

# SOUND BITES

Fall 2007



## “From Ashes to Moon Dust”: Oral History Helps Win the Race at National History Day

by Shruti Varadharajan

Shruti Varadharajan, First Place, Junior Individual Documentary,  
National History Day 2007

*Shruti Varadharajan, middle schooler from Sugar Land, is a TOHA student member. At Texas History Day 2007, she won the TOHA award for the best use of oral history in an individual junior documentary. From state, she went on to place first in the nation. The annual theme for the contest was Triumph and Tragedy in History. Read here Miss Varadharajan's account of her award-winning research.*

In the early 1960s Russia was ahead of America in the space race. The cold war had begun between the two nations, and soon President John F. Kennedy focused the U.S. on a clear goal: to land a man on the Moon before the decade was out. He also said, “We chose to go to the Moon, not because it is easy but because it is hard.” After the successful series of one-man missions in Project Mercury and two-men missions in Project Gemini, NASA’s go-fever gave birth in 1966 to the Apollo project, a series of missions that would lead to the first moonwalk. Destination moon did not seem very far for Americans until January 27, 1967, when a tragic fire during the preflight test of the first Apollo mission killed three astronauts aboard.

“From Ashes to Moon Dust” is a true story of NASA’s penance to get back into the space race against Russia after this terrible setback. The documentary takes the viewers to the Apollo mission era. It offers dramatic testimony of extraordinary moments, the sacrifice of three astronauts who paved a way for others to reach the stars. While nothing could replace the lives lost in the *Apollo 1* tragedy, NASA inherited enormous knowledge that enabled them to successfully land the first man on the moon before President Kennedy’s deadline. Furthermore, it led to the space shuttle and international space station missions that improve our lives on Earth and explore the universe.

I got interested in the topic because of my grandfather Mr. P. D. Mujumdar, an eminent space scientist in the Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO). He often

told me dramatic stories of the Apollo missions and helped me understand different facets of the topic. Last summer when I was visiting him, he told me the story of *Apollo 1*. He gave me rare collections of articles on Apollo missions and took me on a tour of the ISRO’s launch pad facilities. My journey had begun there, and the education department at NASA was my next hop. Ms. Robin Hart, NASA educational specialist, gave me information about some key NASA scientists of the Apollo missions and fixed my appointments with them. I thus met Mr. Jared Woodfill, who designed the alarm system, wiring, and plumbing of the Apollo spacecrafts. He took me on a special tour of the Johnson Space Center in Houston to explain the details of the *Apollo 1* tragedy and how it resulted in improved spacecrafts that eventually brought triumphs. I had several discussions with him over the phone and e-mails thereafter. Mr. Tim Cooper, NASA spacecraft design consultant, loves to educate youngsters about space programs. He even came to my house to discuss how the *Apollo 1* tragedy helps today’s spacecraft designing.

As I continued my research, I established contact with Stephen Clemmons, a launch-pad technician during *Apollo 1* (now retired in North Carolina). He survived burns during the rescue efforts and received the Presidential Bravery Award. I had telephone and e-mail interviews with him. He gave me an eyewitness account of the tragedy, the rescue efforts, and many valuable photographs. Mr. G. Ganapathi, a propellant specialist at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, California, (*continued, p. 5*)

# Keeping in Touch

## TOHA Board of Directors

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### President's Report

by Vernon L. Williams  
Professor of History, Abilene Christian University

On behalf of everyone in TOHA I want to thank JoAnn Pospisil for a great year of leadership for our organization last year. As president, JoAnn oversaw continued growth and activity for Texas oral history and made TOHA more prominent in historical circles around the state and throughout the nation. As you can see in my message below, she is continuing on the board as an active member who leads by example.

Plans have been finalized for our twenty-fifth anniversary program and reception at next year's joint session with the Texas State Historical Association during its annual meeting in Corpus Christi in March 2008. The program is titled: "A Defining Moment: West Texas Community in the Big War."

Headlined as "Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Session," the program will be chaired by JoAnn Pospisil, of Baylor College of Medicine, Houston, and includes these papers:

"From Pyote to Fortress Europe: Film, Oral History, and the 381<sup>st</sup> Bomb Group in World War II," by Vernon L. Williams, Abilene Christian University;

"Girl Pilots in Sweetwater, Texas: Training the Women Air Force Service Pilots (WASP) in Oral History and Film," by Dawn Letson, Texas Woman's University;

"'Soldiers Were Everywhere': Camp Barkeley and Abilene, Texas, 1940-1945," by Tracy M. Shilcutt, Abilene Christian University.

