

TABLE 4. Occupational indexes, Houston, 1920-1940

	1920	1930	1940	Change 1920 - 1930	Change 1930 - 1940	Change 1920 - 1940
Males						
Blacks	569	557	579	+12	-22	-10
All whites	369	353	353	+16	NC	+16
All native whites	359	354	NA	+ 5	NA	NA
Native whites of native parentage	358	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Native whites of foreign or mixed parentage	364	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Foreign-born whites	419	344	NA	+75	NA	NA
All workers	421	405	399	+16	+ 6	+22
Females						
Blacks	639	636	645	+ 3	- 9	- 6
All whites	336	341	368	- 5	-27	-32
All native whites	331	341	NA	-10	NA	NA
Native whites of native parentage	329	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Native whites of foreign or mixed parentage	340	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
Foreign-born whites	398	329	NA	+69	NA	NA
All workers	477	459	471	+18	-12	+ 6

SOURCE: Tables 1, 2, and 3.

NOTE: Since the occupational categories upon which the occupational index is based are ranked from 1 (highest) to 7 (lowest), a change in the index from a higher to a lower number indicates an improvement in a given group's occupational status. This change is denoted with a plus (+) sign, while the deterioration of a group's status is denoted with a minus (-) sign. NC indicates no change. NA indicates data not available.

THE WAY WE WERE: HOUSTON'S CULTURE IN THE 1940's

BY MARTIN DREYER

The big bang we hear throughout Houston is what is popularly known as a cultural explosion. It gets noisier with the years and with the growing prosperity of the city. Art, theater, symphony, opera, ballet, literature are mushrooming on all sides. A recent weekend preview in a local newspaper listed, among other cultural showcases, sixty-three art galleries, thirteen museums and twenty-five theaters. Not all Houstonians are excited by the city's stepping into the Golden Age. Many prefer the boots-and-spur image. And it is a tired fact of life that much of the local arts is supported by the status-seeking rich. However, the explosion is there, sounding right through the smog of progress. And who helped light the fuse? Many of us— in the "Good Ol' Days."

Circa 1940. There I was, fresh from Chicago, checking out this purer, less complicated Houston, No cowboys or hosses. But not much culture either. I found an art museum, a few galleries, a Little Theater, a symphony orchestra. A handful of other groups trying to score on the cultural front. I rented a room in the basement studio complex in the Beaconsfield Apartments on Main Street. It was Nydia Dallas' studio and was said to be a cultural hangout. Nydia, statuesque and modish, taught voice, drama and charm, when she wasn't munching on raw carrots or other health food. My room featured a cot and battered Underwood typewriter. I was in business.

I taught creative writing—classes and private instruction. My qualifications? Well, fiction in *Esquire* and the Little Magazines and stories cited in Best Short Stories collections. That qualified me in those more naive days. I conned some people to sit in on my first class and there I stood, in tie and jacket and with ears showing, tossing out nuggets about narrative hooks, story plants and character development. Things really looked up when Ellen Garwood, daughter of the Will Claytons, and Annie Laurie Trousdale, wife of a rice rancher, joined the class. They were paying customers.

It was interesting, even the periods of starvation. There was the time when I was awakened by a rhythmic clapping outside my door. I staggered up and peered through the glass partition into the main studio. I blinked hard and stared

again. On the nearby stage a shapely chorus line was kicking up a storm. In brief dance gear. Somewhere there was the beat of a Dixieland record. I discovered that the girls were being trained by Marge Sloan (wife of band leader Bert Sloan) to dance during a performance of Nydia Dallas' Houston Players. The leg action went on for days and I determined to ignore it, dedicating my waking moments to meditation. But each morning, voyeurism grabbed hold and I glued my eyes to the glass partition, taking off in flights of fantasy. Then one morning the door was yanked open and I stumbled through in a crazy, impromptu dance-step. The girls giggled. Dallas said in a saccharine voice: "This is Mr. Dreyer, girls. He's our writer-in-residence."

Every Sunday Dallas held what she called a soirée. A smattering of artists, actors, musicians, poets and culture groupies attended. I can recall a typical gathering, the men in dark suits, the women in long gowns, sipping at tea, chomping on celery stalks and listening to a poetry reading, a book review and a classical rendition on the keyboards. I visited with Phylura Skalinder and Col. Ben Dancer (they owned a cemetery and looked at me speculatively) and Dr. Russell Sheldon Wolfe and Dr. David Mandel and Ione Selman Fox and Lon and Norma Crone and many others. Poets predominated. Members of the Pen Women's and the Rittenhouse Poetry Society. Some belonged to the Scribblers Club. Of those who had made it into print, some were self-published.

