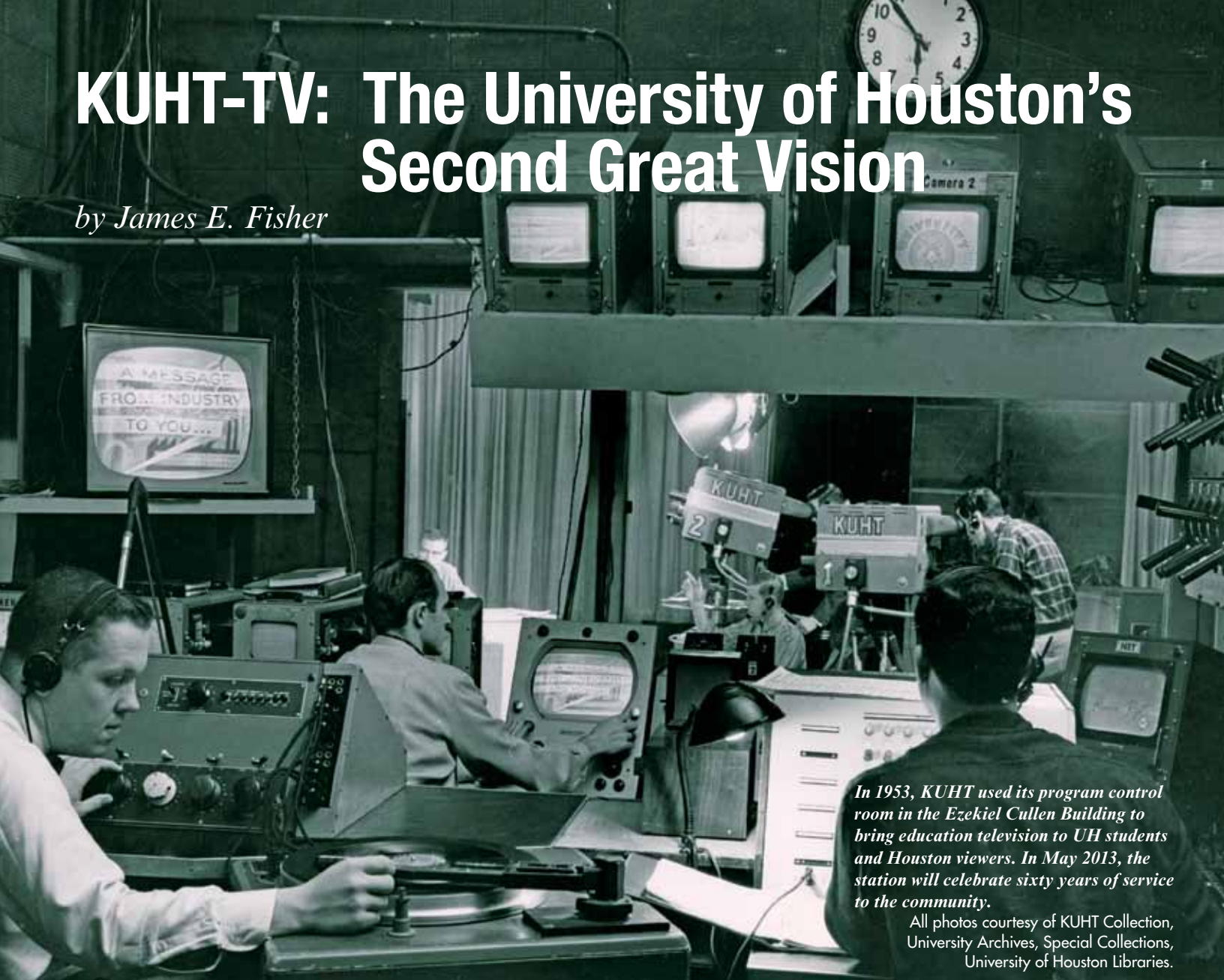


# KUHT-TV: The University of Houston's Second Great Vision

by James E. Fisher



*In 1953, KUHT used its program control room in the Ezekiel Cullen Building to bring education television to UH students and Houston viewers. In May 2013, the station will celebrate sixty years of service to the community.*

