

## FRONTIER FIESTA: “The Greatest College Show on Earth”

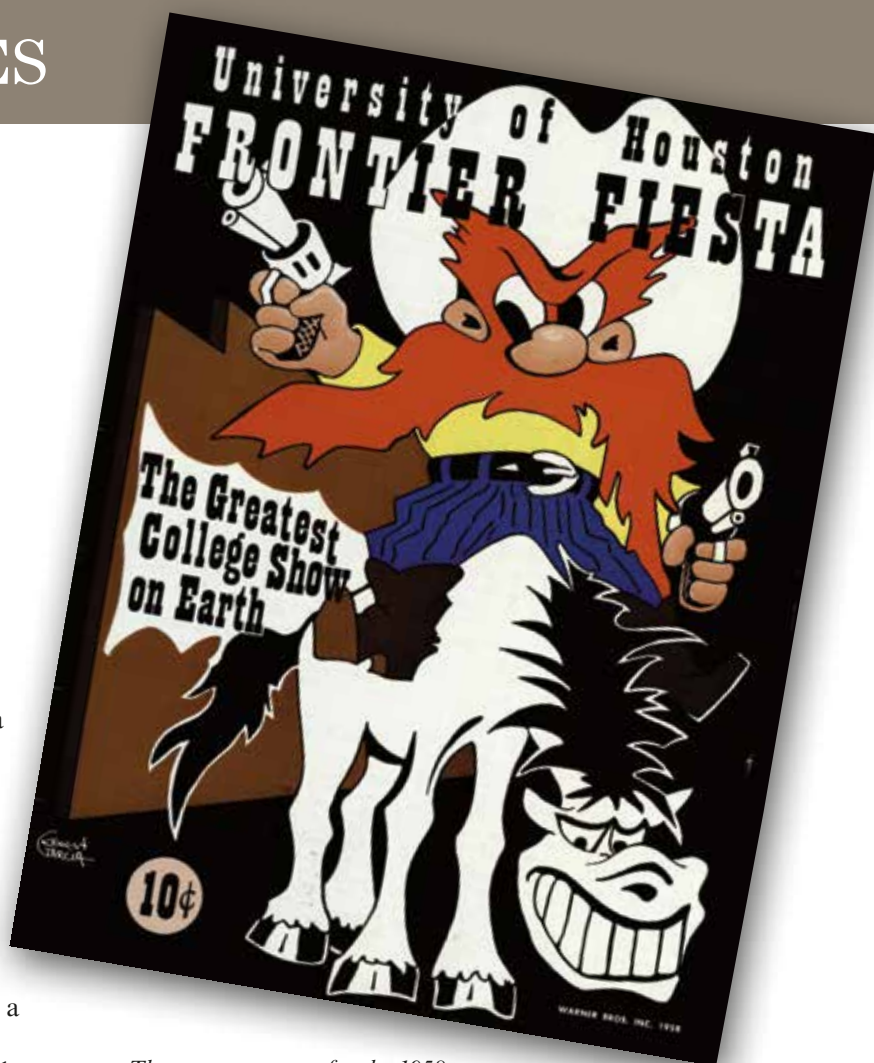
By Mary Manning

A University of Houston tradition, Frontier Fiesta began seventy-three years ago as an amalgamation of musical and theatrical performances, cook-offs, carnival booths, and concessions. Each spring, Fiesta volunteers transform a piece of vacant land or a parking lot on campus into a western frontier-style town called Fiesta City to accommodate the festival, which has had three separate runs. This article concentrates on the first two runs of the festival as the history of the current run is not yet well documented. The University Archives hopes to remedy this as it works with the Frontier Fiesta Association to chronicle the more recent events in preparation for a Frontier Fiesta exhibition in spring 2014.

The original Frontier Fiestas, held in 1940 and 1941, were almost immediately interrupted by World War II and suspended from 1942 to 1945. Reestablished in 1946, it ran until 1959, was again reinstated in 1992, and continues today. Frontier Fiesta is, and always has been, a fundraising event. The early Fiestas raised money to address campus needs, such as a student recreation center or swimming pool. Later, and to date, proceeds from the festival fund scholarships for entering freshman and current students.

