

Country to City: North Harris County College and the Changing Scene in Gulf Coast East Texas

Marilyn D. Rhinehart

Nestled in the southern fringe of the East Texas Piney Woods, North Harris County College, twenty miles north of Houston's inner city between two major freeways, might appear to the unfamiliar observer to be set in the middle of "a far-flung wilderness."¹ Even one who travels to the campus regularly often recognizes at least two basic requirements of a rural East Texas setting—the early morning whistles of communicating "bob whites" and the fragrance and resonance of pines shifting in the breeze. However, the periodic roar of jet engines overhead, the drone of bulldozers within walking distance, and the sight of lines of automobiles pouring into concrete and asphalt parking lots suggest a phenomenon affecting numerous communities throughout the Sun Belt, especially those in the "golden buckle" of the Sun Belt,—the transformation of rural or suburban/rural centers into urban ones.² The founding of North Harris County College represents one manifestation of this remarkable alteration in north Harris County. And the transfiguration continues today, presenting special problems and opportunities which the college and the community supporting it must address.

Creation of the North Harris County Junior or Community College District in 1972 by voters in the Aldine, Spring, and Humble independent school districts reflected the burgeoning nationwide community college movement in post-World War II America. A uniquely American institution, the two-year college first appeared in small numbers in the late nineteenth century. Although initially attracting few supporters, this "institutional curiosity" began to thrive in the early decades of the twentieth century, largely

Marilyn D. Rhinehart is on the history faculty at North Harris County College.

¹Houston *Chronicle*, November 18, 1980.

²*The Wall Street Journal*, May 28, 1976. See also the Houston *Chronicle*, July 27, 1981 — Longview, Texas has recently joined other communities in achieving "urban" status according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

in response to the demands generated by the nation's increasingly urban-industrial orientation and an egalitarian impulse among Americans advocating the full realization of each person's potential. Post-World War II technological requirements, expansion of higher education opportunities with passage of the G.I. Bill, and the more cosmopolitan nature of postwar society fostered a phenomenal increase in community colleges. Today they are the fastest growing educational institutions in the United States. Their popularity can be attributed in part to low expense and the awesome responsibility they assume in service to their communities, offering academic-transfer, vocational-technical, and continuing education courses on an open-admission basis.³

In Texas recent community college growth has made the state a "pacesetter" in the Southwest and a model for other parts of the country. The state currently boasts forty-seven junior colleges on sixty campuses. Thirty-seven percent of all freshman and sophomore college students enrolled in semester length classes in the state attend junior colleges. This percentage increases to forty-four percent if one includes less than semester length enrollments in the computation.⁴ As the figures indicate, the junior college's contribution to postsecondary education in Texas is significant.

The community college's singlemost distinction lies in its responsiveness to community needs. Colleges within areas in a state of flux, such as north Harris County, demonstrate this unique quality best. A review of the region's recent history demonstrates how a changing economic base actually fomented the establishment of the college envisioned for years by far-sighted citizens interested in expanding the community's educational opportunities.

Longtime residents of the area encompassing the North Harris County College District marvel at the transformation undergone within the past thirty years. Historically a dairy and produce farming, ranching, and lumber and oil producing region, the locality now includes Houston Intercontinental Airport, one of the largest shopping centers in the Southwest, affluent residential subdivisions, billion dollar business and industrial parks, and skyrocketing property values. Development along FM 1960, formerly known as Jackrabbit Road and a primary thoroughfare across north Harris County, has surpassed the wildest dreams of speculators and lifetime residents, with no

³Leland L. Medsker and Dale Tillery, *Breaking the Access Barriers: A Profile of Two-Year Colleges* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1971), pp. 13-15.