All photos courtesy of KUHT Collection, University Archives, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

## KUHT – The Big Picture

Houston Independent School District superintendent Dr. E. E. Oberholtzer's concept for Houston Junior College was arguably the University of Houston's first great visionary aspiration.<sup>1</sup> In 1951, UH president Dr. Walter Kemmerer brought another visionary concept to the University, a proposal for an educational television station. The University had already launched the nation's first university-licensed radio station, KUHF-FM, in November 1950 to provide courses in radio communication, but expanding that concept to an entirely new technology was a bold move for the youthful institution. The University's intention became firm on April 17, 1951, when it approved and sent an application to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) for a television permit. On April 15, 1952, the University's Board of Regents approved a resolution for a joint application with Houston Independent School District (HISD) to secure an FCC "construction permit" for Channel 8. The commission granted that license, and KUHT-TV went on the air May 25, 1953.<sup>2</sup>

To fully appreciate this accomplishment a general famil-

ilarity of television history is helpful. The United States had not taken its first tentative steps into commercial broadcasting until the mid- to late-1920s. These basic steps generally in the New York area, however, represented merely a starting point. The adoption of technical standards, the Great Depression, and a lack of willing participants in this business limited the television industry's expansion. It suffered another set-back with the United States' entry into World War II. This time period saw the NBC, CBS, and Du Mont networks limiting their schedules to four hours per week, while utilizing their manpower, equipment, and expertise for government service.<sup>3</sup>

World War II ended in 1945, and in the years that followed, the nation was ripe for growth. By 1948, the broadcast industry began to lay the foundation for the complex media we know today. The FCC became the battleground for this expansion. Houston's first commercial television station, KLEE, owned by W. Albert Lee, went on the air on January 1, 1949.<sup>4</sup> At the time Albert Lee applied for KLEE's license for channel 2 in Houston, no other FCC applications had been filed for that channel. Typically during this period,

the FCC promptly granted all uncontested license requests. However, the launch of KLEE incited the competition for licenses locally. This movement mirrored the national trend; and as a result, on September 30, 1948, the FCC implemented a “freeze” on the granting of new licenses. The freeze lasted for over three and a half years. It was only after the Commission’s 6th Report and Order was issued on April 14, 1952, that the commerce of television moved forward. Among other things, this report allocated 242 channels for educational, non-commercial television use across the county.

With the lifting of the freeze, the race was on for new stations to begin broadcasting. KUHT’s first broadcast came just over a year later, on May 25, 1953. With this broadcast, KUHT became the second television station in Houston, and the third television station in the area. It followed KLEE (now KPRC) in Houston and KGUL-TV in Galveston, which signed on the air two months prior to the launch of KUHT. In 1959, KGUL-TV moved to Houston and became KHOU-TV.<sup>5</sup>

KUHT-TV was only the eleventh television station in Texas, with three stations in Dallas-Ft. Worth, two each in San Antonio and El Paso, and one each in Austin, Houston, and Galveston preceding KUHT’s launch. Today, the Houston market boasts seventeen full power television stations.<sup>6</sup>

With its first transmissions, KUHT established non-commercial educational television in the United States, a new broadcasting branch for the fledgling industry. With its primary focus on education, it helped to establish the foundation for “distance education,” a staple of contemporary higher education today. Before then “extended education” consisted primarily of correspondence courses or satellite colleges.<sup>7</sup> Given the challenges faced by the individuals whose determination brought KUHT to life, this educational environment benchmarks a vision for the future that is still one of the University of Houston’s most significant early accomplishments.



UH student Nancy Watchous displays a 1954 KUHT insignia designed by Walt Disney Productions.

