

The Demolition of the Shamrock Hilton Hotel: Motivation for a Preservation Culture

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It is possible the Shamrock Hilton Hotel meant more to Houston than Houstonians realized. From its completion in 1949 until its destruction in 1987, this imposing structure at the intersection of South Main and Holcombe dominated the southern end of the city. Big and bold, it symbolized the coming of age of Houston in the post-World War II era of growth and prosperity, an era when oil dominated the economic landscape and independent oilmen shaped the city's development. Ironically, its loss forced some Houstonians to begin to question the values and the political process that laid waste to landmark buildings in the name of progress, with little regard for their social or historical significance. The lack of any effective means to challenge the process of development that brought down the Shamrock Hilton outraged many observers, encouraging them to come together and try to find ways to protect historic structures. In this sense, the destruction of the hotel became a symbol of the need for a stronger preservation ethic backed by law in Houston.

GLENN MCCARTHY: THE MAN BEHIND THE SHAMROCK

Glenn H. McCarthy was an independent oilman who focused his money and attention on civic pride. Wanting to develop his city into a world class venue for visitors, commerce, and culture, he envisioned a retail and amusement cultural center anchored by an upscale hotel, a larger airport, and a multi-purpose sports arena outside of the central business district.¹ The Shamrock was the only part of this vision that he realized.

McCarthy was born in Beaumont, Texas, on Christmas day, 1907. His childhood memories included the wells at the nearby Spindletop oil field, but his family eventually moved to Houston. McCarthy went to San Jacinto High School in Houston. He attended Texas A&M, Allen Academy, and Rice Institute² before dropping out of college to marry Faustine Lee, daughter of millionaire oilman W. E. Lee.



Glenn H. McCarthy with Michael T. Halbouty, 1928-29. Photo courtesy of The Sloane Collection.

Glenn and Faustine had four daughters and one son. After running a gas station and dry cleaning businesses, McCarthy ventured into oil in the 1930s, acquiring the materials necessary to drill for oil by hook and by crook.³ He made his first million at the age of 26, and struck oil “thirty-eight times between 1932 and 1942.”⁴ McCarthy was a hard-working, hard-living, hard-dealing, hard-talking man of his time.

After World War II, he recognized the direction the oil business was headed as the major, international conglomerates and government regulation slowly marginalized the independent oil companies.⁵ In response McCarthy began to diversify his business interests. He invested in newspapers, a radio station, publishing, and a movie production company, two banks, several properties, and oil-related companies.⁶ His most famous investment was the Shamrock Hotel. The Shamrock was the first phase of his proposed McCarthy Center, a retail, entertainment and recreational center similar to today's Galleria. McCarthy also built a \$700,000 home in Braeswood in 1950, however, by 1952 he was virtually bankrupt.⁷

Although McCarthy maintained that the Shamrock always showed a profit, he cited failures in his other ventures as the cause of his financial difficulties in the 1950s.⁸ McCarthy claimed that his newspapers constituted a big financial drain, the radio station lost ground as it competed with the new television stations in town, his chemical plant experienced difficulties, and his oil income was cut in half due to the prorationing of oil production.⁹ McCarthy lost or sold off most of his properties, yet managed to live a comfortable, but substantially quieter life until his death in 1988.



Glenn McCarthy gets King Capon award for 1958. Photo: The Houston Chronicle

THE SPECTACULAR RISE AND SUBSEQUENT DECLINE OF THE SHAMROCK

The Shamrock Hotel was a comet on the Houston landscape; it shined brightly in its heyday, but trailed off into the mist all too soon. A factor in the fate of the hotel was undoubtedly its location. McCarthy said he chose the location for his McCarthy Center because of “foresight.”¹⁰ He saw that the city was developing to the south and southwest, and he recognized that new freeways would encourage decentralization and suburbanization in Houston.

