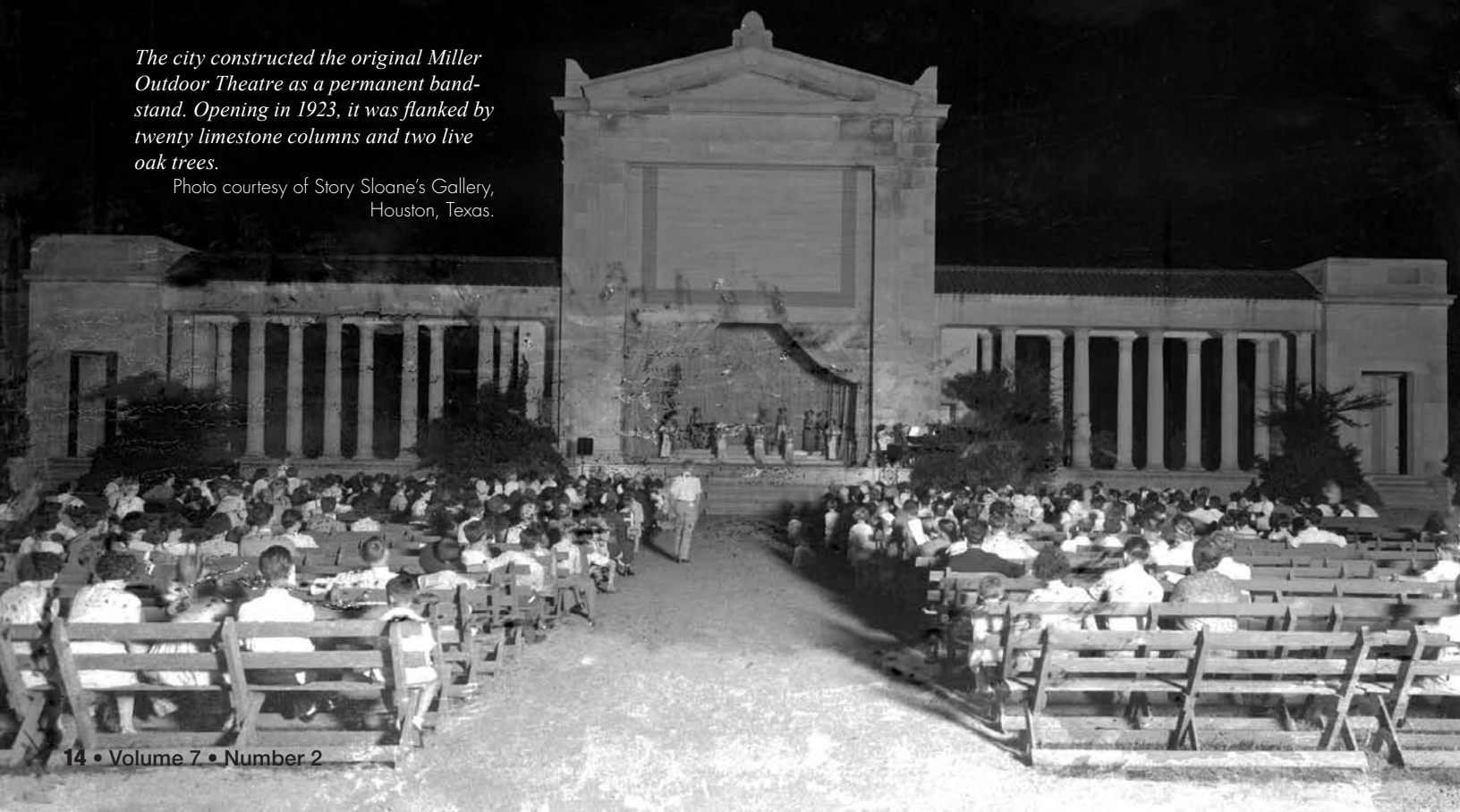
MILLER OUTDOOR THEATRE

A Uniquely Houston Experience for 87 Years

by Debbie Z. Harwell

Remember rolling down the hill at Miller Outdoor Theatre? Or taking pictures of your children giggling as they rolled down the hill? How about watching fireworks on the Fourth of July? Or spreading out your blanket and picnic in the summer breeze to watch a play under the stars with your special someone? This year marks eighty-seven years since the opening of Miller Outdoor Theatre, and throughout its long history it has stood as one of Houston's most beloved entertainment venues—one that has never gone out of style and never charged admission. In fact, it is the only proscenium theatre of its kind in the country that gives over one hundred public performances a year completely free of charge.



