## MATRIMONY AND MAYORS! THE STATE Ladies of Houston

istory has seen an interesting and diverse mix of first ladies at all levels of government throughout our country's existence. The role of first lady does not come with a job description, but it does come with varied expectations from the public and the particular (sometimes peculiar) husband. As evidence that politics can be surreal and that the public has an enormous range of expectations from first ladies, former Texas First Lady Nellie Connally's recipe for biscuits can be found online right next to her testimony to the Warren Commission (she was riding in President Kennedy's car when he was assassinated). Perhaps Lady Bird Johnson said it best: "The first lady is an unpaid public servant elected by one person – her husband."<sup>2</sup>

But what about Houston's first ladies, the wives of the mayors of Houston? What did these "unpaid public servants elected by one" do, think and feel? In a mayoral scrapbook kept by the Houston Public Library in the Texas and Local History Collection in the historic Julia Ideson Building downtown, Houston's first ladies are defined briefly and primarily by their fathers and husbands, and by how many offspring they produced. Many of the first couples were quite prolific. Susan and Andrew

Jackson (1904-1905), Ella and Ben Campbell (1913-1917), and Margie and Jim McConn (1978-1981) each had six children, and Iola Faye and Louie Welch (1964-1973) had five. Mary and John Browne (1892-1896) had a baker's

dozen at the family dinner table with their eleven children.<sup>3</sup>

Even until recently, many of Houston's first ladies were fairly unknown. Sometimes this was by choice, but a caption from a picture in the *Houston Chronicle* as recently as 1978 reveals a decided prejudice by the establishment for "and wife":

Houston's new mayor, Jim McConn, was inaugurated Tuesday in the presence of four predecessors. From left are Neal Pickett and wife, Lewis Cutrer and wife, Fred Hofheinz, Mrs. McConn and McConn.<sup>4</sup>

**FALL 2007** 

While each Houston first lady certainly must have had a first name and been special in her own way, whether she was recognized for it or not, three Houston first ladies leap off the pages of yellowing



A young Mamie Holcombe in the 1920s.

Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

29

HOUSTON HISTORY VOLUME 5, NUMBER I

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newsprint at the Ideson Building: Mamie Holcombe, because she had the role longer than any other; Dene Hofheinz, because she was ahead of her time in many ways; and Elyse Lanier, because as University of Houston political expert Dr. Richard Murray said in an endearing way, "Elyse Lanier has made this partner role a hell of a lot more visible than we are accustomed to in the city."<sup>5</sup>

## Mamie Holcombe: "Hés the boss."

Houston first lady Mamie Holcombe, wife of Mayor Oscar "the Old Gray Fox" Holcombe, lived much of Houston's history and could probably have written quite a book if political memoirs by women were prevalent in her time. Mamie was first lady of Houston for a record twenty-two years during eleven terms beginning in 1921, ending in 1957, and interrupted by the terms of five other mayors and their first ladies. Oscar was defeated at the polls four times. During Mamie's time, Houston's population rose from 150,000 to almost one million. City territory burgeoned from thirty-four square miles to 352 square miles.<sup>6</sup>

Mamie and Oscar were married for fifty-seven years, and the marriage has been described as a "love story." They wed in 1911 at First Baptist Church in Houston, went to the rail station in a carriage lined in yellow velvet, and took a six-week honeymoon boating from New Orleans to New York.8

Mamie appears to have stayed in the background for the most part and gone along with her husband's wishes even though it was widely believed that she had not wanted him to run for several of his terms. When asked if her husband would be running again in 1950 she said, "I've never objected. He's the boss."

Mamie must have been of strong constitution to endure some of the events of Oscar's tenure. Oscar had a couple of run-ins with the Ku Klux Klan:

Once, when thousands of Klansmen were converging on the city for a state-wide meeting, Mayor Holcombe discovered their password. He sent men to all the highways around Houston to tell the Klansmen the meeting place had changed. The gathering was never held.<sup>10</sup>

Shortly before the 1922 election, the Klan accused Oscar of gambling and drinking habits when he refused their demand to fire three Catholics on the city staff. Oscar decided the best way for him to clear his name would be to have



Oscar and Mamie Holcombe.

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A much older First Lady Mamie Holcombe stands behind Jack Benny as her husband, seated at right, converses with the Hollywood star. Also pictured are Oveta Culp Hobby, standing next to Mrs. Holcombe, and former Governor William P. Hobby, second from left.