In 1949 the city of Houston had begun to plan its freeway system through the city. U.S. Highway 59 was scheduled to



Shamrock Hotel, photo courtesy Metropolitan Research Center.

follow Main Street through the city and south where it turns into State Highway 90 as illustrated in the Houston Freeway Planning Map for 1949.¹¹

Had the freeway taken this route, McCarthy's proposed commercial development along South Main and Bellaire might have prospered. He might have been able to attract a major anchor retailer such as Saks Fifth Avenue.¹²

Ultimately, decentralization did take place, despite the resistance of many businessmen devoted to the continued development of downtown, and McCarthy led the way. McCarthy had bought a 4,000-acre tract of land, Westmoreland Farms, in the 1940s. In 1953 he proposed to develop it in partnership with the city as Houston's intercontinental airport.¹³ According to McCarthy, Oscar Holcombe, the mayor at the time, rejected the southwestern location for the airport, as did Jesse Jones, the most prominent of the downtown Houston business leaders.¹⁴

In 1954, as McCarthy tried to recover from his financial difficulties, he sold the land to Frank Sharp. Sharp, in turn, donated right-of-way through the land to the city to build the Southwest Freeway. Consequently, U.S. 59 turned due west as it emerged from downtown and turned southwest just past the proposed Loop 610, completely bypassing McCarthy's Shamrock Hotel and diverting the subsequent development along the highway to the southwest. Frank Sharp developed the Sharpstown residential area and the retail mall along the Southwest Freeway corridor.¹⁵

Although McCarthy lacked the political clout within the city of Houston that was needed to push through his grand plans for the McCarthy Center, one part of the proposed center, the Shamrock Hotel, moved forward. Construction on the hotel began in 1946, and \$21.5 million later, the Shamrock opened on March 17, 1949.¹⁶ This was a world-class hotel, plush, extravagant, and lavish.¹⁷ The eighteen-story building boasted a 5,000-square-foot lobby adorned with Bolivian mahogany paneling and Art Deco trim. The color scheme throughout the hotel consisted of sixty-three shades of green, a tribute to McCarthy's Irish lineage. The hotel's 1,100 rooms had air conditioning, and each had a television, push-button radios and abstract art works. One third of the rooms had kitchenettes. These were extraordinary amenities for 1949. Surrounding the Shamrock was an elaborately landscaped garden and terrace. The hotel's pool measured 165 by 142 feet, with a three-story diving platform accessible by an open spiral staircase. The pool was large enough to accommodate ski exhibitions. Adjacent to the Shamrock was a five-story facility that housed the 1,000-car garage and 25,000-square-foot convention hall. The hotel's opulence attracted Hollywood royalty and heads of state and patrons from all walks of life from around the world.¹⁸

The star-studded, one-million dollar grand opening of the Shamrock Hotel was covered by every media outlet at the time. McCarthy brought in 150 to 175 stars. The



Shamrock Hotel, photo courtesy of The Sloane Collection.

master of ceremonies for the evening was actor Pat O'Brien, and Dorothy Lamour's radio show broadcast was part of the entertainment for the party. The aspect of the grand opening that endeared the hotel to Houston was McCarthy's inclusiveness. Three thousand guests (including the Hollywood crowd) were invited to the party in the hotel and some 50,000 Houstonians showed up to watch the festivities. The evening evidently became so rowdy that an expletive was heard on the Lamour broadcast and the network cancelled the rest of the show.¹⁹ The local newspapers dripped with stories about the stars, McCarthy, the hotel and anything related to it. Congratulatory ads took up entire pages, and regular ads identified their product with the hotel, capitalizing upon the event.²⁰ The Shamrock's grand opening was one of its finest hours.

Despite being famous for catering to the rich and famous and having been dubbed the "Houston Riviera," the Shamrock nonetheless became an integral part of the local community. This author recalls parking near the Lanai Wing, a section of bungalow-style motel suites, and walking into the pool area as if a registered guest to enjoy a summer afternoon swim. Local celebrations, such as Easter egg hunts and St. Patrick Day parties, were annual events. Weddings, anniversaries, bar and bat mitzvahs and high school reunions were held at the Shamrock Hilton. The hotel organized sports clubs that allowed area residents to utilize the Olympic-size pool and tennis courts for a nominal fee. The Shamrock Hilton in essence became a kind of civic center for the neighborhood.²¹ The memories generated over the thirty-plus years of its existence made the Shamrock Hilton an important asset to Houston. But the bottom line determined its fate.