Painter-poet Grace Spaulding John swept in. Her entrance was always a sweeping one. A high priestess of the arts who loved to shock the staid and dull with her capers, she was draped in a dazzling gown that flowed out in a wall-to-wall train. Her smile was mocking and her tongue a weapon against hypocrisy. Other celebrity friends would drop in for the Sunday revelries. There was Fay Bainter, the one-time film star, and Orlova and Billie Predeau, the San Carlos Opera Company dancers, and Frank Buck, the "Bring 'em back alive" big game hunter. Buck wrote in the autograph book: "Nydia, why do you collect autographs when it's more fun to collect tigers?"

And then there was Frederick Hand. He wandered into my class one day, a black notebook tucked under his arm. He soon established himself as a frail, gentle-voiced, near-sighted, shabby genius who had been published in *Atlantic Monthly* and poetry magazines. He was a round peg among the squares, but was tolerated by the studio crowd. He had problems — besides hunger. When he shuffled down the street, he was a constant target for cruising police who thought they had caught a wino. He told me about one such incident, which went something like this: the burly policeman, after checking his I.D., said:

"Okay, buddy, so what you got in that there book? You a schoolboy?"

"It's my poetry." said Hand, fumbling with his black notebook.

The policeman and his partner doubled in laughter. "Poetry! You sure don't look like no poet. How's about readin' us some of your poetry?"

Hand, expressionless, thumbed through the notebook, plucking out lines at random: "We made a jumbled heap of all regrets / In that last hour of the weeping dawn . . ."

"Huh?"

"Solemnly on the pyramidal stone / Osiris plays a wan wild dithyramb . . ."

"Huh?"

"Before you see death's shadow on your wall / You shall stand lonely on a barren hill / Or in a faceless crowd upon a street . . ."

The police roared off, breaking all speed laws. Shortly afterwards, the newly formed publishing company of Dreyer & Greenwood published Hand's book, *Beneath the Mirror*. Praise from nationally known poets was on the jacket, but sales were slim and the publishing venture was short-lived.

Scott Greenwood and his Mexican guitar also had a room on the studio complex. A University of Nebraska dropout, he sought adventure and wound up in this tranquil Bohemian jungle. He was fascinated by the artsy crowd, especially a leggy, green-eyed redhead who was an early-day groupie with brains. She was always around, running errands, emptying ashtrays, putting on the coffee. Greenwood analyzed them all, strummed his guitar and worked daytime heading production for Alpha Law Brief Co.¹

I met my competition, Royal Dixon. He was a naturalist and author, with impressive space in *Who's Who in America*. He had the look of Voltaire, only handsomer, and was topped by a pre-hippie mane of grayish hair. I beat a path through the jungle of plants and birds in gilded cages in his two-story studio home on Truxillo. Tall young artist Chester Snowden shared the home. He towered over his easel and smiled a lot. In the course of time, I discovered how the unattached women set their traps for bachelor Dixon. They popped out from behind the redolent plants bearing gifts of food and other goodies. They waited on him, babied him, hauled him around in their cars. He rewarded them with flattery, spread impartially. I sat in on his weekly writing classes, fascinated at watching the Master at work. He sparkled with anecdotes and charmed the mostly female assemblage with intimate portrayals of his celebrity friends in the cultural East. Sometimes he discussed writing and pointedly asked my opinion on problems of technique.

It now comes back to me, with a black iciness, the night when Jesse Stuart was guest speaker. The famed author and poet from the Kentucky hills talked about the search for truth and what it means to the creative person. Dixon's face was creased with pleasure. It was a successful evening. Then, out of the blue, he called on me for a few words. I stood up, a bit weak-kneed, and saw all the eyes as I tried to think of something nice to say. I had to make it good and put in a plug for Royal Dixon and his writing groups. I said: "The best writer and writing teacher in Houston lives at . . ." And instead of giving Dixon's Truxillo Street address, I heard myself giving my own. Gasps and snickers. I hastily tried to correct the slip and got in deeper. I crept away.

Soon marriage pulled me deeper into the arts scene. She was Margaret Lee Webb, tall, dark-haired, amiable, a version of Garbo who didn't "want to be alone." In due course of time, she produced a son, Thorne.² Margaret and

¹ Later Greenwood went to war, took his college degree, published and edited country newspapers and returned to Houston to become an insurance man who still plays the piano and horn, and whose actress wife, Dottie, is a guiding light of the Country Playhouse.

² Thorne Webb Dreyer became a political activist and journalist in the 1960s and is now a free-lance writer and owner of a public relations firm.