Courtesy Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library.

30 HOUSTON HISTORY VOLUME 5, NUMBER I FALL 2007

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the Baptist Ministers' Association decide if the allegations were true at a public hearing. A trial of sorts was held at the Rice Hotel, and the charges of drunkenness and gambling were ruled false by the Baptist ministers even though nine of the thirteen ministers were Klansmen.<sup>11</sup> Oscar won the election. It was probably not too far from Mamie's mind that she could find a cross burning on her lawn or worse since, as Oscar said, the Klan "killed and mutilated in those days."12 While Oscar stood up to the Klan, he refused to integrate the Houston swimming pools in the 1950s, and was defeated at the polls because of it. He claimed he did not integrate because he wanted to prevent violence.<sup>13</sup>

Mamie also had to endure the uncertainty of the Mayor's fate in a boating accident in Galveston Bay. In January of 1926, Oscar was with a fishing party in a boat a mile or two offshore when the engine exploded and burned the boat. The men in the boat had to jump into the frigid water to escape, and according to varying

Oscar had to swim a long distance to save himself. 14 As much as times change, some things stay the same. Garbage collection and street improvements occupied much of the city agenda during the Holcombe administrations. Oscar claimed to be the first mayor anywhere to install sequenced traffic signals. Oscar had the city electrician create signals similar to train signals he had seen on a

reports, floated for two to eight hours awaiting rescue.

One man was killed by the blast, and it was reported that

trip to California. The Mayor said, "They were the first of their kind. The company that made them for us had them on the market for years under the name of 'Houston type signal lights'. I wish I had patented them." 15 As for Mamie, she seemed to play a role in the mold of another first lady named Mamie, as in Eisenhower, who famously said, "Ike runs the country and I turn the lamb chops." 16

Dene Hofheinz: The Ringmistress Irene Cafcalas Hofheinz, Mrs. Roy Hofheinz, had a large

political role throughout her husband's career. Roy nicknamed her Dene (pronounced Deanie) which is an endearing corruption of the Greek for Irene.<sup>17</sup> Dene's father emigrated from Greece, and she was born in Houston's east end.

Dene Hofheinz was ahead of her time in many ways. She met Roy in college, and they both went on to law school, earning law degrees in June of 1933.18 To put this accomplishment in context, women only had been given the right to vote thirteen years earlier under the Nineteenth Amendment. Eleanor Roosevelt, who revolutionized the roles of women in public life, and life in general, had only been the first lady of the United States since March of the year Dene earned her law degree (presidents took office in March rather than January before the Twentieth Amendment was adopted). On the other hand, or maybe not if Pa was really running things, Ma Ferguson was sworn in for her second term as Governor of Texas in 1933.<sup>19</sup>

When Senator Kay Bailey Hutchison graduated from the University of Texas law school in 1969, thirty-six years after Dene earned her law degree, she was one of only five women in her class of five hundred.<sup>20</sup> Dene said of her own decision to go to law school, "Roy convinced me that we both should enter Houston Law School." She also said during college she took notes for Roy in math class when he had to work explaining, "It used to make me angry that he would make 100 on a test from my notes, and I would barely pass."21 Maybe Dene was being overly modest, and Roy convinced her to go to law school because he wanted the continued use of her notes.

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Dene Hofheinz, in glasses, in 1961. The pain of her tumor has taken part of her smile from her pretty face, but not her enthusiasm for helping with a good cause (note the "Fight Cancer" label on the envelope she is holding) COURTESY HOUSTON METROPOLITAN RESEARCH CENTER, HOUSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY.