⁴*Statistical Supplement to the Annual Report of the Coordinating Board, Texas College and University System, For Fiscal Year 1979*, (January 1980), pp. 14-15. *CB Study Paper 27, Coordinating Board Texas College and University System, Fall Headcount Enrollment Forecasts 1980-1990 Texas Postsecondary Educational Institutions*, (July 1980, rev. ed.), p. 3; Margaret C. Reap, former Director Staff Development/Institutional Research, NHCC, interview with author on August 31, 1981.

early end to the growth in sight.⁵ Ed M. Wells, chairman of the feasibility committee which presented the proposed college to voters in 1972, a charter and current member of the College Board of Trustees, and a twenty-six year resident of Spring, recalled the "strictly rural" nature of the region in the 1950s when "a person could stand in the middle of 1960, wait fifteen minutes, and maybe see one car." Now, he continued, "it takes fifteen minutes to get onto 1960!"⁶ H.J. "Buddy" Doering, also a steering committee member, trustee on the original college board, and another longterm Spring resident, remembered a time when he "knew nearly everyone who lived on 1960," an impossible feat today.⁷ *Houston City Magazine* described FM 1960 as "not much more than its name implied" as late as the 1970s: "a farm-to-market road that threaded quietly through the edge of the Piney Woods of East Texas." Today, the magazine noted, "the leisurely drives it once offered have been replaced by traffic jams rivaling anything rush hour Houston has to offer."⁸

A recent history of the Humble community, which FM 1960 also traverses, describes similar changes, noting, "the old hometown is no longer a quiet village where everybody knows everybody."⁹ William W. "Bill" Thorne, North Harris County College president since the institution's inception, a lifetime resident of the north Houston area, and former superintendent of Aldine Independent School District, recalled a school bond election during his tenure at Aldine where "I had a picture of a filling station and a picture of a motel to represent commercial growth in the area. That was the extent of industry there." The economic evolution within the college district has been, simply stated, "unbelievable."¹⁰

Similarly, other Americans across time have watched rural areas and towns evolve into cities. A partial explanation for the transformation can be found in farmers abandoning faltering agrarian ventures and migrating to more industrial-urban centers "to make a living." In Houston one can attribute growth in the mid-twentieth century not only to a booming industrial-based economy and resultant in-migration but also to an aggressive annexation policy which has enabled the city to extend into surrounding,

⁵*Houston Post*, May 20, 1973; *Houston Chronicle*, June 17, 1980; *Houston Chronicle*, June 16, 1980; *Houston Chronicle*, March 12, 1978.

⁶E.M. Wells, interview with author on July 27, 1981.

⁷H.J. Doering, interview with author on August 3, 1981.

⁸Melissa Frank Hightower, "Neighborhoods: The Piney Woods," *Houston Magazine* (July 1978).

⁹James Tull Chapter, DAR, *A History of the Humble, Texas Area* (1976), pp. 20-21.

¹⁰W.W. Thorne, interview with author on July 20, 1981.

unincorporated communities.¹¹ Under the impact of such a policy, the city, in Houston's case, has swallowed up the country, reshaping the landscape, lifestyles, and social values in the process.

One can see the effects of Houston's sprawl even more graphically in a report filed in 1979 by Rayford Kay, Harris County Agricultural Extension Agent. In 1960, he reported, seventy-one percent of Harris County was agricultural land. By 1974 that percentage had fallen to forty-four percent and continued to decline. "The city," he stated, "has pushed the local farmer gradually from Little York to Aldine, Spring, Klein, Tomball, [and] Cypress" and eventually could push the farmer completely out of the county.¹² Thus, in north Harris County "the sounds of the country—tractors grinding in the fields, cattle lowing as they head for the barn—have been drowned out by the roar of bulldozers clearing away acres of trees [pasture, and farmland] for shopping centers. . . ."¹³ Correspondingly, a Houston Chamber of Commerce executive, Marvin Hurley, wrote in 1966 that "the difference between country and city, or even between suburb and city has largely lost its meaning [in Houston]. Today Houston merges into the countryside in such a way that it is difficult to say where the city stops and the country begins."¹⁴

