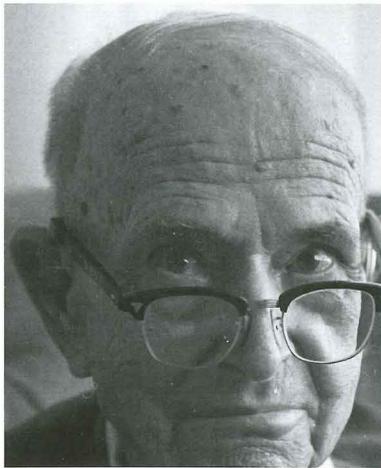


The Legacy of Houston's Yates Family

# TEXAS HERITAGE

A PUBLICATION OF THE TEXAS HISTORICAL FOUNDATION | EST. 1954 | \$5 ISSUE | Volume 3 2011



The  
Faces  
of  
Texas  
History



**Respected Academics, Past and Present  
Women Historians  
Newspaper Columnists and Bloggers**

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Once he steps down from his post as The State Historian of Texas, Dr. Light Cummins plans to work on his next book, a biography of Texas sculptor, Allie V. Tennant. All images courtesy of Light Cummins.

# DR. LIGHT CUMMINS

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## THE FACE OF TEXAS HISTORY

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Dr. Light Cummins, a history faculty member at Austin College in Sherman, is winding down a two-year assignment to, as he says, “successfully animate the cause of Texas history.” What many people are often surprised to learn is that this undertaking came with a title—The State Historian of Texas. Created through 2005 legislation, this non-partisan, governor-appointed position requires two years of voluntary service as a public advocate for Texas history by the individual chosen. The duties of the position are varied: acting in an advisory capacity on government-related historical matters, furthering Texas history education efforts both in and outside of the classroom, and fostering awareness and appreciation for the state’s distinctive past.

BY PAMELA MURTHA



Above: At the April 2011 city council meeting, Sherman Mayor Bill Majors (standing) presented an official proclamation honoring Dr. Cummins (on right) for his service as state historian; Councilman Willie Steele (center) looks on.

Appointed by Governor Perry in May 2009, Dr. Cummins is well-qualified to serve as the state historian. His professional credentials include 34 years of teaching history at Austin College in Sherman, an expert scholarship on the Anglo-American westward movement into Spanish-speaking Texas, and author of several books on American and Texas history. Cummins says being asked to succeed the first appointee to the post, Dr. Jesús (Frank) de la Tejas, a Texas State University distinguished professor and a respected historian, was a privilege and afforded him the opportunity to share a lifelong passion with a wider audience. He describes his role as state historian as being the public face representing the passion and loyalty that so many Texans feel for the history and heritage of the place they call home.

Cummins, who grew up in San Antonio and spent time on his family's ranch, can trace his Lone Star roots back to the 1820s. The native Texan is a descendent of Asa Townsend and James Cummins, two members of Stephen F. Austin's Old 300 Colony. The historian remembers growing up hearing family stories of Texas and being surrounded by San Antonio's old mis-

sions and the Alamo, visible testimony to the state's past. As such, Cummins developed a keen interest in history during his childhood, which would direct his academic pursuits. While attending Southwest Texas State University (now Texas State University) as a history major, Cummins explains that he came under the influence of two professors, Everett Swinney, currently a distinguished professor emeritus at Texas State, and the late William C. Pool, a prominent educator and biographer of Texas historian Eugene C. Barker. The two men introduced Cummins to the richness of the state's history and encouraged and mentored him through his undergraduate and graduate pursuits.

Because of San Antonio's thriving Hispanic community, Cummins not only learned to speak Spanish, but also gained an appreciation for the city's culture and heritage. Therefore, he decided to focus his graduate studies on the Spanish and Mexican period in Texas. He did doctoral work at Tulane University and spent two years in Spain in the 1970s on a Fulbright scholarship, writing his dissertation on Spain and the American Revolution, with the historical focus on Texas and Louisiana. In the fall of 1978, Cummins joined

the faculty of Austin College. He reports that Texas history continues to be one of his most popular courses, simply because of the avid interest in the subject. He goes on to explain, "Many of my students do not necessarily want to major in history. They are from all backgrounds, all cultures, and some are from other countries. These young people share a desire to learn more about where they are from or where they now live."

