

The Houston Academy of Medicine— Texas Medical Center Library: A Notable Medical Athenaeum

by Kimberly Youngblood

The Texas Medical Center (TMC) in Houston, Texas, with forty-two member institutions and thirteen hospitals, is the largest medical center in the world with some of the world's best doctors. The TMC stands as an example of innovative healthcare and major medical accomplishments because its institutions and doctors offer a network of knowledge, skill, and expertise that is remarkable. Undoubtedly, any doctor would say that access to knowledge is the basis of his or her expertise. At the Texas Medical Center, the Houston Academy of Medicine-Texas Medical Center (HAM-TMC) takes the lead in

providing medical knowledge to the medical community. The Medical Center Library is a dynamic member of the TMC that offers a unique story and history.

The name of this institution has endured as many transitions as the library itself. Over the years it has been called the Houston Academy of Medicine Library, the Texas Medical Center Library, the Houston Academy of Medicine Library for the Texas Medical Center, and finally in 1970 it was given the name it is known as today.¹ Besides the library's official name are its common names such as the "the Jones

Library" or "the Med Center Library."²

The HAM-TMC Library's story began in 1903 with the formation of the Harris County Medical Society (HCMS), which sought to improve public health and medical standards for the Harris County community. In the early 1900s, Houston doctors had to deal with devastating contagious diseases such as typhoid, malaria, tuberculosis, and yellow fever with little semblance of sanitation or health standards. Shortly after the inception of the HCMS, it became clear that member physicians required resources and books to increase their knowledge in certain aspects



View of the front of the Jesse Jones library in 1954 shortly after its completion. Unless otherwise noted, all photographs in this article are courtesy McGovern Historical Collections, Houston Academy of Medicine - Texas Medical Center Library

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Kimberly Youngblood is an Academic Advisor in the Scholars' Community program at the University of Houston. She has a MA in Public History and presently is working on a PhD in Environmental History at the University of Houston.



The addition of nearly 72,000 square feet in the 1970s helped to alleviate the library's growing pains.

of medicine. They also needed a place to store and to use these materials—a library.

In December 1904, the HCMS formed a committee to arrange a location for a library. The legal issue of how to attain and own real property stymied the committee's progress until 1915, when it organized a holding company, the Houston Academy of Medicine.³ The Society's library was funded and maintained by donations until 1922, when they decided to assess a yearly library fee of ten dollars. Luckily, many of the HCMS members contributed additional funding through liberal donations, and by 1923 the Society secured a location of 1,200 square feet for the HCMS library in the Keystone building in downtown Houston. At its founding, the library maintained only 1,871 books and 56 journals,⁴ but its holdings grew steadily, forcing numerous moves to accommodate its ever-expanding collections. By 1942, the library maintained 13,235 books and 221 journals, and was "the 13th largest county society library in the country,"

according to published statistics.⁵

Yet, even bigger and better changes were on the way. The trustees of the M. D. Anderson Foundation, decided to establish a cancer research center.⁶ At the same time, the Baylor College of Medicine (BCM) was looking for a new location for its medical school. BCM, along with their medical library, chose to move to the Texas Medical Center in 1943.

All those involved quickly realized that they could better serve the medical community by merging the Baylor College of Medicine Library, the M. D. Anderson Hospital for Cancer Research Library, and the Houston Academy of Medicine Library, and the libraries of the Houston Academy of Dentistry and other TMC institutions to create a first-class medical library.⁷ The Texas Medical Center continued its rapid growth, and all too quickly, TMC officials recognized the pressing need for a larger building. So, the library moved into a vacant building in the medical center, and by 1949, books were stacked on the floor since shelf space was non-existent.⁸ That persistent problem of

space had reared its ugly head again.

Since the founding of the Texas Medical Center, officials recognized the need for a permanent and larger building to ensure the quality of a great medical center library. Their goal was to build a first class medical library that would offer a selection of books and journals covering every aspect of medicine. A 1944 campaign for a Library Building Fund collected almost \$100,000 from HCMS members, dentists, the Women's Auxiliary to the HCMS, and others.⁹ Yet, this was only a fraction of the estimated \$1.25 million cost of the new library building sought for the Texas Medical Center. Even after the approval of the plans, the location, and the costs of the new facility, it took almost ten years to finish raising the funds needed to begin construction.

