

8F and Many More:



Business and Civic Leadership in Modern Houston

by Joseph Pratt*

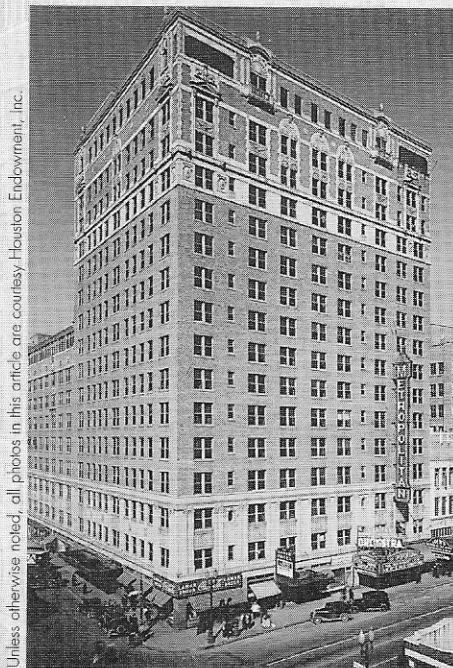
In January 2001, Ken Lay was the poster boy for civic leadership in Houston. He had built Enron into a leading company in a dynamic industry, bringing thousands of jobs to the city. He had helped keep major league baseball in Houston by pushing through a new downtown stadium aptly named Enron Field. He, his company, and his foundation led the league in corporate giving. He enjoyed easy access to political figures at all levels of government, and rumors flew in 2000 of a cabinet office in the new Bush administration or a run for mayor in Houston. Only a year later, Enron lay in ruins. Bad jokes about "Chapter 11 Field" made the rounds. His harshest critics asked just whose money Lay had been giving away to charities. Politicians asked "Ken who?" as they dodged media questions about political influence.

Such criticism took on an especially hard edge because Lay had become "Mr. Houston" at the turn of the twenty-first century, the latest in a line of powerful business/civic leaders who shaped the city's modern development. The *New York Times* ran a profile of his local influence under the headline, "In Houston, the Lines Dividing Politics, Business and Society Are Especially Blurry." The article noted that Lay "was only the city's latest king-maker. A generation before, the leadership had been a close-knit group of financiers and businessmen known as the 8F Club."¹ This reference was to suite 8F of the Lamar Hotel in downtown Houston, which Herman and George R. Brown (of

the giant Houston-based construction firm Brown & Root) rented and used as a meeting place for a wide variety of like-minded Houstonians in the boom decades after World War II. The *New York Times'* attitude toward the "city building" activities of this "8F Club" is captured in its use of a quote from *Texas Monthly* magazine: "Maybe it's a classic Texas story to push things to the limit."²

Or maybe not. "Especially blurry" lines dividing politics and business are hardly unique to Houston. By acquiring economic power and wealth, businessmen in all capitalist societies often become first among equals in civic and political affairs. Other less powerful citizens in Houston and other American cities have never quite known what to make of the influential businessmen who have played such a prominent role in shaping our society. In good times, we react to their power with admiration tinged with envy; in bad times, with skepticism tinged with anger. But at all times, we have looked to them to push our cities and our nation forward.

First and foremost, we have wanted them to create jobs. This has been particularly important in Houston. Not many of us came here in search of beautiful scenery or a mild climate; we came seeking jobs for ourselves and expanded opportunities for our children. Once business leaders have delivered jobs, we also have expected them to help build the cultural institutions (including higher education) common in a mature metropolis. Most of us have not been surprised



The Lamar Hotel was home of suite 8F where Houston's business and civic elite frequently gathered.

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when business leaders have taken an active and self-interested role in politics, but we have expected the best among them to have a vision of the needs of the city that extends beyond their immediate personal and corporate interests.

After more than twenty years of studying the history of business/civic leadership in Houston, I have well-developed opinions on the topic. Indeed, I can say with absolute confidence that I hold the key to what the *New York Times* referred to as the "8F Club" and older Houstonians at times call the "8F crowd." Naurice Cummings reached in his desk and gave me his after I interviewed him in the mid-1980s. Cummings had been a regular visitor with his own key to 8F, where he made kings with Herman and George R. Brown. But by the time of my interview with Cummings, the historic Lamar Hotel had fallen victim to the vision of unfettered progress of its most celebrated inhabitants; it had been demolished to make room for an important new parking

lot. I thus faced a historian's dilemma. I had the key to all power and influence in Houston, but the lock in which it fit, the door opened by the lock, the suite, and the entire building no longer existed. What follows is my effort to reconstruct suite 8F, placing the Brown's generation back into the world they inhabited. This requires establishing the historical context in which they operated and comparing them to other business/civic leaders who shaped Houston's development both before and after them.

Captain Baker's Era—1880s–World War I

Despite the historical emphasis placed on the 8F crowd, in my opinion, the single most powerful business/civic leader in the history of Houston was Captain James A. Baker. He was the midwife at the birth of the modern city. He and his law firm (which is now known as Baker Botts) stood at the center of a cluster of lawyers, bankers, and businessmen who led Houston from the 1880s through World

War I. During these years, Houston grew from a raw, rowdy town of less than 20,000 to a small, but bustling city of about 130,000. When Captain Baker and his father, Judge Baker, arrived in Houston in the 1870s, the city was about one tenth the size of New Orleans, which served as the center of regional trade and commerce on the Gulf Coast. By the time of Captain Baker's death in 1941, Houston was the clear leader of industry and finance on the Gulf Coast, and it was well on its way to national prominence as the energy capital of the nation. Because of his broad involvement in the life of Houston during those formative years, Captain Baker is a logical historical symbol of those who transformed a town with big aspirations into an emerging metropolis.³

With good reason, Houston found leadership among its lawyers and bankers in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. To grow, the region needed to forge solid connections with the

Downtown Houston in the 1880s



Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library

The Bakers of Houston and Baker Botts

Captain Baker's father, Judge James A. Baker, who moved to Houston from Huntsville, Texas, in 1872, was a railroad lawyer at Baker Botts, as were other prominent partners in the firm. From the 1880s forward, the firm managed the giant Southern Pacific Railroad's (SP) legal affairs in Texas, smoothing the way for the railroad's unified operations throughout the state. This line and others connected Houston firmly into national markets, vaulting the city ahead of Galveston in the race for regional preeminence and laying the foundation for the city's economic expansion. Baker Botts greatly benefited from its growing reputation in railroad law. One of its early partners, Robert Scott Lovett, embodied this tie. He grew up in rural Texas north of Houston, took a job digging stumps out of the right of way of the SP, moved on to become a lawyer at Baker Botts, and went on to become the head of the Southern Pacific.

After joining his father as a partner in Houston's major corporate law firm, Captain Baker became deeply involved in key sectors of the city's economy. As a director and, for a time, president of one of the city's largest banks, Captain Baker was a lawyer or a banker for many of city's businesses. He also was an officer in the local natural gas company and numerous other local enterprises. As chairman of the Rice board, Baker headed what amounted to another major Houston bank, since the Institute's endowment became an important source for real estate loans. Lawyer, banker, and businessman, Captain Baker remained one of the most visible business/civic leaders in Houston for almost seventy years.

The Baker family has remained prominent in Houston since Judge Baker arrived here in 1872. Five generations of James Addison Bakers have worked for

Baker Botts and for the good of the city. The original Baker, "Judge" (1821-1897), received his distinctive title from his brief service as a judge in the Confederacy. He practiced with Baker Botts from 1872-1897. His son, who remained at Baker Botts from 1877 to 1941, became known as "Captain" Baker (1857-1941) after service under that rank in the Houston Light Guard, a ceremonial military organization that ultimately became a part of the Texas National Guard. Ironically, Captain Baker's son, who was a captain in the real army during World War I, spent his long, productive life in Houston (1892-1973) and at Baker Botts (1919-1973) known as "Junior."

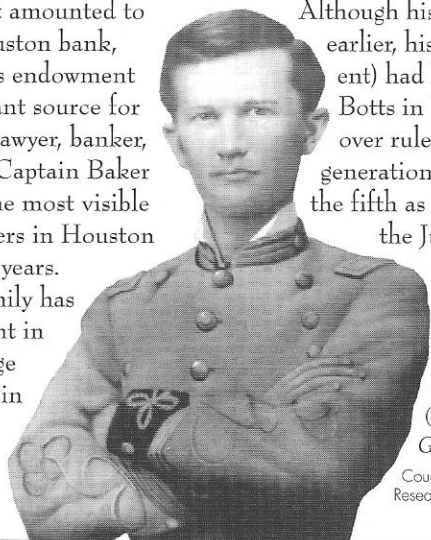
An even greater irony came with the next generation, "Secretary" James A. Baker (1930-present). As one of the most prominent Houstonians in the last half of the twentieth century, Secretary Baker served two presidents as chief of staff, Secretary of Treasury, and Secretary of State. Yet until his return from Washington in the 1990s, he could not serve at Baker Botts. The firm had passed a strict antinepotism rule in the late 1930s, so Secretary Baker pursued his legal career as a partner in the Houston-based firm of Andrews & Kurth. When he returned to Houston after his distinguished career in government, the antinepotism rule still seemed to block his hiring by "the family firm."

Although his father had died years earlier, his son "Jamie" (1954-present) had begun working at Baker Botts in 1985. Reason prevailed over rule, and in 1993, the fourth generation James A. Baker joined the fifth as members of the firm of the Judge, Captain, and Junior.

—Source: J. H. Freeman,
The People of Baker Botts
(Houston: Baker Botts, 1992), 19.