## KUHT – The Early Years

During her speech at KUHT’s Dedication on June 8, 1953, FCC commissioner Frieda Hennock said:

*For here in Houston begins the practical realization of the tremendous benefits that television holds out to education. With television, the walls of the classroom disappear; every set within viewing range of the signal is a potential classroom. . . . [T]he accumulated riches of man’s educational, cultural, and spiritual development can be spread right before the viewer’s eyes.<sup>8</sup>*

The start-up of KUHT drew national attention. NBC’s *Today Show*, a program that had premiered a year earlier in New York, filmed a special four-and-half-minute “Welcome to the Pool” talk by host Dave Garroway to air as part of Channel 8’s dedication. In his casual conversation to the viewers, Garroway stated, “you are pioneering a brand new and complex side of the television picture . . . no one knows what educational television can do . . . you are free to investigate the uses and defects of the most powerful communications medium . . . the one with the most overwhelming social impact and overwhelming social implications that anyone can imagine.”<sup>9</sup>

KUHT-TV officially signed on the air on May 25, 1953, using the Very High Frequency (VHF) Channel 8. This live broadcast originated from the remodeled radio studios on the fifth floor of the University of Houston’s Ezekiel W. Cullen Building. The TV station’s schedule that day consisted of two and a half hours of programming between 5:00 and 7:33 p.m. *It’s Five* host George Arms was the first to greet Houston viewers. The evening continued with Dr. Evelyn Thompson’s *Bookland*; a fifteen minute newscast; *Open House* hosted by UH assistant professor Curtis Rogers; a film on The Toronto Symphony Orchestra; and UH assistant dean of the College of Education Charles White hosting *Experiment in Teaching*.<sup>10</sup> Chief engineer W. T. (Bill) Davis was responsible for the technical side of the station’s operations. KHUT-TV sent those first transmis-



KUHT Dedication, June 8, 1953, (left to right) UH president Dr. Walter Kemmerer, FCC commissioner Frieda Hennock, and UH regent Hugh Roy Cullen.

sions from the top of an on-campus oil derrick originally supplied by Hugh Roy Cullen for transmitting KUHF-FM's signal.<sup>11</sup>

The first full week of broadcast, May 25 to May 29, consisted of a variety of programs, including assorted episodes of *It's Five*, *Bookland*, *Open House*, and *Experiment in Teaching*. The schedule also included *Viz Quiz*, *Tour of the Studio*, *Jack Armistead's Music Show*, *Spring Quarterback*, a number of commercially available films, and "hostess" segments.<sup>12</sup> Female college students served as hostesses who provided short on-camera interludes that allowed time for set changes between programs. When not on camera, the hostesses joined other students who formed the station operations team led by radio-television faculty.

A March 1954 *New York Times* article painted a gloomy future for KUHT. John Schwarzwald, director of UH's Radio-Television-Film Center, rebutted in an editorial in UH's *The Cougar*, citing numbers from a recent poll taken by another UH department on the area's 200,000 television sets: "It is estimated that of the 200,000 sets, between 145,000 and 150,000 are tuned in to KUHT at least once during a two week period." Based on national averages, Schwarzwald called it a "staggering number of people."<sup>13</sup>

Of the original 242 channels the FCC allocated for use by non-commercial educational television, KUHT-TV was the first station to begin full time broadcasts. KUHT-TV is also singular for its longevity. The nation's second educational station, KTHE-TV in Los Angeles, went on the air in November 1953, then failed nine months later when its benefactor withdrew support.<sup>14</sup>

A significant part of the original KUHT-TV staff came to Houston from Hollywood show business. Dr. Wilton W. Cook had worked for David O. Selznick, producer of *Gone with the Wind*. He recruited John C. Schwarzwald, a film music director, to head the station's television film center. Paul Owen, also from Hollywood, was hired as producer/director.<sup>15</sup> Others came to establish the radio and television



*GRETA* productions allowed KUHT to provide educational content for local children prior to the creation of the Public Broadcasting Service/PBS.

academic department.