This description of the Houston metropolis assumed special meaning in the northern reaches of the county by the mid-1960s. In the previous decade "only those who couldn't live south of the bayou lived north of [it]."¹⁵ But with the construction of Champions Golf Course in 1958 and the opening of Houston Intercontinental Airport in 1969 the transformation from wooded aisles to paved streets began in earnest, despite some urban skepticism at the north side's adaptability to anything quite so cultural as playing golf and flying airplanes. "People said those folks [who initiated development in the FM 1960 area] are crazy. Nobody on the north side of the bayou plays golf. They wear overalls and go barefooted,"¹⁶ an attitude clearly indicative of the city's myopic perception of the northern suburb. Nevertheless, the visionaries emerged victorious over skeptics, and residential, business, and industrial developers soon appeared, attracted by the wooded environment and country like setting.¹⁷ Within the resulting flurry of economic activity initiated in the 1960s, the desire and the means to found a community college coalesced.

¹¹Houston Post, April 11, 1980; "Growth of Houston," Houston Annexation Report, Houston City Planning Department, July 19, 1976; Barry J. Kaplan, "Race, Income, and Ethnicity: Residential Change in a Houston Community, 1920-1970," *The Houston Review*, Vol. III, No. 1 (Winter 1981), p. 180.

¹²Houston Chronicle, September 13, 1979.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴Marvin Hurley, *Decisive Years for Houston*, (Houston: Houston Magazine, 1966), p. 3.

¹⁵W.W. Thorne, interview with author.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷Hightower, "Neighborhoods."

As early as the 1950s, the communities within North Harris County expressed active support for a junior college to serve local residents. In 1958 members of the Tomball Good Roads Committee, a northside community group whose interest extended far beyond just good roads, raised the idea of establishing such an institution. Local school district officials, however, found themselves in a position of cautious restraint, since the districts' tax base was still homestead-based and insufficient to support the added burden of a junior college.¹⁸

In the following decade, the idea moved closer to reality under the impact of emerging economic diversity and a population boom throughout north Harris County. Spearheading the effort was John A. Winship, Spring School District Superintendent and a shrewd businessman who early recognized the possible "commuter community" nature of the locale.¹⁹ Winship envisioned a college where north Harris County youth, typically without the means or opportunity to seek education beyond the secondary level, could add two years of higher education inexpensively to their educational experience and where local school districts could consolidate vocational-technical training facilities.²⁰

In the mid-1960s, Winship asked Aldine Superintendent Bill Thorne, a participant in the Tomball meeting where the idea for the college first reached the discussion stage and an avid enthusiast of the concept, to host superintendents from the Klein, Humble, and Spring school districts for a planning session. Armed with a positive feasibility study prepared at Winship's request in 1965 by a University of Houston graduate education class, the group embarked on its task of arousing community support to the idea.²¹ Shortly afterward, the Houston *Chronicle* announced a proposal by the Education Committee of the Houston Chamber of Commerce for creation of a county-wide junior college district, which would include the northern sector. Having had no indication such an idea was in the works, the north Harris County group was "thrown . . . into a state of confusion."²² "Placed in a position of having to thumb our nose at them and say we're going to do our own thing or . . . join the group," the north Harris County educators shelved their plans and supported, with limited enthusiasm, the subsequent county-wide proposition.²³

¹⁸W.W. Thorne, interview with author; see also the Houston *Chronicle*, June 17, 1973.

¹⁹Thomas E. Winship, interview with author on July 31, 1981.

²⁰W.W. Thorne, interview with author; H.J. Doering, interview with author; Thomas E. Winship, interview with author.

²¹W.W. Thorne, interview with author; Houston *Chronicle*, June 17, 1973.

²²Houston *Chronicle*, September 29, 1965.

²³W.W. Thorne, interview with author.