Captain James A. Baker
(of the Houston Light
Guard) in 1879

Courtesy Houston Metropolitan
Research Center, Houston Public Library



booming national economy. Good local lawyers were needed to carve out legal space for giant railroads and nationally active industrial corporations in a Texas legal system designed for a rural society. The farmers and ranchers who had written the laws of Texas had set numerous legal traps for large corporations. The big businesses that emerged in the north-eastern United States in the late nineteenth century could not function smoothly under the restrictions imposed by these Texas laws. As one of the largest corporate law firms in one of the major cities in Texas, Baker Botts represented many "foreign" (that is, non-Texan) companies, rescuing them from these legal traps, repairing the damage if possible, and finding ways to remove other traps from the legal landscape.

Captain Baker and other corporate lawyers helped organize and manage the local banks that solidified ties between Houston and the national economy. Although strictly enforced state unit banking laws restricted the growth of Texas banks, Houston banks nonetheless forged important correspondent relationships with much larger "money center" banks in New York City and Chicago. Through these ties flowed capital critically important to the region. The local bankers who directed this flow into the city came to assert considerable influence. Captain Baker cemented his own connections in the east by spending summers in the New York area, tending to vital business connections as his family escaped the Texas heat.

New York City figured into Baker's involvement in one of the best examples of city building in this era, the creation of a major university in Houston. William Marsh Rice had made a fortune in Houston before returning to New York City in the late nineteenth century. To show his gratitude to his adopted home, Rice provided a \$200,000 endowment in a will written in 1891 for the creation of an institute of higher education in Houston. From the original charter until his death in 1941, Captain Baker served as chairman of the Board of Trustees of the Rice Institute. While planning the opening of Rice, Baker had to go to New York City in 1900 to fight and win a highly publicized legal battle to void a second Rice will. In the twenty-one years from the chartering of Rice to its opening in 1912, Baker and the rest of the board

steadily built the Rice endowment. This enabled them to create an institution with the resources to become a first-class university, despite its location in a relatively small city far away from the traditional centers of academic excellence in the East. As a magnet attracting able and ambitious young people to Houston and a source of civic pride for Houstonians, Rice became a symbol of a city on the move. As such, it attracted broad support from the city's business community after its opening.⁴

Along with other lawyers such as Frank Andrews of Andrews & Kurth, Captain Baker prepared the way for the integration of Houston into the national economy. They created legal, financial, and transportation connections to the national economy that could be used by others to build industry and trade. By World War I, such ties had enabled Houston to make important strides toward defining a profitable and distinctive identity for itself in the national economy.

Making good use of the railroads and the legal and financial networks they had helped create, lumber, cotton, and oil catapulted Houston forward after the turn of the twentieth century, drawing the capital, jobs, and leaders required for it to become a major city. The cotton trade brought M.D. Anderson and Will Clayton from Oklahoma City to Houston, which greatly benefited as an international center for the cotton trade. Oilman Joseph S. Cullinan migrated from Pennsylvania to



A young Jesse Jones reigns as King Nottoc at the annual No-Tsu-Oh carnival in 1902.

Texas. After helping establish the new Texas oil industry at Corsicana in the late 1890s, he took a leading role in developing the giant Spindletop field near Beaumont before making Houston his home, as well as the headquarters of The Texas Company. Other oilmen, including John Henry Kirby (whose empire included timber and oil) and early leaders of Humble Oil (Ross Sterling, William

Farish, Harry Wiess, Robert Blaffer, and Walter Fondren), established an influential presence in the city. Houston's cotton and oil-fueled prosperity fed a boosterism with roots deep in the city's past.⁵

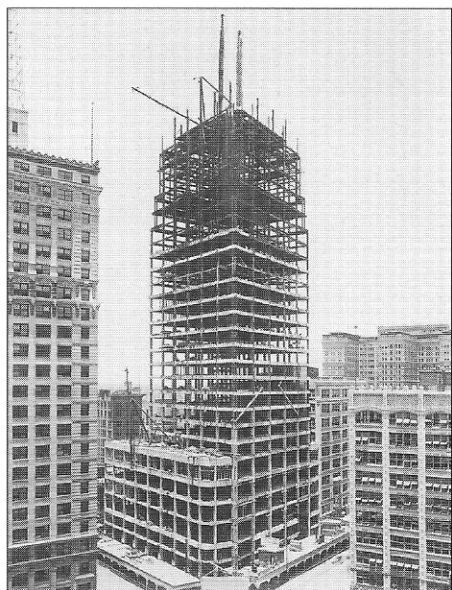
The city's openness to "adopted sons" was readily apparent in these critical years. With its fast-moving economy, the city was too busy to wait for "old money" to take charge of civic affairs. Indeed, Houston had few old, established families and interests. It welcomed newcomers of ambition and talent, quickly harnessing their energies into the frenzied effort to build a major city out of the people and money drawn to Houston by the ample opportunities presented by oil and cotton. Jesse Jones, for example, migrated to Houston from Tennessee by way of Dallas in 1898 at the age of 24. Only four years after his move to the city, a youthful Jones presided as King Nottoc ("cotton" spelled backward) at the annual No-Tsu-Oh Carnival celebrating cotton's importance to the city. By that time, he and others who flooded the city after the turn of the century had already taken a place among Houston's civic leadership.

The climax of this era of city building was the dredging of a deepwater ship channel from Houston to the Gulf of Mexico. The cotton and oil industries had access to broader markets via rail and through the nearby port of Galveston, but they



Cotton rides the rails in turn-of-the-century Houston.

Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library



Jesse Jones' Gulf Building under construction in 1928

wanted easier access to modern ocean-going vessels to expand their trade. The deepening of the channel required the support of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, and the city's elite went to work in the 1890s lobbying the federal government for this vital project. Closing ranks behind Tom Ball, the region's sole representative in the U.S. House of Representatives, Houston's business leaders finally sealed the deal in 1909 by creating a navigation district backed by the power to raise \$1.25 million in private funds to match the Corps funding for dredging a deepwater channel. This "Houston plan" of providing private funding for public works on this scale had few precedents. More than any event in Houston's history, this episode became the symbol of the "can do" attitude of the city's aggressive business/civic elite. It became the story Houston boosters told to illustrate that their city was more ambitious and more innovative than others.⁶

By 1914, when President Woodrow Wilson pushed a button in the White House that traveled via telegraph and shot the canon at the official opening of the new ship channel, Houston was tightly connected into the national economy. The ship channel reinforced ties to national and international markets that the railroads had established in the late nineteenth century. An expanding pipeline system assured the flow of oil from fields throughout the southwestern producing regions to Gulf Coast refineries, from which refined products or crude oil could be shipped in tankers to markets around

the world. The emergence to international prominence of Houston-based companies such as Anderson, Clayton and Company in cotton and The Texas Company in oil defined the region's new identity in the national economy.

Houston still had a long way to go before it could proclaim itself a mature city. Rice Institute had opened in 1912; in 1914 it remained little more than a symbol of the city's quest for education and culture. Civic leaders had constructed a civic center that could be used to host a variety of cultural events. Nina Cullinan (the daughter of Joseph S. Cullinan) and Ima Hogg (the daughter of former governor and Texaco investor James Hogg) had migrated to Houston with their families, but they had not yet emerged as leading patrons of the arts. The establishment of the Houston Symphony Society in 1913 provided a hint of things to come, but the creation of institutions of "high culture" would have to wait a while longer. The city's civic leaders had roads to pave and plumbing to move indoors before they could turn their full attentions to operas and museums.

But they were not too busy to address another challenge posed for them by history: the creation of a new social/racial order. Race was the most pressing social issue facing Houston's leaders at the turn of the twentieth century. A growing black population reached almost 24,000 by 1910, drawn to the city by opportunities for education and employment better than those in rural Texas and Louisiana. In this era, the city's white civic elite closed ranks around a Texas variant of the Jim Crow system imposed throughout the South. Legal restrictions blocked equal access by blacks to public accommodations, including schools. Jobs and housing remained strictly segregated by custom. Poll taxes and all-white primary elections (which in the single-party South effectively chose the Democratic candidate who usually would win without real opposition in the general election) severely limited the political power of blacks.

Jim Crow enjoyed the near unanimous support of Houston's white population, including its business/civic leaders. They embraced segregation as essential to progress, since in their view it would assure the social stability needed to foster economic growth. No white leaders stepped forward to oppose Jim Crow or to offer alternatives. Given the pervasive

racism of the times, it is ahistorical to look back and expect otherwise.

It is also ahistorical, however, to ignore the long-run costs of segregation. Jim Crow took an obvious, harsh toll on individual black citizens while imposing high, yet less obvious, costs on society as a whole. Businesses paid the price of maintaining segregated labor markets and restricting the access of black customers to goods and services. All employers felt the impact on potential workers of the separate but unequal educational system. The society as a whole lost the initiative and energy of ambitious blacks who fled the region to less hostile places such as California in search of better social and economic opportunities. The city, the state, and the South as a whole bore the political costs of a stunted form of democracy in which a race-based single party political system consistently neglected the needs of disenfranchised blacks and poor whites. The economic irrationalities of maintaining a dual, race-based system of public accommodations and education proved increasingly costly as the city grew larger.