From the very beginning, KUHT-TV offered two kinds of programming that commercial broadcasters did not want to air: instructional and enrichment. Instructional television denoted the reason for the station's existence, while enrichment programming catered to special audiences and has now become the foundation for cable television. In the summer of 1953, Dr. Richard I. Evans taught KUHT-TV's first credit course on Channel 8—Psychology 231. Numerous courses in English, foreign languages, sciences, and the arts followed. Experimentation became the norm in those first years. In the fall of 1954, KUHT's schedule included *Metropolitan Farmer*, *Civil Defense*, *Pigskin Pow-Wow*, *Language Hour*, *Classic Piano*, and *The Chemist at Work*.<sup>16</sup>

Dr. Harlan Burr Roney taught perhaps the best-known course at the time.<sup>17</sup> His beginning biology course, using models constructed especially for television, was subsequently filmed and distributed nationally via National Educational Television (NET) to other educational stations.

In April 1954, the station presented "3-D Sound," using a creative simulcast technique. Viewers watched the program on KUHT-TV and heard it on KUHF-FM. They were asked to place an FM radio twelve feet to the right of their television set and, for better results, an extension of their television speaker the same distance to the left. UH journalism professor Jim Palmer called the technique the first of its type in the world.<sup>18</sup>

In this early period, KUHT-TV also presented live broadcasts of the Houston Independent School District (HISD) board meetings. These meetings proved quite lively because a public chorus applauded, hissed, and booed in response to the board members' actions. As the year progressed, KUHT-TV's ratings soared and the programs received extensive local – and eventually national – press attention. Viewers described the HISD board sessions as the best program on television. In 1956, Dr. Richard I. Evans reported that twenty-six percent of the area's television homes watched at least some part of these telecasts.<sup>19</sup>



*UH* students shown as a camera operator, floor director, and on-air personalities for live KUHT broadcasts.

From June 1955 through May 1956, KUHT provided a total of 1,453 hours of broadcast in its Monday-through-Friday schedule—about twenty-eight hours a week, on average. The total direct expenses for the television and film operations for 1955-1956 were \$211,117. Today, KUHT broadcasts 8,736 hours each year, twenty-four hours a day and seven days a week, with an annual budget of \$9.5 million.<sup>20</sup>

In 1957, KUHT developed a sociology project titled *People Are Taught To Be Different* conceptualized by Texas Southern University (TSU) professor Henry Allen Bullock. This co-production featured student performers from TSU working with KUHT's production staff and KUHT director Paul Schlessinger. These innovative films visualized intellectual concepts such as birth, death, aggression, and personalities through interpretive dance. Nationally known artist Dr. John T. Biggers (1924-2001), the founder of the TSU Art Department, was part of this creative team.<sup>21</sup> The two schools completed twelve nationally distributed films during an era of strict racial segregation.

In 1958, just one year after the launch of *Sputnik I* by the Soviet Union, KUHT-TV produced a multipart series titled *Doctors in Space*. Utilizing rudimentary props made of paper and wire, host and UH associate professor John Rider and his guests envisioned a future in space that included space stations and a space shuttle.<sup>22</sup>

In 1959, at the suggestion of the UH Board of Governors, HISD agreed to allow the University to be KUHT's sole licensee.<sup>23</sup>

UH applied for and was granted status as a state-supported institution in 1963. Then-president Philip G. Hoffman – who had vigorously supported Channel 8 – found himself forced to terminate the instructional programming because legislators would not allocate funds for broadcast stations. KUHT then had to take on the task of raising all the money for its operations as well as the acquisition of programming through National Educational Television (NET) and other emerging national program syndicators.<sup>24</sup>

In 1964, KUHT moved from the Ezekiel W. Cullen Building to 4343 Cullen Boulevard. KNUZ - Channel 39, KTRK - Channel 13, and NASA had previously occupied

the site that also included the station's well known Quonset hut, which was constructed for and housed KUHT's film production unit.