A generous \$300,000 gift from the M. D. Anderson Foundation would not cover the entire cost of the new building. A project of this magnitude required multiple large donations and a person with vision to bring it to fruition. Jesse H. Jones, a well-known Houston financier and philanthropist, stepped forward and played an instrumental role in assuring the completion of the medical center library. Many agree that if it had not been for his charitable contribution, the library as it is known today would not exist. In his autobiography, Leopold Meyer declared, "I admired Jesse Jones for his willingness to lend his name as an endorser of any worthy cause."¹⁰ In fact, Jesse Jones not only lent his name, but he contributed \$600,000 toward the financing of the library.¹¹ Meyer described Jesse Jones' philanthropic nature: "No one would challenge the statement that Jesse Jones was very liberal. It may be that the Jones Library in the Texas Medical Center is a monument to this generosity and humanitarianism, but he was subjected to endless calls to give to the many worthy causes which abound in our community."¹²

Jones recognized that an investment in a first-class medical library would better all of the Houston community. In addition to his monetary support, Jones took a personal interest, working with architect Cameron Fairchild in the planning and construction of the new library building. The new library building would accommodate 140,000 books, Texas Medical Center administration offices,

an auditorium, and study and meeting rooms.¹³ The ivory colored four-story building made of Texas shell limestone would sit on 3.34 acres, and would be called the Texas Medical Center Library. During the initial planning and construction of the main library building, Jones and Fairchild formulated an expansion plan to accommodate the library's future growth. This plan included appending fourteen floors to the main building whenever the library outgrew its original space.¹⁴

In fact, throughout the construction of the library, Jones conducted regular building inspections. Dr. William Fields recalled one of these inspections that demonstrated Jones' dry sense of humor. In the spring of 1954, Jones, Cameron Fairchild, Dr. William Fields, and Lemuel Bottoms (the construction superintendent) toured the construction site.

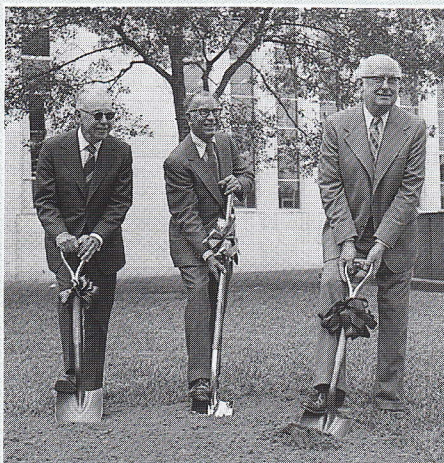
According to Fields:

The restrooms which are in the front of the building on the first floor have windows going from the top to the bottom of the building. When one entered either restroom, there was nothing between "him or her" and the sidewalk outside. One could look directly into the men's restroom and see the urinals. Mr. Jones took one look and said, "Fairchild, is this the way you have it at home?" Fairchild's face became bright red and he did not know what to say.¹⁵

Of course, blinds were installed on the windows, and today the bushes and trees planted in front of the windows add extra privacy. Considering all of Jones' support and input, it was fitting that the new facility was named the Jesse H. Jones Library Building. The Texas Medical Center Library moved into its new home on September 9, 1954.

Friends of the Library

With the library established, supporters decided to form a group to support its programs and activities. The Friends of the Texas Medical Center Library would be independent of library administration, and could provide additional funds for library programs and activities they deemed appropriate.¹⁶ In 1958, the group sent out invitations to 10,000 Houstonians to join in support of the library. They realized that as medical science progressed, more demands would be



Construction of the new library addition begins, 1974.

made on the library to accommodate those in the medical profession. Without the implementation of some sort of support group to aid the library monetarily, it would be impossible to acquire the much needed books, journals, programs, and activities that are required of a distinguished medical center library.¹⁷

Additionally, contributions from the Friends of the Library allowed the library to establish an archive for collections of rare books and materials from significant individuals. In this way, the Friends enabled the Texas Medical Center Library to expand its services, and begin its greatest contribution, the John P. McGovern Historical Collections & Research Center.

The archive officially opened in September 1977 as the Special Collections Department, and after a few name changes it has rested upon its present namesake for very good reasons.¹⁸ Dr. John P. McGovern had an enormous interest in American medicine and also in Dr. William Osler's historical collection and writings as a pediatrician. So, in 1985, Dr. McGovern began donating part of his personal collection to the archive. Much of what he donated pertained to his interest in topics such as allergies, biomedical classics, and William Osler, as well as books and reference materials regarding the history of medicine. Additionally, in 1996, the library's Board of Directors established the McGovern Endowment to preserve and process the historical collections in the archive.¹⁹

A New Era

By the 1970s, the HAM-TMC Library desperately needed additional space to

accommodate its burgeoning collection of books and journals. The library facilities had become inadequate for a complex the size of the Texas Medical Center and its ever-expanding number of students, doctors, and faculty. The Houston Academy of Medicine went into action, designing plans to build a new \$3 million, fourteen-story building addition that would include supporting columns for an underground parking garage. The plan also called for a four-floor addition adjoining the existing and new buildings. The new foundation could support additional floors that might be needed in the future. The Houston Academy of Medicine hoped this plan would resolve the issue of space for the library. In 1973, the garage construction began, and by 1974, the construction of the library addition was in full swing. When the addition was successfully merged to the original building, the library's usable space practically tripled to 71,059 net square feet.²⁰