HOUSTON HISTORY VOLUME 5, NUMBER I Dene and Roy eloped shortly after law school, and Dene worked as a clerk for two years in Roy's law office, although she applied for a job at another law firm.<sup>22</sup> She did not actually practice law, but this is not surprising given the times. Dene was Roy's campaign manager when he ran for the Legislature in 1935. Roy won and became a state legislator at the age of twenty-two. Roy was elected county judge of Harris County two years later, and again, Dene was the campaign manager.<sup>23</sup>

Former Mayor and son of Roy and Dene, Fred Hofheinz, describes his mom as "a traditional wife with flair," saying she "had no political ambition of her own and wanted only to help her husband in anyway she could." She kept their homes as places of refuge for Roy and other family and friends. While she played a significant role and was a campaign manager, she did not get involved in policy as campaign managers do today. Dene ran the campaign offices, walked behind Roy to cover his social flaws, and talked to everyone. She schmoozed the voters when Roy did not have time, and even Roy's enemies would come to her when they needed to talk but could not communicate with Roy. Where Roy was quick to make enemies, Dene was quick to make friends. Fred Hofheinz said, "She was the strength behind the throne. She was accessible to all players in the political game. She was an excellent politician in the sense that she was intimately involved with people, which are the backbone of politics."24

Dene Hofheinz Mann, daughter of Roy and "Big Dene" as she was sometimes called, referred to her parents as the "perfect partnership," and cited her mother as an important influence on her father saying:

In 1944 he made a trip to Washington to get a license to operate a radio station. It was terribly important that he be granted the permit. The prospects of success in this endeavor seemed dim, so Daddy called Mama to tell her that he stood to lose everything they had made together. Mother's reply was, "Well, don't worry Honey, we started out with nothing, so when you get home we can start all over again." She gave him the confidence he needed, and to top it all off, they got their radio station. This incident was typical of Mama's influence on his life. Her outlook has brightened all our lives.<sup>25</sup>

Roy became mayor of Houston in 1953, and it was a wild ride. He was county judge until 1946, and then, owned



Dene Hofheinz and daughter, "Little Dene."
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and managed KTHT radio. Dene said, "It never occurred to me he wanted to re-enter politics. The night before the 1952 city election filing date, he asked the family for permission to run." In 1953, Dene described her major role as taking care of Roy and their three children, but she also found time to answer the profusion of correspondence, attend functions four nights per week plus weekends, support charitable causes, and coordinate a petition drive to restore three city positions axed by City Council.

The Hofheinz family spent summers at "Huckster House" which had themed rooms including the Circus Room and a parakeet that could say "Mayor, you're late." The Hofheinz home in town was on eighty-five

32 HOUSTON HISTORY VOLUME 5, NUMBER I FALL 2007

acres in the area that is now The Galleria. They had dogs, horses, sheep, and other animals, and the door was always open with friends around constantly.

In 1955, Dene helped Roy navigate the palace intrigue and turf wars at a City Hall so fraught with strife that the *Houston Chronicle* editorialized, "City Hall is as full of problems now as an old house is of termites." Roy did end up going down in defeat at the polls in November of that year, but only after months of battling City Council with Dene's help.

Apparently council members felt left out of the loop in Roy's administration, and the councilmen felt Roy wanted to "run the whole show."<sup>29</sup> In a purported effort to control costs, City Council passed an ordinance to eliminate three positions, including that of executive assistant to the mayor, which was held by Gould Beech. It was reported that the council members believed Beech was Roy's political strategist and wanted him "out of the way." <sup>30</sup>

Dene headed up a petition drive to require the restoration of the three city positions, and was frequently quoted in the papers during this time. Volunteers worked on the project in the Hofheinz playroom. When councilmen accused the Fire Chief of ordering firemen to circulate the petitions, Dene defended the right of city employees to circulate these petitions on their own time if they wanted.<sup>31</sup> Later, Dene told reporters she had secured more that 18,000 signatures, and that she intended to file the petitions with the City Secretary the next day.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, the City Attorney ruled the petitions would be effective when filed, and the axed employees were immediately reinstated. As a sign of the times, councilmen claimed the signatures would first have to be verified against the poll tax list.<sup>33</sup> In comments that demonstrate Dene's diplomatic skills and her ability to keep the pressure on at the same time, when a truce over the three positions was rumored the *Houston Chronicle* reported:

Mayor Hofheinz could not be reached for comment. Mrs. Dene Hofheinz, his wife, said she knew nothing about it but hoped "they can get together". Other Councilmen, however, indicated there would be no compromise. And Mrs. Hofheinz said petitions to force the Council to rescind the ordinance abolishing the jobs or submit the matter to a vote, were to be filed today.<sup>34</sup>

A truce did not happen and councilmen were denied an injunction to keep the axed employees off the payroll.<sup>35</sup> Dene rode to City Hall in an armored car with the petitions for filing.<sup>36</sup>