The city constructed the original Miller Outdoor Theatre as a permanent bandstand. Opening in 1923, it was flanked by twenty limestone columns and two live oak trees.

Photo courtesy of Story Sloane's Gallery, Houston, Texas.

In 1919, cotton broker and mining engineer Jesse Wright Miller bequeathed property to the city "for municipal purposes," but the city found that the location of the land made using it impractical. The city sold that property to Miller's sister, Alma Womack, for $50,000 and then used the funds to build the original theatre as a "permanent bandstand" on the current site in Hermann Park. The original facility designed by William Ward Walkin and built by Tom Tellepsen was a classic Doric proscenium structure with a narrow stage flanked by twenty limestone columns and two live oak trees.[1] Today, the theatre's original columns form the circular perimeter of the Mecom-Rockwell Colonnade Fountain that sits on the north side of the park, across from the Hotel ZaZa, between Fannin and San Jacinto Streets. The oaks still stand on either side of the theatre, offering visitors a shady respite from the summer heat.

The perimeter of the Mecom-Rockwell Colonnade Fountain is constructed of columns taken from the original Miller Outdoor Theatre.

Miller Memorial Theatre was dedicated on May 12, 1923. The original dedication plaque read, "To the Arts of Music, Poetry, Drama and Oratory, by which the striving spirit of man seeks to interpret the words of God. This theatre of the City of Houston is permanently dedicated." The ceremonies under the direction of the Recreation and Community Service Department headed by Corine Fonde included representatives "from practically every civic and educational organization in Houston." The pageant, "Springtime of Our Nation," involved approximately 2,500 performers and depicted the progress of the United States from its early settlement to westward expansion, and closed with a ceremony honoring those who had died in World War I. Participants included dance school students, Girl and Boy Scouts, Camp Fire Girls, "ward school children," Rice Institute students, members of the Sons of the American Revolution, Confederate Veterans, Daughters of the American Revolution, United Daughters of the Confederacy, and the U.S. Army, Navy, and Marines. Later that spring, the theatre hosted its first production, Fredric H. Cowen's cantata "The Rose Maiden," conducted by Victor Alessandro, director of city bands.[2]

The 1920s ushered in the "golden age of sports," with baseball, boxing and football proving to be extremely popular with the public and profitable for organizers. In a sign of the times before television and sports bars, Miller served as a venue for local sports fans to come and listen to radio broadcasts of the nation's most contested sporting events, such as the 1925 World Series, which ran from October 7 to October 15. The games were front page news in Houston papers and across the country. The Washington Senators, who had beaten the New York Giants the year before, returned to face the Pittsburgh Pirates. The Senators took game 1, and the Pirates game 2. During game 3 a controversy arose that lasted over fifty years when fielder Sam Rice dove into the right field stands to catch a line drive and did not come up holding the ball for several seconds. The Pirates contested the called out to no avail, and the Senators went on to win that game and game 4. The Pirates took games 5 and 6, which brought the Series down to the final game 7. The atmosphere must have been electric as the Senators jumped to an early lead behind the pitching of future Hall-of-Famer Walter Johnson, and the Pirates pitcher was pulled after just one-third of an inning. The Pirates battled back, however, winning 9-7 and making them the first team in World Series history to come back from a 3-1 deficit.[3]