At the conclusion of the session, TOHA will host a twenty-fifth anniversary reception in the same room. We hope everyone will turn out for this celebration of twenty-five years of oral history networking in Texas. See you in Corpus Christi.

On November 10, TOHA is sponsoring an introductory session on the basics of oral history at a conference at the Center for Big Bend Studies at Sul Ross State University in Alpine. JoAnn Pospisil and I will present the material and encourage everyone to join with TOHA to make oral history a priority for historical preservation in local communities across Texas.

I hope your summer was as productive as mine. I spent most of July traveling in England, France, and Germany doing oral interviews of World War II participants in the military and on the home front. I did my last set of interviews in Schweinfurt, German, where I interviewed men who as young high school boys manned the guns around the ball bearing factories in Schweinfurt and shot down hundreds of American bombers during the war. Their narratives brought full circle the story my British and American interviews had begun. The East Anglia Air War Project, based at Abilene Christian University, has been working on the oral history of the air war since 2002.

I am working on paper proposals for the Southwest Historical Association annual meeting in Las Vegas, Nevada, next March. Please contact me if you have a paper or session proposal you would like to put forward.

Have a great year. ☞

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SOUND BITES is an occasional newsletter of the Texas Oral History Association Board of Directors for the benefit of TOHA members. Lois E. Myers, TOHA secretary-treasurer, composes the newsletter. For questions, submissions, or comments, please contact Myers at [lois\\_myers@baylor.edu](mailto:lois_myers@baylor.edu) or call her at 254-710-6285. For access to live Web site and e-mail links listed in the newsletter, visit the newsletter online at <http://www.baylor.edu/TOHA/index.php?id=29357>.

## Excellence in Community History

# TOHA's Mary Faye Barnes Award

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### The Diboll History Center

TOHA is pleased to announce presentation of the Mary Faye Barnes Award for Excellence in Community History to The History Center, in Diboll, in Angelina County. The center serves as the archives and public history division of the T. L. L. Temple Memorial Library and Archives, whose mission is to collect, preserve, and provide public access to the history of East Texas for the educational benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations.

In addition to housing and managing a growing research collection including more than 2,000 cubic feet of archives and manuscripts, several thousand maps, more than 200,000 photographs, 200 oral histories, 100 linear feet of newspapers, and more than 1,000 published books, The History Center offers permanent and changing interpretive exhibits, an annual history magazine, a weekly newspaper column, school and group guided tours, and a Web site which allows access to collections and research services (<http://www.thehistorycenteronline.com>).

The center's oral history collection is known and utilized locally as well as nationally. The interviews, conducted between 1954 and the present (most during the early 1980s), are used regularly by family members related to interviewees, by students, by writers of newspaper and magazine articles, and by book authors. At least two published books have featured the oral sources prominently, including Megan Biesele's *The Cornbread Whistle* (1986, Diboll Historical Society) and Thad Sitton and Jim Conrad's *Nameless Towns: Texas Sawmill Communities, 1880-1942* (1998, University of Texas Press).

The growing oral history collection consists of recorded audio tapes, which have been transcribed, indexed, catalogued, and made available for research in both audio and text formats. Most of the oral sources in the collection were created by the Diboll Historical Society utilizing standard accepted oral history practices. Life experiences in East Texas sawmill towns and logging camps, especially Diboll and related communities, during the early and middle twentieth century are well represented. These interviews became part of the public library's archival collection in the middle 1980s, and the work of the no longer active Diboll Historical Society was continued by library and archives staff through the 1990s and is now performed by The History Center staff and volunteers. The History Center is now exploring plans to digitize the audio tape recordings and convert the transcriptions into PDF files which can be accessed through the center's Web site.

To learn more about The History Center, visit its Web site or contact its executive director, Jonathan K. Gerland: phone, 936-829-3543; [jgerland@consolidated.net](mailto:jgerland@consolidated.net).

## ORAL HISTORY EXCHANGE

### Highlights TOHA's Twenty-fifth Anniversary

TOHA celebrates its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2008 and to help mark this memorable occasion the organization will host a special event to showcase the work of oral historians in our state. During the past quarter of a century, Texas has boasted numerous oral history projects that have been recognized throughout the nation and continue to offer a record of unique historical perspective. Other Texans are at the beginning point of oral history and aspire to hold their projects to the highest professional standards.

