

A CROSS ALONG THE ROAD: REGULATION, PERCEPTION, AND PRESERVATION  
OF ROADSIDE SHRINES IN CENTRAL TEXAS

by

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## I. INTRODUCTION

When driving along the highway in Texas, one can often spot a cross here and there. Seen sitting under a tree, on a hillside, adjacent to a fence, or in the grass along the roadside, crosses typically indicate a place where a motorist or pedestrian lost their life in a vehicle accident. Behind each of these ephemeral shrines there is a story.

The mother of a driving accident victim, Beverly Trollinger, a teacher from New Braunfels, spoke about her son's shrine, "My son Adam was 17 when he died in a car train wreck...[His shrine is] still there...they still meet there."<sup>1</sup> I went to go find this shrine, but soon discovered it no longer existed, despite Trollingers' insistence that it did. This incident highlights the ephemeral, fleeting nature of roadside memorials, or shrines as they are commonly referred to. These shrines, with their crosses and other meaningful signs, are created and maintained by family and friends of the deceased or through government entities and serve the purpose of marking a place of death along the road. Yet, these important, everyday places of public history can potentially be removed by various groups such as individuals who knew the deceased or the state depending on who deems them worthy of existence. This key issue here is who has power to memorialize in public spaces. Roadside memorials and the space they exist in represents a struggle over who has the power to memorialize deceased community and family members in public spaces.

Roadside memorials represent a sector of public memory in which several areas of history and other disciplines intersect. The history of the road, grief practices, memorialization, and preservation can all be explored when studying roadside memorials, as they all have a part in our past, present, and future. Memory studies, in addition to history,

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<sup>1</sup> Beverly Trollinger, Interview by Emma Beard, October 10, 2022, 7-11



also encompasses all of these topics related to grief expression. The ideas regarding community memory and the power of memory are part of the historical and theoretical foundation of memorialization, and by extension, roadside memorials. The connection between the discipline of history and memory studies creates a web of themes that can make up the framework of understanding these public shrines.

Through studying the history, regulations, placement, and public opinions pertaining to these shrines I found that they exist in a space that creates conflict between those who wish to maintain and memorialize these sites and those who want them removed and forgotten. I had initially postulated that roadside shrines were places in which very little interaction occurred beyond that of traditional mourning but found this is not the case. State agencies, private organizations, local municipalities, and individuals all project their own ideas of power onto these sites of grief. One solution to the issue of control—for both those who want to protect and those who want to remove these shrines—is to preserve these shrines through documentation, as they are examples of everyday public history. Preservation through documentation preserves the important aspects of the shrine, while also allowing them to remain within the realm of the ephemeral.

There has been minimal secondary literature regarding roadside memorials up until the last few decades. Few works have even focused on roadside memorials specifically, though there has been some pertinent literature that have illuminated the foundational concepts underpinning the late twentieth century expansion of roadside memorials. In particular, I have drawn on several key secondary sources to help build a foundation for understanding and exploring roadside shrines, including *Memorial Mania* by Erika Doss, *Roadside Crosses in Contemporary Memorial Culture* by Holly Everett, *Carried to the Wall*



by Kristin Hass, and *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death* edited by Jack Santino.

This thesis aims to take up a position that fills in the gaps left in previous literature surrounding roadside shrines, such as the themes of community, memory, preservation. My interpretation of roadside shrines places an emphasis on these themes, in order to fully explore and understand roadside shrines place in memorial culture. The importance of this thesis does not solely lie in the lack of documentation surrounding these shrines. It also lies in their importance to the study of everyday public history. These shrines exist in both the private and the public spheres of grief and memorialization. This gray area between public and private within the discipline of public history deserves attention and study.

The primary sources consist of oral histories, newspapers, government records, and photographs and help to construct a narrative that explores the history, purpose, and potential preservation of roadside memorials. The oral histories used in this work come from a variety of individuals with varying opinions and understandings of roadside memorials. The interviewees cited in this thesis include two City Council members, a family member of a victim, the classmate of a victim, an oral historian, and a TxDOT employee. Each oral history interviewee helped inform the questions I ask in this thesis. The primary questions this study answers are: What specific histories make up the basis of these shrines? How do we to understand they are and what do they mean in the context of the roadside? What place do roadside memorials have in American memorial culture? These questions and their answers form the background of each section in this thesis.

This work is organized into three sections that include several subsections within each. Each section moves forward through time, while simultaneously working through the various



themes that are intertwined with roadside shrines. Section one focuses on the origins of roadside shrines, as well as these memorials' relationship with the history of the American road and the regulatory agencies that hold jurisdiction over them. The regulations that exist along the road directly impact their functionality. Section two addresses the history of memorials themselves, how people interact with memorials, and how individuals view roadside memorials as a mode of grief practice. Finally, section three explores how roadside memorials and archiving intersect, and how these ephemeral pieces of public history can be preserved. There are two main concepts and definitions that need defining before exploring roadside memorials. The first definition is that of tradition. The general definition of tradition is "an inherited, established, or customary pattern of thought, action, or behavior (such as a religious practice or a social custom)."<sup>2</sup> The practice of the roadside shrine is, at its core, a social custom, as it is practiced by communities, groups, and families. Overall, this definition sufficiently explains tradition in relation to the roadside shrines' origins and continued practice as used in this paper.

The second definition concerns "alternative grief practice." The term alternative grief practice as used in this paper refers to a practice that explores and understands grief outside of the mainstream societal norm, such as roadside memorials, which are usually created by members of marginalized groups—or those who believe themselves to be marginalized in some fashion. These practices do not adhere to popular death conventions, such as formal burial and cremations, or formal memorialization such as national war monuments.

This work seeks to demonstrate the importance of roadside shrines through the exploration of their history and meaning. The main point of this work is to understand roadside

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<sup>2</sup> "Tradition Definition & Meaning," Merriam-Webster, Accessed October 25, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/tradition>.



shrines and to highlight them as examples of an organic everyday aspect of public history. They have a deep history and are a meaningful interpretive mode of American culture and public history. Roadside shrines have been overlooked and labeled as ‘unimportant’ to the study of memorialization, as evidenced by the lack of scholarship, documentation, and attempts to preserve and curate them. To repair this damage and promote professional historical and archival interest in roadside memorials, the importance of these sites of alternative grief practice must be studied



## II. ORIGINS AND REGULATION OF ROADSIDE SHRINES AND MEMORIALS

The history of roadside memorials is inextricably linked to the history of the road, which encompasses, of course, centuries of development. Centuries ago roads in Texas began as trails left by animals, primarily buffalo, which then evolved into dirt trails blazed by native peoples of various tribes, which after white settlement then grew into larger dirt roads between settlements, until eventually they grew into the roads we know today.<sup>3</sup> Each phase of the road's history was shaped by a different group, and each group left their own metaphorical footprint through cultural and social practices that occurred along it.

Road development in both the broad region of the Southwest and Texas has a very specific and complex history, spanning from before Spanish settlement to the present day. For example, the Native Plains Indians, such as the Plains Caddo tribes, hunted Buffalo in the Central Texas region. The Buffalo then created trails that the Plains Caddo tribes used for generations, dating back to the pre-Columbian era.<sup>4</sup> This in turn created paths that ran so deep due to use that they became the basis for the Spanish *caminos* that crisscrossed Texas's landscape.<sup>5</sup> Los Caminos Reales, or the King's Roads, were created out of these older routes, and became the basis for the Camino Reale de los Tejas, an important route for the Spanish who would come to take control of the region.<sup>6</sup>

As roads grew, so did traditional practices that took place adjacent to them. The practice of leaving roadside markers in the form of crosses emerged from both Spanish colonial and specific Native American traditions. During the era of Spanish colonial

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<sup>3</sup> Geoff Appold, Carol Dawson, and Roger Allen Polson, *Miles and Miles of Texas. 100 Years of the Texas Highway Department* (Texas A&M University Press, 2016), 4-5.

<sup>4</sup> Joni L Manson. "Transmississippi Trade and Travel: The Buffalo Plains and Beyond." *Plains Anthropologist* 43, no. 166 (1998): 385-400, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25669567>.

<sup>5</sup> Appold et al., *Miles and Miles of Texas*, 7.

<sup>6</sup> Appold et al., *Miles and Miles of Texas*, 8.



domination (spanning from circa the early 1500's through the early 1800's), a grief practice of leaving roadside markers and memorials began to take root in the Southwest. It did so also in Texas after Spanish colonizers moved into the region during the 1680s. This roadside marker tradition that developed throughout the Southwest can be traced through logs and journals left by Spanish missionaries, which offer some of the earliest accounts of practices that influenced the development of the roadside shrine. These accounts describe shrines, often called "*descansos*," which directly translates to "resting places." At times this meaning in the early records appears to have been literal. It was a common practice for the missionaries of the early colonial era to leave crosses to mark resting places for travelers.<sup>7</sup> These crosses typically denoted water or shelter, or simply a safe place to stop along the road. In the mid 1700's, crosses began to be associated with marking a place of violent death. Travelers became targets of Indian attacks while stopping to pray at "*descansos*," eventually leading to the governor of New Spain to issue a decree ordering the removal of all the crosses from the road.<sup>8</sup> It is important to acknowledge that these records of violence occurring alongside the *descansos* are from a white perspective. The Spanish invaded Texas and subjugated the Native tribes that had called the Southwest home for thousands of years, helping to incite the violence that occurred along the roadside. This violence, however, did not stop missionaries from continuing the practice. They continued this alternative form of grief practice, placing memorials along roads leading to cities and surrounding areas, though it is difficult to tell for how long this went on.<sup>9</sup>

The tradition of roadside shrines in Texas, and the Southwest more broadly, was

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<sup>7</sup> Herbert Eugene Bolton, *Spanish Exploration in the Southwest, 1542-1706* (C. Scribner's Sons, 1916), 322.

<sup>8</sup> Sandra Griffin, "Living Remember Dead Through Roadside Crosses - Dead", *El Paso Times*, 27 Oct, 1986, 5. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/430286525/?terms=descansos&match=1>.