KUHT received an extraordinary gift from KHOU-TV, Channel 11 on August 16, 1964. KHOU was relocating its transmitter site and, with the approval of KHOU's owner, Corinthian Broadcasting, gave its old eighteen-acre site and tower in Alvin to KUHT-TV. After installing a new antenna, KUHT's broadcast range extended to an eighty mile radius from Alvin, creating a regional signal covering twenty-three counties.<sup>25</sup>

Regional broadcast capability gave HISD the opportunity to develop and broadcast courses for grades four through six. With the help of funding from the Texas legislature and the University of Houston, the Gulf Region Educational Television Associates (GRETA) was formed. By 1968, GRETA was providing thirty-five hours of supplementary programming to 460,000 children in KUHT's twenty-three county range.<sup>26</sup>

In the spring semester of 1965, at the higher education level, Channel 8 presented seven televised classroom lectures including: accounting, biology, English, mathematics and political science.<sup>27</sup>

## KUHT – The PBS Era

The Public Broadcasting Act of 1967 created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB).<sup>28</sup> When President Lyndon B. Johnson signed the act, non-commercial educational television stations from coast-to-coast joined together as independently operated Public Broadcasting System (PBS) stations.

In 1969, UH President Hoffman and Dr. Patrick Nicholson, who had been the principle officers over the University's broadcast properties for some years, initiated the Association for Community Television (ACT), coinciding with the national movement to build support for public television. ACT, now the Association for Community Broadcasting (ACB), remains the station's primary fund-raising arm.<sup>29</sup>

KUHT took its next step to extend its broadcast range in 1983 when it began transmitting from a 2,000-foot tower in Missouri City. KUHT chief engineer Al Leverick estimated

that this expanded KUHT's service to just under 100,000 additional viewers, and added 2,868 square miles of viewing area.<sup>30</sup> The station's viewing radius increased from eighty-miles surrounding Alvin, southeast of downtown Houston, to a radius of 100 miles from Missouri City, located southwest of downtown.

Technical advances and other industry-leading accomplish-



*President George H. W. Bush was interviewed for KUHT's Berlin Wall Collection in 2011.*

ments have marked the station's history. In 1981, KUHT-TV became the first local station to offer closed captioning. In 1985, it introduced Houston television audiences to high fidelity stereo, further enhancing the viewing experience for fans of *Masterpiece Theatre*, *NOVA*, *the MacNeill/Lehrer NewsHour*, *Evening at Pops*, *Austin City Limits*, *Sesame Street*, and many other programs that became household names during those years. That same year, KUHT's special *Child At Risk*, a program that explored the topic of pedophilia, won the station a national Emmy® Award. The station brought descriptive video and other services for the visually impaired to the city in 1991. And on April 14, 1994, KUHT became the first television station in the United States to embrace the Internet when it launched its website on the World Wide Web.<sup>31</sup>

In 2001, Channel 8 produced one of the first PBS high definition children's productions, *Mary Lou's Flip Flop Shop*, starring Olympic gymnast Mary Lou Retton. The first station to offer live Scripps-Howard spelling bee competitions to Houston viewers in 1954, KUHT returned to its roots in 2009 when it became the first PBS station in the nation to act as a local sponsor of the *Scripps National Spelling Bee*.<sup>32</sup>

As the new millennium began, the television station moved to its third home, the LeRoy and Lucile Melcher Center for Public Broadcasting, at Elgin and Spur 5, off Interstate Highway 45 South. From the Melcher Center, KUHT continues to provide daily offerings of educational, informative, and enlightening programs, including such lo-

cally produced and nationally distributed offerings as *Space Station*, *A Maestro's Farewell*, *The Berlin Wall: A World Divided*, *After the Wall: A World United*, *InnerViews*, *Living Smart*, and *The Cruiser Houston: Of Pride and Purpose*.

The dream of visionaries in the 1940s and 1950s created KUHT-TV. Six decades later, instructional television, as it is now called, provides a multitude of opportunities for students and employees throughout the greater Houston area and southeast Texas. Whether earning a complete degree via television, retraining for a new job, or receiving instruction to improve a career, thousands of Texans are improving their lives and advancing in their jobs thanks to KUHT-TV. Year after year, the community shows its belief and trust in this organization by providing the much needed funding that allows it to provide its services.<sup>33</sup>

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*This Quonset hut was home to the KUHT-TV Film Studio.*

Photo courtesy of the Digital Library, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.