During the 2008 Texas State Historical Association annual meeting, TOHA and its members and guests will have the occasion to share with other historians a vast display of recorded memories and experiences illustrating the Lone Star State. On Thursday afternoon, March 6, 2008, in Corpus Christi, Texas, TOHA will gather for its annual program meeting. Immediately after the program session our twenty-fifth anniversary celebration will begin, featuring a brief history of TOHA followed by the "Oral History Exchange." During the exchange session, we will hear from members and guests sharing a five-minute overview of their oral history projects. TOHA welcomes oral historians from throughout the state to greet and meet, as well as share brochures, Web site information, books, CDs, DVDs, and other related materials. Light refreshments will be served.

Please make plans to be part of the TOHA Oral History Exchange. Watch for further updates from TOHA. For more information, contact TOHA board member Rebecca Wright at [rebecca.a.wright@nasa.gov](mailto:rebecca.a.wright@nasa.gov).

# Portraits of Achievement

## TOHA Awards 2007

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### *Lifetime Achievement Award*

JoAnn Pospisil presented the TOHA Lifetime Achievement Award to Dr. Kenneth E. Hendrickson Jr., on May 5, 2007, in Wichita Falls.

### *Community Award*

Lois Myers presented the TOHA Community Award to John L. Hamilton and Historic Waxahachie, Inc., for the Ellis County Oral History Project, on August 19, 2007, in Waxahachie.



### *Texas History Day*

Earning TOHA Texas History Day medals were individual and group documentaries created by Molly Sun, Carver High School, Houston; Shruti Varadharajan, Sartartia Middle School, Sugar Land (*pictured left*); Tia McKinney, Dilim Nwobu, Austin Glamser, and Ernesto Reyes, Eisenhower High School, Houston; Emily Tat, Andrew Ngo, and Nicholas Chan, Holub Middle School, Houston.

## Keeping in Touch

# TOHA Member News

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On Tuesday, August 21, TOHA Board member **DIANE L. WARE** presented a talk on her own experiences with collecting oral history interviews in Fort Bend County for the quarterly meeting of the Historical Commission. Before a sizable audience of some fifty commissioners and guests, Ware recapped early experiences for her thesis work on the company town of Sugar Land, providing the audience with photographs and several lengthy oral history excerpts on various aspects of life in the company town. She explained how she continued collecting interviews even after the 1994 publication of the thesis because “more of the story remained to be told.” After a short question-and-answer session, Ware personally greeted guests, who, to her delight, unexpectedly included the widow of one her earliest interviewees. Ware later met with the Fort Bend Oral History Commission to answer questions and help in the formulation of their newly launched oral history project.

On October 1, **JOANN POSPISIL** will speak at Blinn College in Brenham at a meeting of the Washington County Genealogical Society, the Brenham Historical Commission and the Brenham Heritage Museum Board, their docents and friends, regarding planned and ongoing oral history projects. Dr. Larry J. Watson, professor of American and Texas history at Blinn College, is coordinating this meeting.

**VALERIE G. RAMIREZ** has made impressive progress on her family history project. She and her husband have interviewed several family members, including some who served in the military during World War II. A reunion last summer attracted more than fifteen hundred family members. The Vela family established a Web site at <http://vela.ourroots.info> and created an exhibit in the Museum of South Texas History and a display in the library lobby of the University of Texas-Pan America, both in Edinburg. This fall the family will dedicate an historical marker at UTPA honoring their ancestor, educator Emilia Wilhelmina Schunior Ramírez (1902-1960).

The Twelfth Annual Cotton and Rural History Conference announces its 2008 keynote speaker will be James M. Smallwood (Emeritus, Oklahoma State). Smallwood has written extensively about Southern history and among his books are: *Time of Hope, Time of Despair: Black Texans During Reconstruction* (1981), *Struggle for Equality: Blacks in Texas* (1983), *Murder and Mayhem: The War of Reconstruction in Texas* (2003), and *The Indian Texans* (2004). Other presenters include author Jack Duncan, historian John Lundberg (TCU), and sociologist Pam Gaiter (Collin College). English professor/ folklorist Chris Grooms (Collin College) will perform a concert/presentation entitled “How Cotton Brought the Blues to Texas.” The meeting will be held Saturday, April 19, 2008, 9:30-1:30 p.m., at the Audie Murphy/American Cotton Museum in Greenville. Advance reservations may be made by contacting the Audie Murphy/American Cotton Museum, 600 Interstate 30 East, P.O. Box 347, Greenville, Texas 75403, (903) 454-1990 or (903) 450-4502. A registration fee of \$10 includes a catered barbecue buffet. Those with an interest in presenting at future conferences should contact **KYLE WILKISON** ([kwilkison@ccc.edu](mailto:kwilkison@ccc.edu)) or **JIM CONRAD** ([james\\_conrad@tamu-commerce.edu](mailto:james_conrad@tamu-commerce.edu)).

