

“Talk at Ten”
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RACHEL: This is “Talk at Ten.” Thanks for joining me today. I’ll be your host, Rachel Lindley. This Friday and Saturday is the 16th Annual Conference on the history, archaeology, and culture of the Trans-Pecos region. It’s brought to you by the Center for Big Bend Studies. And we have joining us in the studio, Melissa Crowfoot Keane. She’s an archaeologist and an historian with the Center for Big Bend Studies. Hi, Melissa.

MELISSA: Good morning.

RACHEL: Good morning. And she’s here to tell us a little bit about this conference. We were just sort of going through the program earlier before the interview and lots and lots of really interesting stuff—I don’t know—

MELISSA: It’s been a wonderful conference. I mean, every year in the last 16 years it brings together historians, archaeologists, professionals, avocationalists. It’s a very unique conference that way, because most conferences tend to focus on either history or archaeology or professionals or avocationalists, but we bring them all together in one room. We’ve got Ph.D.’s and M.A.’s and students and retired folks and journalists and all kinds. So we’re going to cover a lot of topics.

RACHEL: Over 30 different speakers at the conference, lots of interesting topics. But before we get into talking about some of the specific programs this weekend, I was wondering if you could just sort of, for our listeners, give us a little bit of background on the Center for Big Bend Studies.

MELISSA: Well, the background of the Center actually reflects the content of the annual conference. The Center was started on the Sul Ross campus in 1987 by Dr. Earl Elam who was an historian and he ran the place—it was basically Dr. Elam and a half-time secretary from about 1987 to about 1995. And that’s when Dr. Elam retired and Bob Mallouf came in as the new director of the Center for Big Bend Studies. And Bob Mallouf, of course, is an archaeologist and has been interested in Trans-Pecos archaeology for most of his career. So when he came in and took over as director, the emphasis shifted from history to archaeology.

RACHEL: And you said that the daily work there is about 90% archaeology now.

MELISSA: Today, yes. These days we do archaeology but we pull in history at the conference. In the early days, it was exactly the opposite. They did history on a day-to-day basis and pulled in archaeology for the conference.

RACHEL: So you're an archaeologist with the Center. How many other folks do they have working there?

MELISSA: We have a staff of 18 now.

RACHEL: Mostly archaeologists?

MELISSA: Mostly archaeologists. We have some administrative help and we have an editor and a scientific illustrator; just about everybody else is straight archaeologist, which is some days good and some days not so good (laughing).

RACHEL: And just sort of some background about this area—it has a really rich history. Can you speak a bit on the people that lived in the Big Bend that you all study?

MELISSA: Well, most people don't realize, there's this thing—people come out here from other places where they're used to trees and streams and whatever, and they look around and they call it the despoblado or the middle of nowhere or whatever. And that's really doing an injustice to the archaeology of the area and the history of the area. We've had people here at least ten to 12,000 years.

RACHEL: And where did they primarily live in the region?

MELISSA: Primarily there's two sort of different places or lifestyles that people lived, prehistoric people lived. One kind of prehistoric people settled along the river, settled along the Rio Grande. And we know at least from about A.D. 1200 that they were doing agriculture right there along the river, in Presidio, Redford, what they call the La Junta region. The other folks would be nomadic folks that wandered. They would live for a while in one rockshelter and maybe move to another rockshelter, maybe live in the open for a while. We've got evidence of residences in rockshelters and in open campsites all over the Trans-Pecos. For example, we've been doing a long-term survey of Big Bend National Park and I believe we're over 3,000 sites in Big Bend National Park. A site would be where we've noticed evidence of somebody camping or living over the last ten to 12,000 years.

RACHEL: So as time progressed, what happened to the people that were living in this region? How did their lives change?

MELISSA: Well, that's interesting. I think the nomadic peoples, basically you could say their lifestyle didn't change much over the years. The one thing that changed that we can see archaeologically—you've got to understand that of course in archaeology we're dealing with a minimum of evidence. You know, these folks 5,000, 6,000, 8,000 years ago didn't leave us newspapers or journals or photographs or whatever. But they did leave us some of their artifacts. So the one big change that we can see is a technological change. The earliest people used very long spear points; and then what we call the Archaic peoples, which is the middle region of time, used dart points. They would use the atlatl and throw darts. And the darts were very distinct from the spear points. Spear

points were huge, very long. Dart points are sort of middle sized. And then in the last thousand to fifteen hundred years, they switched from darts to bows and arrows. So then you have a little arrow point; some people call them bird points. But they're arrow points. So that would be the big change in technology over the years.