Although McCarthy maintained that the hotel was always profitable, his personal fortunes turned, and he lost the hotel in 1954 when he defaulted on a \$34 million loan to McCarthy Oil and Gas from Equitable. Hilton Hotels assumed control of the hotel in November,²² allowing McCarthy to remain the head of the hotel at a salary of

\$100,000 a year. But he quickly became unhappy with his lack of control, and he sold his interests in the hotel to the Hilton Corporation in 1955 and walked away.²³ The hotel remained a Hilton property until the company donated the building and land to the Texas Medical Center in 1985.²⁴

DEMOLITION SPARKS A PRESERVATIONIST RESPONSE

Under Hilton management for thirty years, the Shamrock Hilton became a mainstay in the community, but the location, although promising during the 1950s, became its ultimate nemesis. Houston was growing and annexing land and population throughout the 1950s and 1960s. Suburbs and commercial centers developed along the growing highway system. The Texas Medical Center continued to expand near the Shamrock Hilton, but other businesses shied away from the area. Other hotels sprung up along the new highway corridors, especially near the Domed Stadium, which was built in the 1960s on the South Loop, and in the Galleria area near the West Loop in the 1970s. Although the Shamrock Hilton remained a favorite host for conventions, its room occupancy dropped "from 74 percent in 1956 to 52 percent in 1962."²⁵ Ultimately, the Shamrock Hilton declined due to its isolation from the central business district, the lack of development down the South Main corridor, and competition from the outlying hotels.

The oil bust of the 1980s dealt another blow to the Shamrock. In 1985 the hotel's occupancy rate was down to 48 percent. That downturn precipitated the Hilton's decision to donate the Shamrock Hilton to the Texas Medical Center (TMC) in 1985.²⁶ According to the *The Houston Chronicle*, the TMC conducted studies that concluded that renovation of the Shamrock Hilton was not a financially sound option. Converting the hotel into a housing complex would cost \$43 to \$65 million, and conversion into a medical facility such as a hospital would reach \$102 million.²⁷ By March of 1986, the fate of the hotel was unsure, but demolition seemed likely.

In response to this situation, Houstonians formed a grassroots movement to save the hotel. Dr. Don Speck founded

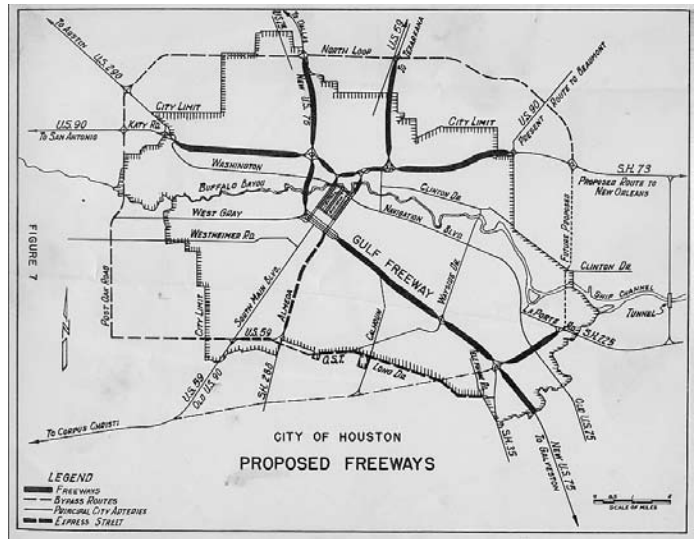
the *Save the Shamrock* committee and organized a human ring parade around the hotel on the thirty-eighth anniversary of the grand opening. Seventy-nine-year-old Glenn McCarthy joined the protest saying, “I want to see it used. It’s a silly thing to tear it down.” Many of the 3,000 participants had personal ties to the hotel, ranging from having spent their honeymoon there to attending their senior prom in the hotel’s ballroom. Beyond such sentimentality, the Shamrock undoubtedly had historic value. The hotel had hosted six United States presidents and numerous foreign dignitaries.²⁸

