

Recalling Houston's Early Days and Its Oilmen:

A Conversation with Jane Blaffer Owen and Elizabeth Gregory, Joe Pratt, and Melissa Keane

Jane Blaffer Owen, an arts patron, social activist, and preservationist, was the daughter of Robert Lee Blaffer, one of the founders of Humble Oil & Refining Company (now ExxonMobil), and the granddaughter of William T. Campbell, who established the The Texas Company, which became Texaco. She was born on April 18, 1915, and grew up in the family home at 6 Sunset Boulevard in Houston. She attended the Kinkaid School, and graduated from the Ethel Walker School in Simsbury, Connecticut. She studied at Bryn Mawr College and Union Theological Seminary. In 1941, she married Kenneth Owen, a descendant of New Harmony Utopian Society founder Robert Owen.

Recognized for her philanthropy in both Houston, Texas, and New Harmony, Indiana, Blaffer Owen was a life-long supporter of the University of Houston's Blaffer Art Museum and a patron of the Moores School of Music and College of Architecture. She received many awards and honorary degrees over the years. In 2009, Jane Blaffer Owen achieved the highest honor given by the National Trust for Historic Preservation, the Crowninshield Award. Although dividing her time between Houston and New Harmony, a historic town founded by her father-in-law as a utopian community, Blaffer Owen served as the first president of Allied Arts Council, as an early organizer of the Seamen's Center, as a trustee of the C. G. Jung Education Center, and as a board member of the Sarah Campbell Blaffer Foundation—demonstrating her community activism in the Bayou City. Jane Blaffer Owen died on June 21, 2010, at the age of ninety-five.¹

Jane Blaffer Owen's reflections that follow are derived from two oral histories. The first was conducted by Joe Pratt and Elizabeth Gregory of the University of Houston on May 3, 2006, and the second by Melissa Keane for the Bill White City of Houston Oral History Project on March 27, 2008. We have attributed quotations to their respective interviews in the endnotes.

Early Life: Reflections on Houston

If you can believe it, Bissonnett was a series of farms with cows and horses on those farms. Where the art museum now stands was a field of blackberries and buttercups.... J. S. Cullinan, bless his heart, developed Shadyside as one of the early residential sections, and it was far out ... It seemed remote. Mother ... was a great believer in candle light in the evening. Our house was described by some friends abroad as being so remote in the country that electricity had not yet reached [it.] ... When Daddy and Mommy were married, Will Hogg gave them a cow. Not many people give cows for wedding gifts, but Will Hogg did. They called it Wedding Bells, and he was always belled. At Shadyside, there were extra lots. As the houses were built, there would be less lots until finally—Wedding Bells the 7th because we kept having bells, wedding bells ringing all the time, one after another—Daddy came home one night and said, "Sadie, my dear, the last lot has been sold for a house. There will be no pasture for Wedding Bells, therefore, we will just have to



As a young girl, Jane Blaffer Owen appreciated the rural nature of Houston prior to the growth of the city. As an adult, she transferred this appreciation into preserving New Harmony, Indiana, a utopian community founded by her father-in-law.

Photo from the University of Houston People Collection, courtesy of UH Digital Library, Special Collections, M. D. Anderson Library, University of Houston.

give her up.” It was a very sad day for the Bluffers when we couldn’t have our fresh milk at Shadyside....

[It] was a great Sunday afternoon when daddy would take us for a ride on the trolley car on Bellaire Boulevard. That was remote. There was a wonderful conductor that always looked for us—a lovely man.... There was a funny little shack of a store called the Owl on Main Street across from the main entrance of Rice. If my sisters and brother and I finished our homework early enough, Daddy would take us for a walk to the Owl to have an ice cream cone. But it supplied the students with their snacks. That has long since gone.

[In the 1920s,] Buffalo Speedway was a buffalo trail and a wonderful Saturday would be when my father and I would drive to Green Pastures, which is where the Container Store now sits. Green Pastures was a lovely polo field, Houston’s polo club. Then an attorney for the Gulf Oil Company called John Green, a lovely citizen, and his wife, they bought it for their horses and the horses that belonged to their friends. So, daddy and I kept our horses [Nellie and Prince] on Green Pastures and would park our car there and ride down Buffalo Speedway, which was a trail, to Mother’s house for lunch. It took us three or four hours to do that, and we really felt [like] pioneers. Then, we’d of course pop back to Green Pastures on the corner of Westheimer and Post Oak.²

The Blaffer home on Sunset Boulevard stood across the street from the entrance to Rice Institute, and Owen enjoyed visiting the grounds.

I used to take my baby carriage and wheel it down that avenue of oak trees leading to [Rice’s] Lovett Hall. On the way, I would pass these little frogs in wire cages, and I learned, to my chagrin, that they were destined for dissection in the chemistry and biology laboratories. Now today, I imagine they still experiment with frogs, but they are not anywhere to be seen....