In 1968 Harris County residents cast their votes on the county-wide proposal, advanced by the Houston Community Junior College Commission headed by Dr. H.M. Landrum, Superintendent of Spring Branch Independent School District. Only twelve percent of the eligible voters turned out, and although Aldine, Klein, Tomball, Humble, and Spring all approved the concept of a county-wide college district, Houston voters rejected it, resulting in the proposal's quick demise.²⁴ In response to north county voters' apparent approval of the community college concept, plans for an independent college in the northern suburb proceeded again. Yet another obstacle would present itself in 1971 when Houston Independent School District Superintendent George Garver announced plans for a junior college within HISD. Sensitive to the need for proper timing in announcing their proposal, community leaders to the north did not perceive that moment an opportune one to start talking to their citizens about bond issues, building programs, and taxing entities. "It's pretty difficult to vote a tax entity," Thorne related, "when your neighbor to the south says we're going to have [a college] for free."²⁵

In fall of 1971, however, subsequent to the establishment of Houston Community College, the advocates of a college for north Harris County would see their dream closer to fruition. Out of a dinner meeting hosted by the Aldine School Board in October for Klein, Humble, and Spring school board officials came appointment of a steering committee to perform the logistical tasks necessary to bring the idea before local voters. As the committee completed its data collection and analysis for area school board approval, Tomball school officials requested that their district be included in the college district, sending Thorne, the report's architect, back to the drawing table. Shortly thereafter, Klein ISD withdrew from the proposed district when Klein voters rejected the prospect of increased taxation to support the college, apparently out of fear the Klein box might fail in the college election but the proposal still pass requiring the school district's tax support. This, in turn, precluded Tomball's inclusion in the college district, since state law required participating school districts to be contiguous, a prerequisite Tomball, without Klein, could no longer fulfill.²⁶ The remaining three districts, Aldine, Humble, and Spring, represented on a nine-member steering committee by citizens, district trustees, and superintendents, proceeded with the task at hand. The group successfully circulated petitions in the community calling for creation of a junior college in the area, acquired approval from the Coordinating Board of the Texas College and University System, met with county officials to set an election date, and initiated a public information

²⁴Houston *Chronicle*, September 27, 1968; Houston *Post*, December 30, 1971; Houston *Post*, September 29, 1968.

²⁵W.W. Thorne, interview with author.

²⁶*Ibid.*

campaign to arouse public support.²⁷ With these technical barriers crossed and little opposition apparent among residents, voters on October 7, 1972, overwhelmingly approved the college's establishment, sanctioned the proposed maximum tax rate of 30¢ per \$100 valuation, selected seven trustees to serve on the college board, and voted \$6.5 million in bonds for construction of a physical plant.²⁸ The postsecondary educational institution which North Harris County long had dreamed of had become a reality.

The community's effort to expand its educational offerings represented a true grassroots undertaking, initiated and carried to fulfillment by community leaders, local parent-teacher organizations, and school administrators and faculty members.²⁹ This action reflected, in turn, not only a typical neighborhood or small-town communal action but also one important characteristic of emerging cities. Houston Chamber of Commerce executive Hurley describes it in *Decisive Years for Houston*: "The history of cities . . . indicates that they are built through a continuous process of meeting needs and joining together for the achievement of mutual-interest goals." It is there, he continued, "where teamwork starts, where leadership is developed, and where joint efforts begin to solve problems and to capitalize on opportunities."³⁰ In establishing a postsecondary educational institution in north Harris County, residents narrowed the gap between a suburban/rural and suburban/urban existence, capitalizing on the opportunities economic development presented and responding directly to the community's need for postsecondary academic preparation and ongoing educational opportunities as well as to the technological demands of a sprawling urban metropolis. Correspondingly, the college's subsequent nine-year history demonstrates further indications of the evolving urban society in the area.

Although initial projections foretold rapid enrollment, tax base, and staffing increases concomitant with population and industrial expansion in the locality, actual growth far outstripped expectations.³¹ The original institution, which with 8 full-time faculty members and 613 students held its first classes in fall 1973 at Aldine High School, within three years had moved into its own facility on a 185-acre site and had become the fastest growing

²⁷*Ibid.*; H. J. Doering, interview with author; E.M. Wells, interview with author; Houston *Chronicle*, January 21, 1972.

²⁸W.W. Thorne, interview with author; H.J. Doering, interview with author; E.M. Wells, interview with author.

²⁹W.W. Thorne, interview with author; Houston *Post*, October 5, 1972.