I painted on shaky easels at home and at a studio with E. M. "Buck" Schiwetz in a former store on Pacific Street. A nationally known watercolorist, Buck looked like a benign rancher. Husky, booted, big-hatted, wide grin. I watched him do his Texas scenes, admired his sure strokes. I knew both he and his award-winning ceramicist wife, Ruby Lee, were generous in their encouragement of young artists. She fired their ceramics in her kiln and he hauled their paintings to museum shows in his big station wagon.

Artist Christine Streetman and Lowell Alden also had studios in the Pacific Street complex and as their friends began checking in, it soon became an "in" place with Bohemian overtones. There were many parties, drinkfests, intellectual exchanges, and an occasional clash of creative temperament.

In those earlier years, the Museum of Fine Arts gave encouragement to Houston artists by holding annual exhibitions of their works — a practice long since discarded. James Chillman, Jr., Museum Director, championed the cause, ably assisted by Ruth Uhler, his stately Girl Friday and supervisor of education. I can see him now, this bespectacled, wise-owl of a man whose faith in the Houston artist was embodied in these words from an early brochure: "It is the mind of the artist as well as that of the man of science which will shape the environment of our city."

I was without formal training as an artist, except for pointers from wife Margaret. So naturally I was ready to submit to a Museum show. It was my first one and I haunted the mailbox. And what do you know? They accepted four paintings. Oils. It was my primitive period. (I'm still in my primitive period.) The judge of the show, sculptor William McVey, said, with a snap of the fingers: "Your stuff's got zip!" I strutted my brief hour, snapping my fingers and flaunting zip. I strode among my peers, dispensing words of artistic wisdom. Artists such as Gene Charlton, Robert Preusser, Francis Skinner, Jack Flanagan, David Parsons, Robert Joy. I waved a chummy hand at Dorothy Hood and buddied up to Charles Schorre, Jim Love and James Boynton. When David Adickes and Herbert Mears popped in from Paris, we broke open the champagne while discussing Left Bank techniques and mademoiselles. Alas! My zip too soon oozed away. For in succeeding years, as other artists such as my wife kept winning awards, I began winding up deep in the rejection piles.³

Today, for the most part, the art crowd gets together in bars like the Chaucer Room at the Plaza Hotel or the fountain at Avalon Drug. Back then, they usually congregated in studios and homes. Our place was a favorite. After marriage, we moved to the Isabella Courts Apartments at Isabella and Main Streets. It was a white-stucco, Spanish-style building with tile courtyard, wrought-iron railings and amber lights. Our apartment, on three levels, was the farthest on the third floor.

When Margaret and I planned our first big party, Scott Greenwood, who was sharing apartment expenses, rented a mammoth upright piano which had to be delivered up two flights of stairs to the very last apartment. There was also music

³Margaret Webb Dreyer, gallery owner and Texas painter, died of cancer December 17, 1976. Posthumous shows of her works, including a retrospective, were held at the Contemporary Arts Museum and St. Thomas University.

from a fat cello, in the loving arms of Mike DeRudder, a member of the Houston Symphony. It was a polite crowd at first, with a sprinkling of artists and actors and literary folks. But the liquor loosened them up and it began to jump. A hippy blonde found a big sombrero and did a Mexican hat dance. Others joined in. Greenwood left Old Mexico for boogieland and DeRudder sawed away at his happy cello and Hand scribbled poetry in this black notebook and there was loud singing and laughter and then a furious pounding on the wall. "It's the building drunk," I explained. "Lives next door." The pounding shifted to our door and he threatened to report us to the Mafia if we didn't let him in to listen to the music. I let him in and he staggered unerringly, with black moustache twitching, to the bottles on the bar.

In my search for culture, I discovered that the Houston Symphony did its bit in those early years of World War II. It helped sell War Bonds. But one night the patriotic tune went false. George Fuermann, newsman and author, told about it in his *Houston: Land of the Big Rich*. The scene was the old City Auditorium. The symphony and the resident wrestlers were doing their thing on the same night. This was arranged so as to promote bond sales. Ernst Hoffman, conductor in white tie and tails, led his musical troops in a funeral march during the main wrestling event. The somber music apparently darkened the spirits of massive Ellis Bashara, who lumbered half-naked from the nearby ring and rose in monstrous splendor onto the stage. There, with a playful tap, he knocked the fragile Hoffman from the podium and took over the baton himself.

What about play-acting? When I first came to Houston, Margo Jones was sparking the Community Players sponsored by the City Recreation Department. Her inspired direction led it through six seasons of lively plays, from the classics to new works. Such top talent as Ray Walston, Andy Duggan and Cy Howard emerged. Soon there was the Houston Little Theater. Also, Nydia Dallas's Houston Players. My acting career started and ended with the Houston Players, except for a thirteen-week stretch on local radio with a cast putting on a horror mystery drama. Margo Jones took her theater-in-the-round concept to Dallas and Nina Vance put her Alley Theater, which started here in 1948, on the national map. And in the art world there was Jermayne McAgy, a creative force who headed the early Contemporary Arts Museum and then the art department at St. Thomas University.