RACHEL: If you're just joining us, we're speaking with Melissa Crowfoot Keane, and she's with the Center for Big Bend Studies telling us a little bit about the history of the people who lived in this area. I was wondering now if we could get into the conference. We've got a lot of really good sessions, a lot of stuff to cover.

MELISSA: We can; let's talk about the conference.

RACHEL: It begins this Friday; registration starts at 1:00 p.m. at the University Center, the second floor of the University Center—

MELISSA: —at Sul Ross State University in Alpine, Texas.

RACHEL: And some of the programs—you actually were mentioning that there are three different programs on architecture at this conference, which there usually aren't.

MELISSA: I was poking through the program looking for themes and to see some of the threads that run through. And the one that struck me particularly was there is a session on Saturday afternoon on housing and architecture which talks about some of the late 19th century or early 20th century traditional Mexican architecture along the border as well as the work of Henry Trost, who's a very famous El Paso architect who did, of course, the Paisano Hotel here in Marfa.

RACHEL: But if you pair that session with a Friday 2:00 session, with Andy Cloud's session—he's the director of the Center for Big Bend Studies and he's an archaeologist. And he's going to be talking about some of the earlier architecture along the La Junta region.

MELISSA: That's a very fun thing that archaeologists like to talk about is pit houses versus houses in pits. I'm not going to go into it. You have to come to Andy's talk.

RACHEL: It seems like they'd be similar.

MELISSA: Well, they're similar but they're evolutionary over time.

RACHEL: And also you're on the program. You're speaking during—West Texas Biographies is the name of the session—and that's on Friday from 3:45 to 5:15. And you're talking about—this is a great title—Victor J. Smith: Teacher, Architect, Archaeologist, and Human Dynamo. Human Dynamo, not your words, though.

MELISSA: Not my words. That was actually the president of Sul Ross at the time that Victor J. Smith worked there is the one that called him a human dynamo. And I first

became acquainted with Victor J. Smith through his archaeology work. But then I had a question about whether or not he visited a particular archaeological site that we were doing some other research on. So I went and read up on this fellow and he's incredible. He's one of the longer term teachers at Sul Ross. He was there from 1920 to 1951. He came as an industrial arts teacher, which is what we would call these days as "shop." He taught furniture making, architecture, design, concrete, mechanical drawing, architectural drawing, all that sort of thing. But he got interested in the archaeology of the area right away. And during the first 15 years he was here, he visited on the weekends in his Model-T—he would chug out on the dirt roads and visit archaeological sites. And he visited over 200 sites. He not only visited them, but wrote them up and wrote scholarly papers on them, and then started collecting artifacts, brought them back to Sul Ross, put them on the shelf in the biology laboratory, and they became the nucleus for the Museum of the Big Bend.

RACHEL: So kind of a pioneer for archaeology in the area?

MELISSA: Absolutely. Absolutely. He brought outside investigators in here from the Smithsonian and The Gila Pueblo in Arizona. And then was one of the founders of the West Texas Historical and Scientific Society, which built the Museum of the Big Bend on campus. And he was its first curator. And on top of that he was an architect. He built buildings all over Alpine and he designed the Bar SR Bar emblem for Sul Ross State University.

RACHEL: And that's Victor J. Smith. Joining you in that session is also Judith Parsons and Mary —

MELISSA: It looks like Mary Troxclair to me.

RACHEL: Troxclair, okay, I just wanted to make sure. Can you tell us a little bit about the other West Texas biographies that they'll be covering?

MELISSA: Yes. Dr. Judith Parsons is a history professor at Sul Ross. And she's working through the Morelock papers. And this is a paper on Dr. Morelock, who was president of Sul Ross. She's entitled her paper "The Man Who Saved Sul Ross." And he did some very interesting, innovative programs that kept Sul Ross going through the '20s and the '30s, during the depression. And then Mary Troxclair. This is an example of how this conference works. On one hand we have Judith Parsons, who is a long-time historian-researcher-Ph.D. teacher; and Mary Troxclair is a student at Sul Ross. And she's talking about a pioneer Jewish cattleman, Meyer Halff, who came to Brewster County in 1873 when he was 14 years old.

