

Giving as a Hobby: A Family Legacy

by Patricia Pando and Robert Pando

The elegant woman in her eighties looked through the windows of her eighth-floor condominium in Houston's River Oaks. Her views encompassed most of the city and large chunks of her world—downtown and the Medical Center, the University of Houston and Rice, and the headquarters of the *Houston Post* where her formidable powers had held sway.¹

Oveta Culp Hobby had much to remember. From before her marriage to former governor William Pettus Hobby in 1931 at age twenty-six (he was twenty-seven years her senior), she had been a force in the state and city, and later, in the nation. Now, although officially retired, she remained in touch with the world news by way of public affairs programming on C-SPAN and with friends and family by way of the telephone.²

Sometimes the person on the other end of the phone line was Peter Marzio, Director of the Museum of Fine Arts. Hobby, long an art collector, took great pleasure in sharing her collection with the museum and in financing new acquisitions. Many of these conversations focused on her goal of acquiring an important work for the new Cullen Sculpture Garden. She emphasized to Marzio that she was willing to spend, but that she wanted a lot of sculpture value for her dollar. They were successful. In 1988, the Hobby Foundation proudly presented Marino Marini's *The Pilgrim* to the museum.³

Generosity and service were key words in Oveta Hoover Culp Hobby's life and indeed, in the life of her family. She learned it early and in a very real way.

The Hoover and Culp families had roots both in Texas and in public service. Isaac (Ike) Culp, a second-generation Texan, read the law, entered the bar, and served in the Texas legislature, all before he moved to Killeen, Texas, in 1900 to set up a law practice. There, he courted and married Emma Hoover, daughter of one of the town's leading families. Oveta was their second child, born January 19, 1905. Emma had her hands full, as one reporter phrased it, "with having babies and looking after the unfortunate in the town."⁴

When she was six, Oveta learned a real lesson in self-sacrifice. Grandfather Hoover took particular interest in young Oveta Hoover Culp; realizing that he had little time to live, he elicited a promise from his daughter and her husband—when he died they would send Oveta to live with his lonely wife. The young girl moved into her grandmother's house, calling it home until she was about fourteen. "It was not fair

to either one of us," she recalled to Marguerite Johnston Barnes, her friend, employee, and biographer. "Grandmère was too old to have to take on a small child. And I was too young to profit as I might have from her upbringing."⁵ Cordelia Hoover was a strict woman and imposed her high standards on the youngster. She treated the child like an adult, and not just any adult—Oveta was a Culp and a Hoover; she had responsibilities.

Emma Culp followed her mother in taking those responsibilities seriously. One story that Oveta often told was how, when Oveta was in her early teens, she and her mother assessed the needs of the less well-off of the town, contacted the better-off, and put together an early version of a Community Chest. Years later, the grown Oveta Culp Hobby served on the board of the Houston Community Chest.⁶

The Culp family entered a new world the year Oveta turned fourteen. Ike Culp had thrown his hat into the ring for the Texas House of Representatives and won. He settled his family in Temple, where he established a law practice, and took himself off to Austin.

He did not go alone. In 1919, Oveta said good-bye to her grandmother, mother, brothers, and sisters; good-bye to school; and set out to Austin with her father. There she did not bother to enroll in school; rather, she studied with tutors. Whenever Ike was on the House floor, so was Oveta, picking up "the nuances of politics and law like a prairie hen picking up seeds."⁷

This pleasant, stimulating life came to an end for the father and daughter two years later when Culp lost his bid for election as lieutenant governor. They were back in Temple at the law office and at Temple High School. There, Oveta, a good student,

acquired a taste for the stage. She and several other teenagers organized themselves into "The Jolly Entertainers," giving vaudeville-like performances in and near Temple. Typical of Culp/Hoover family behavior, all proceeds went to church organ funds.

In 1922, Ike Hobby regained his seat in the legislature, and father and daughter headed back to Austin. Oveta considered this a permanent move. No longer did she sit on the floor of the House, a docile daughter alongside her father. She became a reporter on the *Austin American-Statesman*, the beginning of a long career in



Oveta Culp Hobby, circa 1935

All photos courtesy of Woodson Research Center, Fondren Library, Rice University, Houston, Texas, unless otherwise noted.



Oveta Culp Hobby set an example for her own children's philanthropy. The Hobby family shown from left to right: future lieutenant governor Bill Hobby who donated generously to construction of the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts, Jessica Hobby Catto who became an avid conservationist, Oveta Culp Hobby, and former governor William Hobby.

journalism that ended with her at the helm of the *Houston Post*.

In 1925, she went to work in the circulation department of the *Houston Post-Dispatch* and enrolled in the South Texas School of Law. She also became active in both social and civic activities—particularly the League of Women Voters. In January 1928, she became Executive Secretary of the 15,000-Democratic Women's Club based in Houston. When the eyes of the country focused on Houston in June 1928 as the Democratic National Convention convened in the city, the name of Miss



Oveta Culp became the first woman to serve as parliamentarian for a state legislature when she was named to the post for the special session of the 39th Texas Legislature in 1926.