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“From Ashes to Moon Dust” (continued from page 1)

is a very good family friend; he clarified some of my questions about the coolant and the oxygen atmosphere in the cabin during the tragedy. I used the famous book, *A Man on the Moon*, as a bible throughout my project. I was lucky to establish contact with the author of this book, Mr. Andrew Chaikin, and got an inside picture of public and political outcries after the tragedy. It was truly a great experience learning a piece of history from him. I thank each one of my interviewees for the time and effort they put in to make my study enjoyable.

I also made many visits to the Johnson Space Center and was able to see the massive Saturn V rocket used to launch Apollo spacecrafts. The *Apollo 17* spacecraft displayed in the museum gave me an inner look at the spacecraft. My visit to the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum was another great resource for the project.

I take pride in being a TOHA member as it has inculcated in me an interest in collecting and valuing oral history. I also cherish all the awards TOHA has bestowed on me. Apart from learning about the topic and making a documentary, I learned many things like analyzing facts and expressing my thoughts. Above all, the most important thing I have learned is perseverance and dedication, as the Apollo mission motto says: To Strive, To Seek and Not To Yield. I was selected to present the documentary at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum. This truly was an experience of a kind. I had an opportunity to discuss my project with the directors and curators of this museum and also explain it to many visitors there. Winning the National History Day competition was a cherry on top of the ice cream. ☺

# TOHA Calendar

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## September 13–October 10, 2007 U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Oral History Project

Barnes & Noble book stores will feature a display highlighting *A Legacy Greater than Words: Stories of U.S. Latinos & Latinas of the WWII Generation*, written by Juliana Torres, Lindsay Fitzpatrick, Maggie Rivas-Rodriguez, and Melissa DiPiero-D'Sa. This 344-page volume features summaries of 425 stories and photos of men and women of Latin American heritage who served during WWII through the military or in civilian work. The work is also available through other book stores, the University of Texas at Austin Press, or the U.S. Latino & Latina WWII Project (phone 512-471-1924).

## September 27–29, 2007– East Texas Historical Association, Nacogdoches

TOHA board member Beverly J. Rowe is program chair and TOHA member Dan K. Utley is presiding president for this exciting meeting at the historic Fredonia Hotel in Nacogdoches. Details are posted on the ETHA Web pages at <http://www.easttexashistorical.org>.

## October 24– 28, 2007– Oral History Association, Oakland, CA

The Marriott Oakland City Center will be the setting for the 2007 OHA annual meeting. In keeping with the theme “The Revolutionary Ideal: Transforming Community through Oral History,” the meeting will focus on oral history’s role in social and political change, community survival, and technological change. Learn more at [http://alpha.dickinson.edu/oha/org\\_cfp.html](http://alpha.dickinson.edu/oha/org_cfp.html).

## March 6, 2008—TOHA Meeting and Oral History Exchange, Corpus Christi

Titled “A Defining Moment: West Texas Community in the Big War,” the annual TOHA program in joint session with Texas State Historical Association features World War II training facilities in three West Texas communities. JoAnn Pospisil will chair the session, which includes papers by program planner Vernon L. Williams, Abilene Christian University, titled “From Pyote to Fortress Europe: Film, Oral History, and the 381st Bomb Group in World War II”; by Dawn Letson, Texas Woman’s University, titled “Girl Pilots in Sweetwater, Texas: Training the Women Air Force Service Pilots (WASP) in Oral History and Film”; and by Tracy M. Shilcutt, Abilene Christian University, titled “Soldiers Were Everywhere’: Camp Barkeley and Abilene, Texas, 1940-1945.” Following the paper presentations, TOHA will launch its twenty-fifth anniversary celebration with an Oral History Exchange. Learn more, page 2.

## September 23–26, 2008 – International Oral History Association Conference, Guadalajara, Mexico

Plan ahead to participate in the 2008 IOHA meeting at the University of Guadalajara. Themes to be discussed include contributions of oral history to twentieth-century political history, teaching oral history, archiving memory, oral history theory and method, ecology and natural disasters, migrations, memories of violence, museums and oral history, gender identity, religion, and oral tradition. Learn more at <http://www.ioha.fgv.br/ioha/english/index.html>.

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