Walter W. Kemmerer, then comptroller and director of curriculum and later president of the university, conceived and cultivated Frontier Fiesta as a way to engender and maintain school spirit, balance defense-oriented projects with extracurricular activities, and respond to student dissatisfaction over the lack of an intercollegiate sports program and a student recreation center. Kemmerer was determined to make Fiesta a success. He recruited student leaders and urged “the entire student body [to] take part in Frontier Fiesta, recreating for Houston the good old days when men were men, women loved them for it, and a maverick was an unruly steer instead of an unruly politician.”<sup>1</sup> He earned the nickname “Doc” by working tirelessly, day and night, alongside students to build Fiesta City.

Held on April 26, 1940, in conjunction with a long-established annual Houston Independent School District high school reception, the first Frontier Fiesta featured talent shows, musical and dance acts, concessions, and games along with what became a long-time festival highlight: the



The program cover for the 1958 Frontier Fiesta used the phrase “The Greatest College Show on Earth” – a moniker given to the event by a *Life* magazine article in the early 1950s.

All images courtesy of UH Frontier Fiesta Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

beard growing contest. During its first year, Fiesta raised \$2,000 toward building a student recreation center. Frontier Fiesta’s second run saw the event grow to great popularity and achieve national acclaim. In the early 1950s, *Life* magazine proclaimed it the “Greatest College Show on Earth.” During its heyday, Frontier Fiesta attracted as many as 100,000 people to the UH campus, including celebrities and visitors from all over the nation. The 1955 Frontier Fiesta signed over a check for \$106,000 to help pay for the university’s swimming pool.

It took hundreds of students each year to run the event—starting with the selection of its officials in the fall through its close in late spring. The beard-growing contest grew in popularity, “spurred on by constant publicity and by the Ford automobile that Don McMillan, a local dealer, traditionally awarded to the contest winner.”<sup>2</sup> Students built elaborate floats for the downtown parades. The festival included a pre-Fiesta dance, musical and theatrical shows on the Midway, auctions, barbecues, an original song contest, and many of the features still associated with Fiesta. It grew to a week-long event; however, its great popularity and the merriment that ensued also led to its demise.



Students perform in a stage show at Frontier Fiesta in the 1950s.

In the mid- to late-1950s, President A. D. Bruce and Vice President Clanton Williams identified “Frontier Fiesta and credit” as one of thirteen trouble spots at the university. The “credit” referred to academic credit that students could earn for a drama course by working the spring festival. The examination of the credit’s legitimacy incited a full-scale, heated discussion of Fiesta’s value. The festival had many loyal proponents, including thousands of spirited alumni and Hugh Roy Cullen. Bruce and Williams took on what they called the “Fiesta problem” by raising questions with the faculty about how much the carnival, and its week of spring holidays, interfered with class attendance and assignments. They also examined “its potential to damage institutional image and incipient fund-raising if its negative aspects got out of hand.”<sup>3</sup>

In the end, the administration limited the time and expenditures that could be spent on the festival and put in place academic criteria (e.g. 2.0 GPA) for students to qualify to run the event. This placed a damper on the 1959 Frontier Fiesta, and the university cancelled the 1960 event to conduct a feasibility study for the 1961 Fiesta. A poorly-reviewed musical comedy called the *Cougar Capers* attempted to replace Frontier Fiesta with a three-day run March 16-18, 1961. These events led to the end of the second run of Frontier Fiesta, which vanished for over thirty years.

In 1992, alumni, student leaders, and the University of Houston’s Athletic Department resurrected the long-lost tradition. The student-run, community-minded festival continues to celebrate the spirit of the University of Houston and the talent and leadership ability of its students. Every year the Frontier Fiesta Association awards scholarships to incoming freshman and current UH students in recognition of their academic achievement and outstanding efforts in community service.