<sup>9</sup> Bolton, *Spanish exploration in the Southwest*, 448.



generated by Native American groups of the region, as well as by missionaries. One account from the Espejo expedition in 1583 compares the practices of the Native Americans to that of the Spanish: “In each one of these pueblos they have a house to which they carry food for the devil, and they have small stone idols which they worship. Just as the Spaniards have crosses along the roads, they have between the pueblos, in the middle of the road, small caves or grottoes, like shrines, built of stones, where they place painted sticks and feathers, saying that the devil goes there to rest and speak with them.”<sup>10</sup> The appearance of the roadside memorial was and is still made up of motifs that came from practices that originated from both the Spanish and Native Americans. The Spanish utilized Roman Catholic symbols (crosses), while Native American groups created their shrines from natural materials, such as stone, feathers, and small idols meant for personal worship. Scholars have suggested that twentieth century iterations of roadside memorials have in shape and form drawn upon the Catholic and pagan elements that seem to have characterized some of the roadside shrines and descansos described during the Spanish colonial period. For example, historian John O. West documented shrines –which he called “folk graves” – in the Rio Grande Valley in the 1980’s, and described how they were decorated with shells, rocks, and other natural additions in addition to catholic symbols like the cross. These elements trace back or at least echo those found in the Native American shrines described in the Spanish missionaries’ accounts.<sup>11</sup>

Some of these aspects can still be found in the shrines of the present day. The photographs of shrines in the Austin area, taken in 2022 and 2023, published in the appendix illustrate this. One shrine located along the I-35 northbound frontage road had little

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<sup>10</sup> Bolton, *Spanish exploration in the Southwest*, 177-178.

<sup>11</sup> John O. West, “Folk Grave Decorations Along the Rio Grande,” in *Folk Art in Texas*, ed. Francis Edward Abernethy, (Denton, Texas, 1985), 47, <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc38854/>: accessed April 14, 2023.



information attached, such as a name or date of death. But it incorporated religious elements such as an angel and cross, and elements that connect to nature, such as flowers. (see appendix, image i). Another shrine that highlights elements that harken back to earlier iterations can be found along the exit ramp of toll road 45, right near I-35 north (see appendix, image ii). This shrine includes the typical elements such as flowers, lights, and the symbol of the cross. The religious symbol of the cross and the naturalistic elements of the flowers, both real and fake, are tied directly back to earlier iterations described by Spanish missionaries, such as the crosses and shrines used by the Spanish and Native American groups.<sup>12</sup> Sentiment and grief are at the root of roadside memorials as an alternative form of grief practice, which is different from formal memorialization such as gravestones or formal markers. This stems from a tradition that dates back to the Spanish colonial era.

Roadside memorials in Texas have been evolving over a long period of time. But the advance in Texas of a complicated, modern road systems and government control over them has shaped roadside memorials. The formal roads system began to develop in Texas after the Texas Revolution of 1836, which ended Mexican control. The new Texas government then set up the Central National Road. This system of roads connected county seats to one another, and relied on the communities alongside it for maintenance.<sup>13</sup> These roads cared for and maintained by the community would eventually turn back over to the state as populations boomed in the late nineteenth century.<sup>14</sup> It was during the early to mid-twentieth century that

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<sup>12</sup> Jack Santino, "Performative Commemoratives: Spontaneous Shrines and The Public Memorialization of Death" in *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 9.

<sup>13</sup> "Early Texas Roads," Texas Historical Commission, accessed April 6, 2023, <https://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/historic-texas-highways/publications-roadside-architecture/history>.

<sup>14</sup> "Post-Civil War Era Roads," Texas Historical Commission, accessed April 6, 2023, <https://www.thc.texas.gov/preserve/projects-and-programs/historic-texas-highways/researching-roads-roadside-architecture/post>.



modern road construction and regulation began to develop. Of course, the advent of cars and new road surfaces made them easier to travel.

Between 1926 to the 1950s, US routes such as the Lincoln Highway, the Dixie Highway, and Route 66 linked the states together.<sup>15</sup> These routes, in particular Route 66, helped to expand travel, and many small towns became highway towns.<sup>16</sup> These routes would both lose their names, and become obsolete as the federal government began to take over the maintenance and control of highways.

Texas specifically began building and expanding roadways into freeways during the late 1950s, and those roads, along with the early Texas interstates, created massive increases in roadway size and use.<sup>17</sup> On a national level, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act in 1956, which then allowed for nationwide roadway expansion.<sup>18</sup> This growth of the road and its landscape led to the creation of federal, state, and local government organizations that asserted more control over the roadside and the memorials that dotted its sides. These organizations have asserted their control through various laws and programs that regulate the roadside.

The Texas Highway Department was created in 1917 by the Thirty-fifth Texas Legislature, during the administration of Governor James Ferguson in order to fulfill the requirements of the 1916 Federal Aid Road Act; it granted monetary assistance to all states

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<sup>15</sup> Bruce Jensen. "Multiple Property Survey: Historic Road Infrastructure of Texas, 1866 to 1965," National Parks Service, February 2, 2015, <https://ftp.dot.state.tx.us/pub/txdot-info/env/toolkit/mps-tx-hist-roads.pdf>.

<sup>16</sup> Peter B. Dedek, *Hip to the Trip: A Cultural History of Route 66* (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 2007), 26.

<sup>17</sup> Dennis L Christiansen, "Transportation Infrastructure in Texas: The Needs and the Numbers," Texas A&M Transportation Institute, last modified September 6, 2022, <https://tti.tamu.edu/uncategorized/transportation-infrastructure-in-texas-the-needs-and-the-numbers/>

<sup>18</sup> "Highway History," U.S. Department of Transportation, last modified February 22, 2022, <https://www.fhwa.dot.gov/highwayhistory/interstate.cfm>



that had centralized, state control of road building guided by a state agency.<sup>19</sup> This called for a State Highway Department that would oversee and maintain all activities related to roads. In 1991, seventy four years after its initial creation, the department gained a new name, the Texas Department of Transportation (TxDOT), and it adopted an updated mission statement.

TxDOT continues to oversee and maintain all activities related to state roads and highways within Texas, though this is not true for county and private roads. TxDOT's mission as described on its website is "Connecting you with Texas," a somewhat vague and simple assertion. TxDOT's goals, detailed under a separate category on its website, have the same sort of ambiguity but are expressed in an explicit bureaucratic language. The broad goals of the Texas Department of Transportation are to "deliver the right projects, focus on the customer, foster stewardship, optimize system performance, preserve our assets, promote safety, [and] value our employees."<sup>20</sup> Reading each of these goals, while keeping in mind the overall mission of TxDOT to 'connect you with Texas,' TxDOT seems to simply be focused on maintaining Texas roads and the safety of travel. However, the language TxDOT uses fails to capture the assertive actions it takes to control and regulate highways and the right of way adjacent to them. Specifically, roadside memorials are not mentioned in the rhetoric, rationale, and justification of promoting safety. TxDOT offers a benign sense of service to Texans, which masks the programs designed to regulate.

TxDOT asserts oversight over roadside memorials through a complex, overlapping set of rules and regulations dictated through various programs and legislation. These can be difficult to disentangle. Regulation through TxDOT takes different forms, including through

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<sup>19</sup> John D Huddleston, "Texas Department of Transportation," *TSHA*, August 5, 2020, <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/texas-department-of-transportation>

<sup>20</sup> "Mission, Vision, Values, and Goals," Texas Department of Transportation, accessed February 21, 2023, <https://www.txdot.gov/about/leadership/mission>



formal marker programs as well as legislation that dictates specifics surrounding memorials. Both of these forms of regulation involve specific language used to describe roadside memorials. The specifics involved in regulation allow for TxDOT to control almost every aspect of roadside memorialization. TxDOT asserts control of roadside shrines through its legal control over the “right of way.” The right of way is defined as “the legal right of a pedestrian, vehicle, or ship to proceed with precedence over others in a particular situation or place.”<sup>21</sup> Within this context, the right of way refers to the place in which pedestrians and vehicles interact, essentially the roadside.

TxDOT has its own department dedicated to this space, the aptly named ‘Right of Way Division.’ The division provides *relocation* assistance “when needed.”<sup>22</sup> Relocation, in particular, is important here as roadside memorials are directly affected. Relocation is used to justify the legality of removal of shrines, resulting in the loss of these sites of cultural importance.

Another explicit means of oversight of roadside memorials is implemented through TxDOT’s Memorial Sign Program. The program, created in 2007, includes a manual which describes the ways in which the right of way must be treated, such as how to set up a marker through TxDOT, what rules must be followed when setting one up, as well as details about size, placement and materials. The marker can only be of two" X four" construction and concrete footings are prohibited; markers should be located in such a way that it does not distract motorists and overly ornate markers are prohibited so as to not distract drivers; and the marker should be no more than 30 inches high and no wider than 18 inches as to not

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<sup>21</sup> “Right of Way Definition & Meaning,” Merriam-Webster, accessed February 21, 2023, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/right-of-way>

<sup>22</sup> “Right of Way Division,” Texas Department of Transportation, accessed February 21, 2023, <https://www.txdot.gov/about/divisions/right-of-way-division.html>.



impair driving.<sup>23</sup> TxDOT maintains that these regulations are simply about safety and traffic flow, but in reality the guideline defines those markers that are acceptable and those that are “non-conforming” and “illegal.”<sup>24</sup> This has a negative impact on those with alternative ideals, which can be illustrated through the language used to control ‘non-conforming’ shrines. Specifically, TxDOT states that “The placement of non-conforming markers” is discouraged, and if a marker presents a potential safety hazard to the public or an operational problem, “the marker should be removed immediately or relocated.”<sup>25</sup> The potential immediate removal of a shrine set up by loved ones of a victim of violence on the road seems to go against at the least TxDOT’s mission to ‘focus on the customer,’ and at the most to ‘connect you with Texas.’ These guidelines disconnect those who put these shrines as a mode of grief expression, from the personal process of creating and space in which grief can be expressed and shared. TxDOT has a set of guidelines published under the section “Sign Guidelines and Applications Manual.” Specifically, program guidelines state that, “certain criteria” must be met in order to create a roadside memorial legally. Ultimately, the Memorial Sign Program dictates who may put up shrines, where they may put them up, and for how long.<sup>26</sup>

Additionally, TxDOT asserts its control over roadside shrines through different price-based regulations within the Memorial Sign Program. Legislative bills pertaining to the program and the memorials it creates also stipulate a price for formal roadside memorials. A bill from 2007 states that, “if the application meets the department’s requirements and the applicant pays the \$100 fee, the department shall erect a sign.”<sup>27</sup> “Sign” in this context simply

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<sup>23</sup> “Section 10: Memorial Markers within the right of way,” TxDOT, accessed January 30, 2023, [http://onlinemanuals.txdot.gov/txdotmanuals/use/memorial\\_markers\\_within\\_the\\_right\\_of\\_way.htm](http://onlinemanuals.txdot.gov/txdotmanuals/use/memorial_markers_within_the_right_of_way.htm).