On September 22, 1927, the rematch for the World Heavyweight Boxing Championship fight between Jack Dempsey and Gene Tunney drew 150,000 spectators to Chicago's Soldier Field. Dempsey had held the title since 1919 and suffered his first defeat against Tunney in 1926. Seventy-four radio stations broadcast the rematch to an estimated fifty million listeners. Cities including Boston, Washington, D.C., and Houston had public broadcasts using amplifiers. An estimated 12,000 to 15,000 people came to Miller to hear the broadcast carried locally by KPRC and billed as "the biggest event in the history of radio." Announcer Graham McNamee, who was "to radio what Caruso was to grand opera," provided the blow-by-blow account. In the seventh round Dempsey knocked down Tunney, but when Dempsey refused to go to his corner as the rules required, the referee dealt with the infraction before beginning the count. As a result of the controversial "long count," Tunney was able to get up before the referee counted to ten. Tunney went on to win the fight in ten rounds. For the thousands at Miller, they had been "present" for the momentous event.[4]

In 1938, the Houston Recreation Department developed weekly programming for civic and community groups under Fonde's direction in conjunction with music director Coralee Wood. In 1940, *Houston Post* drama critic Hubert Roussel received a letter from former Chicago resident Lewis Brown that asked why Houston could not have outdoor summer symphony concerts as had become popular in other cities. People all across the Houston area showed their support, and Roussel approached Houston Symphony Society conductor Ernst Hoffman about the possibility. Hoffman explained that, with difficult economic times and looming war news, the symphony could barely cover their regular season schedule. When Roussel reported his findings to his readers, a Houston financier and symphony support-

Cannons added a punch to Tchaikovsky's 1812 Overture *at the 2009 Fourth of July celebration.*
Photo courtesy of Leroy Gibbins.

er, N. D. Naman, donated $1,000 to cover the cost of a summer concert.[5]

The conductor promptly hired forty-five union musicians and scheduled the concert for August 21, 1941. That day the temperature reached 100°, but Houstonians were not deterred. By 7:00 p.m. roads to the park were clogged with cars, and the crowd reached an estimated 15,000 by the time the concert began. The program included the "March" and "Procession" from *Queen of Sheba* by Charles Gounod, *Wine, Woman, and Song* by Johann Strauss, *Tannhauser* "Overture" by Richard Wagner, "Dance of the Hours" from *La Gioconda* by Amilcare Ponchielli, the first movement of Franz Schubert's *Unfinished Symphony*, and *Finlandia* by Jean Sibelius. During the intermission, organizers circulated collection buckets throughout the audience to take a "free-will" offering in support of the performance. They were stunned to collect $800. Following such a positive response, Symphony Society president Walter Walne pledged continued support of the summer symphony, and a tradition was born. The city became a backer of the Summer Symphony Series in 1943 when it allocated $5,000 to initiate annual concerts. Two years later it approved a $10,000 grant for the concerts to be administered by the Parks Department; and in 1948, it began financing the performances in full, eliminating the need for collecting audience donations.[6]

In the post-World War II years, Houston continued its amazing growth. The city's population approached 600,000 and the metropolitan area reached approximately 900,000. Development began on the Texas Medical Center south of Hermann Park, and along with that expansion came the need for wider roads. The city began excavating and widening Fannin Street, and all of that dirt had to go somewhere—hence, the hill at Miller Memorial Theatre. The hill formed a "seating" area, and the incline enabled the audience to have a better view over the heads of those sitting closer to the stage. Throughout the years, an unspoken rule, which continues today, divided the seating—those who bring their lawn chairs on one side and those sitting on the ground, spreading out a blanket, on the other.

The annual Fourth of July celebration is a signature piece of the theatre and a crowd favorite. The Houston Symphony produces the show and the Miller Theatre Advisory Board provides the fireworks.
Photo courtesy of Leroy Gibbins.

As Cissy Segall-Davis, Managing Director of Miller Outdoor Theatre, explains, "Nobody mixes it up because they couldn't see as well." Many people who come would not even consider sitting in the theatre seats, but prefer the hill and the summer breeze. In 2009, the hill was raised six feet, which improved the sightlines and enabled Miller to build a permanent structure into the hill for the sound and lighting control equipment.[7] Of course, theatre seating is not the hill's only function. For over sixty years, the hill has also served as a favorite playground of children who have rolled or run down the hill at breakneck speeds, squealing and laughing all the way.