Oveta Culp figured prominently. Although later she declared herself “only a flunkie,” she was a flunkie who organized a rooftop breakfast at the Rice Hotel that included Woodrow Wilson's widow as well as the governor of Texas, the mayor of Houston, and the convention organizer, Jesse H. Jones.⁹

That fall, following the election of her Houston mayoral candidate, Walter Monteith, she went to work as assistant to the city attorney with the understanding that she would be able to continue to serve as parliamentarian of the Texas House.

The political bug bit again in 1930, and this time it bit Oveta. She declared as a candidate for Houston District 5 in the Texas House of Representatives. For the rest of her life, she told the story of how her opponent, who had Ku Klux Klan ties, tried to smear her reputation by stating in darkest terms that she “was a parliamentarian,” then pausing for the expected gasp of horror. She fielded a spirited campaign but lost nevertheless.¹⁰

Undeterred by defeat, she turned to other campaigns and to the comfort of a romance. Governor Will Hobby, widowed in 1929, had begun a low-key courtship. She later maintained that she did not realize that she was being courted until “Governor,” as she always referred to him, said they should speak with her father. When he told her why, she retorted that he had better ask *her* first. Both daughter and father assented to the proposal. In February 1931, Oveta resigned as parliamentarian and became Oveta Culp Hobby, as she would be known for the rest of her life.¹¹

The young Mrs. Hobby spent an active decade. In addition to working at the *Post*, she accelerated her public service activities. Late in 1931, she was elected president of the Texas League of Women Voters, a distinction made somewhat unusual by the fact that she was seven months pregnant. Jesse H. Jones appointed her to the Texas Centennial Commission. When a deluge caused serious flooding in Houston and Harris County in 1935, Oveta was appointed to a citizens' commission charged with the task of solving the recurrent flooding problems; the commission's work resulted in Houston's current bayou drainage system.¹²

A natural leader, she headed the Women's Crusade section of the fundraising campaign for the Community Chest (forerunner of today's United Way), and then joined the board of directors. Other boards sought her talents: the Houston Symphony, the Houston Art Museum (now the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston), the YWCA, and the Houston Recreation Council. The University of Houston, determined to start an endowment fund despite the discouragement of the Depression, selected Oveta as chairman of the women's division of the drive. In a short time, she became co-chairman of the entire campaign, sharing the position with oil millionaire Hugh Roy Cullen.¹³

Oveta did not pass up opportunities to serve Texas. She chaired the Advisory Committee on Women's Participation for the 1939 New York World's Fair, and the Women's Field Army (later part of the American Cancer Society) named her commanding general for Texas.¹⁴

By now a mother of two, Oveta also worked at her professional development. An early woman member of the Southern Newspaper Publishers Association, by the end of the decade she was the group's president. Nationally, she became the first woman member of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, a distinction made more notable by her entry into a Society dinner meeting at a club restricted to male guests. Oveta at-



Colonel Oveta Hobby and Major William Burgoyne at the Pyramids.
Photo courtesy of The National Archives, Still Picture Branch.

tended—but she was barred from the front foyer of the club and strolled in through the kitchen door.¹⁵

Oveta Culp Hobby's name is synonymous with women and World War II. In 1941, while in Washington, D.C., on newspaper business, Oveta got a call for help from the Public Relations Section of the War Department. Letters from women across the country cascaded into the department, asking for information and comfort as to how their recently drafted sons, brothers, and boyfriends were faring. Oveta quickly sized up the situation and suggested specific, workable solutions. Soon, over her initial objections, she began dividing her time between her "dollar-a-year" advisory role in the War Department and her *Post* duties.¹⁶

The scale of the impending war forced Army Chief of Staff General George C. Marshall to include women in the military. He turned to Oveta for a start-up plan for his proposed organization, then drafted her as the director and first member of the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, soon shortened to Women's Army Corps, or WAC. Oveta's plan worked amazingly well—within twelve months, 60,000 uniformed, trained WACs were able to perform 406 Army functions previously done by male soldiers. Oveta was not the only Hobby contributing heavily to the war effort. While she was spending the war years largely in Washington, Will Hobby assumed many of her publishing and parenting duties, and her two children were often without their mother.¹⁷

At the end of the war, Oveta Hobby resumed her leadership role in her home city. She joined the coterie of influential Houstonians—the rest were all men—who often met in a suite at Jesse Jones' Lamar Hotel.¹⁸ Oveta was embedded in the city's business structure—when Foley's opened its new flagship store on Main Street in downtown Houston, she gave the keynote address.¹⁹

Oveta's influence during these years was not limited to Houston or to Texas. President Harry S. Truman put Oveta Hobby (never a Truman supporter) on the advisory panel of the Hoover Commission, charged with guiding the reorganization of the federal government. In 1949, she once more raised funds for the American Cancer Society. The following year, General Marshall called his favorite female colonel back to public service—twice. As president of the American Red Cross, he placed Oveta on his fund-raising committee. When Marshall became Secretary of Defense, Oveta became a key advisor on women's issues.²⁰