<sup>24</sup> TxDOT, “Section 10: Memorial Markers within the right of way.”

<sup>25</sup> TxDOT, “Section 10: Memorial Markers within the right of way.”

<sup>26</sup> “Sign guidelines and applications manual: Fatality memorial markers and signs,” TxDOT, accessed June 17, 2022, [http://onlinemanuals.txdot.gov/txdotmanuals/smk/fatality\\_memorial\\_markers.htm](http://onlinemanuals.txdot.gov/txdotmanuals/smk/fatality_memorial_markers.htm).

<sup>27</sup> Tex. S.B. 937, 80th Leg., R.S. (2007).



means a marker, usually a metal sheet attached to a post or pole, with the victim's name, date of death, and a brief message about drunk driving. This sign is not the same as a traditional roadside memorial, as it lacks the personalized aspects seen in the elaborate, culturally rooted sites created by people outside of government, local, and private groups. This is another hurdle in front of those who want to go through the system in order to set a memorial. A fee is not only a deterrent for those who desire to set up a sign through the proper channels, but also to those who have set up “non- conforming” memorials and who have been told by the state to set up these signs. This aspect of price delegates these “proper” memorials only to those who can afford them. TxDOT’s rationale for this enforcement ultimately boils down to safety. Traditional roadside shrines are removed, and formal shrines enforced by TxDOT and the Texas Legislature in order to rid the roadway of distracting objects that could be potentially hazardous.

Additional legislation involving roadside memorials also regulates these shrines. The bill SB 521 from 2009 directly states that “a sign designed and posted under this section shall include the phrase “Please Don’t Drink and Drive”; the phrase “In Memory Of” and the name of one or more victims in accordance with the commission rule.”<sup>28</sup> This language is bureaucratic at best and speaks to the level of control the state wishes to have over this alternative form of grief practice. By dictating what language is and is not allowed, TxDOT inadvertently strips away the personal elements of these shrines that make them so culturally significant in memory studies.

Employees of TxDOT have their own way of speaking about the practices and objectives of TxDOT as well. One interviewee attempts to draw his own conclusion about the

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<sup>28</sup> Tex. S.B. 521, 80th Leg., R.S. (2009).



treatment of shrines by TxDOT. Harsh Doshy, an employee of TxDOT states that “As a state employee, I’m not really supposed to have an opinion on it [roadside shrine placement]. We have guidelines set forth by the legislature and all the different governing bodies that cover us. And based on that, we just followed those requirements. Our job is to make sure we follow the mandates, the guidelines and the laws, and we just work with them to make sure that we’re running a smooth program.”<sup>29</sup> This way of speaking is in line with the language, programs, price, and regulation that surrounds roadside shrines asserted by TxDOT. Doshy highlights the bureaucratic stance that agencies like TxDOT have towards these sites of mourning. Employees of the agency of course need to follow its rules of the bureaucracy, as does TxDOT as a government agency. Yet, this bureaucracy inherently demands the close regulation of sites of mourning.

Additionally, state agencies are not the only entities that create regulations that affect these sites. Private, voluntary organizations, such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD), also exert control over roadside memorials. MADD is a private organization that has over time developed its signature of placing roadside crosses. It was started in California in 1980 by Candace Lightner, whose thirteen-year old daughter Cari had been killed in a drunk driving accident. The MADD National Office moved from California to Texas in 1983, with the mission statement “To aid the victims of crimes performed by individuals driving under the influence of alcohol or drugs, to aid the families of such victims and to increase public awareness of the problem of drinking and drugged driving.”<sup>30</sup> With the goals “aid to families” and “public awareness” in mind MADD began to lobby for legislation surrounding drunk driving, hold public gatherings and vigils, and enact victim outreach. MADD continued

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<sup>29</sup> Harsh Doshy, Interview by Emma, September 12, 2022, 4-5.

<sup>30</sup> “History,” MADD, last modified April 20, 2022. <https://madd.org/our-history/>.



to push for more and harsher legislation in regards to drunk driving, as well create more training and programs in order to connect with the families of drunk driving victims. Victim advocate training, victim impact panels were created with the goal to “provide supportive services to victims and survivors” and “providing victims a healing opportunity to share their story.”<sup>31</sup> Both of these objectives would eventually grow into their “Victim Services” sector. This sector of MADD is specifically designed to interact with and service families of drunk driving victims.

MADD focuses mostly on victims of drunk driving and legislation surrounding drunk driving laws, but one of the services they also offer is to put up a roadside cross in honor of the deceased. The first cross erected by MADD within the Central Texas area was in 1984 in Austin. Jennifer Solter, the founder of the Heart of Texas chapter of MADD, erected a cross in honor of her daughter Sara who died in 1981 in an alcohol-related auto accident.<sup>32</sup>

Typically, crosses erected through the Heart of Texas MADD chapter have been white, two-foot high structures bearing a red plastic plaque at the crosspiece. Each plaque bears the accident victim’s name, and dates of birth and death.<sup>33</sup> MADD crosses are the only legally approved roadside memorials in some areas of Austin. While there are some non-legal crosses within the area as well, the jurisdiction and legality of MADD’s program alludes to an authority over roadside memorialization in some pockets of the Central Texas region such as Austin.<sup>34</sup>

Although MADD has not had as much influence over roadside memorials as TxDOT,

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<sup>31</sup> “History,” MADD.

<sup>32</sup> Holly Everett, “Roadside Crosses and Memorial Complexes in Texas,” *Folklore* 111, no. 1 (2000): 92, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1260980>.

<sup>33</sup> Everett, “Roadside,” 92.

<sup>34</sup> Everett, “Roadside,” 93.



it has helped dictate some of the formal methods of roadside memorialization over the past 40 years. Through right of way regulation, price, and legislative language, MADD, like TxDOT, has been able to maintain authority over formal roadside shrines. The hallmarks of regulation of memorials such as wording and cross sizes can be seen in MADD's methodology. As previously noted, a TxDOT cross may only be 18 inches high and 30 inches tall, while MADD's crosses may be 24 inches tall. Additionally, both TxDOT and MADD dictate what may go on a roadside cross, which includes information such as name, date of birth and death, and a message regarding traffic safety or drunk driving. The exception of allowing some words on the signs but not others alludes to the contradictory nature of official roadside shrines. These signs that are meant to be sites of grief prevent people from fully participating in a process where grief is meant to be experienced, not controlled. One interviewee brings up the MADD organization. Stephen Cure, an oral historian with the Texas Historical Commission, alludes to the fact that MADD asked for and received permission to put up "white crosses with the little red tags on them" to help increase awareness of drinking and the danger of drinking and driving in the 1980's.<sup>35</sup>

These two organizations, TxDOT and MADD, have had arguably the largest impact on memorialization along the Texas roadside. Both of their regulations have taken the form of memorial sign programs that lay out rules that dictate the price, size, word count and more allowed in relation to roadside memorialization.<sup>36</sup> MADD has its own objectives and goals separate from state organizations like TxDOT, such as aiding victims and increasing awareness through legislation that targets drunk driving, a worthy cause. But still they in turn

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<sup>35</sup> Stephen Cure, Interview by Emma Beard, January 27, 2023, 14.

<sup>36</sup> "Memorial and Specialized Highway Signs," TxDOT, accessed June 17, 2022, [https://ftp.txdot.gov/pub/txdot-info/sla/education\\_series/memorial-specialized-signs.pdf](https://ftp.txdot.gov/pub/txdot-info/sla/education_series/memorial-specialized-signs.pdf).



influenced the methods in controls that were asserted over the formal placement of roadside memorials. The crosses do act as connections to grief through remembrance, but because of the formality MADD uses they are still part of the formal memorialization process and cannot be categorized in the same way traditional roadside memorials are, as an alternate grief practice that reflects the individual's notion of what the memorial should be like.

Regulation is not only asserted on the state or private stage, but on the municipal level as well. Municipalities assert their rules over roadside memorials in similar ways to state agencies like TxDOT. Some communities—unlike Austin—have made makeshift memorials illegal, such as El Paso, Texas, where policies have been put in place that take action against and “rein in” roadside memorials.<sup>37</sup> An article from the *Austin American Statesman* discusses the new policies and states that, “makeshift memorials are mostly illegal throughout the city...the El Paso City Council...will remove them after 30 days.”<sup>38</sup> This regulatory practice came about due to “neighborhood group” complaints of the shrines becoming “eyesores.”<sup>39</sup> The practice of dictating how long a memorial may stay up is similar to some of the practices TxDOT has. While El Paso now only allows 30 days, TxDOT allows memorials to remain up for two years.<sup>40</sup> These similarities point to the nature of not only regulatory practice, but how it can move from one sector to another depending on the area’s ideas on the maintenance, safety, or aesthetic of the right of way.

Additionally, some municipal regulations hold similarities to practices seen in the private sector, such as MADD. MADD’s operations hinge on the emotional and human

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<sup>37</sup> “City Tries to Rein in Roadside Memorials,” *Austin American Statesman*, 13 Feb, 2017, B4 <https://www.newspapers.com/image/435088381/?terms=Roadside%20Memorials&match=1>.

<sup>38</sup> “City Tries to Rein in Roadside Memorials,” B4.

<sup>39</sup> “City Tries to Rein in Roadside Memorials,” B4.