Me. I gave up all those nice cultural things for nearly thirty years as a *Chronicle* newsman. But first I had a brief stint at the old *Houston Press* where my inaugural assignment was the incredible one of *rewriting* an opera review by the competition *Post's* immaculate critic, Hubert Roussel. One *Chronicle* assignment stands out. Invading Fine Arts Editor Ann Holmes' territory, I joined the glittering crowd at the annual Museum Ball on the mezzanine of the Rice Hotel. This was about ten years after I first came to Houston. I was a sheik, in voluminous burnoose and the works. Margaret was my harem dancing girl, in something flimsy, peering seductively through a black veil. The costumes startled and amused and there was dancing to a lively band and gourmet food and bars bursting with champagne and superior liquor.

The art patrons were out in royal force at this benefit ball and I tried to

pick the Bluffers and the Cullinans out of the costumed revelers. Gauguin was there and Davy Crockett and Romeo and Juliet and a mixture of jesters, royal figures and walking still-lives. I saw some of my old gang and exchanged witticisms with such as Kathryn Swenson, who had Houston's first professional New York-connected gallery, and artist-dancer Gertrude Levy, who — as Gertrude Barnstone — would become a force in local progressive politics. A tall cardboard carrot went by and I thought for a moment that it was Nydia Dallas. I discovered the place was swarming with sheiks. At least a dozen, some with harem dancing girls. I kept bumping into them and spilling my drinks. Finally I stood beard to beard with one of them and we exchanged fierce glares. "I'm having a ball," he said wittily. "Sure nice party." I nodded my hooded head and watched Picasso and Marie Antoinette go by and wondered what the connection was. Two Jacks of Hearts were hand-in-hand, and a knight in clanking armor downed a drink through his visor. "Wasn't like this in the old days," said my sheik friend. "Used to be, this was a hick town, but now — all this art and stuff and the money behind it. What's New York got that we haven't got?" I told him that we'd really set the ball a-rolling and with an "Allah be praised" I turned to the East where the nearest bar was.

JOHN MILSAPS'S HOUSTON: 1910

BY CHARLES ORSON COOK

John Ephraim Thomas Milsaps, in a rare moment of self-doubt, once questioned whether he deserved "credit or censure for writing the voluminous series of books" known as his diary.¹ But even a casual reading of the Milsaps Diaries demonstrates that it is credit he deserves, and not censure. Houston has inspired a number of reminiscences — *Gustav Dresel's Houston Journal* and Francis Lubbock's *Six Decades in Texas* are two that come readily to mind — but none matches the length or the variety of John Milsaps's seventy-three volume work.²

Milsaps was born in the "village of Houston" (as he called it) in 1852 and spent the next twenty-five years either in the city or very close to it. The Houston of Milsaps's youth was a dusty, dirty little place that competed fiercely, though unsuccessfully, with Galveston for commercial supremacy on the Texas Gulf Coast. It was in that setting that young John, the eldest surviving child of the family of Ephraim and Elizabeth Hilger Milsaps assumed partial responsibility for the support of his family. As a young worker in downtown Houston, he was in a position to observe such commonplace events as slave auctions, secessionist rallies, and the commerce that passed daily through the doors of "the old iron front John Morris Building on Main Street."³

As Milsaps wrote in 1894, however, "great changes have taken place since then, and Houston of those bygone days would hardly recognize itself in the present days."⁴ Like his native Houston, John Milsaps changed, too. The young man of twenty-five who left Houston in 1877 to seek his fortune in the Black Hills Gold Rush bore little resemblance to the man he would be by the turn of the century. For by that time Major Milsaps had given up gold for the gospel and had become an officer in the Salvation Army and an editor of its official publication, *The War Cry*. As a journalist, Milsaps traveled the United States and abroad, recording in his diary his observation of events, both

¹ Gustav Dresel, *Gustav Dresel's Houston Journal: Adventures in North America and Texas, 1837-1841*, ed. Max Freund (Austin, 1954), Francis R. Lubbock, *Six Decades in Texas*, trans. and ed. C. W. Raines (Austin, 1900).

² John Milsaps Diary, 73 vols., John E. T. Milsaps Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library. Hereafter cited as Milsaps Diary.

³ Milsaps Diary, vol. 1, 1852-1877 (Old Series).

⁴ *Ibid.*