Undeniably, Cummins' personal background, education, and his teaching career have made him an ideal advocate for serving as state historian. Yet, in return, the post has provided him with a broader perspective on the obvious—how the cause of Texas history is publicly perceived and supported. "One of the things I've learned during these past two years is that most Texans, from any and all backgrounds, have a real and notable appreciation for their state's extraordinary past. There is a presence in this state that draws people into its history," says Cummins, "and I believe that [the cause of] Texas history has never been more alive, more vibrant or robust, than it is right now." He maintains that this fascination and regard for the story of Texas is something, in his experience, that

is unlikely repeated in other states. As further illustration, Cummins refers to the extensive scholarship devoted to the state's historical record, pointing out that Texas bookstores often have shelves filled with works devoted to a wide range of topics on the Lone Star legacy. "On the other hand," he says, "if you walk into a bookstore in New Jersey, for instance, there would not be as many books on that state's history." He clarifies that this comparison does not imply that other states do not have their own compelling heritage, explaining that the majority of state histories are commonly linked to America's narrative, whereas Texas has its own distinctive chapter outside of that realm.

Most of Cummins' work as state historian has consisted of public speaking engagements, and these talks have strengthened his optimism for the future of Texas history. He comments, "I am always happy to talk to people, but I have been pleased to discover that

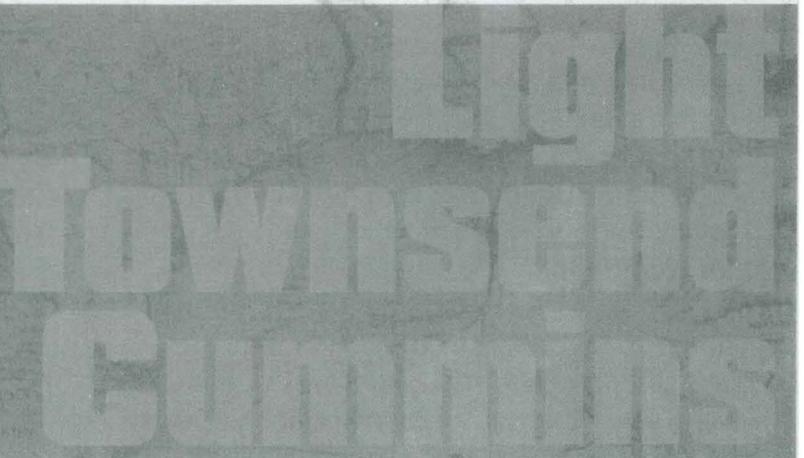
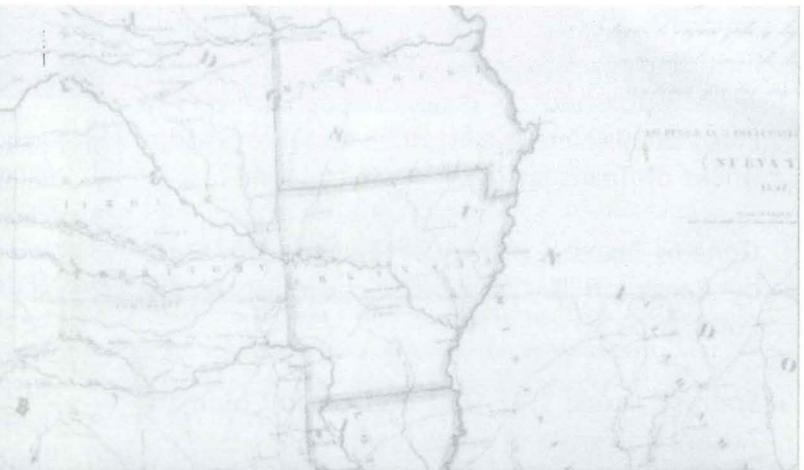
they are just as eager to talk with me about their passion for the subject." He notes that his one regret in serving in the state post is that, as a working Austin College educator, teaching obligations occasionally have meant turning down invitations to lecture. According to Cummins, after giving a talk, people often come up to him to share their family stories of Texas or historical anecdotes about their community. He says, "The passion and knowledge that Texans demonstrate when telling me their stories is truly a unique and wonderful thing. You will find few places where people talk about their state and local history as much as Texans do." Further, he has noticed that the majority of conversations typically begin with the person identifying that they are an x-number generation Texas native or mentioning how long they have lived in the state. The former exhibits an inherent pride that natives have in their Texas roots. As for the latter case, Cummins says non-natives tend