The current run of Fiesta includes many of the features of the earlier festivals. Each spring, Fiesta volunteers still build, from the ground up, a western-themed town known as



The beard contest was a highlight of Frontier Fiesta for many years. Here a student has his beard shaved after the contest, 1950s.

Fiesta City. The festival still includes Broadway-style variety-shows put on by campus organizations, and the festival even reinstated the old favorite beard-growing competition in 2012! (Sadly, without a car for the grand prize.) However, Fiesta now includes events such as a BBQ cook-off and Bake Fiesta that differentiate it from earlier runs. Family Fun Day, founded in 1996 as “Cougar Kid’s Day,” is oriented towards UH faculty and community families and features child-centered programming and carnival activities.

In 2013, the demolition of Robertson Stadium forced the move of Fiesta City to its new location adjacent to the Campus Recreation and Wellness Center and the East Parking Garage. An effective fundraising event throughout its many years, this year’s event raised \$11,500 in scholarship funds. In the past fifteen years, Fiesta has awarded more than \$100,000 in scholarships.



A 1950s Frontier Fiesta float moves through downtown Houston, instructing the crowd, “Don’t you dare miss it!”

## THE ARCHIVAL COLLECTION

The UH Frontier Fiesta Collection (University Archives, UH Libraries Special Collections) captures the western-themed revelry surrounding Fiesta City and documents the history of Frontier Fiesta through all its iterations, from its beginnings in 1940 until today. The collection includes financial records, contracts, programs, organizational records, correspondence and memos, show scripts, newspaper clippings, film, photographs, and negatives.

Highlights of the collection include photographs featuring all aspects of the festivities, from stage performances and students posing in western costume to parade floats and the wooden structures making up the Wild West town each year. Programs from the 1940s and 1950s present the calendar of events and maps of the grounds as well as the names of event organizers and friends, board of directors, and contest winners. *The Great Bank Heist*, a black and white silent film, depicts an Old West-style bank robbery perpetrated by gunslingers who ride into town on horseback.

Especially noteworthy is Fiesta City's charter drawn up by students in 1952 and branded onto a tanned cowhide by student Betty Rich and taken to Austin for Governor Allan Shivers's signature. Student leaders Helen Gilpin, Johnny Goyen, and Jack Valenti compiled a beautifully crafted, thirty-five-page, cowhide scrapbook with color drawings and descriptive narrative that capture well the essence of Frontier Fiesta held April 19-24, 1954.

Many of these collection materials have been digitized and can be accessed through the Frontier Fiesta Digital Collection, <http://digital.lib.uh.edu/collection/p15195coll14>.



UH Chancellor and President Renu Khator participates in Family Fun Day at Frontier Fiesta, March 2013.

## THE EXHIBIT

University Archives, a part of UH Libraries' Special Collections, will display Frontier Fiesta related materials in the exhibition area on the first floor of M. D. Anderson Library, March-June 2014. Exact dates are still to be determined. Please contact University Archivist Mary Manning at [mmmanning@uh.edu](mailto:mmmanning@uh.edu) for more information.<sup>4</sup>

**Mary Manning** is the university archivist at the University of Houston Libraries' Special Collections. As its curator, she collects, preserves, and makes available archival materials that document the history of the university and its students, faculty, and staff.

# Frontier Fiesta Oral Histories

In October 2012, Charlie Sicola ('64), president of UH Atlanta Alumni Association, came to the university for homecoming and agreed to be interviewed by the Frontier Fiesta Association about the importance of Frontier Fiesta. The organization expanded the project to include all alumni interested in sharing their thoughts and stories about the long-standing Cougar tradition. In one of the first interviews, Welcome Wilson Sr. explains the value of Frontier Fiesta to students past and present:



*"Frontier Fiesta is an opportunity for students to learn—to learn organization, to learn how to meet deadlines, to learn how to be a success in life.*

*"It's an opportunity to build student spirit; and it's an on-campus activity, and we, in my view, need on-campus activities now that we have 8,000 students living on campus. I think Frontier Fiesta will grow and thrive."*

*Welcome Wilson Sr.*  
Photo courtesy of Nancy V. Clark.