The National Conference of Christians and Jews, planning for Brotherhood Week in 1951, named Oveta chairman of the newspaper committee. The Houston Chapter of the organization recognized her contribution with a dinner at the Shamrock Hotel, at which Oveta and Will were both praised for their public service and contributions to brotherhood. At about this time, a journalism publication recapitulated her major memberships and honors from nineteen civic, public, and professional organizations; she was an officer or director of almost every one.²¹

In 1953, President-Elect Dwight D. Eisenhower placed Oveta (a strong supporter) in his cabinet as the first secretary of the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW). The new department included most of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal social service agencies, together with other agencies that predated the Roosevelt administration. Secretary Hobby assumed control of the Social Security Administration (which served sixty-seven million citizens), the Office of Education, the Office of Vocational Rehabilitation, the Food and Drug Administration, and the Public Health Service. Smaller agencies included a mental health hospital, a college and teacher training school for the deaf, a hospital focusing on African American patients, and a printing house for the blind. Although Hobby's politics tended



President Lyndon B. Johnson watches Oveta Culp Hobby cut the ribbon at the Oveta Culp Hobby Memorial Library, Central Texas College, in Killeen, Texas.

to be conservative and Republican, she pledged not to attempt to roll back the social gains of previous administrations.²²

One of the most visible accomplishments of HEW, working in concert with the privately funded National Polio Foundation, was development of vaccines for polio, then the summertime scourge of the U.S. and much of the world. Working rapidly, and working against the summer deadline of the disease, the National Foundation and HEW guided the production and testing of millions of doses of the unproven Salk vaccine and quickly judged it safe. Today, mass vaccinations have eliminated the disease in all but four countries.²³

Hobby stepped down from full-time government service in 1955, but continued to contribute to national affairs. President Lyndon B. Johnson placed her on an advisory board determining the future of Selective Service—the military draft—and on another board planning the future of public television. Soon after, LBJ appointed her to the founding board of directors of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.²⁴

Back in Houston, Oveta turned her energies to education as Rice Institute's first woman trustee. There, she joined the faction of directors seeking to break the university trust documents barring African American students. Some of the alumni took their opposition to the courts. The trustees won, and Rice joined other private colleges and universities across the South in opening the admissions process to black students. Hobby's interest in higher education spanned many decades. In addition to her service as a Rice trustee, she raised funds for the University of Houston, served on the board of regents of six state colleges, and contributed ideas to institutions as diverse as Harvard University and Clark School for the Deaf. The colleges and universities of the country recognized her contributions with seventeen honorary doctorates.²⁵

When Oveta Hobby returned to civilian life after her WAC service, she plunged back into the daily fray of her pre-war life: newspapering, parenthood, and service. The *Post* was profitable, and growing even more profitable as income grew from the newspaper's radio and television ventures. Oveta and Will began to plan how to share their good fortune. In 1945, they established the Houston Post Foundation (in 1947 it became the Hobby Foundation) with the objective of supporting religious, educational, and charitable organizations.²⁶

True to Oveta's Killeen roots and upbringing, on January 29, 1946, the Foundation made its first donation to the Houston Community Chest. Across the years, the Community Chest (later the United Way) invariably received the first, and almost always the largest, annual donation. While the Foundation gave to many national causes such as the American Red Cross, local groups received the bulk of support. Occasionally, a specific need—the Texas City disaster—precipitated a gift; more often donations went on a regular basis to groups across the area, from small organizations such as the YMCA Colored Branch and Dixie Drive Baptist Church, to the large and well established—the Museum of Fine Arts, the Symphony, the Houston Christian Committee for United Jewish Appeal—and, of course, Rice University. The legacy of this early generosity continues into the twenty-first century.²⁷

At about the time Oveta and Will established their foundation, Oveta started collecting fine art. She had begun collecting things early in life. As a teenager, she collected books—over 750 before she was twenty-one. As a young wife, she became



Marino Marini's sculpture, *The Pilgrim*, which stands in the Cullen Sculpture Garden at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, was a gift from Hobby.

Photo by Aimee L'Heureux.

a knowledgeable collector of antique silver. Now, she concentrated on "modern art"—twentieth-century paintings and drawings.²⁸

By the late 1950s Hobby had begun donating some of her works to the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, and subsequently rejoined the board. Her gifts came with no strings attached. She did not quibble if the museum sold artwork not needed for its collection, applying the proceeds to new works. Over time, in addition to many paintings by such masters as Picasso, Renoir, and Matisse, she gave jewelry by Fabergé and Jean Schlumberger, ceramic and stone sculpture, and significant pieces of Steuben and other leaded glass crystal. In all, MFAH counts 100 donations ranging from a cigarette lighter to Marini's *The Pilgrim*, the bronze horse and rider now in place in the Cullen Sculpture Garden and subject of the long conversations with Museum Director Marzio. The conversations and the donations continued. Marzio sought to include works from two missing masters, Joan Miro and Arshile Gorky, among the twentieth century artists in the museum collection. In 1991, with Oveta's final funding, the museum purchased a work of each artist.

On August 16, 1995, at the age of ninety, Oveta Culp Hobby died in her home. Long before, her parents had instilled in her the importance of sharing. She passed down this legacy to her children, her city, and her state.

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