<sup>40</sup> “Memorial Sign Program,” TxDOT, accessed December 6, 2022, <https://www.txdot.gov/content/txdotreimagine/us/en/home/safety/traffic-signs-signals/memorial-sign.html>.



aspects of this practice, which distinguishes them from TxDOT. But like El Paso' MADD has imposed control over sites of mourning that impedes the meaning of these shrines. The neighborhood groups and MADD have both placed time limits, prices, and language limits on memorials that traditionally range widely in size, placement, and aesthetic. Like that of the state sector, the movement of private sector practices into local areas points toward the nature of both regulatory practice and its ability to affect roadside memorials in multiple ways.

Local regulation is older than that of the state. In fact, the trend of regulation of the road moving between state and local agencies is not new at all. As early as 1932, trends in the legislation surrounding roads were appearing. The trend was essentially this: Federal supervision of highways that had been taken from local communities went back to state supervision which then went back to local communities.<sup>41</sup> This trend is in line with TxDOT's own laws and supervision of roadside memorials today. While some local communities take over at times, the laws and regulations surrounding the road and roadside memorials go back to state agencies.

The impacts of the practice of regulation and removal strips away the personal and traditional characteristics of shrines placed by private citizens and communities. TxDOT seems to emphasize safety above all considerations. Personal examples of citizen and organization interaction throughout the state of Texas showcase the impact of the layers of regulation. In Austin a roadside memorial was removed by TxDOT due to its location, deeply upsetting a woman who risked her life to try and save a victim in a fatal crash on I-35 who then made the memorial.<sup>42</sup> The citizen came back to add flowers to this shrine but found the

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<sup>41</sup> Frank M. Stewart, "The Development of State Control of Highways in Texas," *The Southwestern Social Science Quarterly* 13, no. 3 (1932): 211, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42864811>.

<sup>42</sup> Adam Hammons, "TxDOT Removes I-35 Crash Memorial in Dangerous Location," KEYE, January 9, 2018, <https://cbsaustin.com/news/local/txdot-removes-i-35-crash-memorial-in-dangerous-location>.



memorial had been removed and destroyed by TxDOT. These memorials can be in dangerous locations, and the concern for safety is valid. But rather than fully remove them, those who take part in these layers of regulation must take into account the emotional and traditional value of these shrines. Steps must be taken to connect with the community and open channels of communication with those who create informal shrines, rather than simply removing and destroying them.

Other examples suggest the seemingly callous ways that removal is forced. For example, a similar confrontation occurred in San Antonio. In December of 2019, Normal Jean Flores died in a single car accident along I-35 near Ansley Boulevard on the South Side of the city. Following her death, Flores' family put up a large memorial at the crash site. This memorial was deemed by TxDOT to be distracting, as many locals called to complain of its size; it was taken down in May of 2020.<sup>43</sup> This instance of a family being asked to take down a personal memorial is just another example of these memorials not being seen as byproducts of tradition and grief, but as nuisances that need to be regulated and removed by local government. These interactions stem from the direct conflict between formal organizations' policies and the basis of alternative traditional grief practices.

Oral histories with those involved in this grief practice help us understand the relationship between roadside memorials, remembrance, and grief. Roadside memorials involve remembrance of loved ones and awareness of motor vehicle accidents. New Braunfels local Beverly Trollinger suggested that roadside memorials are used in order to “give an outlet and meaning and a remembrance” for those who passed away along the

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<sup>43</sup> Darian Trotter, “Family Takes down Roadside Memorial Deemed Too 'Distracting',” KEYE, May 5, 2020, <https://cbsaustin.com/news/local/family-takes-down-roadside-memorial-in-honor-of-crash-victim-that-deemed-too-distracting>.



road.<sup>44</sup>

Place is important here—there is not the same message of grief with a grave in a cemetery. Part of this grief practice is to give the death an immediacy and presence. Thus it is within the older practice of leaving “descansos” along the road, the act of giving meaning to places and spaces in which death occurred.

A different point, one about using the life of someone else to potentially save another comes from another interviewee, Austin City Council member Kathie Tovo. She remarked how roadside memorials also seem to carry with them a “kind of message about safety in many ways that this is a place where somebody lost their life and it’s a reminder to those around that we need to be careful in our actions.”<sup>45</sup> The messages of safety and death are present in both formal and alternate roadside memorials, but the message of a loss of life is inherent in roadside memorials, because they cannot exist without it. Formal memorials are erected through regulation and processes, while roadside memorials are created through human emotion and alternative grief practice.

Alternative grief practices today take the form of modern roadside memorials, which represent an amalgamation of Spanish, Native American, and modern elements. Non-formal memorials today range from small, unmarked crosses to large shrines complete with markings, names and offerings left at the foot of the shrine. One example of a larger shrine can be found right before exit 215 along southbound I-35 outside Kyle, Texas (see appendix, image iii). The elaborate memorial is dedicated to “Moose” and includes a small altar that sits below the cross, a mailbox for notes, and lights situated around the shrine to illuminate it at night. A smaller version of a roadside memorial is best exemplified by a memorial to an

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<sup>44</sup> Beverly Trollinger, Interview by Emma Beard.

<sup>45</sup> Kathie Tovo, Interview by Emma Beard, September 10, 2022, 5.



unknown person along Slaughter lane in south Austin. The shrine represents the common occurrence of a memorial lacking specific information, but including motifs often seen in roadside memorials such as flowers, a cross, etc. The use of flowers and the cross are two hallmarks of the practice. The way shrines look is undoubtedly linked to who is putting them up and what culture they come from.

The regulation of roadside memorials is widespread throughout Texas. The power or placement and who gets to put up these memorials is an important theme to keep in mind when studying these shrines. Many memorials are set up without the “permission” of either local or state based organizations. Not all follow the program, in fact many do not. Perhaps the program might be unknown, hard to find, difficult to navigate, or the fees daunting. Also, the TxDOT program’s website uses only English, which does not accommodate the groups in Texas who may not read English. Texas has a large population for which English is not a first language, as an analysis by the US department of census has shown.<sup>46</sup> Often those who set roadside memorials up are unaware of the reach or even the presence of regulation until they are informed, as seen in the examples in the above sections, an issue that continues to affect those who interact with these shrines.

So far, by looking at regulation as well as its impacts, a level of bureaucracy can be seen within larger formal organizations such as TxDOT, that disregard human emotions and impacts. Even groups such as MADD, an organization rooted in human grief and grief expression, has become similar to TxDOT. The way that MADD bureaucratically handles the creation of formal roadside memorials is at odds with these very human matters the organization deals with.

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<sup>46</sup> “Bilingualism in Texas: The Perryman Group,” The Perryman Group, accessed April 2, 2023, <https://www.perrymangroup.com/publications/column/2016/10/24/bilingualism-in-texas/>.



While conflict arises between tradition and bureaucracy in roadside memorials, there are also people who practice this alternative form of grief who are unaware of the regulation that surrounds it, until it impacts them. For example, interviewees have expressed a lack of knowledge towards regulations set out by TxDOT. One interviewee, New Braunfels native Melinda Aguirre, specifically mentioned that she “Wouldn't even know the guidelines to that. If it's something we wanted to do through TxDOT, then yes, we'd go through procedures and stuff like that. If it's something just very small, I feel like we could probably do ourselves.... It's just I wouldn't know that information on what we would do.”<sup>47</sup> Aguirre is a prime example of people not understanding or even being aware of TxDOT's regulations or rules. Moreover, she points out that smaller acts don't seem to require such bureaucratic effort and formality. Her comments suggest that individuals have an overall lack of knowledge about TxDOT's resources, and that helps explain why they are used, regardless of legality. Aguirre notes if it's a small shrine, she wouldn't feel the need to go through the proper channels. People will continue to put up shrines independently, despite TxDOT's efforts. The formality and bureaucracy undermine the grief and sentiment inherent in the creation of roadside shrines.

The impact of the lack of awareness of bureaucratic rules that surround shrines by private citizens has had a great impact on how shrines are treated by both government and the public. As seen in the above sections, government entities step in to regulate these memorials, which in turn replaces memorials with traditional meaning with signs that have little connection to the deceased beyond a name and date. This completely ignores the grief culture tied to this practice.

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<sup>47</sup> Melinda Aguirre, Interview by Emma Beard, January 31, 2023, 5-6.



### III. GRIEF CULTURE, MEMORY, AND PUBLIC PERCEPTION OF ROADSIDE MEMORIALS

Roadside memorials act as places where people experience a range of emotions including grief. Although they exist outside of mainstream grief expression today, roadside memorials are steeped in the history of American grief culture and past practices of memorial culture. Historian Holly Everett, an expert in the field and one of the first to study these shrines, states that, “These sites represent the continuation and adaptation of one of the oldest forms of memorial culture.”<sup>48</sup> As an older form of grief culture that is still continuing today, an understanding of the sites’ basis in grief culture is needed in order to fully understand how they have come to stand outside of typical means of memorializing, such as in graves in municipal cemeteries.

Today's ideas of grief practice are relatively new. Up until the twentieth century, grief was seen as a public practice shared by a community.<sup>49</sup> For example, many American communities in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries took part in preparing the dead for viewings, church services, and burials in local cemeteries.<sup>50</sup> Aspects of this practice continue into today, but certainly related activities are now divided into different service providers. Grief practices in the 19th century were more public due to how much of a role the community played. Today, grief is a more private, family centric-practice with fewer service providers, while in the past the communities were tight-knit and the whole group was involved in the grieving process.

Roadside memorials themselves cannot exist without a foundation of community.

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<sup>48</sup> Holly J Everett, *Roadside Crosses in Contemporary Memorial Culture*, (University of North Texas Press, 2002), 1.

<sup>49</sup> Andrea DenHoed, “Our Strange, Unsettled History of Mourning,” *The New Yorker*, February 3, 2016, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/our-strange-unsettled-history-of-mourning>.

<sup>50</sup> Tamara Plakins Thornton, Review of *Habeas Corpus: Death in Nineteenth-Century America*, by Gary Laderman, *Reviews in American History* 25, no. 3 (1997): 435, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30030813>.