Yet believing in white supremacy and enamored by the short-term benefits of a cheap black labor force, Houston's business/civic leaders helped create and defend Jim Crow. As they put their shoulders to the economic wheel to build a dynamic economy, unfortunately they embedded in this economy an unjust and inefficient Jim Crow system that



remained a drag on the region's development for more than three generations.⁷

The Era of Jesse Jones— World War I to World War II

Jesse Jones stood astride Houston's civic elite in the interwar years. As a young banker/developer before World War I, Jones had helped collect the private funding that persuaded the Corps of Engineers to deepen the Houston Ship Channel. After the war, Jones became the symbol of Houston's rapid emergence as a major city. His background is discussed elsewhere in this issue, as are his efforts to bring the 1928 Democratic Convention to meet in the city. He left distinctive marks on Houston as a real estate developer and a political figure. As a developer, he built much of the city's growing skyline from the turn of the century until his death in 1956. As one of the first Houstonians to play a highly visible and powerful role in national politics, he made an even more lasting impression on history. A physically imposing man, Jesse Jones became "Mr. Houston" to observers throughout the nation and to younger civic leaders in the city and even in Washington, D.C.⁸

Houston rapidly industrialized in the interwar years. The land on both sides of the new ship channel from Houston to Texas City attracted an array of industrial enterprises, with giant oil refineries and petrochemical plants creating thousands of new industrial jobs. Oil-related manufacturing in other parts of the city added

good jobs by the thousands. The opportunities presented by these new factories attracted a wave of migrants from rural Texas and Louisiana, as well as numerous professionals and managers from around the nation. By 1940, Houston had grown spectacularly to a population of almost 400,000, with a strong, dynamic industrial foundation for future growth.⁹

The surge of expansion down the ship channel corridor during these years confirmed a pattern that continued to shape Houston's growth into one of nation's largest cities in terms of geographical area. To the southeast, the Houston metropolitan area came to include such smaller "refinery towns" as Pasadena, Deer Park, Baytown, and Texas City. Even before World War II, Houston had begun to reach out and absorb once "outlying" areas in several directions.

Despite such geographical sprawl in the interwar years, downtown business leaders continued to shape the city's development. Lawyers and bankers, including Captain Baker himself, continued to take leading roles in civic affairs, as did those who owned and managed the region's sprawling complex of cotton and oil-related activities. Among the growing number of strong leaders in Houston in the 1920s, Jesse Jones stood out. When he returned to Houston from Washington, D.C. after World War II, he became a gray eminence in the city, serving as a role model for several generations of younger civic leaders. During his remarkable

career, Jones had a hand in almost every civic project in Houston for more than half a century. Although he died in 1956, through his personal involvement and his impact on others, Jones' direct and indirect influence spanned most of the history of twentieth-century Houston.¹⁰

In the 1930s and 1940s, as Jones worked in Washington as head of the Reconstruction Finance Corporation and Secretary of Commerce, a new generation of business/civic leaders emerged in Houston. These men represented the city's new industrial economy. As their expanding companies fueled the region's industrial growth, they began to identify a common interest in civic affairs. As World War II ended and the region moved into a sustained postwar boom, they were poised to assert leadership. Independently wealthy and relatively young, they had already built successful companies and they looked forward to the challenge of helping Houston move into the ranks of what they called the "major league cities."

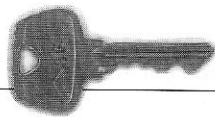
The Era of 8F and Many More— World War II to the 1980s

In the postwar boom, this new generation of business/civic leaders did just that. Their various enterprises, along with the Houston-area operations of major corporations based outside the region, created a tidal wave of jobs that moved the economy forward. With their personal fortunes and energies, they built cultural institu-

Continued on page 31

A view of downtown Houston in the 1950s, with many of Jones' buildings filling the skyline.





tions worthy of a maturing metropolis that tripled in size from 1940 to 1970, passing the million mark in population while moving rapidly up the ranks of the nation's largest cities. In politics they lobbied aggressively for what they considered a healthy business climate marked by a minimum of government regulations, a weak labor movement, a tax system favorable to business investment, the use of government subsidies to spur business expansion, and a conservative approach to the expansion of public services. With substantial political clout and little effectively organized opposition in a single-party political system, they pushed the city hard in the direction they believed it needed to go. In the process, they shaped much of what was good and bad about modern Houston. They had obvious blind spots—notably on race and environmental quality—but they also shared a consuming passion for Houston and a vision that economic development could lift the city and its population.

The 8F crowd was the most visible group of business/civic leaders in Houston in this boom era. Indeed, "8F crowd" became synonymous with "power elite" in postwar Houston. This group of friends used the Brown brothers' suite 8F at the Lamar Hotel as a convenient place to relax, play cards, discuss the day's issues, and shape Houston's development.¹¹ With other like-minded business leaders, they shared a general vision of the city's future, and they had the resources, connections, and commitment to the city necessary to act on their vision.

"Membership" in this group was by no means fixed; individuals moved in and out of this circle of influence as their careers and interests changed. Perhaps the best way to provide a snapshot of the group is to make a distinction between the core group that met regularly over several decades and a broader group that came together on specific issues. The core generally included at least Herman Brown, George R. Brown, Judge James A. Elkins, Gus Wortham, Jim Abercrombie, Governor Will Hobby, Oveta Culp Hobby, and R.E. (Bob) Smith. Jesse Jones, who owned the Lamar Hotel and lived in its 16th floor penthouse, might be seen as the godfather of the 8F crowd; they generally went up to visit him, not vice versa.

A much broader collection of Houston businessmen and politicians at times visited suite 8F and at times cooperated with members of the core group on specific projects and issues. For example, oil man Claud Hamill, a business partner of Bob Smith, at times worked closely with friends in the 8F crowd. A list of other "friends of 8F" might be expanded to include William A. (Bill) Smith, Leopold Meyer, Lamar Fleming, Wesley West, George Butler, Charles Francis, Felix Tijerina, Leon Jaworski, Howard Keck, Judge Roy Hofheinz, and, at one time or another, most other influential business leaders in Houston in this era. Government officials such as Colonel E.O. Thompson of the Texas Railroad Commission and local, state, and national politicians also frequented the Lamar Hotel. 8F and friends included individuals with ties to most areas of the Houston economy, and they could often mobilize broad support from the like-minded people throughout the city and the state on issues of importance to the downtown Houston business community.¹²

Critics focused on the power of the 8F crowd, making it a symbol for a political and civic culture dominated by business interests. "There was talk in Texas in the 1940s and 1950s," wrote Texas historian George Norris Green, "that state affairs were handled by card-playing multimillionaires who convened in Herman Brown's suite."¹³ Writing in the *Texas Monthly* in 1976, journalist Harry Hurt asserted that "Their rule was a virtually unchallenged and—they would emphasize—very 'civic-minded' gerontocracy."¹⁴ James Conway's popular book *The Texans* concluded that "during the 1940s and 1950s they [8F] exercised a concerted influence in Texas that was unparalleled."¹⁵

Sociologist Joe Feagin's *Free Enterprise City* went so far as to construct a Houston model of development around a historical account of the role of the 8F crowd and other elites in the city's development. Feagin's account, which is still the only book that systematically analyzes the role of elites in Houston, asserts that 8F "appears to have been the most powerful elite in the city's history."¹⁶ Feagin concluded that 8F's narrow, business-related definition of what was good for the city led Houston down a path characterized by

underdeveloped public services, a mediocre educational system, harsh working conditions for labor, and government promotion—but not regulation—of business interests. Such critical accounts suggested a sort of soft conspiracy of a few powerful men to shape Houston in their own image. The populist *Texas Observer* popularized this criticism by poking fun at the quest for a healthy "bidness" climate.

Louie Welch, who as mayor of Houston was at times both a friend and a foe of the 8F crowd, put a much more positive spin on 8F's activities: "You'll hear, I'm sure, all about 8F, like that's some mysterious, sinister meeting place where people got together and figured out what to let the common people do. It wasn't anything of the sort." According to Welch, "they created the initiative and the locomotive to pull the train...They were movers and shakers, but they were not self-serving in anything that I ever saw them do."¹⁷

No doubt, those who were moved and shook took a somewhat less favorable view of the process of change. But in Houston's postwar boom, those who had the most reason to complain about working conditions and under-funded public services tended to come from rural sections of Texas, Louisiana, and Mexico where far worse conditions had pushed them to try their luck in Houston. As hundreds of thousands of migrants sought improved opportunities in the growing city, racial and ethnic tensions also blocked the rise of a unified, political movement in the region capable of challenging the power of business leaders. Even had such a voice been asserted, it was unlikely to be heard in the one-party, business-led politics of the postwar years.

Because of frequent criticism of the 8F crowd and the Brown brothers' close connections to President Lyndon Johnson, this small group has come to command more attention than it deserves. Houston in the 1950s and 1960s was not Cook County, Illinois, and Herman Brown was not Mayor Daley. It was not even very similar to Houston before World War I, where a smaller, more cohesive collection of lawyers and bankers had held sway. Indeed, in historical terms, business/civic leadership broadened dramatically in

postwar Houston compared to previous eras. This is true even if the 8F crowd is understood to refer only to the relatively small core group and even if it wielded all of the power accorded to it by critics.

But these simplifying assumptions about 8F simply do not describe Houston in the postwar boom. Notable by their absence from the list of either the core group of 8F or their close friends are numerous influential Houston business leaders of this era. Prominent among them were independent oilmen such as Hugh Roy Cullen, who was deeply involved in the growth of the University of Houston and the Texas Medical Center; Glenn McCarthy, who built the Shamrock Hotel; and John Mecom, who owned the Warwick Hotel and interests in local banks. Also missing from most discussions of 8F are numerous leaders of Humble Oil and Refining (notably Morgan Davis and Carl Reistle) and other major oil firms such as Texaco who remained quite active in Houston's civic affairs. After its move to Houston in 1970, Shell Oil quickly became a prominent corporate citizen.