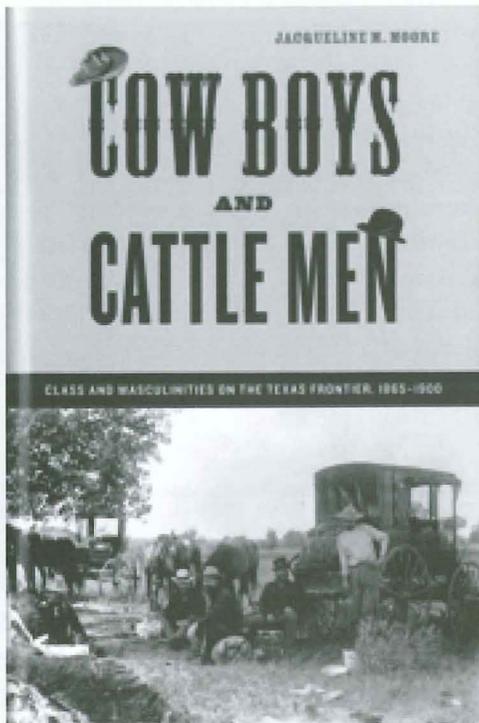
to quantify their time here as a preface to talking about how they have come to embrace the state's culture and history.

Though intangible, there surely seems to be something special about Texas that cultivates a people proud of its heritage. Cummins suggests that, for a large majority of its residents, this history has also become integral to adopting or acknowledging a "Texan" identity. He explains, "This state has always been a land that welcomes immigrants, some of whom arrived during the Spanish period, and others who came just last week. But, no matter when they arrived, everyone inevitably learned how to be a Texan." The historian refers to Texas history as "the common lingua franca" [traditionally defined as a universal language that can be understood by a multilingual group]. Knowledge of state and local history helps transplants better understand the cultural and social identity in their new surroundings. This common

This Lone Star flag rendition paid tribute to Austin College's beloved faculty member during a day of festivities held in his honor this past April.

An Austin College Recognition of Texas State Historian





## Top Five List

Dr. Light Townsend Cummins is the author of several books on Texas and American history, including his most recent work, *Emily Austin of Texas* (published by Texas Christian University Press, 2009). Here is a list of his top five favorite books on Texas history.

***Gone to Texas: A History of the Lone Star State*** by Randolph B. Campbell, Oxford University Press, 2003

***Spanish Texas, 1519-1821*** by Donald Chipman, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992

***Stephen F. Austin, Empresario of Texas*** by Gregg Cantrell, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999

***Cow Boys and Cattle Men: Class and Masculinities on the Texas Frontier 1865-1900*** by Jacqueline M. Moore, New York: New York University Press, 2009

***A Breed So Rare: The Life of J. R. Parten, Liberal Texas Oil Man, 1896-1992*** by Don E. Carleton, Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1998

lingua franca also helps bond natives, newcomers, and even visitors because they all share a mutual interest and respect for the Lone Star legacy. Because the state's historical record serves as a "language" that communicates the attitude and characteristics of what it means to be a Texan, that persona is continually absorbed and redefined as time passes and the culture changes. As such, Cummins says, "A knowledge and understanding of Texas history, in many respects, is the glue that holds together the Texan identity."