No traffic. There were islands of trees in the middle of the street. We were the second house. J. S. Cullinan built the first house at Shadyside, a large red brick house ... There were many pastures for mother and daddy’s cows to graze. We would hear the [cow] bells come in at night and the cow bells going out in the morning. It was very rural.... The Warwick Hotel had not been built....

Mrs. Hobby tore down that beautiful Cullinan house. It should have been part of the museum.... It looked like an old English Manor house. We all loved Mr. Cullinan because, first of all, he was so handsome. He was a very tall Irishman but thick white hair, a mustache ... My sisters and I would compete as to who was to pick a bunch of violets to take to Uncle Joe for his birthday. He was quite a figure.³

We all knew each other intimately in Shadyside, and also on Lovett Boulevard and Courtland Place. What happened to them good or bad, we’d know right away. It was more of a community.⁴

In those days, people had large houses; they... [had] thick

hedges or covered them with fig ivy. Mommy and Daddy said anyone that couldn’t afford a big house would not look enviously at you.... You could hardly see our house. While I applaud the great advances in the arts and in the Medical Center, which is probably the most impressive, finest one in the country—very proud of that—we have lost a great deal. People now are cutting down their trees in front of their mega houses so people can see how rich they are. That wasn’t the Houston I was growing up in. In Houston, people who had wealth, they were modest about it, and they did not show off their houses.

Daddy called River Oaks, even in the days when he was still with us, “a light bulb contest.” It is even more so now. People look like nightclubs, their houses.... See, no zoning. Anyone can do anything. That is the Wild West. One man, one horse. If I want to have my leaf blower all day long, I can jolly well have it all day long. And Sundays, too.

Of course in those days, we could all have our private cooks. We didn’t. Mother thought only older people had to cater their dinner party because there were enough wonderful black people to go around. We did not think of them as servants—they were part of the family. If I kept having babies, they would be in the kitchen. It was the southern way of life....

Along the golden circle of Post Oak Boulevard, there was nothing but little truck farms. Mexicans growing vegetables. We had a Mexican gardener called Angelo who lived on that golden circle and sometimes bought us vegetables. [Houston changed] at a run. At a gallop.... It happened. Gallop is the right word. I can hear hoof beats, galloping hoof beats. My chief desire became to live in the country. When I married my husband in 1941, he took me to this little village, [New Harmony,] and it became the focus of my life for sixty-seven years....

Early Oil Men

Houston has always had the two elements: the Wild West and the South. My father’s partner for thirty years, Will Farish, the firm was called Blaffer and Farish before they became part of Humble [Oil & Refining Company]. Their families had both been ruined in the Civil War, but they brought their culture with them. Then, there was the Wild West element ... that still exists here.⁶

Daddy and Mommy never wanted the control of Humble Company to be in the East. In fact, Mother held out some shares that she would not give up. Daddy wanted the control to be here, not in New York. Speaking of companies, my grandmother Campbell was the first lady stockholder of the Texas Company because her husband died before the other partners; and she was in charge of the stock, which she fought for. She said, “These ... lawyers, they want to handle it for me but, Jane, they are crooked as corkscrews, and they couldn’t sleep straight in bed!” And I held on; I held on to my Texas Company [stock] because I wanted to educate my children with that Texas Company stock.

The reason it went to New York was that the bankers, the timid bankers in those days, would not make loans to oil companies. It was too risky for them. So, Joe Cullinan and the others went to New York, ... and it was financed from

New York in the early days.... The East Coast took charge of the Texas Company. Dear Mo-Mo, [which is what] we call my grandmother, she didn't like the way everything went, so she went up there to the stockholders meeting to give them a piece of her mind. They were so impressed with Mrs. Campbell that they put her picture on a folder. I still have that folder. Dear Mo-Mo, first lady of the Texas Company. She would take no nonsense from New York or Washington, but we take a lot of nonsense from Washington these days. That is just an aside. But there was that spirit of independence of the women and the men both. It could be overdone, I know that. You could be 101% Texan, which I think is a bore....

My blessed Daddy died in 1942, but he had taught me about Robert Owen because he greatly admired the labor reforms that [he] went ahead and instituted in New Atlantic, Scotland. He cut down the hours for child labor. He gave their parents better wages, better housing and it was phenomenal in that period of history when the poor were expendable. The children didn't live very long because they were so tiny, they could fit under these machines in the cotton mills and drag coal cars in the coal mills. They were all expendable. So, Robert Peele passed the first child labor laws in England to put an end to the abuse. Well, that didn't end it. Evil will always pop up its head again, but they made a great improvement in the labor conditions; and he founded the first trade unions so that the labor voice could be heard. Daddy was all for that.