Representatives of the giant natural gas pipeline companies headquartered in Houston quickly took their place among the region's civic leaders as their companies grew quickly after World War II. The Browns' Texas Eastern Corporation was one such company, but even more active in Houston's civic affairs was Tenneco and its leader Gardner Symonds. 8F

Judge Elkins continued the tradition of the Baker era with his ties to a major law firm, Vinson & Elkins, and a major bank, First City National. But he was hardly the only prominent lawyer in Houston amid the postwar surge in both the size and number of corporate law firms in the city after World War II. Bankers not normally associated with the 8F crowd continued as in the past to take on important civic responsibilities. Kenneth Schnitzer, Gerald Hines, and Dallas-based Trammell Crow—Jesse Jones' successors as the leading developers in Houston—were not frequent guests at 8F, despite their role in building much of the approximately sixty million square feet in major office construction in Houston in the thirty years after 1955. In short, many of the most influential members of Houston downtown business community did not frequent 8F and did not automatically follow its lead.¹⁸

At the same time, groups of citizens traditionally not included fully in the life of the city asserted a stronger voice in Houston. Through the middle of the twentieth century, anti-Semitism remained a barrier to full participation in the life of Houston by prominent Jewish citizens. Not until the 1970s, for example, did the major downtown law firms actively recruit Jewish lawyers. Members of the all-Jewish firms that arose in response contributed many of the leaders of Houston's thriving Jewish community, as did successful developers and retailers such as Leopold



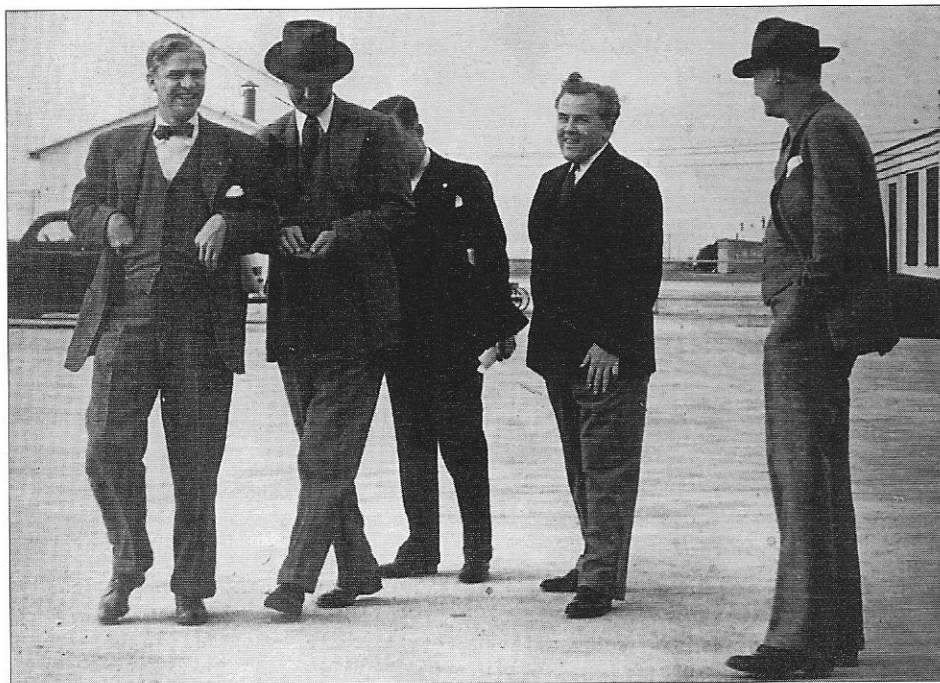
Maurice Hirsch was central in building the many educational and cultural institutions that now flourish throughout Houston.

Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library

and Joseph Meyer, Joe Weingarten, Simon and Tobias Sakowitz, and Ben and Sam Taub. General Maurice Hirsch of the firm of Hirsch and Westheimer lived a long and fruitful life in Houston practicing law, building several businesses, and helping build the Houston Symphony, the Houston Grand Opera, the Museum of Fine Arts, the Houston Ballet, Rice University, and the University of Houston. Historically, Hirsch and other Jewish leaders had a form of dual civic citizenship in Houston; they took seriously their responsibilities in nurturing the causes and institutions of the Jewish community at the same time that they made important contributions to the city as a whole.¹⁹

A somewhat similar pattern prevailed among African Americans and Mexican Americans in Houston. In the postwar years, non-white citizens long ignored by downtown business interests were beginning to find their own civic voices. As discussed in more detail in Amilcar Shabazz's article in this issue, the successful black businessman, lawyer, and newspaper owner Carter Wesley used his newspaper, *The Informer*, to give voice to the city's growing black communities. For most of the twentieth century, such communities taken collectively had a population large enough to have ranked as a major Texas city, and black Houston generated its own leaders, despite the yoke of segregation. A handful of white philanthropists from Joseph S. Cullinan to Jesse Jones contributed to the development of medical and educational institutions serving the black community. But this limited assistance was designed to make good on the promise of "separate, but equal," not to foster desegregation and equal opportunity. For that, blacks turned to Wesley and other leaders, who mounted sustained challenges to Jim Crow from the 1930s forward.

At least through the 1960s, most



Left to right: George R. Brown, Lyndon Johnson, unidentified man, Tommy Corcoran, and Herman Brown

Courtesy Brown & Root

Houstonians thought of race relations as a question of black and white, but a growing brown population gradually generated its own leaders. In his biography of Houstonian Felix Tijerina, Thomas Kreneck tells a success story quite similar to the stories of those who frequented suite 8F.²⁰ One of the first prominent Houstonian business leaders of Mexican decent, he displayed values that closely matched those of his counterparts in 8F. In his many business and civic endeavors, he could count on the support of his friend, Bob Smith, who was a part of the inner circle of 8F. While participating in civic initiatives that were aimed at the betterment of the entire city, Tijerina also played an active role in issues that affected primarily Mexican Americans. Tijerina was a pathbreaking leader in an increasingly diverse city, and the growing number of Houstonians with close ties to Latin America assured that others

would follow his lead.

As Houston became more diverse, it also became more dispersed, sprawling out over an ever-broader region. Civic leaders in the city's suburbs and in once distinct surrounding cities such as Sugar Land, Katy, and even Galveston, added their voices to issues affecting the entire Houston metropolitan region. Such issues as transportation, pollution control, water supply, and even taxation all had implications for the entire metropolitan area, but public authority remained quite fragmented, with competition by city, county, state, and federal authority levels.

By the 1970s Houston was a maturing city with numerous centers of power and influence. At times these groups spoke with something akin to a unified voice on important issues such as the need to create strong educational and cultural institutions. But at other times, they fought bitterly over issues ranging from political

campaigns to the building of a new multi-purpose stadium for the city's various sporting events. 8F was not the only suite in town, although it was certainly the most highly publicized. If we insist on continuing to use the phrase "8F crowd" as shorthand for Houston's business/civic elite in the postwar era, we should at least amend it to read "8F and many more."

That said, a closer examination of the ties that bound 8F together tells us much about the operations of the broader business elite of which they were a part. Their power reflected their business ties into the critical industries that fueled the postwar boom. The key economic task of this generation was building prosperous regional companies that made good use of the connections into the national economy established in the Baker era. 8F and many others in this era built local companies that became nationally and internationally competitive. The growth of these compa-



Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library

The opening of the Houston Negro Hospital in 1926 was a prime example of white philanthropy for "separate, but equal" facilities.

FELIX TIJERINA AND AN EXPANDING CIVIC ELITE

Born in 1905 in General Escobeda, Nuevo Leon, Felix Tijerina came with his family to the Houston area in 1915 to escape the turmoil caused by the Mexican Revolution. He spent the remaining fifty years of his life building his restaurant business while also making contributions to the betterment of his adopted city. During his years in the city, the Mexican American population grew from an estimated 6,000 (in 1920) to perhaps 50,000 in the late 1950s. Tijerina was one of the first Mexican Americans to play a prominent role in Houston's civic affairs, and he became a potent symbol to many in the city that Houston's version of the American Dream was available to Latinos.

Tijerina initially found work as a bus boy in one of the original Mexican food restaurants in Houston, and he worked his way up from the bottom to become the proud owner of his own chain of Felix restaurants. Both the food and the owner became Houston institutions.

As Felix and his wife Janie steadily built their restaurants, they looked for ways to make a difference in Houston. From early in their lives in the city, they were involved in a variety of civic causes such as the Boy Scouts that sought to improve the lot of children. Tijerino's most significant project was the "Little School of the 400," a program to prepare Spanish-speaking children to succeed in school by teaching them 400 basic English words. This highly acclaimed program used creative teaching techniques later incorporated in the federal government's Operation Head Start program.

Tijerina exhibited a sense of a dual civic responsibility, to Houston in general and to other Mexican Americans in particular. As a four-time national president of the League of United Latin American Citizens, he extended his influence far beyond Houston. By the time of his death in 1965, the Mexican American population of Houston was greater than the total population of the city had been at the turn of the twentieth century. In local and national affairs, Felix Tijerina put a face on the significant new reality of growing ethnic diversity.

Source: Thomas H. Kreneck, *Mexican American Odyssey: Felix Tijerina, Entrepreneur and Civic Leader, 1905-1965* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2001).



Left to right: Houston Mayor Pro-Tem Phil Hamburger, Mayor Salinas (of Monterrey, Mexico), Felix Tijerina, and R. E. Smith



Felix Mexican Restaurant, 1948

Courtesy Tijerina Papers, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library

nies provided the dynamism that fed Houston's sustained expansion up the ranks of the nation's largest cities.