In August 1952, Hugo Koehn, the head of the city Parks and Recreation Department, reported that the city had somehow called Miller Memorial Theatre by the wrong name since its inception. Although he was unsure how the mix up had occurred, he assured the citizens that the correct name was Miller *Outdoor* Theatre.[8]

By the 1960s the city wanted a more modern venue that could accommodate expanded productions. In 1964, voters approved capital improvement bonds for construction of a new Miller Outdoor Theatre. Eugene Werlin and Associates designed the structure that was constructed of Corten steel that rusted to its characteristic redwood color. At sixty feet wide, forty-five feet deep, and twenty-six feet high at the opening, the new stage was now comparable to downtown theatres. To stave off the summer heat for performers, air conditioning could be

The crowds frequently arrive early to grab their favorite spot on the Miller hill. Photo courtesy of Leroy Gibbins.

forced up through slits in the stage. The facility seated 1,750 with room for 8,000 more on the lawn. Orange plastic seats matching those for patrons were attached upside down on the pitched-roof's ceiling, giving the theatre a rather unique appearance. These were placed there to improve the acoustics and later removed when the sound system was upgraded. Concession stands and restrooms were added, along with a small music library, green room, four dressing rooms, an orchestra pit, and office space. Bright orange and turquoise comedy and tragedy masks designed by Harry Fulcher were installed on the wall above the concession stand. The masks, intended to portray a unification of the traditional themes of theatre with the contemporary architecture, instead created a controversy when a vocal few, who thought the masks were ugly, sent their criticisms to the *Houston Chronicle*. The structure won several awards including: the American Iron and Steel Institute's Biannual Award, the American Institute of Steel Construction's Award for Excellence, and the James E. Lincoln Arc Welding Foundation Award.[9]

The bright orange and turquoise comedy and tragedy masks, a traditional symbol of theatre, ignited controversy among local residents when they were installed on the new structure that opened in 1968. Photo courtesy of Industrial Photography of Houston.

The new theatre opened on Sunday, September 1, 1968, with a performance by seventy-six members of the Houston Symphony conducted by A. Clyde Roller. The *Houston Chronicle* described the scene: "The red molded seats were filled by early comers. Other listeners languished on the pitched greensward . . . some on blankets, hundreds on campchairs. Dogs frolicked, small children wriggled on their blankets, lovers bundled, and the townsfolk of all ages and conditions and phenomena of dress arrived to listen and look." The program included "Overture" from *Russian Easter* by Nikoli Rimsky-Korsakov, *Hora Stacato* by Grigoras Sinicu arranged by Jascha Heifetz, and *Polovetsian Dances* by Alexander Borodin. The popular Houston violinist, Fredell Lack, drew a standing ovation for her performance of Felix Mendelssohn's *Violin Concerto in E Minor.* The evening closed with Mayor Louie Welch coming on stage to conduct John Philip Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever." The newspaper's review indicated that no amplification of the instruments was necessary and that the sound quality was a "spectacular improvement" over the old theatre.[10]

On September 15, 1968, Miller hosted *Bells are Ringing*, the first production of Theatre Under The Stars (TUTS), forging a relationship that has brought quality entertainment to generations of theatre-loving Houstonians. Founded by Frank M. Young, TUTS chose its name to reflect the outdoor venue. The Saturday performance was rained out, but the show went on the next night to rave reviews that compared it to the quality of anything seen on New York stages. In 1972, TUTS' production of *South Pacific* had a twenty-seven-foot lagoon in the orchestra pit with an eighteen-foot waterfall. An estimated crowd of 25,000 attended the show, many sitting on the back side of the hill where they could hear, but not see, the performance. Although TUTS began doing indoor performances that year, and has now moved to the Hobby Center for the Performing Arts, it contin-

The Theatre celebrated Houston's Hispanic heritage with an Ambassadors International Ballet Folklorico program showcasing the beauty and traditions of Mexico with lively mariachi music and colorful folk dance performances.

Photo courtesy of Barrera Photography.

Today many programs at Miller are intended to educate as well as entertain. The Houston Symphony's instrument "petting zoo" gives children the opportunity to try out the instruments first-hand—no doubt inspiring many budding musicians.