He founded the first stock plan in Houston so that employees would own stock in the company for which they worked. After that, he died. So many people called me and said, "We are so grateful to your father because the stock has gone up, and we were able to buy a better house and educate our children with what your father insisted that we possess." Think of Enron today. The opposite. These were the opposite. These were not Houstonians. I don't know where they came from. We won't go into that, but he couldn't have thought ever a greater contrast between those early businessmen here and their companies and, of course, taking a page from Robert Owen. The contrast. Whenever I go anywhere in the East or abroad, they say, "Tell us about Enron." That is the face that they put upon Houston.⁷...

My beloved daughter [wrote an article for the *Houston Chronicle*,] I applauded every word she wrote. The Rockefeller family, I have learned today [March 27, 2008] through an attorney friend who had read the article and said the Rockefellers are coming out with the same position; that there should be a separation between the chairman and the president; and the outrageous salaries, while people are dying, and dying of early cancer near the refineries. With all these tremendous profits that they are making, couldn't they put something aside to relocate some of the people who are living in cancer polluted areas?

When my father and Will Farish were alive, and the Cullinans, there was absolutely no connection between cancer and refineries. That was not an issue. And if it had been, those fine men would have done something about it because they were humanitarians as well as businessmen. So, Janie [my daughter,] is speaking for my dead father. He would have applauded every word she wrote.

Culture and the University Communities

There are different strains of culture. Rice was the first university and it was an island of culture, stability.... A. E. Russell, the Irish poet, and also editor of the *Irish Statesman*, an agriculture magazine, I remember him so well walking the sidewalks of Shadyside. He would ... draw landscapes of Ireland on the sidewalk in charcoal and [tell] stories about the Celtic race. I was fascinated. The Cullinans, very close friends of my parents, would bring their distinguished Irish guests to dinner, and I would listen in. It was a little nucleus of culture and civility....

[At Rice] you could sit in on wonderful courses whether you were a student or not. Daddy, of course was a trustee for many years. I was welcomed. There was good music. There was opera already in Houston. Mrs. Lovett began Houston Opera, and Ima Hogg, she started the symphony. It was all burgeoning. But the only university was Rice.... Our table was fed with wonderful people from across the street [at Rice]....



Jane Blaffer Owen fondly remembers Uncle Roy and Aunt Lillie (Cullen) as philanthropists who personally guaranteed that "a university would rise on their land." Over the years, the Cullen family has donated nearly \$70 million to the University of Houston and the UH System to ensure an education for those who could not afford Rice University.

Photo from University of Houston People Collection, courtesy UH Digital Library, Special Collections, M. D. Anderson Library, University of Houston Libraries.

Right now, I am working with the University of Houston in Harmony Park designed by Frederick Kiesler, the great architect with whom I worked ... It is going to be sort of an oasis for the busy students at U of H. And the reason I am involved now more with U of H—Mommy and Daddy were great friends of the Cullens. Uncle Roy, as we called him, wanted desperately to be a member of Rice, ... and they turned him down.... In the end, Houston has benefitted....

He [Roy Cullen] was determined to do something for those who couldn't afford Rice. He was a real humanitar-

ian, and we loved them both. I will never forget when they lost their only son on an oil rig, the source of their wealth was the source of their greatest sorrow. We were on the Mediterranean that summer, and we had a cable—we didn't telephone so much, there were cables—they wanted to be with Mommy and Daddy. So, we spent several months together ... He was undefeatable....



Blaffer Owen donated The Winged Victory statue in honor of the friendship between the Blaffers and the Cullens. The statue is situated in the Jane Blaffer Owen Plaza in front of the Moores School of Music at the University of Houston.

Photo by Aimee L'Heureux.

[In the] early 1970s, ... [the University of Houston was] interested more in art than Rice. Pat Nicholson obtained a concession from Austin to do a certain percentage of all the money from the University to go into sculpture. Some very important sculptures [are] there.... Mother felt that they were more interested in art ... They had a burgeoning art department. It was just crying aloud for a gallery. Mother felt that art belonged, first of all, where young people could see it; and then, from the University, then go on further to the Museum, but so many of these students had never seen art.

I remember one of the letters received thanking the Foundation for a traveling exhibit because Mother wanted art to travel around Texas, especially the places that had no

museums. The majority of the letter said we [the senders] felt we would never be in the same room with something 500 years old because this little town was fifty years old. The age of something impressed them. It was not that Mother didn't like Rice, it was just the circumstances and her friendship with the Cullens, and having the burgeoning art there....

While Daddy was trustee, he helped towards that endowment from oil interests. I think some oil properties were given to Rice.... I remember Daddy talking about that. So, that was a very natural alliance and a needed one. Not only a natural, but essential to the development of this whole area. It all made sense. It was less so when the University of Houston started. I think Uncle Roy wanted many professions open to young people...