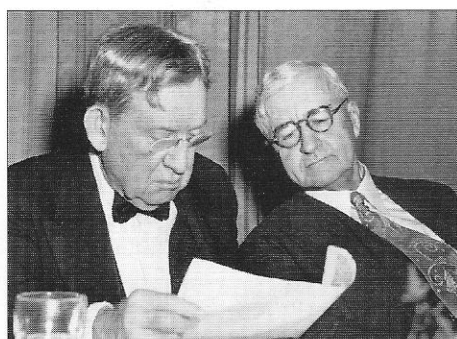
The Browns and Bill Smith represented the area's booming construction industry, which placed them in the middle of such key economic trends as the growth of the petrochemical industry and the expansion of offshore petroleum production. The Browns also owned a substantial interest in Texas Eastern Corporation, a major competitor in one of the region's and the nation's fastest growing regional industries after World War II, natural gas. Bob Smith was an independent oilman, while Jim Abercrombie was a major supplier of tools and services to the oil industry. Gus Wortham, whose Houston-based American General was one of the largest insurance companies in the Southwest, provided financial services to many of the region's leading firms. Judge Elkins represented the legal/banking interests that traditionally guided Houston's evolution. Will Hobby and his wife Oveta Culp Hobby had extensive political connections and ran one of Houston's major daily newspapers, *The Houston Post*. Jesse Jones was Jesse Jones. This was one very well-connected crowd.

Strong personal and business ties linked the core members of 8F. Wortham was a protégé of Jones and a friend and business associate of the Browns; he had organized American General in 1926 in part with capital supplied by Jones and Judge Elkins. In the 1940s and 1950s, George Brown and Gus Wortham spent long hours together on the Rice University Board of Trustees. Among his friends at 8F, Wortham was the quiet man who could be counted on to do his share behind the scenes. He also set the tone for the group as a whole with an oft-repeated distinction between "business dollars," which had to be watched closely, and "entertainment dollars," which were meant to be spent lavishly.²¹

Judge James Elkins played a central role in the dynamics of decision-making at 8F; all members of the group valued his counsel. This reflected his well-earned reputation as a clear-headed, decisive decision maker, as well as his broad connections into all areas of the Houston political economy through his bank and his law firm.²² The Browns were clients of his law firm and prominent shareholders in his bank.

The economic interests of the 8Fers

often overlapped, a situation best symbolized by their memberships on various "interlocking directorates." In practice, this meant that many of them met regularly at meetings of various boards of directors of banks and other businesses based in Houston. In general, they belonged to the same downtown businessmen's clubs, where they often ate lunch together. The Browns regularly hosted lunches at a table reserved for them at the Ramada Club. After the meal and a drink or two, those present often strolled back to 8F for a mid-day visit. Many belonged to the same country clubs. They often supported each other's favorite charities and civic causes,



Governor Will Hobby and Jesse Jones

just as they often closed ranks in support of political candidates.

Beyond that, they were good friends who enjoyed spending time together. Many afternoons of cards, trips to Southwest Conference football games, regular hunting expeditions to various retreats, and an annual trek to the Kentucky Derby gave them time to relax out of the public eye and away from the pressures of running their companies. In this fraternity of bosses, these strong-willed men who spent most of their working lives making hard decisions under intense pressure could relax, bantering and cutting up like care-free young men. A closeness and mutual respect gained from long and often fun-filled hours spent together helped smooth over disagreements on the issues of the moment, fostering a cohesion that was crucial to the sustained influence exerted by this group.

The core group of 8Fers stayed active in politics. Each might be asked to ante up a contribution to the campaign funds of political candidates at the local, state, or national levels who had passed muster with the group. Similar contributions could be expected when one of them became highly committed to a particular

charity or civic cause. Individuals could pass on a particular candidate or on a request for a charitable contribution, but all recognized that a part of their mystique as a group was their often demonstrated capacity to close ranks behind favored causes.

Politics was their favorite sport. Most were conservative Democrats in the traditional one-party system of Texas, but a real Republican or two could be tolerated. Politicians who sought support at times underwent what amounted to job interviews at 8F, and those who passed could expect vigorous support. The 8F crowd's unofficial endorsement was a potent weapon for anointed "moderate" candidates who sought local and even state offices. Campaign funds, as well as support from Jones' *Houston Chronicle* and the Hobbys' *The Houston Post*, often followed, making such candidates difficult, though not impossible, to defeat.

Despite their many political activities, the 8F crowd knew that a low profile could be useful in politics. As Gus Wortham was fond of saying, "You don't go hunting with a big brass band."²³ But on several occasions, controversy over political disputes spilled out into public. In the early 1950s, 8F supported Roy Hofheinz for two terms as mayor of Houston. But his efforts to raise property assessments on downtown buildings cost him their continued support. In the 1956 mayoral race, the group threw its weight behind Oscar Holcombe, who had previously held the office for eleven terms. Hofheinz responded by going public with the contents of a meeting in 1952 with the Browns, James Elkins, and Gus Wortham, with an open phone line to both the *Houston Chronicle* and *The Houston Post*. Hofheinz later recalled that Herman Brown told Mayor Holcombe he was



Colonel Oveta Culp Hobby

Core Group from 8F



Herman Brown (1891-1962)

Born: Belton, Texas

Moved to Houston: 1940s

Business interests: Brown & Root (construction), Texas Eastern Corp. (natural gas transmission)

Other interests: Southwestern University, Texas Children's Hospital, Brown Foundation

George R. Brown (1889-1983)

Born: Belton, Texas

Moved to Houston: 1926

Business interests: Brown & Root, Texas Eastern Corp.

Other interests: Rice University, Museum of Fine Arts, Brown Foundation

Robert E. "Bob" Smith (1894-1973)

Born: Greenville, Texas

Moved to Houston: 1900s

Business interests: Independent oil, real estate, cattle

Other interests: Houston Symphony Orchestra, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston Astros, Petroleum Club

James Abercrombie (1891-1975)

Born: Huntsville, Texas

Moved to Houston: 1906

Business interests: Cameron Iron Works (oil tools), independent oil

Other interests: Texas Children's Hospital, Pin Oak Horse Show

Gus Wortham (1891-1976)

Born: Mexia, Texas (grew up in Huntsville)

Moved to Houston: 1915

Business interests: American General Insurance

Other interests: Houston Symphony Orchestra, Rice University, Wortham Foundation

Judge James Elkins (1879-1972)

Born: Huntsville, Texas

Moved to Houston: 1917

Business interests: Vinson & Elkins (law firm), First City National Bank

Other interests: University of Houston, University of Texas, St. Anthony's Home for the Aged

Governor William P. Hobby (1878-1964)

Born: Moscow, Texas

Moved to Houston: 1893

Business interests: *Houston Post*, KPRC (radio), KPRC-TV

Other interests: Governor of Texas (1917-1920)

Oveta Culp Hobby (1905-1995)

Born: Killeen, Texas

Moved to Houston: 1928

Business interests: *Houston Post*, KPRC (radio), KPRC-TV

Other interests: Head of WAACs (Women's Auxiliary Army Corps), Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare

Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library

through as mayor, and then informed Hofheinz that "we will support you for mayor and all you have to do is call them down the middle."²⁴ When Hofheinz later disagreed on what constituted "the middle" on issues such as taxes on downtown buildings, he lost 8F's support.

In state politics, Herman Brown took the lead. The state legislature in Austin in the 1950s has never been used in high school civic texts as the model of government of, by, and for the people. Business-led lobbying was so direct, determined, and open that it drew responses that were equal parts outrage, astonishment, and admiration for a job well done. Herman Brown spent much time in Austin while also maintaining there a skilled team of lobbyists. One key issue of concern was the possible impact of organized labor on the traditionally non-union operations of Brown & Root. In an era when the Texas Senate had only thirty-one members, Brown held such sway that an article in

the *Reader's Digest* in 1953 quoted an unidentified source that "if Herman Brown is against something, there is no reason for the Senate to meet." His influence was especially strong in shaping a series of antiunion laws at the state level, including a "right-to-work" law that outlawed union membership as a requirement to hold a job.²⁵

The Browns' West Texas property at Fort Clark became a frequent weekend retreat for the brothers and their friends in business and government. The ranch was a short plane flight away from the state capital, and Brown & Root's DC-3s regularly ferried passengers from Austin and Houston to Fort Clark. Searcy Bracewell, a prominent Houston lawyer and one-time state legislator who later worked on political issues in Houston for several 8F members, later recalled these leisure/lobbying trips. Of the 31 state senators in the 1950s, "usually fifteen or sixteen or seventeen of them...would

come." Frequent guests at these retreats also included political writers for the state's major newspapers. Festive barbecues around a large, spring-fed swimming pool highlighted the activities. Looking back at these gatherings, Bracewell concluded: "Now, in this day and time, that would have been a scandalous situation that Brown & Root had the state senators out to their place....In those days, it wasn't."²⁶ Indeed, following the custom of the time, reporters never wrote about these get-togethers.

At the national level, the Browns and their friends supported numerous prominent Texas politicians, led by Lyndon Johnson, Sam Rayburn, Albert Thomas (long-time representative of Harris County in the House), and Lloyd Bentsen.²⁷ The Browns had known their fellow central Texan, Lyndon Johnson, since his first election for the U.S. House in 1937. In that election the Browns supported Johnson's opponent, but they

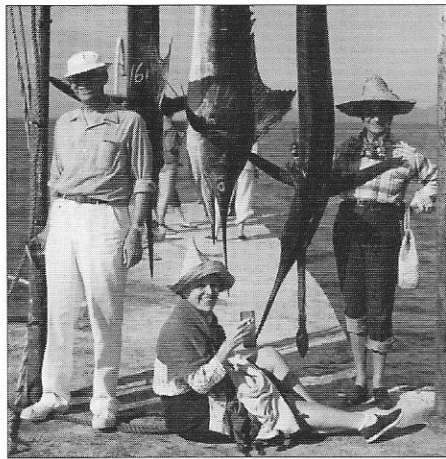


The Texas Medical Center in the 1950s. Clockwise, from bottom left: Hermann Hospital, Baylor College of Medicine, M.D. Anderson, and Methodist Hospital.

recognized a winner after they were beaten by him. It was as if the brothers purchased a winning colt at a county fair and that colt grew up to win the Triple Crown of politics: the Senate majority leadership, the vice presidency, and the presidency. Their unwavering support of Johnson as he climbed the ladder all the way to the presidency assured the brothers of good political access at the highest levels of national politics. It also focused the intense glare of the national spotlight on their political activities. History plays cruel jokes, especially in the high stakes game of national politics. Today, decades after the end of extraordinarily productive lives, the Brown brothers, when included at all in history books, generally appear as campaign contributors to Lyndon Johnson.²⁸

The 8F crowd by no means reached consensus on every political candidate or every significant issue. But they shared with other business leaders a broad vision of Houston and a predisposition to use their collective economic, political, and civic influence to shape the city's future. They had chosen to migrate to Houston to pursue their ambitions. They had lived through the dramatic growth of their adopted city and were strongly committed to making Houston a better place to live. They felt that this required the continued growth of business and more fully developed civic institutions—art museums, symphonies, ballets, operas, universities, medical facilities. Although most of them preferred college football to high culture, they committed both their money and time to these endeavors in the interest of creating a “major league city.”

