

WORLD WAR II VETERANS AND THE G.I. BILL REVITALIZE THE UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON, 1944-1946

By Betsy Morin

Returning veterans eagerly selected classes and enrolled at the University of Houston under the G.I. Bill following World War II.

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The first two buildings on the University of Houston campus—the Roy Gustav Cullen Memorial Building and the Science Building—stood in solitary splendor in the early 1940s, at the epicenter of what became, six decades later, a 667-acre campus serving 40,000 students in over ninety buildings and facilities. Local businessmen, and Houstonians like the Cullen, Settegast, and Taub families, to name a few, played an instrumental role in the school's early development. By 1942, two new buildings, funded in part by New Deal programs, joined the original structures, providing space to train local navy reserves and recruits through the U.S. Navy Reserve Vocational School. These young men experienced a taste of university life before joining our forces fighting overseas. UH President Edison E. Oberholtzer, who led the University from 1927 to 1950, drew the connection between the institution, the war, and its veterans:

Since its founding, the University has tried to do everything possible to enable young people and adults alike to get advance training while they live at home and while they work for a livelihood. Now, as we shift with the nation to a war footing, we will seek new assignments as part of the overall defense effort; but we will not forget either our antecedents, or the long future.

All University of Houston curricula are designed to be vital and significant, and to be presented in relation to the world in which the student must live. We began, and we will continue, as a service institution, undergoing continuous growth and expansion to provide whatever courses are needed. The deciding factor for us is not tradition, but what the individual needs.¹

The 1940 Selective Service registration affected 77,177 men in Harris County alone, and since UH enrollment drew largely from commuter students, the University must have felt a tremendous drain. Dr. Walter Kemmerer, administrative assistant to President Oberholtzer, expressed concern about the draft's impact on future enrollment and the University's role as a supporter of national and community interests. With both objectives in mind, Kemmerer pursued the Army and Navy Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC) units. Eventually three Navy training units and a small Army Air Corps unit occupied campus facilities, boosting enrollment while allowing UH to play an active role in the nation's war efforts.²

Enrollment at the University of Houston steadily decreased from 2,494 in the fall of 1941 to 1,508 in 1942 and declined again to 1,015 in the spring of 1944.³ Overwhelmingly, the largest decrease occurred when male students enlisted or were drafted. Tuition from the war production courses and navy and civilian pilot training classes kept the University functioning as students (mostly male) left school to enter the armed forces. Extracurricular student activities halted out of respect for those serving in the war. The University appeared in limbo from 1942 to 1944 until the Selective Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944, or G.I. Bill of Rights, provided a generous program for returning servicemen and women.

The G.I. Bill had far-reaching social implications by giving veterans access to higher education as they prepared to reenter the workforce. Over ten million WWII veterans took advantage of the vocational and educational benefits, which



The Navy Reserve Vocational Training School prepared sailors for their jobs in the military, and their positive experience at UH encouraged them to return as university students after the war.

paid \$500 per year toward tuition for college or technical training along with a living allowance. This delayed their reentry into the workforce, thus relieving some of the stress on the job market caused by so many individuals looking for work at one time. While certain provisions in the G.I. Bill offered low interest home loans, it also alleviated housing shortages by placing large numbers of veterans at private and public institutions, shifting the housing burden to universities or colleges. Campuses such as UH established "university villages" to accommodate them.

UH's enrollment increased to 2,720 by fall 1944 with a few veterans enrolled under the G.I. Bill. After Japan's surrender, more soldiers returned home, and by 1946, the fall enrollment soared to 10,028, including over 6,000 veterans.

In 2000, I interviewed several World War II veterans who took advantage of the education provisions in the G.I. Bill and were representative of the approximately 1,400 veterans who enrolled at UH after the war and lived on campus. These interviews and university records reveal that World

Families joined married veterans in extended trailers and in military barracks adapted for use on campus.



War II veterans revitalized the University's campus life as they actively participated in academics, sports programs, and other student activities. The solid foundation for future expansion that students, faculty, administrative personnel, and business community leaders built from 1927 to 1944 provided a launching pad for the explosion of activities following World War II. The majority of students who enrolled during these early years came from high schools in and around Houston. The war years kept some Houstonians close to home. Many who could afford college, but perhaps not room and board, elected to attend the small university.

UH held day and night classes, and many students worked while attending the University. Business opportunities along with the war and draft depleted the job market, and alumnus Elizabeth Rockwell remembered thinking, "I don't want to wait until I graduate; I want to get into the business world and get one of these jobs [that belong to] some of these men who are going to war, or into the draft, or whatever."⁴ Rockwell correctly ascertained that World War II was draining local businesses of manpower and elected to stop her formal education in 1942 to pursue her career. She continued her relationship with UH, however, and in later years made many monetary and educational contributions to the University, especially to the University of Houston Libraries.

