

# Ringing the History Bell



Joseph A. Pratt

After forty years of university teaching, with thirty years at University of Houston, I will retire at the end of this summer. For about half my years at UH, I have run the *Houston History* magazine, serving as a combination of editor, moneymen, manager, and sometimes writer. In the first issue of the magazine, I wrote: “Our goal... is to make our region more aware of its history and more respectful of its past.” We have since published thirty-four issues of our “popular history magazine” devoted to capturing and publicizing the history of the Houston region, broadly defined.

The magazine has been my favorite hobby while I worked at my real job teaching some 10,000 students and publishing roughly 4,000 pages of academic history in books and articles. It introduced me to smart, creative student workers who passed through our magazine staff in three or four waves. It pulled me off campus and out into the lively world of Houstonians who shared my commitment to our region’s history. It encouraged me to reclaim the writer’s voice of my youth after decades of writing academic books.

At this point, I need to thank the editor of the magazine, Joe Pratt, who seemed to like everything I wrote. After years of trying to help students see historical trends all around them and recognize that these trends shape their lives, writing for the magazine has encouraged me to do the same. It has been fun to reflect on young Joe’s life against the backdrop of the historical knowledge old Joe has accumulated over 67 years.

My articles and letters from the editor helped me better understand my dad’s experiences in World War II, my lifelong love affair with the Bolivar Peninsula, my obsession with hurricanes, my passion for country music, the impact of race on my upbringing and my mature self, and especially my calling to be a teacher. I had the chance to interview interesting people as varied as Jane Blaffer Owens, George Mitchell, Ben Love, and Larry Dierker, gaining new perspectives along the way. I came away from all of this much more certain that history matters on both regional and a personal levels.

In retirement, I hope to convey some of our family history to our two grandsons.



In memory of my Grandma Pratt I keep her dinner bell, which she rang to call the “men folks” home from the fields for supper. After ringing the bell long enough to make us wish we had a field to retreat to, Felix, my six-year old grandson, asked me what it was like to live on a farm in the old days. We talked at bedtime for almost an hour about my grandparent’s life on an East Texas farm that for decades lacked both electricity and running water. I relived for him my memories of regular trips to their farm: moving the outhouse to virgin land with my cousins, “helping” my dad and grandpa slaughter cows and hogs and hanging up their meat in the smoke house, drawing water from a well instead of turning on a faucet, winding up last in a long line of cousins for a bath in a big tub filled with increasingly dirty water heated on the stove. Felix especially liked my memory of the day I joined my cousin in shooting a bull in the behind with BB guns to see what he would do. The enraged bull broke through the fence separating us and chased us back to the farm house, where we confronted uncles who grew angrier than the bull when they realized what we had done.



Grandma and Grandpa Pratt with baby Joe. Photo courtesy of Joseph A. Pratt.

At the end of our talk, I told Felix that I lectured to my students in my large American history survey classes about what it was like to live on a farm without electricity and running water to help them understand how different life was in “the old days.” I showed them my grandma’s dinner bell and told them that she used it to announce it was time to come to supper. Then before each class, after hundreds of rowdy students had filed into the big auditorium, I vigorously rang the history bell to announce it was time to come to order and learn some history.

Felix seemed amused by this. When he asked if he could have the bell, I assured him that someday it would be his.

The uses of history are many, and awareness of history and respect for the past are good for us all.

Happy retirement, Joe! We will miss you.

—Your colleagues, students, and friends