This meant that they were as deeply involved in the city's cultural life as they were in its political life. They often used their wealth and influence for broad social purposes as they aggressively shaped Houston's development. 8F and others supported such initiatives as Jim Abercrombie's impulse to build and support the Texas Children's Hospital. The philanthropic gifts of the 8F crowd (and later their foundations) and many more helped make the Texas Medical Center complex a major new hub of research and jobs in Houston. They supported the efforts of George Brown and Gus Wortham to make the Rice Institute into an elite university, the parallel efforts of fellow Houstonian Hugh Roy Cullen to build the University



Alice Pratt Brown (seated) with husband George R. Brown and friend.

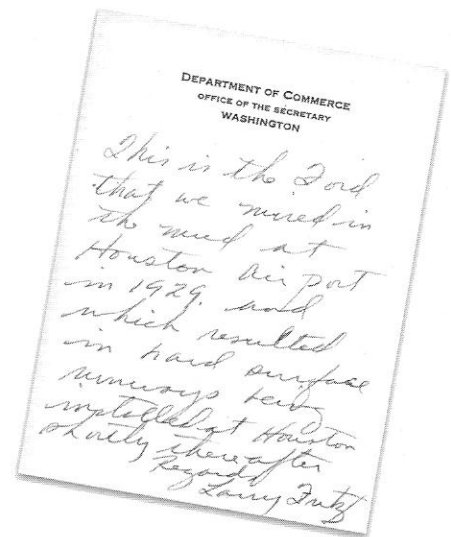
Courtesy Isobel Wilson

of Houston into an agent of upward mobility for the mass of Houstonians, and the efforts of Herman Brown to support Southwestern University in Georgetown, Texas. The opera, the symphony, the Museum of Fine Arts, and many other cultural institutions flowered after sustained watering with money from 8F and many more. This generation took seriously the need to develop in Houston the cultural and educational institutions worthy of a major metropolis.

In addition to substantial personal fortunes, many of the business/civic leaders also had strong-willed wives who took seriously their responsibilities to support good causes. The often-used word “help-mate” does not do justice to their efforts. Some of them made invaluable contributions of their time and energies to help build the city's cultural institutions; at times their work included educating their husbands about the value of such institutions. One such woman was Alice Pratt

Brown, the wife of George Brown. Her love of art developed as she grew up in central Texas. She came to Houston with her husband in the 1920s and lived in the city until her death in 1984. She became a steady presence in Houston cultural affairs, with a special interest in supporting the Museum of Fine Arts, Rice University, and her alma mater, Southwestern University. She and other wives of business leaders of this era played critical roles in building and sustaining the high-quality cultural institutions that began to define Houston as a mature metropolis by the 1960s.²⁹

Their husbands specialized in another sort of city building, the improvement of the economic infrastructure of their booming city. One of their dramatic and successful initiatives involved the creation of a new airport for Houston. By the mid-1950s, the Houston Municipal Airport (later renamed Hobby Airport in tribute to Governor Will Hobby) had



Improvements to Houston's airport were necessary as early as 1929. After this airplane became stuck in the mud, a new hard surface was installed.

been renovated with a new terminal building. Several regular visitors at 8F and several others discussed the need for a larger airport farther from downtown Houston. These men included, among others, Ralph Johnston, the Brown brothers, J.S. Abercrombie, William A. Smith, and Hugh Roy Cullen. The group commissioned studies of potential airport sites. The studies noted that fog was more intense and lasted longer south of Houston where the existing airport was located than north of the city. A survey conducted during the early 1950s indicated that a site north of Houston was the most appropriate to locate a new jet airport, although no plans developed out of the survey.³⁰

In late 1956 and early 1957, through an agent, the group quietly began purchasing land north of Houston. In anticipation that Houston would build a large, modern airport on this site, the company ultimately bought 3,000 acres for approximately \$2 million.

After acquiring the land, George Brown and several others involved in the purchase met privately in early 1957 with Mayor Oscar Holcombe and other city officials, including the city attorney, the public works director, the aviation director, and one city council member. The group argued that Houston needed a new jet airport to assure its future growth. They had purchased the land for this new facility with borrowed money and promised to hold it until the city was ready to buy it. The group offered the city of Houston a one-year option on the land extending until February 1, 1958. City officials reacted with skepticism, noting that Hobby Airport had just received a new terminal building.

Mayor Holcombe nonetheless indicated that he wanted the city to go forward with the purchase of the land, but after he lost the next mayoral election, the process broke down. The newly elected mayor, Louis Cutrer was not eager to go forward with the deal. According to Louis Welch, he questioned the motives of the group: "You're not going to tell me that that bunch of high rollers isn't in this for money. They're looking for a profit on this."³¹

After the deadline for the city to purchase the land had passed, Judge Elkins, Gus Wortham, and Herman and George Brown met with Mayor Cutrer and forcefully argued that the city should

purchase the land for the airport. They assured the skeptical mayor that they sought the good of Houston, not personal profits. Cutrer finally yielded. By the early 1960s, construction began on Houston Intercontinental Airport, which became Houston's major airport when it opened for operations in 1969. The acquisition of a site for what became Bush International Airport was motivated primarily by civic interest, not the self-interest of those involved.

Another event orchestrated by civic leaders in the early 1960s pulled the city southward toward Galveston while illustrating the power of a full-court press by 8F and many others. When NASA began scouting about for a site to build what became the Manned Spacecraft Center (which later became the Johnson Space Center or JSC), Houston joined other cities in a race to acquire this jewel. The city brought to bear impressive resources in its quest for the JSC. George Brown was more than a close friend of Vice President Johnson, who chaired National Aeronautics and Space Council (NASC), the federal board that advised the president on all aspects of the space program. He also was chairman of trustees at Rice and was appointed in 1961 by Johnson as a civilian member of the NASC. Kenneth Pitzer, Rice's president, had strong ties to Representative Albert Thomas, who chaired the house committee that approved NASA's funding. Thomas and George Brown had been friends since their freshmen year together at Rice in 1916, and he was always eager to help Houston at the federal level. Morgan Davis, then the chairman of the Houston-based Humble Oil & Refining Company, had worked with Brown on other civic projects, and he supplied a critical element in the plan to persuade NASA to select Houston for its coveted project.³²

The plan was simple. Humble owned a large tract of land south of the city that seemed well suited for the JSC. Davis, who like many officers before him at Humble had strong ties to Rice, agreed to donate this land to the university. After expanding the original tract of land to meet NASA's requirements, Rice offered this land as a gift to NASA. The rest of the proposal came together quickly, and almost before other cities had warmed up for the race for the JSC, Houston had crossed the finish line victorious.

The city benefited greatly from this

victory, since the JSC expanded rapidly and became a much-needed source of diversity for a regional economy still dominated by the petroleum industry. Rice gained national attention and new funding for space-related programs. Humble Oil profited from the development of a planned community on land adjacent to the JSC. Brown & Root received a relatively small construction design contract for the JSC, but publicity surrounding this episode boosted the reputation of George Brown, his company, and his university. The nation found a good site for a vital space program that provided a healthy measure of diversification to the regional economy. And Houston's business/civic leadership had another impressive story to tell in the ongoing saga of its "can do" spirit.

In the era of 8F and many others, one important barrier to the status of a major league city could not be so easily cleared. Jim Crow still remained in Houston in 1960. By that time the civil rights movement had defeated the segregationists in the courts and had them on the run throughout the South. The practical question was not if, but when and how Houston would dismantle its Jim Crow system.