While encouraged by the enthusiasm Texans have for their state's heritage, Cummins has been equally impressed with the fine work being done by the preservation community, noting, "There are close to 5,000 historical societies, museums, and libraries throughout the state dedicated to the Texas history cause, many of them in rural areas." He goes on to say, "Having visited many towns, I have met scores of people who offer, often as volunteers, their considerable knowledge, time, or resources to restoration and preservation projects within their community." When speaking to organizations as the state historian, Cummins seizes the chance to officially recognize and thank these men and women for their efforts, and doing so has been exceptionally rewarding for him. However, he comments, "If there was one thing I could change about the history cause in Texas, it would be that more opportunities would exist for preservationists to publicly receive the accolades due to them."

In his two years of reaching out to citizens and to the preservation community as the state historian, Dr. Cummins has driven more than 34,000 miles by car and taken an unknown number of trips by air, criss-crossing the state several times over. "Having the opportunity to travel the state has been personally meaningful. I have stood by the Sabine River in the southeast corner of the state, spent time in Laredo near the Mexican border, visited El Paso, and toured the Panhandle. I am tremendously impressed by the geographic diversity of Texas," the historian says. More so, these landscapes have been the backdrop for what Cummins calls "magical moments." He describes one of these memorable experiences:

*I was invited to The Alamo to give a speech on Texas history. As a native of San Antonio, I had been to the historic site on numerous occasions as a boy. Many of those visits were to hear speeches from extraordinary people—notable individuals, like Eleanor Roosevelt, Admiral Chester Nimitz, and President Dwight Eisenhower. I also heard talks by Presidents John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon and actor John Wayne. When it came time for me to speak that day, I felt awed and honored to be standing in their footprints.*

Lieutenant Governor David Dewhurst swears in Light Townsend Cummins as The State Historian, while Cummins' wife, Victoria, looks on.



Cummins has also talked to Hispanic organizations during his tenure as state historian. Because he so strongly believes that the Spanish and Mexican heritage in Texas holds the same importance as the Anglo-American contribution, being able to advocate for the Spanish-speaking legacy in Texas has been especially rewarding.

In serving as “the public face of Texas history,” Dr. Cummins has enjoyed the warm and welcoming attitude encountered throughout his travels but admits to being surprised by the attention that has come from an unexpected audience. “I have regularly blogged about my experiences as the state historian ([www.historianof-texas.blogspot.com](http://www.historianof-texas.blogspot.com)) and have been amazed to discover that my blog has been accessed by people from around the globe.” Until he took up his official post, Cummins acknowledges that he did not fully comprehend the extent of scholarship devoted to Texas history in places abroad. Emails have come from every European country and from as far away as India. Some overseas enthusiasts send in particular questions about the state’s historical record or ask for recommendations on books to read (*see sidebar on page 12 for the historian’s favorites*), while oth-

ers write simply to express their fascination with Texas history. As Cummins has discovered, the “common lingua franca” of Texas is an international phenomenon, and thanks to today’s technology, the state historian’s ability to promote Texas history has no boundaries.

Dr. Cummins will formerly step down from his post upon the announcement of his yet-to-be-determined [at the time of the interview] successor. He speaks of feeling privileged to have served as The State Historian of Texas and sums up the past two years as being “enjoyable, incredibly uplifting, and very, very rewarding.” Yet, while the Austin College professor’s high-profile assignment is nearly over, what has become a lifelong mission is certainly not ending. Whether teaching in the classroom, standing behind a speaker’s podium, or writing his next book, Light Cummins will continue to animate the cause of Texas history, a desire that began long before his appointment as state historian and will, accordingly, continue well into the future. ★

*Pamela Murtha is assistant editor of Texas HERITAGE magazine.*



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