The library experienced other significant changes in the 1970s. In 1971, for example, the library implemented an automated circulation system. The next year it received its first federal grants to aid with library programs and efficiency. MEDLARS, an off-line access reference service, was replaced by MEDLINE, its new on-line version. MEDLINE combined with INDEX MEDICUS allowed access to 2,300 indexed medical journals for library users.²¹

Unfortunately, the 1970s marked a tragic event in the history of the HAM-TMC Library, the devastating flood of June 15, 1976. Damages exceeded \$200,000, convincing President Ford to declare the Texas Medical Center a disaster area.²² It seems that a major culprit for the flood was a large drainage ditch constructed in 1949 to link the TMC to Brays Bayou. An underground conduit later replaced the ditch; however, it was not large enough to handle all of the heavy rainfall from that storm.²³

Fortunately, the water from the flood began to seep into the street level (basement) of the library in the afternoon, when employees were still at work. This enabled library employees to salvage materials that otherwise would have been lost. During the 1970s, the library stored its collection of rare books on the lower shelves of the stacks in the street level,

and there were even plans to open an Audiovisual Services area down there as well. When the water began to creep in, employees attempted to save as many rare books and journals as possible by stacking them on tabletops to avoid the three inches of water covering the entire floor. Efforts were then made to move as much of the furniture as possible to the first floor of the library. Suddenly, however, a glass window that had been holding back the raging floodwater broke and the wall in the Audiovisual Department gave way. The water quickly rose from three inches to about thirty inches. For the first time, but certainly not the last, a human chain was formed to move the rare books from the tabletops to higher ground.²⁴ After this catastrophe, the executive director of the library, Samuel Hitt, sent out a notice to all staff that any books, journals, or supplies placed in the street level should not be placed on the bottom two shelves.²⁵ It was good advice, but twenty-five years later, it did not prove to be enough.

Tropical Storm Allison in June of 2001 was another unforeseen catastrophic event that caused devastating flooding. Unlike the flood of 1976, this storm hit the Houston area on a Friday, and the significant damage became apparent only over the weekend. With no time to salvage all of the valuable books and journals, the only thing left to do was to wade into four-foot deep water and salvage as much as possible. Library employees and other TMC staff pulled books, journals, and manuscripts from the murky water in the street level of the library, boxed them, and then put them in a freezer semi-truck. These trucks transported the damaged materials to a mold-remediation company in Massachusetts that used a freeze-drying process to save whatever could be saved. Despite the best efforts of the staff, however, significant losses of books and journals occurred. As a result, the John P. McGovern Historical Collections & Research Center, the archive for the library, moved its institutional and manuscript collections to a facility outside of the Texas Medical



Library underground parking garage completely under water after Tropical Storm Allison, June 2001. Courtesy Baylor College of Medicine Archives

Library employees try to salvage books and articles during the flood of 1976.



Center to ensure its safety. The new facility is spacious enough to handle years of donated collections, and is located approximately two miles from the Texas Medical Center, outside of the flood zone.

The HAM-TMC Library is a unique institution because it is governed jointly by seven Texas Medical Center institutions: Baylor College of Medicine, Houston Academy of Medicine, Institute of Biosciences and Technology-Texas A&M University, Texas Medical Center, Texas Woman's University-Houston, University of Texas Health Science Center-Houston, and The University of Texas M. D. Anderson Cancer Center. In 1991, the library was designated as the Regional Medical Library (RML) by the National Network of Libraries of Medicine. In this capacity it serves a five state region including Arkansas, Louisiana, Texas, New Mexico, and Oklahoma. The RML is located in the basement level of the main library. The main focus of its mission is to provide biomedical information to doctors liv-

ing in the five state region. It also provides medical information to the public that might assist them in health-related decisions.

The HAM-TMC Library has withstood many changes and challenges, yet it has continued to grow and respond to the needs of the medical community it supports. It is the principal library for the Texas Medical Center and receives support from sixteen TMC health-science institutions. As the information age progressed, the library advanced its capabilities to provide library users with medical and health data via computer. On PubMed alone, the National Library of Medicine citation database, the library offers access to over 4,000 electronic journals. It houses over 300,000 books and journals, and offers consumer health materials in several languages such as Spanish, Vietnamese, and Chinese.²⁶

The HAM-TMC Library not only has a unique history as an unprecedented institution, but it plays an important role in the Texas Medical Center today. It provides scholars as well as doctors, nurses, medical students, and the public with medical, health, and scientific knowledge and historical information. As Mrs. Bushman, one of the first members of the Friends of the Texas Medical Center Library, stated, "The library really belongs to everyone, for eventually all of us, at one point or another, get to visit the doctor or dentist."²⁷ The more knowledge they have, the better expertise they will maintain and the better healthcare the public will receive. The HAM-TMC Library is just as unique and ever changing as the Texas Medical Center. Through all the years, transitions, and hardships that HAM-TMC Library has experienced, it has proven to be a reliable resource of research material and medical knowledge for healthcare professionals, students, doctors, and the public. ■