Houston's business/civic leaders had resisted taking charge of change on this issue for half a century. They now faced difficult choices. In the deep South, the violent defense of Jim Crow against determined civil rights demonstrators had produced bloody conflicts sent out over the airwaves for all the world to see. In 1960, Houston's black population had grown to more than 215,000, a figure roughly equal to the total population of the city in the mid-1920s. With an eye on the escalating racial conflict in much of the South, white civic leaders in Houston sought to cut their losses by desegregating with as little violence as possible. With the cooperation of most of the city's media, they arranged for drug store counters and some public accommodations to be desegregated with a blackout on the sort of publicity that had assured the presence of aggressive white racists at similar sit-ins in other parts of the South. Administrators at Rice and at the University of Houston followed a similar path, moving as quietly as possible to admit black students.³³

Chairman of the Board George Brown led the way at Rice in the early

Continued on page 40

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Chairman of the Board George Brown led the way at Rice in the early

Continued on page 40

1960s. By then he knew that Rice could not gain the federal funds, the faculty, or the administrators needed to become a first-rate university if it remained segregated. An ugly court battle in which former students of Rice sued the university to prevent desegregation tested the resolve of Brown and the Rice board. After Baker Botts lawyers successfully defended the university from the demands of the pro-segregationist former students, Rice finally admitted its first black undergraduate in 1965.³⁵

8F and others have been given credit for helping Houston desegregate with relatively little violence. They did this, but only after forces beyond their control forced them to act. A grassroots movement in Houston led by black activists and an ascendant national civil rights

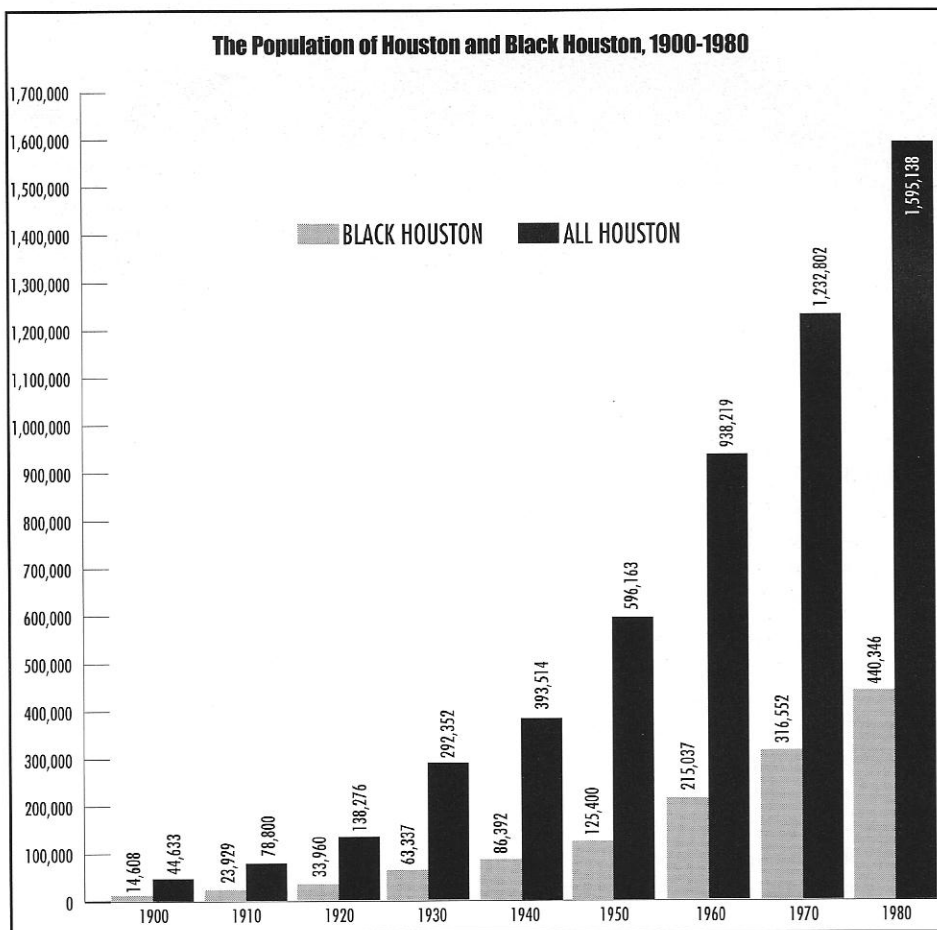
movement left them with little choice in the early 1960s. The key civic leaders in this pivotal era were not those who finally stepped aside from the doors of traditionally all-white institutions, but those who actively confronted segregation and shoved open those doors. Their ranks include numerous young black citizens who physically desegregated the institutions that embodied the old Jim Crow system. Included were college students such as Winona Frank, who was among the first black students at Lamar in Beaumont in 1956; Charles Freeman, one of the first black undergraduates at Rice in 1965; Nia Becnel, one of an impressive early group of black students who left a permanent, positive imprint on the University of Houston; and many others.* Such names may never appear in

listings of the region's "civic leaders," but they remain useful symbols of those who literally took the first courageous steps in desegregating schools and public accommodations in our region, often at great personal costs.³⁶ Their actions helped end the long era of formal segregation. Yet efforts to repair the personal and societal destruction wrought by the Jim Crow system and to find ways to create a more open and just racial/social order remained formidable challenges for the region's civic leaders, white and black, after the turbulent 1960s.

The Coming of the Greater Houston Partnership—1980s to present

Herman Brown died in 1962; George, in 1983. Between those dates the leaders of postwar Houston steadily passed from the scene. Their reputation for decisive action had been earned in an era that gave them much leeway to decide. Decades of steady economic growth created new jobs, easing social tensions. Only near the end of this era did the racial time bomb of Jim Crow threaten to explode, and 8F and others moved, however reluctantly, to defuse it. A one party political system—and a pro-business party at that—held power for much of their era, and 8F and many more proved adept at using it to their advantage. Although Houston more than tripled in population from 1940 to 1970, for most of these years the city remained compact enough for the downtown business leaders to hold the region together on key issues.

In these years, 8F and others enjoyed a hell of a run, building productive nationally-competitive companies that created jobs by the tens of thousands in the Houston region. Many of the business leaders in this era built their own companies, earning personal fortunes relatively early in their careers that gave them the independence and resources to pursue their civic and political interests. With a swagger backed by real power over much of what mattered, they worked and played hard in an era



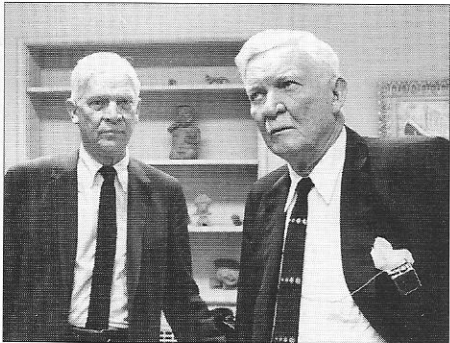
* Winona Frank graduated from Lamar and had a long career as a teacher in the Beaumont Independent School District. (Her son, Amilcar Shabazz, has an article in this issue.) Charles Freeman, a National Merit Finalist from Port Arthur, transferred to Texas Southern University in 1967. (He was my suitemate at Rice, and I remained astonished by how little Rice did to prepare him, other students, or the university as a whole for the process of desegregation.) In the spring of 1967, in response to growing activism by black students including Freeman, policemen stormed the dorms at TSU. When an officer died after police fire ricocheted off the dorms, Freeman and four others became scapegoats for the night of violence, and

they were tried for inciting a riot that led to the policeman's death. After a hung jury, Freeman went back to school at Lamar and then earned a law degree at the University of Houston (UH). He practiced public interest law until his death at age 54 in 2003. Nia Becnel was not one of the very first black students at UH, which desegregated its undergraduate programs in 1962. But she was one of a dynamic group of black students several years later that helped create the African American Studies Program at UH. Later, as a faculty member of the College of Architecture at UH, she remained active in the study of Houston's Freedmen's Town before her untimely death in 1990.



Courtesy Houston Chronicle, ©1985

The Lamar Hotel and suite 8F, symbols of Houston's most powerful business and civic leaders, came crashing down on April 14, 1985.



Courtesy Brown & Root

George and Herman Brown

that gave them more admiration than criticism. In civic affairs, they demonstrated an undeniable love of their adopted hometown and a willingness to commit their time and money to its betterment. The legend of 8F has exaggerated both how tightly power was held in postwar Houston and how cohesive the downtown business elite was in those years. But the impact of 8F and many more on Houston's development is difficult to exaggerate.

Those who came after them had a tough act to follow and a much more dif-

ficult stage on which to perform. From the 1970s through the end of the twentieth century, the Houston economy went through a cycle of boom, bust, and rebirth that posed severe challenges to the region's business leaders. While tending to the health of their own companies in an increasingly competitive economy, those who cared about Houston's future had to find ways to help diversify the petroleum-led economy that had served the region so well in the past. And they had to do this in a global economy in which deregulation had removed many traditional safety nets.

The last thirty years of the twentieth century witnessed another doubling in the population of the Houston area. This much larger size combined with sprawl out into ever-growing suburbs made the city much more difficult to manage from the perspective of those in the downtown business community. They faced a growing challenge in defining a common interest for the broad region centered on Houston but extending forty or fifty miles in all directions, south to Galveston, north to The Woodlands, west

to Katy, southeast to Sugar Land, and (at least on some issues) east all the way to Beaumont and Port Arthur.

They also needed ways to bring a measure of unity to an increasingly diverse population. In the decades after desegregation, white and black leaders alike confronted hard questions involving integration. At the same time, Houston was attracting growing numbers of migrants from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. To move the city forward, Houston's leaders had to find ways to build consensus on key civic issues in a multiracial, multiethnic society. "Embracing diversity," an issue largely neglected before the 1970s, proceeded along numerous avenues. The most pressing challenge was to create a public school system capable of preparing children from a variety of backgrounds to compete as equals in the modern economy. Past leaders in Houston had made great headway in developing institutions of higher education, but they had seldom focused their attentions and resources on the public schools.

Before business/civic leaders could

tackle such issues, they had to find ways to organize civic initiatives. Captain Baker and friends could meet in a hotel coffee shop; 8F could meet in a single hotel suite; 8F and others could meet in a hotel lobby; the expanded leadership needed to move a larger, more diverse city required the grand ballroom.

During the oil boom of the 1970s, prosperity washed aside many such concerns. But when the oil price bubble burst in the 1980s, the region went into a downward spiral as devastating to its economy as the onset of the Great Depression had been. This "oil depression" raised fundamental questions about the city's

leum industry? Could other industries be added to the region's growing space and medical industries to build a more balanced regional economy?