RACHEL: And another session that's actually going on at the same time on Friday, 3:45 to 5:15, as your West Texas biographies—it's on Big Bend Ranch State Park, the Texas Parks and Wildlife. They're having their big Fiesta celebration this weekend, so I was wondering if you could tell us a little bit more about the speakers that are going to be talking and what they're going to be discussing about the Park.

MELISSA: Yes. This is also one of the difficulties of the conference is we've got so many good speakers that sometimes they're scheduled right next to each other. But the rooms are very close, so you can duck in and duck out if you want to go listen to parts of lectures. The Texas Parks and Wildlife program—as you said, it's 3:45 on Friday. There's three speakers: Doug Porter and Cindy Brandimarte both work for Texas Parks and Wildlife. And John Leffler is a professor at U.T. They're going to be talking about various aspects of the history of Big Bend Ranch State Park, which is a project that Texas Parks and Wildlife has been working on recently, putting together a full history of the ranch. So they're going to include such topics as mining, candelilla wax, the building of roads, ranching, agriculture, and water supply.

RACHEL: Another one that really stuck out and caught my eye was on Saturday: mortuary studies. That's at 10:45 a.m., that session. What do they mean by mortuary studies, exactly?

MELISSA: In the archaeological sense.

RACHEL: Yes, it's not exactly, come to this session and you can learn to be a mortician.

MELISSA: Mortuary studies is the archaeological term for studying burials. And so we've got two speakers there. Bobby Gray is going to be talking about the crevice burial in southern Brewster County. A crevice burial is where the bones were tucked in between rocks, in the crevice between rocks. It's a very common way of burying people around here. And the other speaker is Leticia Gonzalez Arratia and she's from northern Coahuila and she's an excellent well-known rock art and archaeologist from northern Mexico. And she's going to be speaking on some caves in Mexico, burials in caves.

RACHEL: And you also are the chair for a session on Saturday from 1:00 to 3:00 p.m. West Texas history featuring Matt Walter, whose been on our "Talk at Ten" program before, and Kristen Tyson. Can you tell us a little bit about what they're going to be talking about in that session?

MELISSA: This is a session focusing, as you say, on West Texas history. Matt is an employee at the Museum of the Big Bend and he's been poking around in the Marty and Yanna Davis collection of maps that was donated to the university a year or two ago. And he's going to be presenting some of those maps and showing how Texas—I think his topic is something like putting Texas on the map, so he's going to be talking about how Texas begins to show up on historic maps. So he'll have a lot of really cool maps to look at.

RACHEL: Do you happen to know around what time Texas—

MELISSA: I don't know that. Probably mid nineteenth century, I would suspect.

RACHEL: And then Kristen Tyson?

MELISSA: Again, Kristen is a student at Sul Ross. And she's going to be talking about "A Nation at War." This is basically the effect of the two World Wars on the Big Bend region. She did some work as a student at Sul Ross and worked with Matt to put together the display at the Museum of the Big Bend—A Nation at War. And then the third member of that group is a fellow—Dr. Glen Ely—

RACHEL: This is the best title for any talk, "Skullduggery at Spencer's Ranch: Civil War Intrigue in West Texas." I'm very curious already, just from the title.

MELISSA: Well, Dr. Ely is an interesting fellow. He started out not doing the Master's and Ph.D. route. He started out with ten years of Texas history documentaries. He's done oodles and oodles of them. So he came at it from sort of a public history, let's talk about history so that the public can understand it, rather than going the scholarly route where it might get a little obfuscated. So, after doing ten years of documentaries, then he went back and finished a Master's and Ph.D. at TCU. And he's taking up a new job in the fall teaching historical film making at Texas State in San Marcus. So it doesn't surprise me that he has a great title. He's talking about things—again, it's similar to Kristen's ideas that when you think of the Civil War you don't necessarily think of the Big Bend or Trans-Pecos Texas.

RACHEL: I think this might actually be the first time I've thought of the Civil War and the Big Bend simultaneously.

MELISSA: You see, you learn something new everyday.

RACHEL: I'm learning a lot. I'm having a lot of fun talking with you.

MELISSA: In his description of his paper, he also uses the words "hot bed of espionage, murder and mayhem" down there in the La Junta area, so I'm looking forward to hearing what he has to say.

RACHEL: Do you have any background on what that skullduggery, as it were, was?