Houston had a record, however, of tearing down the old and the not-so-old and replacing them with the even-newer. There was little sense of history in the relatively young city. Consequently, “there was no political will or support for saving it [the Shamrock Hilton],” observed Minnette Boesel, who was president of the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance (GHPA) in 1986. “And, of course, no preservation laws at the time.”²⁹ Public policy governing historic preservation was nonexistent in Houston in 1986; consequently there was no legal recourse in place to protect the Shamrock Hilton.³⁰ The GHPA lobbied the Texas Medical Center in an effort to change its mind. The TMC’s answer echoed earlier reports on the infeasibility of renovation and the impracticability of maintaining the building. “The rationale was that it was full of asbestos,” said Boesel, “and too expensive to renovate.”³¹ GHPA Executive Director Ramona Davis felt that the failure at the time was the lack of vision on the part of the administration of the TMC.³² What Houston needed was a change of vision.

The Shamrock Hilton officially closed on June 30, 1986.³³ TMC announced in December of 1986 that the hotel would be demolished.³⁴ The contents and appointments of the hotel were auctioned off the next spring to Houstonians, who relished the thought of owning a piece of the hotel, a piece of Houston’s history. On May 31, 1987, the first doomed sections of the Shamrock fell under the wrecking ball. After the demolition uncovered the cornerstone, the stone and the contents of the copper box behind it were given to Glenn McCarthy.³⁵ The next year, eighteen months after the wrecking ball began to swing, McCarthy died at a Houston nursing home. He passed away on December 26, 1988, one day after his 81st birthday.³⁶ Granted, McCarthy was 81 years old, but many in the media at the time felt that the razing of his beloved hotel broke the oilman’s heart, even though he had lost it over thirty years earlier.

The loss of the Shamrock Hilton was the catalyst for change in the cultural mindset of the city. Boesel felt that the efforts that surrounded the Shamrock and the *Save the Shamrock* committee were the beginnings of preservation activity in Houston. Ramona Davis noted that membership in the GHPA has increased dramatically in the last decade, citing that modern technology made communication easier and more effective.

In the years since the demolition of the Shamrock, change has occurred. The City of Houston adopted a Historic Preservation Ordinance in 1995, which “recognizes and protects the city’s historic sites, many of which are in a five-mile radius of downtown.”³⁷ The city also created the Houston Architectural and Historical Commission so that there would be an official entity charged with reviewing any



Houston Freeway Planning Map, 1949, Historic Houston Freeway Planning Maps (Texas Freeway.com)

demolition or alteration proposals for historic structures. After a 90-day waiting period, however, even if the Houston Architectural and Historical Commission disapproved, a property owner was and is free to do as he wishes with his property.³⁸ In 2006, City Council approved tax incentives for protected landmarks in an effort to support the need for prudent preservation.³⁹ In April 2007, the 1995 ordinance was given a little punch as the City Council approved measures to designate neighborhoods as historic districts, strengthening preservation efforts.⁴⁰

Articles in the *The Houston Chronicle* that discussed the preservation measures taken in 2007 credited the loss of the Shamrock as the pivotal moment that galvanized Houston’s preservation movement: “Ironically, the 1987 demolition of the legendary Shamrock Hotel, symbol of Houston’s unbridled energy and flash, might have occasioned Houstonians’ first significant preservationist stirrings. Since then, many buildings worth saving have disappeared, often in the dead of night, with no legal avenues available to save them.”⁴¹ According to Ramona Davis, ultimately it is up to the citizens of Houston to save their historical heritage. While there are now protections in place, historical sites are by no means safe. Houston’s preservation ordinance allows a property owner to request landmark designation from the Houston Archeological and Historical Commission, but the fate, positive or negative, of any given property is still in the hands of the owner.⁴²

In 1987 there were no such incentives, options, or legal recourses in place to save the Shamrock Hilton. The TMC chose to demolish the hotel without regard for civic sentimentality or its historical significance; it was strictly a fiscal decision. The land where the hotel, its gardens and pool once were became a surface parking lot for the TMC. The acreage has experienced some development since the 1980s. In 1990 The TMC announced plans for a park to be located in the triangular area on the southwest corner of South Main and Holcombe Boulevard. The 1.2-acre Gus S. and Lyndall F. Wortham Park, dedicated in September, 1991, was designed by John Burgee Architects of New York City, the same firm that designed the Water Wall fountain next to the Williams Tower near the Galleria. The centerpiece for the