Memorialization, and by extension shrines, exist firmly in the realm of community identity. David Glassberg in particular has looked at community specifically through collective memory and how “individual memory is the product of group communication...intimately linked to a collective memory of the community.”<sup>51</sup> Collective memory of a community can be employed in individual sites of mourning, such as roadside memorials.

A large part of the meaning of roadside memorials is determined by the community of grievers. One interviewee, Beverly Trollinger, discussed her son Adam's death and the effect it had on the community. “Everybody drove around with his football number on all over their cars for six months and it was everywhere. I know that was an outlet for those young people.”<sup>52</sup> The way in which a large group, a graduating class, was brought together in grief, and then expressed that grief through creating a memorial speaks to the large role community plays in these shrines. Without community, these shrines would not exist.

The shrines themselves also highlight the role in which the community plays. In San Marcos, along Ranch Road 12, an elaborate memorial for Bryson Harlen Waggle can be found (see appendix, image iv). This memorial is covered in photographs and flowers, along with various cans and empty beverage bottles. This memorial steps slightly outside the motifs typically seen at these memorials. The cross is secondary at this site, as it is placed to the side of the memorial, rather than being placed front and center. This memorial draws on symbols of community and family, such as the photographs of the deceased, the elaborate offerings, and flowers that are replaced every so often. A group of people came together to create this memorial, highlighting the importance of community in creating and maintaining these sites.

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<sup>51</sup> David Glassberg, “Public History and the Study of Memory” *The Public Historian* Vol. 18, No. 2, (Spring,1996): 10, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3377910>.

<sup>52</sup> Beverly Trollinger, Interview by Emma Beard.



The concept of community and memory is also important in understanding the placement and value of roadside memorials. A collection of works edited by Jack Santino, *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death* further explores the community aspects of these shrines. Within this collection, Maida Owens studied the local aspect of shrines through the lens and scope of Louisiana. Owens described how the “trend” of roadside memorials had “proliferated into non-Christian and non-Catholic communities” in order to argue that the locality of shrines and memorials was of key importance.<sup>53</sup> Owens argues that without a system of “friends and family to maintain [these] memorials,” roadside shrines fall into disrepair and disappear.<sup>54</sup> Community and locality are of key importance to these shrines and their placement.

Locality and placement play out in my research through photography of the shrines themselves. A shrine dedicated to Brandon Gutierrez can be found outside of Zelicks Icehouse along West Hopkins Street in San Marcos, TX (see appendix, image v). This shrine includes the symbol of the cross, the deceased’s year of birth and death, and flowers. This is a unique example of a shrine being located close to a business, as roadside shrines are typically found further away from private property, depending on where the person lost their life. The locality and placement of a shrine determines how it is perceived and treated, as there is a personal and traditional nature of roadside shrines.

People who construct roadside memorials in specific places, such as that of the right of way, are interested in projecting their ideas of community mourning. Melinda Aguirre, for example, helped construct a roadside memorial to her classmate Adam Trollinger. She spoke

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<sup>53</sup> Maida Owens, “Louisiana Roadside Memorials: Negotiating an Emerging Tradition” in *Spontaneous Shrines and the Public Memorialization of Death*, ed. Jack Santino, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 119.

<sup>54</sup> Owens, “Louisiana,” 125.



about how much closer her class was because of the tragedy they experienced, and how Adams' shrine represented their grief as a community:

At the accident site, which was at a railroad track... I've never seen anything like that. That was my first roadside memorial. There were crosses and a bunch of flowers...it was very overwhelming. And right now...I definitely feel like I'm back there right now because [I'm thinking] of the amount of people that were there. It was definitely a moment for everyone.<sup>55</sup>

These sites act as places where grief can be processed by a group of people, such as the high school community Aguirre discusses, who were close to the victim. Like Waggle's shrine, Agurrie and her classmates not only emphasized placement but also community symbols.

According to Beverly Trollinger, her son Adam's football number was used heavily in his memorialization, and "everybody drove around with his football number on all over their cars" for months.<sup>56</sup> On one hand, this practice is about privately mourning an individual, but at the same time roadside memorials exist publicly. Grief through memorialization in general can be argued to be both a public and private practice.

The practice of memorializing traumatic death in the present stems from its growth over the last two hundred years. An important new development in remembering the dead occurred with an increase in formal memorialization during the late nineteenth century. No longer were burials and cemeteries enough of a marker in the post-bellum era, but rather remembrance of the dead took on the added fashion of memorialization through monuments. Remembrance of some of the dead became tightly linked to historical events, especially war. This in turn led to an increase in formal memorials, many of them connecting the individual to an event. The earliest record of such a memorial in the United States dates back to the

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<sup>55</sup> Melinda Aguirre, Interview by Emma Beard.

<sup>56</sup> Beverly Trollinger, Interview by Emma Beard.



immediate post-Civil War years, when numerous monuments were dedicated to battles and soldiers in rural and urban areas.<sup>57</sup> These monuments were designed to keep the memories of war time events alive and to give meaning to the loss that was still felt keenly in society. These memorials were used as both social and political spaces and objects that were meant to evoke a sense of “collective remembering.”<sup>58</sup> The impact of this shift from traditional personal practices to formal practices had been seen through the increase of memorials erected during the twentieth century following not only the Civil War, but both World Wars, the Korean War, and the Vietnam War. Grief is still shared with the community, like in these national memorials, but it can also be a private practice for people. All the national public memorials are partially about private grief displayed in public.

The Vietnam memorial is an example of the concept of public and private, mainstream and alternative grief, existing in the same space. Those who visit the memorial do not simply interact with it as a formal, austere monument, but also as a public space in which private grief can be explored. Not only is the memorial a place for griever to remember their loved one—the names are listed on the memorial—but griever also leave mementos as a mark of remembrance. Loved ones and family members of the deceased travel to the Wall in order to leave gifts in memory of those they lost, such as birthday cards, notes, toys, and more.<sup>59</sup> According to Hass, the Vietnam memorial “elicits a physical response and contributes to the private representations in public space, [a phenomenon that seems to] cross the boundary between private and public.”<sup>60</sup> The use of public space for private grief in modern grief culture

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<sup>57</sup> Sanford Levinson, *Written In Stone: Public Monuments in Changing Societies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998), 249.

<sup>58</sup> Levinson, *Written In Stone*, 249.

<sup>59</sup> Kristin Ann Hass. *Carried to the Wall: American Memory and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial* (Berkeley, Cali: University Presses of California, Columbia and Princeton, 1998), 1.

<sup>60</sup> Hass, *Carried to the Wall*, 21.



is exemplified here, a tangled relationship that can also be seen through roadside memorials.

This public yet private element of memorialization suggests how grief is mediated in contemporary culture. Public shrines and contemporary memorialization objects, items such as toys, clothing, candles, photographs and messages left at these shrines, highlight modern practices for grieving that are at the core of memorialization, both alternative and traditional.<sup>61</sup> The relationship between both the origins of grief culture, such as community practices of the past, and the current iterations of memorialization, such as national memorials, are exemplified in the relationship between private and public grief in roadside memorials. To be sure, people also leave similar mementoes within cemeteries, and this practice has grown in recent decades. Yet, the public-private relationship is quite different, as these are not alongside a roadway nearby the place of death nor is there the same degree of alternative practice.

Roadside memorials are examples of community grief expression as their existence rests upon the work of the community and family of the deceased. They also embody aspects of larger memorials, as they are constructed with the primary purpose to remember those who died in sudden, and often violent ways, like national war memorials. At the heart of this is the relationship between the public and private, and how these two concepts overlap. Author and historian Jack Santino has focused on private grief and public memorialization in roadside memorials. Santino has focused on the personal presence in public memorials, showing how they display death in the heart of social life.<sup>62</sup> Santino describes how these shrines, these spontaneous memorials, are not traditional sanctioned graves, but sites that connect the public

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<sup>61</sup> Erika Doss, *The Emotional Life of Contemporary Public Memorials towards a Theory of Temporary Memorials*. (Amsterdam University Press, 2008), 8.

<sup>62</sup> Santino, *Spontaneous Shrines*, 13.



through the grief presented at these shrines.<sup>63</sup> Roadside shrines situated within public space occupy the realms of both public and private. They are focused spaces that insist on both the private grief of those mourning a specific loss and the public memorialization of victims of violent roadside death.

This relationship between place and grief connects back to the basis of memorialization itself, that of memory. Within the practice of memorialization and the previous examples, is the concept of memory. One of the basic lenses this paper uses is that of memory studies, and within memory studies is the concept of collective memory, a term which refers to the memory of a group or society. Author and philosopher Maurice Halbwachs was the early definitive source on collective memory--and is still influential. Halbwachs' early twentieth century writings on collective memory argued that "The memory of a society extends as far as the memory of the groups composing it."<sup>64</sup> Our collective memory is filtered through and influenced by social location. Collective memory can be exemplified in roadside memorials through their connections to groups, and their locations. Groups in the context of traditional, non-formal roadside memorials refer to families and communities that create and maintain them. These are the people who dictate how the memory of the deceased is communicated to those who interact or just come across these sites of mourning and remembrance.

The concept of collective memory is also featured in the shrines themselves. On a small backroad near 1626, a shrine for "Nick" can be found (see appendix, image vi). If you look closely along the spine of the cross bearing the deceased's name and date of death, you

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<sup>63</sup> Santino, *Spontaneous Shrines*, 13.

<sup>64</sup> Maurice Halbwachs and Lewis A. Coser, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1925), 144.



can see that this shrine is attached to a street sign. The memorial also includes an American flag, which speaks to the connection between this shrine and a collective memory of a larger group. This type of collective memory—with its links to the nation—is often seen at larger, national war memorials, where flags are left behind next to the name of the deceased.

There exists another core concept known as “the economy of power” that can be related to roadside memorials. This economy of power refers to how certain stories, sites, and objects are ignored or celebrated depending on their place in mainstream history. Historian Robert Bednar argues that there is an economy of power circulating in the practice of roadside memorialization: some subjects are deemed legitimately memorable and some are not, and some subjects are legitimately allowed to memorialize their losses in public landscapes and others are not.<sup>65</sup> This essentially ties into the themes of power and placement, specifically the location and interaction within the study of roadside memorials, where TxDOT forbids some roadside memorials, and allows others.