The new generation of business leaders was too large to list, too diverse to classify easily. It included bankers and lawyers operating within banks and law firms far different than those of Captain Baker's era; Houston-based developers active around the world with a bit of the dash of Jesse Jones; representatives of Houston-based oil, gas, and oil-related manufacturing with a more corporate tinge than their counterparts in 8F; and a variety of others from emerging new

reached back into the world of Jesse Jones and the 8F crowd and forward into the creation of the Greater Houston Partnership. Like most of Houston's business/civic leaders, he grew up in a small town, the north Texas community of Paris. Love's early and lasting impression of Houston came during World War II. While training to be an Army Air Force navigator at Ellington Field, he came into the city on weekend passes to visit the U.S.O. He came away impressed with Houston's prospects, especially after receiving a grand tour of sorts by older Houston businessmen who, in typical booster tradition, showed soldiers like Love the town while touting it as a good place to make a career after the war.

After flying twenty-five B-17 missions over Europe with the Eighth Air Force, Love returned to the University of Texas and completed his business degree. Then, as so many small-town Texans had done before him, he cast his future with that of Houston. As he succeeded in building his own business and then in becoming a banker, he gradually became more involved in civic affairs. Taken under the wing of 8Fer Gus Wortham, he gained growing prominence in civic affairs as he moved up to become chairman and CEO of Texas Commerce Bancshares, a major downtown bank with a predecessor once owned by Jesse Jones. Love did not have the option to keep old-fashioned "banker's hours" while devoting his time to civic issues. In a rapidly changing banking industry, he worked overtime to meet the rising tide of competition and to build a statewide bank holding company. But he also found time to become involved in a wide range of civic projects. One of these was the reorganization of the city's business/civic leadership to better meet the needs of a city that continued to grow larger, both in population and area, and more diverse, both in ethnic and economic terms.³⁷

Love joined a collection of civic leaders who sought to create some sort of "big umbrella" capable of pulling together business/civic leaders in their sprawling city. The Chamber of Commerce had done this at times in the city's past, notably during the hard times of the 1930s. In the 1980s, as in the 1930s, economic development was badly needed, and the Greater Houston Partnership (GHP) evolved to address



Robert Onstead (right), 1990 chairman of the Greater Houston Partnership, recognizes Ben Love for his leadership.

future. The challenge of recovery attracted the efforts of business and civic leaders who had come to prominence in the boom years. During the flush times of the 1970s, this diverse group had taken to the task of mobilizing the city's resources to sustain and expand the cultural and educational institutions created by earlier generations. But hard times brought harder tasks. How could the "energy capital of the world" cushion itself against the cycles of boom and bust that plagued the petro-

industries from space, to medical, to computers. The downtown business community still dominated, but many others emerged from the numerous "satellite cities" that had grown around Houston by the 1980s. An increasingly ethnically diverse middle class and professional class had a seat at the table, as did representatives of suburbs with futures closely tied to Houston's.

One of the best symbols of this generation is Ben Love, whose experiences

this need. The list of its founders and its early presidents reads like a 1990s roll-call of a suite 8F with the walls knocked out to take in the entire eight floor. But the rank-and-file members included a much broader slice of Houston than had been characteristic of previous generations of business/civic leaders. Men and women from businesses large and small were joined in this big tent by people from non-profits, social service providers, and other professions. With some success, the Partnership reached out far beyond the all-white male downtown businessmen who dominated earlier generations of civic leaders.

The key issues faced by the Partnership were at first glance similar to those of earlier eras in the region's history. As always, first came the need for jobs. Amid sustained economic growth in the decades after World War II, job creation seemed on automatic pilot, but the oil bust of the 1980s demolished that illusion. The diversification of the regional economy became a central concern of the Greater Houston Partnership, and the organization's work has reinforced market forces in fostering the emergence of a more diverse set of medical, space, and technical industries to supplement the region's traditional core activities in oil, gas, petrochemicals, and oil-related manufacturing.

Business conditions at the turn of the twenty-first century, however, present stark differences from those during most of the twentieth century, and these differences have profound implications for civic leadership. Many of the potential business/civic leaders in Houston today did not move here to stay as of old, but rather are passing through as they move up the corporate escalators. Will such individuals display the long-term commitment to the city that characterized earlier generations? In addition, an intense merger movement in oil, natural gas, and banking has greatly reduced the number of large companies in these vital industries, further reducing the list of potential difference makers in civic affairs. When, for example, a company with the record of good civic works of Tenneco disappears, the void is most difficult to fill. Can the "foreign" banks that have purchased the major Houston banks reasonably be expected to be their equals as corporate citizens? Finally, a

deregulated, globally competitive business world has become meaner and more demanding than the business environment in the postwar boom years. Civic leadership is easier to embrace when your business is on automatic pilot than when it is in a fight to the death for survival in worldwide competition. The future will make its own judgments of Ken Lay's business decisions, but his full to overflowing plate of civic endeavors had to deflect his attentions from his duties at Enron at a critical juncture in his company's development. Ironically, Lay's many civic contributions will probably be buried beneath the rubble of Enron's collapse, a cruel reminder that business leadership in civic affairs has always flowed from the power and resources of successful companies.

In the 1990s, Lay spoke persuasively about the need to build Houston into a world-class city so that world-class companies such as Enron could continue to attract the talented employees they needed to succeed. Despite his company's collapse, we should not dismiss Lay's sentiments. A world-class city, properly understood, requires a business climate that embraces much more than low taxes, lax regulation, and neglected public services. Needed are other factors that could contribute to profitable business operations in the long-term, such as an excellent public school system, clean air and water, efficient transportation, and safe working conditions. Success in a global economy will also accrue to businesses and regions that understand how to take advantage of the skills and ambitions of people from diverse backgrounds. A healthy business climate, much more broadly defined than in the city's past, will continue to be vital to its future.

Aggressive business/civic leadership will continue to play important roles in shaping Houston, but modern leaders face a more difficult set of challenges than their predecessors. The rapid population growth and spectacular expansion of regional-based companies and industries since the heyday of 8F now call for the redoubled efforts of the even larger collection of people and resources encompassed by the GHP. The activities of Houstonian George Mitchell—from the redevelopment of his hometown of Galveston, to his Houston-based oil company, to his planned community at The Woodlands—

exemplify the growing economic integration of the Houston Metropolitan Area.

The big umbrella required to hold those who deserve a voice in shaping the future of this sprawling region will need seats for many such leaders from outside the downtown business community. It will need more seats for the growing number of women and for representatives of "minorities" who are rapidly becoming a majority in the region. But most of all, it will need seats for people with the vision and commitment to identify critical problems and solve them.

As we go about this last demanding task, we would do well to recall the words of those who came before us. They were very good at job creation and at building and sustaining institutions of high culture, higher education, and sports. Looking back, we might wish that they had paid greater attention to other issues such as pollution control, public education, historical preservation, and green space. But we cannot honestly examine their record without noting the mix of commitment, passion, energy, and, yes, money they brought to the civic affairs of their adopted city. If we could bottle that and serve it with lunch at the meetings of the Greater Houston Partnership (and many other groups), we might unleash a new generation of civic involvement capable of finding creative solutions to the many challenges presented by our ever-growing city. If we become pessimistic about meeting such challenges, we should recall the leap of faith required by those who looked at this small, hot, dirty town on a meandering bayou one hundred years ago and saw the raw material from which they could build a major metropolis. ■



Courtesy Brown & Root

A strong push from Brown & Root construction workers made the new Rice Stadium (shown here under construction) ready for the first game of the 1950 season.

SHIP CHANNELS AND AIRPORTS AND SPACE-CRAFT CENTERS might prove easy enough, but the harsher test of civic leadership proved to be the building of sports stadiums. 8F and many others spent much energy trying to acquire the most obvious symbol in popular culture of a "major league city"—major league sports teams. They also worked hard to build big time athletic programs at local universities. Both required large stadiums, which are expensive propositions. The high visibility of such projects and the mixture of public and private funds often used to build them assured that they would come under intense public scrutiny.

The first postwar effort at stadium building in Houston involved college football. Southwest Conference football was a major sport in these years, and Rice Institute had some of the best teams in its history in the 1940s and 1950s. By the late 1940s, boosters of the Rice football program found the existing stadium's capacity of about 30,000 to be inadequate. As the Brown brothers and Gus Wortham led discussions of the construction of a new stadium for Rice, other groups within the city also began to look into the prospects for building a stadium worthy of a city on the move.

Suddenly, proposals for new stadiums popped up all over. The fact that the city's rival to the north, Dallas, now had a fine new stadium to host the Cotton Bowl, added urgency to the debate. If Rice had a new stadium, the University of Houston, of course, needed one also. The Houston Fat Stock Show needed a new home worthy of its bulls. Glenn

McCarthy and others schemed to find a way to build a stadium capable of enticing an existing major league baseball team to move to Houston. Mayor Holcombe and the Houston City Council proposed the construction of "Houston Stadium," a 110,000 seat monster to be used by everyone and to try to attract such events as the Pan American Games.

As 8F and others argued about the best way to move a large stadium off the drawing board, Brown and Wortham finally lost patience. They convinced the Rice board to go it alone. The proposed Rice Stadium quickly grew in size from 50,000 seats to 70,000. Wortham took the lead in selling options to buy season tickets that netted about \$1.6 million of the final cost of \$2.1 million. The Browns pushed the project forward by agreeing to build the stadium at cost. Brown & Root attacked the job as it had the construction of ships for the war effort, with crews working two ten-hour shifts in a determined nine-month blitz to complete the stadium before the start of the football season in September of 1950. When a reporter asked Herman Brown if the stadium would be finished on time, Brown famously answered with his own question: "Is it a day game or a night game?" He obviously relished the task of proving that his company and his friends at 8F were up to the task. The night game was played on the scheduled date with all the seats full in a mostly finished stadium worthy of a major college football program in a major league city.³⁴