Things got progressively nastier with City Council's attempting to impeach Roy, Beech's being accused of associating with leftists, and Roy's proclaiming early elections were needed to clean house and settle things one way or the other.<sup>37</sup> In the midst of all of this the *Houston Chronicle* reported the following under a bold caption:

Mrs. Hofheinz Back: The Hofheinz forces were enheartened by the return to town of Mrs. Hofheinz, a major force in all of the mayor's campaigns. Mrs. Hofheinz arrived at Municipal Airport Sunday night to be greeted by a cheering crowd of more than 150. Mrs. Hofheinz had been in Colorado Springs for four days and brought Dene, Jr., back from a summer camp near the Colorado city. <sup>38</sup>

In an early election that November Roy was defeated by none other than the Old Gray Fox, Oscar Holcombe.<sup>39</sup>

Dene had a brain tumor most of her life, and in the early 1960s it was causing her extreme pain. The tumor was not cancerous, but to relieve the pain surgery would be needed. When she died prematurely in 1966 at age fifty-three after the surgery in New York, the obituaries were genuinely complimentary, confirming what her children have said. The *Houston Chronicle* editorialized:

To know Dene Hofheinz was to like her. This applied even to the political opponents of her husband....her personality was so winsome that she stood out as a personality in her own right. Thousands who knew her considered her a model wife and mother. No matter how fast the pace of the family's activities, Mrs. Hofheinz kept its members closely knit. Among friends the family was often referred to as "the Hofheinz team." Roy Hofheinz many times publicly credited her with being his chief source of inspiration. She was a stabilizing factor in his victories and a comforting rock of loyalty in his defeats. 40

A biography written during Roy's tenure as mayor says:

Mrs. Hofheinz presides over the two homes, and children of all ages look on her as a second mother, addressing her as "Big Dene" to distinguish her from her namesake daughter. She is known throughout Houston as one of the city's best-loved personalities. While she's been in the middle of each of the Mayor's political campaigns, typically rough-and-tumble campaigns, the scars of the political wars have never left their mark on her. The day after election nights, she resumes her role as mother, maintaining constant contacts with those who worked in the campaign not as political allies, but as friends.<sup>41</sup>

One legacy of Dene's influence at City Hall was evident to Fred Hofheinz when he was Mayor two decades after his father. Fred gave out many twenty-year service pins to city employees first hired by Roy, and quickly discovered that an unusually large percentage had Greek names. His mom had been a sort of employment agency for the Greek community.

## Elyse Lanier: "I Tule not ing out."

Maybe the events surrounding the wedding of Bob and Elyse Lanier on October 25, 1984, were a sign of the political future to come. They married on the spur of the moment at the Texas Supreme Court while in Austin, two months

HOUSTON HISTORY VOLUME 5, NUMBER I FALL 2007

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Mayor Bob Lanier and wife, Elyse. Election night victory, November 11, 1991.

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after their first date. On their first full day as husband and wife, Elyse joined Bob while he chaired a meeting of the State Highway Commission, and later they dined at Lady Bird Johnson's ranch.<sup>42</sup> Quite an introduction as Mrs. Lanier. Their views on marriage have been described as traditional, but Elyse was not one to be left out of the action.

From the beginning of their marriage, Elyse went with Bob to his development company offices and meetings of the Texas Highway Commission and the Metropolitan Transit Authority where she worked the crowd skillfully. Bob would later return the favor watching from the front row at Elyse's first meeting as a University of Houston regent in 1995. Elyse seemed to worship Bob, and kept a picture of Mount Rushmore with the addition of Bob's face on her desk. He was also busy buying clothes, making the Best Dressed Hall of Fame in 1989.

Bob says he would not have run for mayor if it weren't for her, 46 and one of his daughters agrees, saying she helped him to the position that was the most fulfilling in his life. 47 Their togetherness continued on the campaign trail with Elyse missing only two events of the entire campaign. No separate campaigning to cover more ground for this couple. Before Bob took office, Elyse said she would probably have an office in City Hall, but also scoffed at the notion that she would wield any power, saying, "She would not play a role in city issues." 48