Within all of this history, meaning, and connection to roadside memorialization in memory studies, there is still a major facet that is missing: those who build, interact, and perceive memorials—i.e., the public. The public, more specially individuals who interact with memorials, are the ones who create meaning within the space these memorials inhabit. Their interactions with both formal and traditional roadside memorials help shape this meaning.

The interaction, both direct and indirect, between the public and memorials is an important facet of memorialization today. Emotional responses such as grief, pain, and shock, acceptance, and hope are at the core of these interactions. Indeed, Erica Doss writes individual

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<sup>65</sup> Robert M Bednar, “Killing Memory,” *Cultural Politics* 9, no. 3 (2013): 337, <https://doi.org/10.1215/17432197-2347018>.



chapters on each of these varying emotional responses in her book, *Memorial Mania*.<sup>66</sup> One way to understand the interactions between the public and memorials, more specifically roadside memorials, is through oral histories. Beverly Trollinger, mother of a vehicle accident victim, recalls the first time she saw a roadside shrine. When first interacting with this type of memorial she “really didn’t understand it, but knew it had heartbreak attached to it.”<sup>67</sup> This indirect interaction between an individual and roadside shrines exemplifies how perceptions of these sites can be formed not only by those who create them, but by those who simply pass them by. These interactions between not only communities and family groups, but also individuals, gives them meaning.

Public discussion of the roadside memorial in Texas and beyond reveals broad disagreement about their purpose and value. There are those who wish to see roadside shrines gone, and their points revolve around three reasons. Firstly, for some, they pose clear safety hazards. An article from *The Kerrville Times* quotes a spokesman from a state highway department, “A roadway speckled with various roadway memorials could pose a safety problem.”<sup>68</sup> Related to this are complaints that the shrines are a distraction along the highways and therefore dangerous to the motoring public.<sup>69</sup>

Secondly, others reject the shrines for impinging on public property: for example, the author of a *New York Times* editorial published in the *Austin American Statesman* complained: “Is no one questioning whether a public thoroughfare is a suitable location for a private shrine? Is it legal? Is it desirable for these distracting, increasingly elaborate contractions to

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<sup>66</sup> Erika Doss. *Memorial Mania: Public Felling in America* (University of Chicago Press, 2012), 1.

<sup>67</sup> Beverly Trollinger, Interview by Emma Beard.

<sup>68</sup> “Could Permanent Roadside Memorials Curb or Encourage More Crashes?” *The Kerrville Times*, 12 May 1999, 2, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/18939465/?terms=roadside%20&match=1>.

<sup>69</sup> Robert Tiernan, “Should Roadside Memorials Be Banned?” *The New York Times*, 12 July, 2009, <https://archive.nytimes.com/roomfordebate.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/07/12/should-roadside-memorials-be-banned/>.



proliferate”?<sup>70</sup> Robert Tiernan, a lawyer from Colorado, also protested in a debate on the topic published in the *New York Times* that the shrines constitute the taking of public property for private purposes. These questions hold similarities to those from the legislation surrounding roadside shrines discussed in the previous sections.<sup>71</sup> Specifically, the disregard for the importance of these sites of mourning to the individuals who interact and create these shrines is echoed here. These opinions allude to how policies created and perpetuated by state, local, and private companies inform these opinions. Thirdly, still others see a problem with the religious aspect. The roadside memorials nearly always include Christian crosses and other religious symbols; this can be viewed as violating the constitutional principle of separation of church and state as public facilities are being used to promote religion.<sup>72</sup> These criticisms elucidate the negative visceral reactions some people have to roadside memorials. These attitudes, particularly those concerning safety and the preeminence of public control over public property parallel the rationales articulated by the Texas government in its sign program and legislation.

Opinions and ideas that surround roadside memorials, as exemplified through those who write about and come across these memorials, have influence on public opinion. Stephen Cure in his oral history described the ways in which these conflicts can lead the public to form opinions that reside at the two extremes of destruction and complete protection—with little room for opinions in between. It forces the public to take opposite sides usually, but Cure suggests that there are ways to give them meaning that lies in between. Cure essentially argued that these shrines don’t have to go away fully, but a solution needs to be achieved. He states,

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<sup>70</sup> Raymond Lankford, “Roadside Memorials,” *Austin American-Statesman*, June 13, 1999, 60, <https://www.newspapers.com/image/356854982/?terms=raymond%20lankford&match=1>

<sup>71</sup> Tiernan, “Should.”

<sup>72</sup> Tiernan, “Should.”



I originally started documenting these with the desire of bringing it to the attention of elected officials to do something about it, to end this litter, as I see it, in many cases on our highways. That was my initial thought. Having seen so many, having looked into it and followed the stories and followed people's reactions, I've developed a far more nuanced and empathetic approach to this. And that is, I still think they need to go away. But I think they need to go away in the form of something that still remembers those who have gone and does so in a way that reduces the cost of maintenance for the state of Texas and counties and communities who mow these roadways and have to mow around them and weed around them.<sup>73</sup>

Roadside memorials exist in a space that can lead to conflicts between the public and the State, but as seen through Cure's own thoughts, more "nuanced" approaches can be taken by those who interact with these sites. Cure goes on to discuss more specifics on his ideas for regulating roadside memorials.

I think the state of Texas just needs to lower the cost barrier to its program. I think we need to find the dollars to do a one-time swap out of all the privately erected memorials and put up state ones to that and say, no more. We're now treating everybody the same. No more privately erected, semi-permanent memorials. If you want to put flowers out, if you want to leave teddy bears, if you want to do that sort of thing for six months, three months, six months, that's fine. But after that, the highway department has the ability to go in and remove these items, which by that point in time probably don't look nearly as nice as they did when the loving person put them out in honor of their loved one.<sup>74</sup>

Cure's idea on lowering the cost would make formal programs more accessible. And it is true what Cure argues: the objects placed at these shrines do erode and deteriorate over time.

Flowers die, cloth fades, material decays. These sites will always exist as continuous spaces of public yet private mourning, and they will therefore always be subject to destruction and removal. The solution to this is simple: begin to preserve the objects and records of these sites.

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<sup>73</sup> Stephen Cure, Interview by Emma Beard, January 27, 2023, 16.

<sup>74</sup> Stephen Cure, Interview by Emma Beard.



#### **IV. ARCHIVAL PRESERVATION OF MEMORIALS**

The issues surrounding these memorials as forms of alternative grief practice raise questions surrounding their longevity. The laws that the Texas Legislature has put in place fail to give them any permanence. Most legal shrines are only allowed to be placed for two to five years and illegal shrines are to be removed or destroyed immediately. Though these shrines are ephemeral in nature, removal in part causes these shrines to maintain a state of non-permanence.

The materials these shrines are made of also tie into their ephemeral nature. Most shrines include materials that do deteriorate quickly, such as paper notes, fresh flowers, cloth, and other similar objects. The shrines themselves are even made of materials that are prone to damage, such as wood, and weak plastic easily weakened further by sunlight and weather. The materials used in these shrines are important to this form of alternative grief expression. However, due to their lack of longevity it is difficult to capture and preserve their importance. The historical importance of these shrines lies in their place in not only broader history, but individual histories. These shrines tell us how people can be killed in violent abrupt ways, and how communities respond to tragedy through mourning rituals. Understanding the grief connected to a community allows for an understanding of the community itself at a certain point in time. Within the roadside memorial, the fascinating phenomenon of the merging of the public and private spheres of life can be observed. They help us understand a very specific part of public history, the everyday occurrences that go unnoticed by traditional academia.

There needs to be solutions in place to combat this loss of memorials and their spaces, as well as solutions for preserving them in some fashion.<sup>75</sup> One solution to the issues of

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<sup>75</sup> TxDOT, “Memorial Sign Program.”



destruction and preservation of roadside memorials involves personal photography in order to capture the images of a memorial. For example, a direct study by Native New Mexican authors Rudolfo Anaya, Juan Estevan Arellano, and Denise Chavez investigated roadside shrines and their cultural importance. Their work, titled *Descansos: An Interrupted Journey*, is a combination of images and prose-like text, resulting in a deeply personal and local interpretation of shrines.<sup>76</sup> This large collection of photographs and personal descriptions is one example of what needs to be done in order to preserve and study these important pieces of cultural history. The main reason for preserving these shrines is because they are important examples of everyday expressions of grief, and they are at risk of being lost due to their ephemeral nature.

Beyond the solution of personal photography to preserve roadside shrines, archiving offers another option that would ensure the longevity of these shrines after they are gone. Archives are, in theory, used in order to benefit the public, and they are places in which it could be argued a major source of public memory resides.<sup>77</sup> The public memory is what determines what gets remembered and what does not. Documenting lesser-known aspects of history, such as roadside shrines, allows their images to be preserved and thus enter into the public memory. Any addition to the public memory is a benefit to the public, as knowledge is power. This concept of power of place within the archive and preservation is similar to the power of place along the road. What gets remembered and how it is preserved for others to see is important when discussing roadside shrines and public memory. The idea of preservation is something that has not been fully explored within the realm of alternative grief practices. By engaging

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<sup>76</sup> Rudolfo A. Anaya and Chávez Denise and Juan Estevan Arellano, *Descansos: An Interrupted Journey*, (Albuquerque, NM: Academia/El Norte Publications, 1995), 60.

<sup>77</sup> Scott Cline, "'To the Limit of Our Integrity': Reflections on Archival Being," *The American Archivist* 72, no. 2 (2009): 332, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27802692>.



with it, and utilizing it, roadside shrines are able to be entered into archives and other spaces that preserve memory, such as museums exhibits, and therefore the public memory. It is important to note that we cannot archive the full shrines, only images and descriptions of them, and potentially some of the physical parts, though preserving these aspects of shrines is still important and worthwhile.

In order to understand why and how something should be preserved in archives, such as the roadside shrine, the basis and history of preservation and archiving must be understood. The history of archives is one of the history of record keeping. Over the course of human history, writing and record keeping have been used to preserve almost every aspect of human culture.<sup>78</sup> Within this history, basic principles began to be used in the practice of archiving. Practices derived from historical methodology were developed in the nineteenth century and which were based on available archives and manuscripts.