Universities across the nation reacted differently to the education provisions of the G.I. Bill. Some prestigious institutions such as the University of Chicago openly scoffed at the idea of the "common man" entering hallowed university halls, but the University of Houston planned ahead for just such an occurrence.⁵ The Board of Regents, with its chairman Hugh Roy Cullen leading the way, requested housing from the Federal Housing Authority (FHA).

Beginning in the summer of 1944 and continuing through 1946, housing authorities granted UH buildings from the Federal Works Agency (FWA), which served as temporary classrooms, 320 residential trailers (later known as Trailer Village), and 350 tiny apartments that made up part of Veterans' Village. Kemmerer increased the faculty from forty-four in 1934 to one hundred by 1945.

Other important changes followed. In December 1944, the Veterans Administration selected UH as a site for a Veterans Administration Advisement Center, and student veterans enabled UH to assume a higher status among Texas's colleges, revitalizing UH campus life as early as 1945. That year, the University separated from the Houston Independent School District under Senate Bill 207, which launched UH as a "new" university protected by the Texas constitution.⁶

Instead of "Cougar High," UH had a new image. In addition, graduates from UH's naval, army, and air unit classes provided good advertisement. These students remembered their training years and some returned to inquire about registration after the war. Other returning disabled and discharged veterans heard about UH from buddies while serving in the armed forces.⁷ Some gravitated towards the University because the region offered job opportunities, while local veterans may have been influenced by a desire to

remain close to home. The city of Houston itself also drew students and, even today, thousands of UH alumni reside in the Houston area.

UH along with the staff from the Veterans Advisement Center assisted veterans with registration, receiving their subsistence allowance, housing, and career guidance. R. O. Jonas served as the chief counselor, and Roy Crouch headed the psychological services. The counselors provided stability in the veterans' readjustment process. By September 1944, twenty-nine UH students had enrolled under the G.I. Bill. Kemmerer urged the counselors to "do whatever is necessary to develop a successful program of education for veterans."⁸

The University accommodated veterans' educational advancement in various ways. Kemmerer initiated a policy that allowed veterans to enroll any time of the year. For those who needed background education before taking an upper level class, UH offered a group of "130" classes, which explains the wide variety of course numbers that appear in the Veterans Office Records. "130" classes varied each month and included math and English refresher courses along with physics and drawing. The *Houston Press* reported ten veterans had not completed high school but wanted to train in vocational areas such as radio, shop, auto mechanics, refrigeration, and diesel engines. UH administered any needed testing, and veterans received credit for army and basic training. By November 1944, approximately eighty World War II veterans had enrolled under the G.I. Bill.⁹

UH had two divisions of education in the early forties: the junior college division, which offered vocational and technical programs; and a senior college division, which



Registration lines swelled with veterans when enrollment topped 10,000 in 1946.

provided liberal arts classes. By February 1945, the junior college division became better known as the University of Houston Vocational School. It offered courses in machine tool-making, machine shop, drafting, business training, telephone switchboard design and operation, fundamentals of electricity, needle trades, cosmetology, home economics, and automobile, diesel engine, radio, and electrical appliance repair. Review and preparatory classes in English, industrial math, physics, drawing, and machine shops provided basic instruction for those classes. The senior college division offered liberal arts and sciences, six different foreign languages, engineering, pre-law, pre-med, teacher training, and journalism. In December, to accommodate the demands of increased enrollment, UH added six day and evening courses over a special six-week timeframe to allow veterans to earn six additional semester hours credit.¹⁰

In a 1945 letter, the Veterans Advisement and Guidance Services stated that the University's objectives were to "help and establish an independent, self-supporting American citizen, provide gainful occupation, and educate an active member of the community." The Veterans Advisement Guidance Services also wrote to Kemmerer regarding new "vocational courses needed due to increased veteran enrollment." That year vocational studies added courses in refrigeration and air conditioning, drawing, and machine shop; industrial classes expanded physics and mathematics; practical academic curriculum added English and "130" classes. At year's end, an analysis of the "130" classes showed that out of 1,120 veterans who responded, 30% took every "130" class available, 20% took one or more, and 50% took conventional college courses.¹¹



Veterans influenced the University in areas beyond academic schedules and facilities. On November 20, 1945, student pressure convinced the Board of Regents to authorize an intercollegiate athletics program. The University applied to and was accepted by the Lone Star Conference (LSC), which was primarily a basketball conference. At the time, other LSC universities had up to thirty returning letterman, while UH had not participated in intercollegiate competition. Instead, the 1944-1945 UH basketball team played local high schools or junior colleges. University of Houston Alumni Association (UHAA) member and Cuban native, Tony Moré attended UH as a foreign exchange student and remembers playing basketball with naval reserves and returning veterans from 1944 to 1945.¹²

UH recruited players to join team members Dick Pratt, Louis Brown, Charlie Carpenter, Pete Sealy, and Bill Swanson. Willie Wells transferred to UH from Sam Houston State University. World War II veteran Guy Lewis enrolled at UH under the G.I. Bill in November 1945 instead of returning to Rice Institute after the war and soon joined the basketball team. UH won its opening LSC game against number-one-ranked North Texas and went on to win the conference championship two consecutive years.¹³

In September 1946, Jack and Welcome Wilson's father, Jack Wilson, Sr., selected the University of Houston to further his sons' education because he wanted his sons to attend a university in a city where business contacts could advance their careers. He also believed that Houston "was a land of opportunity." At first Jack, Jr., thought his father meant Rice Institute, but his father was considering a "new university—the University of Houston." When the Wilson entourage arrived on UH's campus, they saw thousands forming an orderly registration line stretching from the Recreation Building's gymnasium to Cullen Boulevard. The Wilsons sought an interview with UH President Oberholtzer, but he was unavailable. When his assistant, Dr.