MELISSA: I do not. He's keeping it under wraps for his paper.

RACHEL: That's exciting. So you've got a lot of stuff that I guess you're interested in learning about and hearing just in addition to what you're presenting yourself.

MELISSA: Again, the wonderfulness and the difficulty of the conference is that you're running around watching your program, going "Okay, that one's next in that room," "I don't want to miss that," Can I leave now? "Can I miss the"—whatever. So I wanted to emphasize the times again. This is Friday afternoon and all day Saturday. Friday the registration starts at 1:00 o'clock. There's a director's welcome at 1:45, and the talks then run from 2:00 to 5:15. There will be 12 talks on Friday followed by a cocktail

reception and a banquet, which I understand is sold out. But if you're interested, you might want to check during registration to see if anybody's backed out.

RACHEL: And that's Dr. John Hart from the University of Houston?

MELISSA: Yes.

RACHEL: And he's talking about the Quest for Silver in the Sierra Madre. How do you all decide who you're going to have as your featured speaker with the banquet?

MELISSA: We always try to go outside the area and get somebody who's a big name and has done some very interesting research recently. So, it varies every year. Usually, of course, it's somebody who knows somebody.

RACHEL: Can you tell me a little bit more about Dr. Hart?

MELISSA: He's been at the University of Houston a long time and is well respected in his field as an historian. That's all I know about him. And he's a good friend of Andy Cloud's.

RACHEL: Again, if you want more information on the Center for Big Bend Studies, it's their 16th Annual Conference this weekend, November 13th and 14th, at Sul Ross; you can call 432-837-8179 for more info. You can also visit them online at sulross.edu/cbbs—that's for Center for Big Bend Studies. And if you're just joining us, we're speaking with Melissa Crowfoot Keane who is an archaeologist and historian at the Center. So, in addition to these programs that are going on all weekend, lots of interesting stuff, lots of great speakers, there's some other events sprinkled in there too, you had mentioned?

MELISSA: There are some other events, yes. Let me finish on the schedules. On Saturday morning the doors open at 8:30 and the talks start at 9:00 o'clock and they will run until lunch. And then after lunch starting up again at 1:30 to a little bit after 4:00. We'll have 20 talks on Saturday. Lunch will be on your own. You can either eat there at the University Center—all this happens at the University Center at Sul Ross State University in Alpine. We're also going to be having—this is something new this year—we're going to be having a raffle. You may have seen the posters around town with Avram Dumitrescu's painting; he entitles it "Vultures on Adobe." It's acrylic on acid-free printmaker's card and it's a \$750 value. It's about three feet by two feet and we are selling \$10.00 raffle tickets. That raffle drawing will be held 11:45 Saturday a.m. and I understand you need not be present to win, but you do have to buy a ticket.

RACHEL: And that's to benefit the Center?

MELISSA: Yes, ma'am.

RACHEL: And Avram is a wonderful painter. His wife Megan was an intern at Marfa Public Radio with me about three years ago and I got to see him paint around the area a lot. And he's just a wonderful artist. He has a gallery on Sixth Street in Alpine.

MELISSA: Uh-huh.

RACHEL: And that's again \$10.00 tickets to benefit the Center for Big Bend Studies.

MELISSA: We'll also have some—we usually have a few booksellers, maybe four or five different tables in the lobby with different sales going on.

RACHEL: So, aside from the conference, you've been at the Center for Big Bend Studies and the university for about three years?

MELISSA: About three and a half years.

RACHEL: Okay. What currently are you and some of your fellow archaeologists working on at the Center?

MELISSA: We do a lot. I would say the three big projects we're working on now—as I mentioned, we're doing a huge survey of Big Bend National Park for the Federal government. But we also work on private land. So we have an ongoing project on the Pinto Canyon Ranch where—I think John told me the other day they've identified several hundred sites—I can't remember now if he said 400 or 500, but a lot. So we're continuing to work with the landowner there. We've also been doing a lot of work over the years at the 02 Ranch south of Alpine. And we've identified 200 or 300 sites there. We've got one active excavation going on there that will be an Early Archaic site, which goes back about 7,000 years. We've got now four radiocarbon dates that date *mas o menos* (more or less) 7,000 years before present

RACHEL: Would that be probably the most exciting thing you've found—

MELISSA: Well, when you've got a site that's 7,000 years old, they're often deeply buried. The more recent sites we can see on the surface. But to find these deeply buried sites, you kind of get them by luck and by guess and by gosh. And so this is a place where the arroyo eroded the bank a bit and you could see the layer of carbon, which would be an old campfire. And it's about—I'd say it's about two or three feet below the surface. You asked if it's exciting. This is exciting because this is, I think, only the third Early Archaic site that we've been excavating.