During the twentieth century, archiving was formalized, especially at governmental institutions. In the United States, specifically, the National Archives was established in 1934 to preserve and care for the records of the U.S. Government. Before this, records were kept in unsuitable conditions in basements, attics, abandoned buildings, and other storage places with little security or concern for potentially harmful conditions. In 1935, workers from the New Deal's Works Progress Administration began to survey federal records and transfer them into the new National Archives Building in Washington.<sup>79</sup> The National Archives now has over 40 facilities nationwide, and records of all sorts can now be found in the many miles of storage

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<sup>78</sup> Elizabeth Yale, "The History of Archives: The State of the Discipline," *Book History* 18 (2015): 332-359, doi:10.1353/bh.2015.0007. 332.

<sup>79</sup> "National Archives History," National Archives and Records Administration, accessed February 27, 2023, <https://www.archives.gov/about/history>.



shelves and computer hard drives of other Archives throughout the world.<sup>80</sup> These archives specifically pertain to federal activities and contain knowledge that connects to national history and information.

These institutions used a top-down approach. For many years, archival practices such as how and what to archive were based on history devoted to formal political and economic organizations and to the lives of the elite. This was the norm at federal and other institutional archives up until around the 1980's. The rise of social and cultural history influenced archives in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Archivists began to encourage and participate in this evolution of history and, in turn, employ the perspectives of social history in the profession of archiving.<sup>81</sup> The practice of archiving and preservation started to employ a bottom- up approach.<sup>82</sup> A focus on cultural and social issues that had been ignored by mainstream archiving over the entirety of their history is becoming the new norm.<sup>83</sup> Sources beyond written documents are now used less to interpret hard data, and more to study the values, emotions, and everyday life and behaviors of people. These larger institutions were catching up to local archives and historical societies to some extent, as their focus had always been primarily on everyday life and material culture as smaller repositories. Issues surrounding archives also exist presently, in no small part due to the rise of social history over the last forty years. Often when new histories and new concepts are introduced to an older system, issues arise. The questions of what should be archived, how it should be preserved, and how it should be displayed begin to arise.

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<sup>80</sup> Yale, "The History Archives," 332.

<sup>81</sup> Fredric M Miller. "Social History and Archival Practice." *The American Archivist* 44, no. 2 (1981):124, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40292380>.

<sup>82</sup> Miller. "Social History," 115.

<sup>83</sup> Miller, "Social History," 115.



Archiving is about power. When you focus only on elites or certain topics then you neglect others. Often this power reflects social, economic, and cultural hierarchies. The importance of perspective in both history and archives in the modern era is exemplified in *Silencing the Past*, by historian Michel-Rolph Trouillot. Trouillot focuses on the relationship between history, power, archives and place. Trouillot states in the book, “what makes some narratives rather than others powerful...enough to pass as accepted history”?<sup>84</sup> The concept of what gets discussed in history—what gets preserved and archived-- and what doesn’t is not a new one. But it is a powerful place to start from in regards to other questions and concepts surrounding power in not only history, but places in which history is preserved, such as archives.

The concept of power is also important in several ways in relation to roadside memorials. Oral histories specifically speak to the notion of power, such as what has been left out, privileged, and legitimized in these shrines. Kathie Tovo, an Austin City Council member, spoke of the primary purpose and placement of roadside memorials: “I think all memorials serve as a celebration of that individual's life and a recognition of their importance...but, because of their placement, because of their choice in placement...they carry this other body of meaning with them.”<sup>85</sup> The placement of these shrines and lack of legitimacy given by private, state, and local agencies speaks to the notion of power. By not giving these spaces the same amount of legitimacy as ‘official’ roadside markers, the power of how to practice this form of grief expression is taken away from those who erect roadside shrines independently.

Archives are sources of history, and those who chose what to put in these archives

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<sup>84</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2015), 6.

<sup>85</sup> Kathie Tovo, Interview by Emma Beard.



shape this history. They are one means for controlling the process of what is remembered by societies. Archivists are participating in the power structure of what gets remembered and what does not within preservation practice when documenting history. This concept of what gets remembered and how it is preserved for others to see is important when discussing roadside shrines and public memory. Due to their lack of documentation, these shrines are not part of the public memory, an issue that could be resolved through preservation.

The power in preservation relates to the roadside memorial specifically. The ephemeral nature of these shrines does not allow them to be fully preserved within archives or museums or the public memory. By preserving some records and not others, such as roadside memorials, power and legitimacy is given to larger agencies rather than the people who are most connected to this practice of alternative grief expression.

In relation to the power that exists in archives, the concept of integrity exists as well. Archives are, in theory, used in order to benefit the public, and are places in which integrity plays into power dynamics in spaces of preservation within the profession. The integrity of archival repositories, meaning their ability to provide both proper care of objects as well as convey correct information to the public, connect to their power in shaping the public memory. This concept of power within the archive and preservation is not new and can be seen in current iterations of archives today. The implication of this power in the archives alludes to what that power has done. That power shapes what is kept, what is not, and what is seen as important or not. By determining what is not recorded, important parts of cultural studies, such as alternative forms of grief practice exemplified by roadside shrines, can be lost.

Questions about the relationship between archives and memorializing have moved to the fore-field. This has redefined what sorts of objects should be collected, a redefinition that



fundamentally affects discussion of roadside memorial preservation. Currently there is a shift from archiving strictly traditional historical objects to memorial-based objects, thanks to scholars who have reimagined the archives through both archives' relationship to power and why certain things are remembered and not others. One new topic and practice involves preserving and archiving materials that are left at traditional public memorials, such as flowers, paper products, clothing, and the crosses that mark the sites themselves. Historian Meredith Lair discusses how atypical information and objects have been preserved by and presented by the Education Center at the Vietnam Memorial. Lair argues that objects have power and how they are displayed determines how they “convey emotional power.”<sup>86</sup> These objects refer to the items left at the Vietnam Memorial by those who visit it.

By extension questions and notions re-conceptualizing what should be archived and what can be displayed can be applied to roadside memorials. New questions about roadside memorials and their archiving are emerging influenced by new professional practices at formal public memorials. Informal memorials have items that are left there, just like formal public memorials. These items can act as historic objects that can be preserved in places such as archives and displayed in public exhibitions. Just as the memory of those who died in the war is preserved through objects, those who died along the road are preserved through objects left at their shrines. How people remember is tied to how memory is displayed through the objects it is tied to. This is also true in situations involving memorials, such as those along the roadside. Roadside memorials can be preserved properly through exhibits. The memorials are worth saving because they can provide us with history and document collective memory in regard to

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<sup>86</sup> Meredith H Lair, “The Education Center at The Wall and the Rewriting of History,” *The Public Historian* 34, no. 1 (2012): 59, <https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2012.34.1.34>.



everyday expressions of public history and grief expression.

Others push the meaning of these practices even further when discussing the sensitivity of these issues. In *What Remains*, historian Dora Osborne explores the complexities that arise when *archiving* memorial and contentious public spaces, as it relates to ethics. Osborne discusses the ethics of putting sensitive information on display in regards to the Holocaust and suggests that history archives can be put into “problematic positions.”<sup>87</sup> In terms of how it relates to memorials, this work brings up the idea of how to archive, curate, and display the materials found at roadside memorial sites. Sensitive, difficult to care for, and decomposed materials are often found at roadside memorials. The issue of how or even if, to preserve them could directly affect whether objects or photographs collected on these sites can be used in archives or exhibits. In addition to the archiving of materials found at memorials, preserving materials left at roadside memorials is something that has also begun to occur. Studies such as those done by Anaya and West are examples of what needs to be done in order to preserve and study these important pieces of cultural history. They suggest photography. The prolific photographic evidence that Anaya has captured of roadside crosses, and the traditional elements that West has documented highlight the cultural elements of these shrines. These pieces show sites of grief as parts of cultural history.<sup>88</sup> Other examples of recent photographic evidence and preservation include international studies as well. In both Ireland and Australia roadside shrines are being studied as important local and community spaces.<sup>89</sup> These authors primarily emphasized the cultural and community importance of roadside shrines in their

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<sup>87</sup> Dora Osborne, “Memorial Projects: Memory Work as Archive Work,” In *What Remains: The Post-Holocaust Archive in German Memory Culture*, (Boydell & Brewer, 2020), 52.

<sup>88</sup> West “Folk Grave,” 47; Anaya et. Al, *Descansos: An Interrupted Journey*, 60.

<sup>89</sup> Jennifer Clark and Ashley Cheshire, “Rip by the Roadside: A Comparative Study of Roadside Memorials in New South Wales, Australia, and Texas, United States,” *OMEGA - Journal of Death and Dying* 48, no. 3 (2004): 203, <https://doi.org/10.2190/3RED-6H7D-PNNC-URT7>.



respective areas of the world, though in Ireland an emphasis is placed on the ways in which people see these sites as continuous spaces rather than spaces of remembrance. These newer studies speak to the field's growing interest in this diverse, and often divisive, subject.<sup>90</sup>

Digital methods offer new ways of analyzing, interpreting, and developing historical narratives, and archiving, preserving and presenting roadside memorials. My own research has led to my own documentation and preservation of shrines in ways that combine conventional photography with digital innovations. There are now ways to connect work like this with digital history. Over the course of several months, I have collected photographs of twenty-one sites in the Central Texas area; they were taken in both 2022 and 2023. This information has been compiled into both a google maps document, and an ArcGIS Story Map exhibit to be displayed in the Texas State University library (see appendix, image vii). By using not only a method of quantitative data collection, but an interactive exhibit based method of data collection and exhibition, this research is presented in a format that reaches a wider audience. This is the first step to preserving and sharing the history of roadside shrines in ways that bypass the issues of power that can exist in more traditional forms of preservation. Once preserved, these memorials, more specifically objects, images, and stories related to them, can then in turn be presented and interpreted in public history venues, such as museums and other public exhibits.