Later on, it became clear she did have power and used it. Derivative power can be just as potent as the real thing. In 1993, she is quoted as saying, "My phone calls get returned so fast, you wouldn't believe it. When you are

the mayor's wife and you call, God! I mean, people really do respond." <sup>49</sup> She did not take issue with critics who opined she only got the University of Houston appointment because she was the Mayor's wife saying, "Because I am the Mayor's wife I will be able to bring something to the table – fundraising, and the Mayor's ear – other regents might not be able to. It would be foolish not to make use of that." <sup>50</sup> Dr. Richard Murray said, "One of the most aggressive regents in shaking things up was Elyse Lanier. She was no wallflower on our board. The perception that she was just involved in fluff...was just not the case." <sup>51</sup>

It was clear that she used her power as the Mayor's wife to help other charitable causes as well. When Bob was inaugurated, Elyse immediately moved into her office in City Hall, and initiated a program to beautify the area around City Hall with roses and other improvements. Public debate started about whether she should have an office at City Hall and what she would be up to in that office. Many people had no objections to her office including Council Member Frank Mancuso, who noted that many former mayoral wives had been very active in volunteer causes, albeit without the City Hall office. Others thought she had no business having a City Hall office, and the Laniers finally decided to pay the City \$200 per month to rent the space.

People were not used to having a first spouse since Bob's predecessor, Kathy Whitmire, was a woman and a widow, and Elyse's ever-present effervescence was quite a contrast. One critic suggested beautification was not a substantive or worthy project proposing that Elyse plant vegetables instead of roses to feed the poor, while others were afraid she would inappropriately meddle in policy.

34 HOUSTON HISTORY VOLUME 5, NUMBER I FALL 2007

Other critics "acted as if they'd prefer a combination of Mother Teresa and Eleanor Roosevelt." <sup>53</sup>

Elyse dove into her role as first lady with gusto and joy. She had never in her life ridden a horse, but she learned to ride so she could lead the rodeo grand entry parade with Bob.<sup>54</sup> Throughout Bob's tenure, she was actively involved in causes such as revitalizing Moody Park. Of this she said, "When we reopened Moody Park, 10,000 kids were out there that afternoon. Now tell me what feels better than that."55 Working on Houston's image and the revitalization of Hermann Park and Miller Outdoor Theater were also big projects she undertook, not without controversy. When Mayor Bob realized on a 1996 trip to New York that Houston had a questionable image, the Houston Image Group Inc., was formed, funded by a combination of city and other public and private funds, and headed by Elvse.<sup>56</sup> Some complained about nepotism, but the Houston Ethics Committee ruled that the ethics policy had not been violated. 57

Speaking out and never ruling anything out became common themes for Elyse, including on policy. In 1993, when approached by a teenager complaining about dilapidated buildings, Elyse encouraged the teen to lobby City Controller George Greanias, saying Greanias had slowed the approval of millions in Metropolitan Transit Authority funds for neighborhood improvements. She wrote to publications such as Newsweek Magazine when they disparaged Houston, and even called NBA Commissioner David Stern to complain when Clyde Drexler was ejected from

a Rockets' game. When asked by a reporter what Mayor Bob's opinion was of her making this call, she responded he probably didn't know she had made it.<sup>59</sup> She was not afraid to talk to reporters, and even when Bob was Metropolitan Transit Authority Board Chair, she would charm them by inviting them to events, and debating those who were Bob's critics.<sup>60</sup>

In Bob's third and final term there was talk of ending term limits to allow him to run again, and talk of Elyse being a candidate for mayor herself. Elyse said at the time, "I rule nothing out." Stirring the pot further, it was reported around this time that the Mayor's Office requested books from the Houston Public Library on Miriam "Ma" Ferguson, who succeeded her husband as Governor of Texas in the early 20th century. Elyse ultimately did not pursue a candidacy reportedly because Bob would not be able to adjust to being "first man." Elyse continues to add to her resume while going at life with gusto. She is currently serving as a commissioner on the Port of Houston Authority.

These three first ladies, in their own dynamic ways, helped define and promote their husbands' administrations. In doing so, they were instrumental in shaping the present and future of Houston. Their legacies live on today, as exemplified by current First Lady Andrea White and her efforts on behalf of Houston's children and the community as a whole. An exacting standard for future holders of the unofficial title of "First Lady of Houston" has been set. May the citizens of Houston be so lucky as to have many more meet the challenge. \*\*



Elyse Lanier at the University of Houston.

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HOUSTON HISTORY VOLUME 5, NUMBER I FALL 2007