RACHEL: And what have you been learning from it so far, or is it still in the early—?

MELISSA: It's still in the early excavation stage. One of the earlier sites we did was the Paradise Site, also on the 02 Ranch and what we were able to do there was expose a full living surface. It's a very carefully done excavation, but we can actually see the surface

that people were, in fact, sitting on, working on. So we traced work areas—over here they were chipping stone, over here they were cooking, and that sort of thing.

RACHEL: Maybe this shows my ignorance about how archaeology works, but so, you know, we now have this living surface that we're on right now. What is the process over 7,000 years that it gets covered up and how is it that things like, you said, a campfire—how is it that those get preserved for 7,000 years that people can then come in and chip through the layers and say, okay, this is the surface that the people walked on?

MELISSA: That's a good question. It's complicated. But basically what happens is that—and actually, one of the talks at the Conference this weekend is on geoarchaeology. We've pulled in outside experts and one of our favorite outside experts is what they call a geomorphologist and this man, named Charles Frederick, can read dirt—you know how a geologist reads rocks and tells you, this is Pre-Cambrian and this is Cambrian—well, Charles Frederick can do the same thing with dirt. He can look at that side of the arroyo, at the site of the cut bank and say, oh look here, here was a flood that came through and deposited a lot of stuff. Here was a time of aridity when there wasn't a lot of water flowing and that sort of thing. So, some of these sites are buried by floods, some of them are exposed by floods, some of them are buried just by wind-blown sediments over the years. It varies by site.

RACHEL: You said there were 18 folks working at the Center for Big Bend Studies. Is there anyone there who specializes specifically in that type of field?

MELISSA: In geomorphology?

RACHEL: Uh-huh.

MELISSA: No, that's when we bring Charles Frederick in.

RACHEL: I thought you just meant for the conference.

MELISSA: No. Well, Sam Cason's talk at the conference is going to be on some of Charles Frederick's work, but no—we would love to have a geomorphologist on staff, but we have to bring him in from outside.

RACHEL: So again, the Conference is this weekend, Friday and Saturday, and we're speaking to Melissa Crowfoot Keane from the Center for Big Bend Studies. And so, what are some of the ones on the schedule that maybe we haven't discussed that maybe you want to touch on briefly just before we run out of time? Just to highlight some more of these excellent programs.

MELISSA: Well, let me say first that there is a fee. If you're not a member of the Center for Big Bend Studies, it's \$40.00. If you are a member, it's \$35.00. If you choose to join CBBS that day, the individual membership is \$25.00. So, you might want to fork that over and save some money. With that \$35.00 or \$40.00 admission fee, you can attend

any or all of the talks and the cocktail reception on Friday afternoon. And you can come and go as you like. As I said, we don't force you to stay in one room all day; you can mix and mingle as you like. We've also got some talks from some visiting people. We've got some talks by the Permian Historical Society and the West Texas Historical Association. I also wanted to mention—everybody loves rock art, so if you'd like to come, the last thing on Saturday afternoon, 3:15 to 4:15, we're going to have a session on rock art. We've got Reeda Peel speaking, who is our rock art specialist at the Center for Big Bend Studies; and we have Jamie Hampson, who is from Cambridge, England, and he has been studying rock art around the world. He's been to India, Australia, Brazil, everywhere. And he is doing his Ph.D. dissertation on the rock art of the Trans-Pecos. His is going to be a great talk—they're both going to be great talks.

RACHEL: Well, again, that's this Friday and Saturday at Sul Ross State University. We're just about out of time for today's Talk at Ten. Thanks so much for coming back and talking with us.

MELISSA: This is great.

RACHEL: I guess this is your third time on Talk at Ten.

MELISSA: Oh, yeah, I'm an old hand at Talk at Ten.

RACHEL: Well, it was really exciting to speak with you about your archaeological work and it sounds like it's going to be a great conference.

MELISSA: Come on down.

RACHEL: This has been Talk at Ten. I'm Rachel Lindley; thanks for tuning in.