Beyond exhibiting this work, the goal with digitization of roadside shrines is to preserve these ephemeral shrines that are often there one day and gone the next. By putting this work in the hands of a larger institution that specializes in the preservation and display of history, more

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<sup>90</sup> Barbara Graham, "The Material Culture of Remembrance in Ireland: Roadside Memorials as Contested Spaces," in *Public Performances: Studies in the Carnavalesque and Ritualesque*, ed. by Jack Santino (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 239.



and more of the public can interact with and understand roadside shrines. In addition to images the public needs written interpretation based on sound historical research so that they can understand what they're seeing. Roadside shrines are vulnerable to being forgotten by the general public as they are at their core a form of alternate grief expression that many are not familiar with, by displaying ephemera such as these shrines, the risk of this lessens.

People think roadside memorials are important. These shrines are everyday expressions of culture, family, and community. Several interviewees discuss this at length. For example, Maxfield Baker, a San Marcos City Council member states, "I think most people want some type of legacy and even if somebody does something really tragic and loses their own life or takes the life of somebody else, I feel like we want to be remembered..."<sup>91</sup> The importance of grieving was something all of my interviewees agreed was important. Without the freedom to memorialize, personal and even cultural memorializing is at risk of being erased due to regulations that have affected these shrines.

Roadside shrines should be preserved, archived, documented, and presented in public history exhibits and digital projects. This is more than just because they have not been preserved, or because of the issues of power within them, but because of the ways power plays out in these shrines specifically. There is a power of place and remembrance in these shrines. This power is exemplified in the way they are not treated with the same respect as "official shrines" and are therefore subject to removal from not only their location, but the public memory. State agencies have the power to remove shrines, and therefore have the power to decide what is worthy of remembrance. Archives and museums, in turn, have this power, but not through removal, but through determining placement within their repository. Both archives

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<sup>91</sup> Maxfield Baker, Interview by Emma Beard, October 12, 2022, 10.



and state agencies have the power to determine if these shrines remain within the public memory, or fade out of it. This loss of important examples of mourning culture is completely avoidable. These shrines should be preserved not because of their lack of documentation, but because they exemplify an occurrence of everyday public history that comes from a place of deep feeling and interesting history.



## V. CONCLUSION

Within the roadside memorial, the histories of the road, regulation, and memorialization, all intersect. Each subject helps in the understanding of these unique, ephemeral sites. Every topic has a part in its past, present, and future of roadside memorials. The past of these memorials is seen in the history of the road and the organizations that have appeared over time due to its growth that hold jurisdiction over the landscape in which these memorials reside.

Memorialization and memory studies in the U.S. are applicable to alternative forms of grief practice, due their sharing of themes such as power and purpose, exemplified in the roadside memorial as an often contentious ephemeral space. The intersection of these themes and topics of histories in the study of roadside memorials is unique, and points towards the need for preservation of these sites of often overlooked public history.

The overall goal in this work on roadside shrines is to explore possible solutions to the issues that exist around roadside death memorials. The lack of understanding of the emotional aspect of roadside shrines by regulatory agencies, which then leads to the removal and destruction of sites that do not meet the “proper criteria” is one of the more pressing issues in this field. This is partially due to the adjacent issue of the public simply not being aware of these regulations being made by State agencies like TxDOT, as seen through various newspapers and first-hand accounts in sections one and two.

Roadside shrines have been overlooked and labeled as “unimportant” to the study of memorialization, as evidenced by their lack of record in most archives or museums. The only place to find these shrines is through academic studies by historians and anthropologists such as John O. West and Rudolfo Anaya, which are geared towards smaller niche groups of



researchers, and not the public. Until the 1970's, cultural and social histories were not primary concepts of analysis used in historical scholarship. The topic of roadside shrines was ignored due to lack of interest in literature pre-1970. These ignored topics began to enter the mainstream and allow for more study. By exploring the various topics, histories, and spaces that exist within an understudied topic such as roadside shrines in this work, meaning and expansion of the historiography about informal public death memorialization can occur.

This study seeks to repair at least some of the gaps in the archival and public history field. This can be done not only through the promotion of professional historical interest but also public engagement in roadside memorials. Through the work done in this study, both the photos seen in this academic work and those placed in the exhibit, both of these goals can be achieved.

Themes of importance appear when studying the roadside shrine. One theme is the importance of these shrines in comparison to traditional forms of mourning. Many interviewees noted how these shrines fill the same role as a grave marker, or cemetery, and should be respected in the same way. This theme is one that could have an entire work dedicated to it, as many elements surrounding it, such as what is allowed to be memorialized, and exactly who is allowed to be memorialized, are deeply interesting concepts that deserve time and recognition.

Another common theme has been the importance of these shrines as markers of remembrance in a public form. The importance of individual, personalized, grieving was something all of my interviewees agreed was important. Without the freedom to memorialize, personal and even cultural memorialization is at risk of being erased due to regulations that have affected these shrines. These shrines along the roadside are important examples of the



personalization of memorialization, and represent a phenomenon that has been slowly building and changing over the last few decades. The space that roadside shrines inhabit is both physically and metaphorically unique, as they are both seen and unseen by thousands of people every day along the road.

The sections within this paper could each become their own full length work. This understudied topic is at a stage in which many avenues for further exploration are available. Preservation of shrines could be its own study in the future. With the growth of interest in the field, more and more documentation could take place, leading to eventually more preservation. Through looking at the previous examples of the documenting preservation of roadside memorials, an idea of where the study of these sites could potentially go in the future can be obtained.

In the future this project has several other avenues it could take in order to expand the field and its historiography. For example, a deeper study of the similarities between cemeteries and roadside memorials within the memorial landscape is a road that this project could take in the future. Many interviewees noted how roadside shrines fill the same role as a grave marker, or cemetery, and should be respected in the same way. Stephen Cure came to his own conclusion that cemeteries are also “traditional forms of memorialization” and are subject to the regulations similar to that of roadside memorials.<sup>92</sup> This is just one of the avenues this project could take, and it is the avenue with the most historiographical potential in the field. The basis of all of this, past, present, and future methods of study, is the importance of these shrines, and how history, regulation, perception, preservation, and public presentation.

The digital history potential for this project exists as well. With my own digital work,

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<sup>92</sup> Stephen Cure, Interview by Emma Beard.



the door for other such projects has opened. There have been the beginnings of projects similar to the map I have started before, but this is the first fully accessible, detailed map of a grouping of roadside shrines. In the future, larger institutions with even more resources could create even more innovative and interactive forms of maps and timelines detailing roadside shrines.

There is engagement in these public yet private areas of grief and mourning. When driving down the road in Austin recently, I passed by an unmarked memorial I had documented during the summer (see appendix, image viii). The flowers were changed, proof that there is engagement in these public yet private areas of grief and mourning, even when the crosses are unmarked. People care about these sites, even those who don't participate in the larger debates around them.

This study allows for greater conversation to occur surrounding roadside memorials. This is key in order for these important sites of personal memorialization and everyday public history receive the recognition they require in order to survive as an alternative grief practice. These are not just crosses along the road, but important sites that represent an intersection between histories, cultures, and communities within the discipline of public history



## IMAGE APPENDIX



I: Exit 213 Northbound Frontage Road





II: US 45 Toll Ramp Memorial





III: Exit 215 I-35 Shoulder Memorial





IV: Ranch Road 12 Memorial





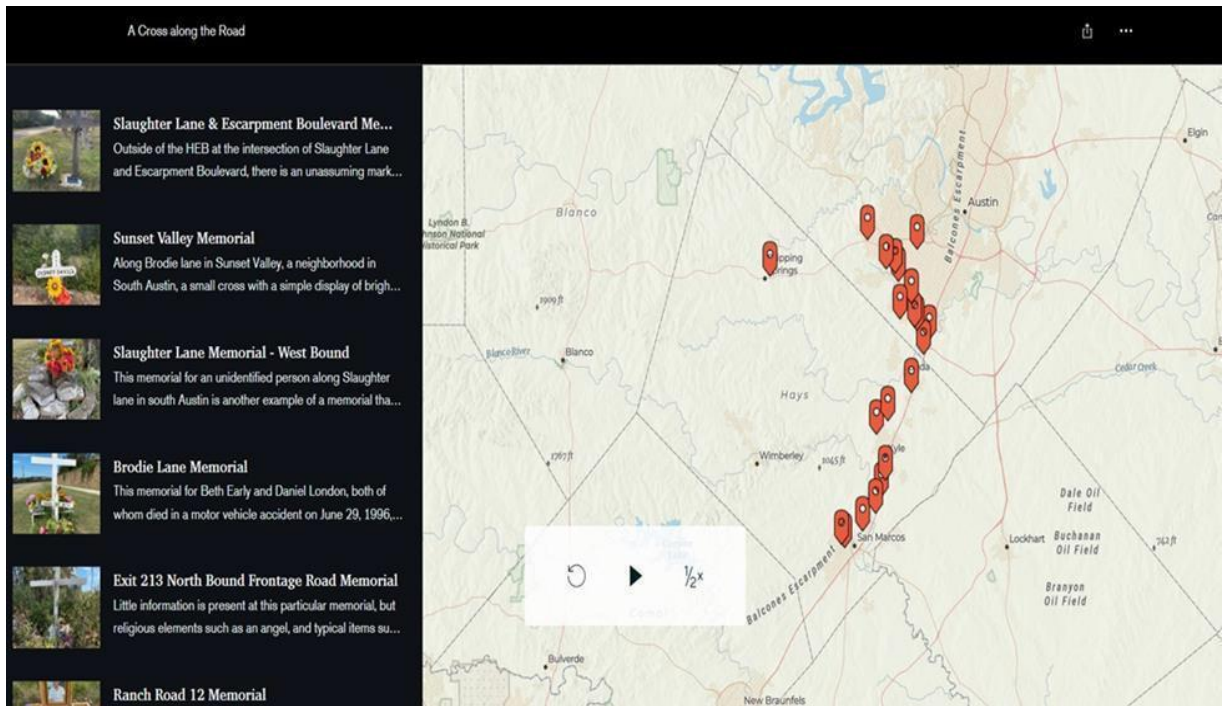
V: Zelicks Icehouse Memorial





VI: Twin Creeks Road Memorial 1





## VII: Virtual Exhibit Map and Shrines





VIII: Slaughter Lane Memorial



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