Philanthropy and the Spirit of Houston

I have a picture of Uncle Will [Clayton] and Daddy at the Port of Houston ... One out of every three dollars came out of the Port of Houston to open our ditch to the sea. It was extremely important. Daddy and Mommy were very interested in building a seaman center, which they did not live to complete, but [for] which I took the torch from them, and I helped start the seaman center.... These sailors, many cynics say, all they want is a warehouse and a bar. That is not true. They are educated young people, and they play chess now in the center that we have, and they telephone their families. They use the chapel, which I am very moved that they named for me because I had a lot to do with the chapel there. The first Christmas Eve that I spent worshipping there, they had to have three different services to accommodate all the seamen that wanted to pray....

It is a "can do" spirit that I think is still here [in Houston]. But you can do the right things, and you can do the wrong things. I think the Rice and the University of Houston and St. Thomas—I love St. Thomas—are all examples of the "can do" and the right spirit. The Medical Center is the "can do" and the right spirit. But this disrespect for well built houses and for beautiful trees that are being cut down right and left, that is [wrong]. And the flagrant exhibition of wealth. I used to love the old Houston Country Club. It was a rambling Spanish style with red tile roof ... [Now] it is no architecture. It is just look how big and rich our members are....

Reflecting on Women's Roles

Daddy would say, "... I hope you all vote. You don't deserve your dinner if you don't vote." He saw that we all went out to the polls. He used to say, "I am a Democrat without the accent on the damn." But little by little, we realized that Houston, and especially Texas, needed a two party system. Women Power for Tower helped to elect our first Republican senator [in 1960], and we felt that was the fair thing to do so both parties would vie for our attention instead of being consistently democratic. We were appalled at "Ma" Ferguson. Her husband was indicted [and impeached.] So, "Ma" Ferguson became the governor [in 1925 and again in 1933 for two-year terms,] and assigned herself "Empress of



Jane Blaffer Owen discussed the importance of philanthropy in Houston. Her Mother gave funding to the University of Houston to set up an art gallery on campus. The black and white photo shows the Blaffer Gallery when it first opened, and the color photograph demonstrates how the Gallery looks today.

Photo on left from University of Houston Buildings Collection, courtesy of UH Digital Library, Special Collections, M. D. Anderson Library, University of Houston Libraries. Photo on right courtesy of the Blaffer Gallery, University of Houston.

Texas.”... Politics was not very, very pretty. Governor Hogg, of course, was our beloved early governor [1891-1895]... When he left his will, he wanted scores of pecan trees planted around his grave so that the people of Texas could find pecans for free at his gravesite.... They were wonderful people. Beautiful people....

Aunt Ima [Hogg] used to spend her summers with us in Massachusetts, and she and Mommy with our wonderful Dan Clay, our black chauffeur, would go antiquing. They bought many of their things together. Only Mommy had children to leave her furniture to; Aunt Ima never married and left her beautiful collection to the nation [see the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and Bayou Bend], She was a gracious, beautiful woman. We all loved her.⁸...

Mother taught the Junior League how to make Mexican food.... She was not a club woman, but her services were always available if anyone asked her. Mother had inherent good taste. Young brides would come to her for advice on furnishing their houses and Mother would say, “It is not what you put in. It is what you keep out,” because we are all pack rats....

The word she hated most in décor was “drapes.” “You don’t need drapes in Houston—you need blinds.” You need blinds to cut out the sun. We had shutters that worked on our house, and they were always closed during the day, that is in the spring and summer, and opened in the evening for the breezes to come in. Then, we had electric fans because I grew up without air-conditioning. Didn’t mind it a bit. The

walls of the house were thick, and the shutters worked, and the electricity, in spite of a reputation for not having any, was functioning.

Now, Mother had a profound influence on my love of art and beauty and poetry. She wrote beautiful poetry herself. So, I was lucky in having two parents that supplemented each other with contrasting gifts.

There had been no women lawyers or doctors in those days, but they were the cultural forces in this city and their excellent minds and hearts laid the foundations for the culture we have today. The men were too busy in their offices working. There were very few divorces as I was growing up. Women didn’t feel neglected because their husbands were on business trips. They simply used their energy and minds to foster the arts, every department of art. And the libraries. I am making rather generalities, but it is generally true. Daddy would come home very tired from a long day at the office, and Mother would say, “But Lee, we are invited to Mrs. So and So’s, we must go.”... He’d say, “If they had not invited us, Sadie, I’d have sent them two dozen red roses!” because ... these men, most of them died in their seventies. I didn’t know any of those early men, my father’s friends and associates, who lived past eighty. They gave so much of themselves, and without air conditioning.... Daddy, Uncle Will, Harry Wise, they all died in their early seventies. They didn’t spare themselves, and the wives didn’t feel neglected. They just got to work and helped build a cultural base for what everyone enjoys now.⁹ 