Photo courtesy of Houston Symphony.

ues to offer performances at Miller every summer. TUTS holds the all-time record for attendance at the outdoor theatre with 91,000 coming to see its ten performances of *Grease* in 1999.[11]

The annual Shakespeare Festival became another long-standing tradition. Conceived by Sidney Berger, former director of the University of Houston's School of Theatre, the Houston Shakespeare Festival opened at Miller on August 13, 1975, with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Taming of the Shrew*—the first spoken dramatic presentations at the theatre. The attendance exceeded expectations and continued to grow in successive seasons. In 2009, the Festival included five performances of *Twelfth Night* and four of *Pericles*, with one performance of each show being captioned for the hearing impaired (something Miller does for many of its performances throughout the season).[12]

Two sculptures were added to the theatre grounds in the 1970s. *Atropos Key* sits at the top of Miller hill. According to Greek mythology, Atropos and her sisters Clothos and Lachesis controlled human destiny. Created by Hanna Stewart, the sculpture is a polished, tool-surface, cast bronze piece mounted on a concrete base covered with black slate. Patricia S. Woodard donated it to the city on August 24, 1972. Outside the stage door stands a cast bronze statue of a young boy with arms outstretched, holding an empty bowl with a spoon. Created by Houstonian Tracey Gutherie at the request of TUTS guild member Pamela Martens, it depicts the main character in the musical *Oliver!* based on Charles Dickens' novel *Oliver Twist*. In the story, the orphaned Oliver goes to the workhouse master, on behalf of a group of hungry boys, and utters the now-famous line, "Please, sir, I want some more." In keeping with that thought, the statue was dedicated on November 11, 1976, as a "continuing plea to city fathers for support for free shows at Miller Theatre."[13]

Throughout the theatre's history and the many changes in political leadership, the city has been forthcoming with funding. The biggest boost came in 1978 when the city created the Cultural Arts Council of Houston to allocate a small slice of the

city's hotel occupancy taxes for the arts with a specified portion of those funds dedicated to programming at Miller. Segall-Davis explains what that means to the city, "This particular facility is one-of-a-kind. Nobody else in the country offers the type of programming we do at Miller Outdoor Theatre, always presented free of charge. Nobody." She adds that people ask, "How do you do that?" And she replies, "the answer is we have a city that invests in this theatre and wants to make it accessible to everyone, no matter what their financial condition, their social standing, or their cultural background."[14]

The Miller Theatre Advisory Board receives the occupancy tax funds that it then grants out to the performing organizations, which have to match those funds with at least fifty percent contributed income and the balance through in-kind services to present the show at no charge to the public. The result is a successful public-private partnership. Some of the production partners this past year included Ambassadors International Ballet Foklorico, Houston Grand Opera, Houston Metropolitan Dance Company, Houston Ballet, Dance of Asian America, Society for the Performing Arts, Houston Institute for Culture, Ensemble Theatre, Kaminari Taiko of Houston, and Institute for Hispanic Culture. About five years ago, the board began raising additional funds to present national and international attractions to augment the offerings of the local companies. This has included such performances as the Golden Dragon Acrobats from China, the Nrityagram Dance Ensemble from Southern India, African Footprint from South Africa, the Soweto Gospel Choir, JIGU! Thunder Drums of China, LUMA, Cirque Mechanics: Bird House Factory, and many more.[15]

Diversity has become a mainstay of Miller programming. Segall-Davis points out, "This place speaks to what Houston is all about." Because of the diversity in programming, spectators from a variety of cultural backgrounds come and enjoy the same show. She said, "They all come together, and they enjoy the same performance. And it may not be one from their particular cultural background, but they understand it, they appreciate it, and they take something away." If the theatre has entertained, enlightened, or educated the audience in some way, then Segall-Davis feels that the Miller Theatre Advisory Board has done its job—providing the most diverse, highest-quality series of per-

The 13th Annual Grand Taiko Festival entertained audiences with a Japanese Taiko drumming concert, which included the most powerful drum in America, combined with authentic Japanese classical dancing and aerial artists. Produced by Kaminari Taiko of Houston, Inc.

Photo courtesy of Kaminari Taiko of Houston.

A statue of Oliver Twist stands as a reminder to civic leaders of the importance of continuing to fund Miller Outdoor Theatre.