Welcome Wilson enrolled at the University in September 1946 at the insistence of his father, who saw UH as the best choice for a future Houston businessman.

Kemmerer, graciously admitted the group into his office, Jack Wilson, Sr., proclaimed: "My sons want to attend *your* University." Kemmerer looked out his office window and announced, "Well, they will have a lot of company!"¹⁴

The Wilson brothers shared a trailer in the Veteran Village, where a committee of tenants handled everyday affairs and social matters. Life there varied for each occupant. "Bums, scholars, guys that would lock their trailer doors and not ever come out because they wanted to study" occupied the village. The trailer section that Jack and Welcome occupied contained minimal space for sleeping and eating and offered nothing in the way of bathroom facilities, but the low rent with all utilities paid made it acceptable. The restroom and shower area for an entire section of trailers was located two blocks away. Times were lean; even with Jack's veterans' benefits, the two brothers at times had only the bare necessities. Veterans



The University's Trailer Village accommodated the influx of veterans in need of housing under the G.I. Bill. Though the conditions were less than ideal, the experience left life-long memories.

Club meeting notes from 1945 to 1946 mention drainage and garbage problems, along with poor lighting and streets. An October 1947 *Cougar* article focused on the Veterans Club's concern over the "atmospheric and industrial conditions east of the University of Houston." Jack remembered once when they started dinner, "the stench from the meat packaging company reached us and we took a look at the can of chili..." Needless to say, they lost their appetite!¹⁵

Other returning World War II veterans and UHAA members, Don McKusker and his roommate, Tony Bruno, also shared a singles trailer. Their unit provided even fewer amenities than the Wilson brothers' since it did not contain a stove. Because Don and Tony lacked money to buy a hot plate, Don improvised by building a holder for their iron, which he took apart and placed upside down exposing the coils. Both young men alternated cooking chores, preparing various Scotch-Irish and Italian cuisines on this small "stove."¹⁶ Jeff Anderson and his new bride initially settled in a singles trailer but moved to an expandable trailer when she became pregnant. The extended sections provided room for a double bed along with a bathroom and kitchen. The trailer measured 20' x 20'.¹⁷ Married veterans like Joe Compton occupied one of the apartments in the surplus military barracks, which arrived at UH from Ellington Field and Camp Wallace late in 1946. The Compton's apartment consisted of an un-air conditioned, open space with a stove and refrigerator.¹⁸ Later, the University adapted them to other purposes.

All of these veterans adapted to their situations and soon became involved in campus activities. Others sought opportunities to supplement their income. Don McKusker concentrated on campus activities for the first two years and loved to attend all sporting events. The Wilson brothers along with Jack Valenti solicited advertisements for the University of Houston's campus newsletter, *The Cougar*.

UH's campus activities included the earlier-established Red Mask Players, Varsity Varieties, and Frontier Fiesta.

The veterans injected new life and vitality into these programs, especially Frontier Fiesta. Veterans also participated in the sports programs. Don McKusker remembered that the Veteran Advisement Center issued coupon books with numbered tickets for the various campus activities. Don took this as a subtle hint to attend all activities or have it look bad on his university record. Although Don did not play sports, he never needed an impetus to participate in student activities. After the high activity level he endured during the war, he felt an incessant drive for action.

Whether other veterans attended events due to an implied negative consequence, or whether they, too, continued to thrive on constant mental and physical stimulation, most veterans entered campus life with a vivacity seldom matched since. UH's expanded academic curriculum along with campus social life appealed to them. UH sports now included football, track, golf, tennis, basketball, and, surprisingly, ice hockey. Through this increased student participation, the University found the *esprit de corps* that Kemmerer had been searching for since 1940.

The increased enrollment and revenues generated by the G.I. Bill gave UH a giant push toward becoming a major university. Transforming rapidly from an arm of the local school district to a respected institution of higher education, UH expanded its faculty and facilities to accommodate its growing student body. Further, the changes made by administrators enabled UH to fulfill President Oberholtzer's vision of a university that would grow and expand while preparing students for the world in which they live.

Betsy Morin earned her B.A. and M.A. from the University of Houston and remains actively involved in supporting UH. For the past year, she has helped organize the December and May CLASS commencement breakfasts and serves as treasurer of Cougar Cookers. She is also a member of the Houston General Go Texan Committee.