yeah, this is - I could be asking you the questions too. [laughs]

TN: Well, thank you, I appreciate it. I think we'll call it there.

MR: Okay, sounds good, I'll stop this recording. And if your recording-