Young Audiences of Houston presented Kuumba House in "Bana Ba Bapala," which means "children at play." The program depicts a typical Saturday for a South African child through work songs, lullabies, children's songs, and travel songs.

Photo courtesy of Young Audiences of Houston.

Cirque Mechanics' Birdhouse Factory, inspired by Diego Rivera's Detroit Industry *murals, the illustrations of Rube Goldberg, and Charlie Chaplin's* Modern Times*, creates a factory workshop where the machines are circus props, and the assembly-line workers are acrobats.*

Photo courtesy of Miller Outdoor Theatre.

formances possible with this most "extraordinary gift" from the city of Houston to its residents and visitors.[16]

In 1996, a $6 million expansion and renovation funded by the City of Houston, Friends of Hermann Park, and the Miller Theatre Advisory Board replaced siding, added restrooms, a concessions facility, office space, and a small stage on the east side of the theatre. Other changes made the facility more accessible to visitors with disabilities. These modifications made it possible to accommodate 6,000 people comfortably, although it is not uncommon to draw thousands more. More recently, adding stops for Metro and the Hermann Park train have made getting to the theatre easier. In the last three years, an additional $3.9 million in refurbishments and upgrades have further enhanced the audience experience.[17]

When people are asked why they come to Miller Outdoor Theatre (besides the fact that it is free), they give a litany of reasons. One woman sitting on the hill responded that she has an autistic child who needs to get up and move around—something that is true for most any child. At Miller children can get up without disturbing anyone, which they could never do in a traditional theatre. A young couple explained that they come for their children to be exposed to the varied performances, which they would not have access to otherwise. A couple with their little picnic table, food, and wine explained that they were simply friends who enjoyed coming to the shows together. Still another couple brought friends visiting from Vietnam to see an opera. Surprisingly, they echoed the same sentiment as another couple from New York, "We don't get to see anything like this." Some return because they came to Miller on their first date; others come because their parents brought them to the theatre from the time they were old enough to remember. Whatever their reason for coming, they are experiencing a long-standing Houston tradition.[18]

Visit www.milleroutdoortheatre.com for an event schedule.

Debbie Z. Harwell is a Ph.D. student in history at the University of Houston and managing editor of *Houston History*.

The Nrityagram Dance Ensemble from Southern India transported viewers to the enchanted worlds of magic and spirituality with Odissi, India's oldest classical dance form.
Photo courtesy of Miller Outdoor Theatre.

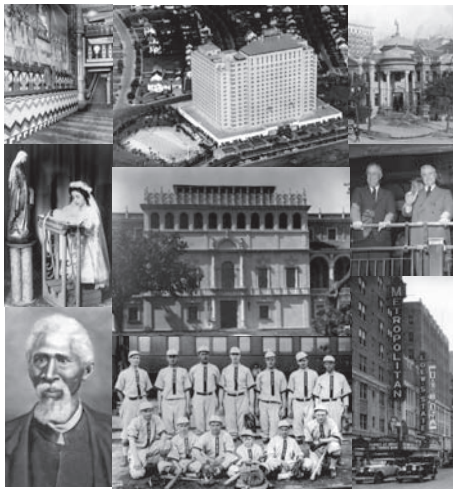
In Search of Houston's History

Order your copy of the award-winning documentary that explores the archival collections of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, located in Houston Public Library's historic Julia Ideson Building.

The program is a nostalgic look at some of Houston's most colorful events and historiclandmarks. From Union Station to the Rice Hotel, Roy Rogers at the rodeo in Sam Houston Coliseum, the grand opening of the Shamrock Hotel, the elaborate downtown movie palaces, the old City Auditorium and Buff Stadium are just some examples of what you'll see.

To order your DVD of "In Search of Houston's History," produced by the Friends of the Texas Room, clip and mail this form. Mail with your check, payable to Friends of the Texas Room, to:
Friends of the Texas Room
P. O. Box 27827
Houston, Texas 77227-7827

Cost for each DVD is $30, which includes shipping and handling. Proceeds benefit the Houston Metropolitan Research Center and the archival collections of the Houston Public Library



Name _____

Address _____

_____

City _____ State_____Zip Code_____

Phone _____ E-mail_____

Quantity @ $30 each_____ Total amount enclosed_____