Photographer Ed Bourdon takes a picture of the Shamrock Hotel's demolition with the same camera he used to photograph the opening of the hotel in 1949. Photo courtesy Metropolitan Research Center.

park consists of a 650-foot water pool and twenty-three water columns, each progressively taller than the next. Funding for the park came from a \$2.5 million grant from the Wortham foundation, as well as donations from three other groups.⁴³ Although the exact costs of the park and fountains and the demolition of the Shamrock have not been disclosed, the combination of the two would have been far less than the proposed cost of renovating the hotel, which at the low end was \$45 million.⁴⁴ Therefore, according to Bob Stott, Executive Vice President for Planning and Development for the TMC, "It was the only decision possible."⁴⁵

In 1991 Texas A&M built the Institute of Biosciences and Technology on the Shamrock acreage. The eleven-story building faces Holcombe and is next to the Wortham Park. The building is a teaching and research facility for the growing biosciences and biotechnology interests in the Texas Medical Center. A&M also has a priority option on the "M" parking lot that will be built on the property opposite the IBT building across from Wortham Park.⁴⁶

Two elements of the Shamrock complex left after the hotel's demolition, the five-story garage and the convention facility, were preserved and remain intact today. According to Stott, both the garage and the Edwin Hornberger Conference Center are in excellent condition. The conference center is available for not-for-profit use only, and is used consistently by Medical Center institutions.⁴⁷

The basement of the garage houses the Texas Medical Center Facilities Operations and Maintenance offices for the entire TMC campus. The structural integrity of the garage was sound enough for the first floor to be the staging area for Federal Emergency Management Agency and for TMC ride-

out teams as part of the Emergency Preparedness activities during Tropical Storm Allison and Hurricane Rita. Currently the University of Houston system occupies the first and second floors.⁴⁸

A few changes are in store for the Shamrock acreage and the current buildings. While the surface parking that currently exists will remain in the foreseeable future, the conference center will be demolished when the Texas Medical Center adds three floors to the parking garage. The building will be renamed the Paul G. Bell Building.⁴⁹ Eventually other medical center institutions may develop facilities on the property, but there are no plans other than the Bell Building at this point.⁵⁰ The TMC is expected to grow considerably over the next six years, reaching 40 million gross square feet of utilized space. Currently the TMC occupies 28.3 million gross square feet.⁵¹

Other than the parking garage, few traces remain of the Shamrock Hilton Hotel. There are no plaques, markers, statues, or monuments to mark its existence at its original location. The only accoutrements from the hotel still in the possession of the Texas Medical Center are the fixtures from the grand ballroom. A piece of the wall of the Shamrock swimming pool is imbedded in the crosswalk path on the northwest corner of Market Square Park in downtown Houston. Minnette Boesel said that it is part of a collection that includes "other architectural shards meant to remind Houstonians that we are losing our heritage."⁵²

In reflecting on her experience at the Greater Houston Preservation Alliance, Ramona Davis concludes that the saving of buildings, not their loss, has more influence on public awareness: "Generally, buildings, houses and neighborhoods that are saved have a much stronger influence on the public's perception of the value of historic preservation than anything that is lost. Losses are easily forgotten. We focus on the success stories because they continue to remind the public of the value of historic buildings."⁵³ But it is not only the saves that the public remembers, nor only the preserved landmarks that instill a sense of historical pride in a community. Houston is finally gaining a sense of self, and Houstonians, natives and transplants, are developing a sense of heritage. The loss of so much of Houston's historical fabric helped inspire this change in the city's culture. Such losses stir the blood, making the public angry enough to be moved into action. The loss of the Shamrock Hotel was one early inspiration for the public's and the city government's interest in preserving the physical embodiments of our past. It helped Houston to begin to consider creating the political and legal framework necessary to protect its history. The Shamrock's loss shocked Houstonians into looking harder at the value of historic buildings, encouraging the emergence of a stronger preservation movement in the city.

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