³⁰Hurley, *Decisive Years for Houston*, pp. 254, 257.

³¹"North Harris County College Local Survey Report," pp. 10, 12; W.W. Thorne, interview with author; Margaret C. Reap, *North Harris County Population Study*, (April 1981), pp. 2, 6; Houston *Post*, February 9, 1973.

junior college in the state.³² In the fall of 1981, a student population of 8,000 could choose from nearly 1,000 class offerings, a dramatic increase over the 100 sections the college's first enrollees filled in 1973. Additionally, in the same semester nearly 8,000 north Harris County residents registered for continuing education classes meeting on campus and at fourteen off-campus sites.³³ Such growth corresponded to escalating population figures in the college district. In 1970 the 254-square mile district held an estimated population of 111,924. In 1981 census analysts projected the number to surpass a quarter of a million, a 163% increase which does not include new residents added to the district's rolls when New Caney Independent School District, to the northeast in Montgomery County, voted to join the college district in spring 1981. A recent population study projects similar growth patterns across the next five years to a possible high of 406,655 by 1985.³⁴ Compared to a 1965 population estimate of 80,000 with the Cypress-Fairbanks, Klein, Tomball, Aldine, Spring, and Humble school districts (all within the northern part of the county),³⁵ the aforementioned figures, coupled with a college district tax base which has expanded 500%³⁶ in nine years, are all the more significant in demonstrating the community's gravitation from suburban/rural to suburban/urban status.

Such a transition, within a locale or an institution, rarely occurs without problems. In the case of the college, the state's biennial funding is not geared to institutions encountering rapid annual enrollment increases. Growth also places widely divergent demands on available funds. Furthermore, "expected to be nearly all things to nearly all men and women,"³⁷ the community college must respond sensitively to alterations within the locale, as well as maintain its traditional standards, or losing community support, forfeit its lifeline. Adaptation is, of course, more difficult when changes come quickly. Finally, as numbers increase, so does the chance for the appearance of a condition about which urban residents often complain—the loss of individual identity in an expansive setting. This would be especially ironic in light of the community college's commitment to serving individual as well as community needs. To cope with such a condition, a number of community college boards, including trustees at North Harris County College, have introduced the multi-campus concept. The College Board of Trustees recently purchased a

³² Joe A. Airola, Vice-President/Dean of Instruction, NHCC, interview with author on July 28, 1981; *Houston Post*, August 2, 1973; *Houston Post*, October 14, 1976; W. W. Thorne, interview with Elma Barrera, (KTRK-TV Houston, Texas), in fall 1976.

³³ Joe A. Airola, interview with author; Larry Phillips, Dean of Continuing Education and Community Services, NHCC, interview with author on September 2, 1981.

³⁴ Reap, *North Harris County College Population Study*, pp. 2, 6.

³⁵ "A Junior College District Study: North Harris County (1965)," p. 1.

³⁶ W. W. Thorne, interview with author; see also *NHCC Annual Budgets*.

³⁷ Medsker, *Breaking the Access Barriers*, vii.

site for a second campus, expected to open in 1984. The board also has projected operation of a third campus by 1994. Functioning within such a multi-campus setting, the college proposes to level student population at an 8,000-10,000 capacity at each site and maintain the low student-instructor ratio, conducive to individual attention, typical of community colleges.³⁸ Whether the college will succeed in retaining the "neighborhood" quality with which it began is uncertain. Hopefully, however, the institution can take advantage of the two worlds, unique but interdependent, from which it emerged, retaining its sensitivity to the individual, the neighborhood, and the community but looking forward as an urban, cultural, intellectual, and technical center with the "flair for brash endeavor" community colleges have exhibited in the twentieth century. In this way the junior college can touch "the spirit of tomorrow" as few institutions today are capable of doing.³⁹

³⁸ W. W. Thorne, interview with author; Joe A. Airola, interview with author; "Board Room Recap," Meeting of the Board, August 13, 1981.

³⁹ Medsker, *Breaking the Access Barriers*, p. 24.