

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

This issue of the *Houston History* magazine celebrates the history of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. The annual Show and Rodeo is a major entertainment event, but it is also a celebration of our region's history and a fund-raising event for scholarships that are a major investment in our region's future. It is a part of Houston culture with deep roots into our past.

Special thanks go to our guest editor, Jim Saye, who contributed two articles to this issue and helped coordinate our work with the Media Center staff for the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. All of us at *Houston History* join Jim in expressing our gratitude to the members of this exceptional staff: Sarah Poole, Clint Saunders, Lauren Rouse, Suzy Martin, and Johnny Westerhouse; as well as School Art Committee members Sally Woody, and Carole Look. Their hard work and spirit of cooperation can be seen in every aspect of this issue, from the content of the articles to the extraordinary photographs. With such a staff and the thousands of volunteers who help with the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, it is easy to understand how the event is successful year after year. Special thanks also goes to Nancy Clark at the University of Houston.

We appreciate the cooperation of the current CEO, Leroy Shafer, and we give him the first word in this issue.

— Joe Pratt, *Editor-in-Chief*

LEROY SHAFER: HIS FUTURE WITH THE RODEO

The path from our youth to our life's profession is not always a straight line. Our supposed and well planned future can often be diverted by unexpected circumstances that push us into unexpected byways, and that is about the best way to describe the life of Leroy Shafer, Chief Operating Officer of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo. For thirty-seven years, his life seemed to have a mind of its own. It began on September 16, 1944, in Roscoe, Texas, which lies just west of Sweetwater, "kind of central west Texas." Connecting the dots from this point to the Houston Rodeo is strewn with happenstance and what he describes as "weird sets of circumstances."

Although born in Roscoe he was raised and educated in Trent, a town a little east of Roscoe, between Sweetwater and Abilene, Texas. As a high school student, Shafer was active in FFA (formerly the Future Farmers of America) and 4-H that is described as a "hands-on" public education program designed to connect youth to country life. Pursuing that ideal, Shafer often showed steers and heifers at the Show, and in 1959, he caught a calf during the calf scramble when the rodeo was held in the old Sam Houston Coliseum. Through these early activities he came to know Dick Weekly, who at the time was the Executive Director of the Texas FFA, and young Leroy's hero. Later, he learned that Mr. Weekly had gone to work as general manager of the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo in Houston.

Shafer attended Texas A&M University in the late 1960's, when it was primarily an all male cadet corps. At the time the Vietnam war was in full swing, and four months before graduation, Shafer received orders sending him to that conflict. He intended to attend Officer Infantry School followed by Helicopter Flight School but through the first "weird sets of circumstances" he wound up at Iowa State University where he got a masters degree in journalism and mass communications. Within twenty months after graduation from A&M, he was a helicopter pilot in Vietnam where he flew 327 combat missions. In time, certain conflicts between the military and the media arose prompting the need for an officer experienced in mass communications and Lt. Leroy Shafer fit the bill. He remained as the military's ombudsman between the military and the media until his tour of duty was over. He completed his last two years at Ft. Benning, Georgia, as a general's pilot and as the assistant editor of *Infantry Magazine*.

With his credentials, several opportunities arose within corporate America, but some of Houston's elite who were sustaining



members of the rodeo launched a campaign to hire him. There was no problem finding a civilian job as several opportunities presented themselves with companies focused directly and indirectly on agriculture. After several interviews from his short list, the most attractive was a position with DuPont, but Shafer was receiving pressure from other Aggies to consider the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo offer. Out of a sense of courtesy he made the trip to Houston where he met some of the organization's notables: Stuart Lang, Buddy Bray, Louis Pearce, and Tommy Vaughn. A more detailed offer was made and discussed. After the meeting, Shafer and his wife were driving home to west Texas and she asked him how the meeting had gone. He answered,

"Those people are crazy. That's the craziest interview I ever had. But the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo is not what I remember. They've got two thousand volunteers and they have got this mammoth scholarship program." Shafer admits that the twenty scholarships the rodeo offered at the time was "mammoth," but it is far from the 535 the rodeo distributes today.

Perhaps it was Dupont's arrogance or pushiness, or perhaps it was the number of volunteers and scholarships that changed his mind, but he decided to work for the rodeo; and when Dupont called, he told them of his decision. "Well, we go to bed that night, I woke up like at 4 o'clock that morning in a cold sweat. I thought, damn I told those people in Houston a month or so ago that I was not gonna go to work for them. I remember that Mr. Vaughn

told me that he was at work by six o'clock in the morning every day. So I waited until 6:15. I asked him if the job was still open and Mr. Vaughn assured that it was. I told him I could only promise him five years and he replied, 'Well Aggie, I can't promise you one! But I'll make a deal with you, if you go to work for us, at the end of every year, if you're doing a good job we'll take you on for another year. Now you got to

make a deal with me.' I said, 'Okay, sir.' He said, 'You won't leave until you get the job finished.' I said, 'Okay, sir.'"

"Mr. Vaughn passed away some five years ago, but up until that point he would come up to me at every annual meeting and say, 'Got the job done yet?' 'No sir, still working on it.' So I've been here thirty-six years." What follows in this magazine, reflects much of his work in getting the job done.

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"The future: The gigantic shadows which futurity casts upon the present."

— Percy B. Shelley