

This temporary wooden hall was built to hold the Democratic National Convention of 1928. (Courtesy San Jacinto Museum of History Association)

The Democratic National Convention of 1928

The Houston newspapers for January 12 and 13, 1928, announced in banner headlines that the Democratic Party leaders had decided to bring their national convention into the South. Houston, one of the smallest cities ever to entertain a national political party gathering, was chosen by the Democratic National Committee after a five-ballot contest with San Francisco and Detroit.¹

Houston businessman Jesse H. Jones, who was a prominent leader in the national Democratic Party, realized how much the convention would mean to Houston. In the long term, the city could benefit enormously from the greater prestige and national awareness that would come from the whole country reading about, and listening to, what was taking place here. More immediately, the city would prosper from serving the thousands of delegates, reporters, and visitors expected. Jones offered the party a bid of \$200,000 from Houston, guaranteed from his own money, and the promise that a convention hall holding 25,000 people would be built and ready by June. Texas Governor Dan Moody (discussed as a possible vice-presidential contender) and Texas Congressman Daniel E. Garrett aided Jones in convincing the party to cast their votes for Houston.

As soon as Houston's bid was accepted, Jones put New York architects Kenneth Franzheim and J. E. R. Carpenter to work on plans for the convention hall. City Architect W. A. Dowdy and Jones's favorite Houston architect, Alfred C. Finn, assisted in the project. By March 6 a contract had been let to Universal Construction Co., Inc., a Houston firm. Over 30 frame houses were demolished by the city to clear the chosen site.

The construction of the new convention hall was an all-Texan affair. Texas longleaf pine was used for the timbers and framing. The painting was done by the James Bute Company, which had been in business in Houston for 61 years. The unique roof was built by the Lamella Trussless Roof Company of Houston, adapted from a design which had originated in Germany. The roofing material was made at the Texas Company factory in Port Neches, and

¹The Democratic National Convention Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, contains two scrapbooks of newspaper clippings from January to July 1928. Most of the information in this essay comes from these clippings. Additional clippings are in the "Democratic National Convention—1928" file, Texas and Local History Department, Houston Public Library. Both the collection and the file contain official programs for the convention and related events, as well as assorted memorabilia. The Hospitality House guest book is also a part of the Democratic Convention Collection.

applied by the Texaco Roofing Company. The wood arch covered 80,000 square feet and was held in place by wooden tie rods. Thirty-three years later, this same design was expanded more massively by architects and built in steel to cover the Harris County Domed Stadium. An elaborate system of fans circulated air through the hall. In addition to the hall itself, a block-long Hospitality House was built, at a cost of \$25,000, to allow an additional 3000-plus visitors to hear the convention proceedings over loudspeakers while sitting on awning-shaded benches. The Hospitality House also provided cold water fountains, an emergency clinic, restrooms, writing rooms, telephones, checkrooms, and information counters.

Within half an hour of the announcement that Houston had been selected as the convention site, the Associated Press had reserved 23 rooms in three hotels, and reservations continued to pour in. The city's hotels provided 8,000 rooms, but "thousands of citizens rented out rooms and apartments to ensure convention-goers places to stay." Trainloads of arriving delegates were met by bands at Houston's two railroad stations. At least nine different bands were scheduled to play during the convention and were available for parades and political rallies around town on request.

Houston raised \$356,907 to cover the convention costs, which came to a final total of \$338,000. Estimates of the number of people attending ranged from 25,000 up to 50,000. There were 1,480 delegates, some one thousand journalists, and thousands of visitors who came to attend one or more sessions. Houston's population at the time was estimated at 280,000. Mayor Oscar Holcombe was the general convention chairman and a number of prominent Houstonians aided in planning for the event, including Colonel Ike Ashburn, executive secretary; R. S. Sterling, chairman of the finance committee; W. L. Clayton, chairman of the reception and entertainment committee; Will C. Hogg, chairman of the Hospitality House committee; and General J. A. Hulen, chairman of the housing committee.

The 1928 Democratic Convention broke a number of precedents. It was the party's first to be held in the South since the Louisville, Kentucky, convention in 1872; delegates put forth the first Catholic nominated for president by a major political party; and the vice-presidential candidate, Senator Joseph T. Robinson of Arkansas, was the first Southerner nominated for president or vice-president in over 50 years.

Democratic leaders worked hard to head off divisiveness. Their 1924 convention, in New York City, had been badly divided and it took 103 ballots to nominate John W. Davis. In 1928, potential controversies included rural versus urban, North versus South, Klan versus anti-Klan, and, most importantly, the Prohibition issue—"Wets" versus "Drys." Southern Democrats were strong supporters of the 18th Amendment and wanted a "bone-dry" plank in the party platform. The fact that the leading candidate for the party's nomination, Al Smith, was anti-Prohibition might have presented a problem,

but the conflict was averted when the convention adopted a plank calling for strict enforcement of Prohibition laws but leaving individual Democrats free to take whatever position they wished regarding the sale of alcoholic beverages. With the nominated ticket boasting both a "Wet" (Smith) and a "Dry" (Robinson), one writer noted, "The Democratic donkey with a wet head and wagging a dry tail left Houston."

Few of the Texas delegates supported Smith's candidacy. Most "stood pat" and refused to join in the traditional demonstration parade around the hall when Smith was nominated by his friend Franklin D. Roosevelt. The Texans nominated Jesse Jones, and several other states joined in the demonstration for Jones as a tribute to his leadership in the Democratic Party while bags of balloons reading "Jesse Jones for President" were loosed to fall from the ceiling. On the first ballot, Governor Smith received 724 $\frac{2}{3}$ votes, just short of the 733 $\frac{1}{3}$ needed to clinch the nomination. Many of the delegates who had voted for a "favorite son" immediately switched their votes, giving Smith a total of 849 $\frac{2}{3}$ and making a second ballot unnecessary. However, the entire Texas delegation had voted for Jones and did not switch.² Some prominent Democrats resented Texas's actions, feeling that it was a deliberate anti-Smith gesture by Jones and his supporters and that they should instead have joined in the effort to promote party unity, especially in their role as hosts of the convention. The Texas delegation made a gesture of "harmony" the next day, with their decision to unanimously support the front-runner for the vice-presidential nomination.

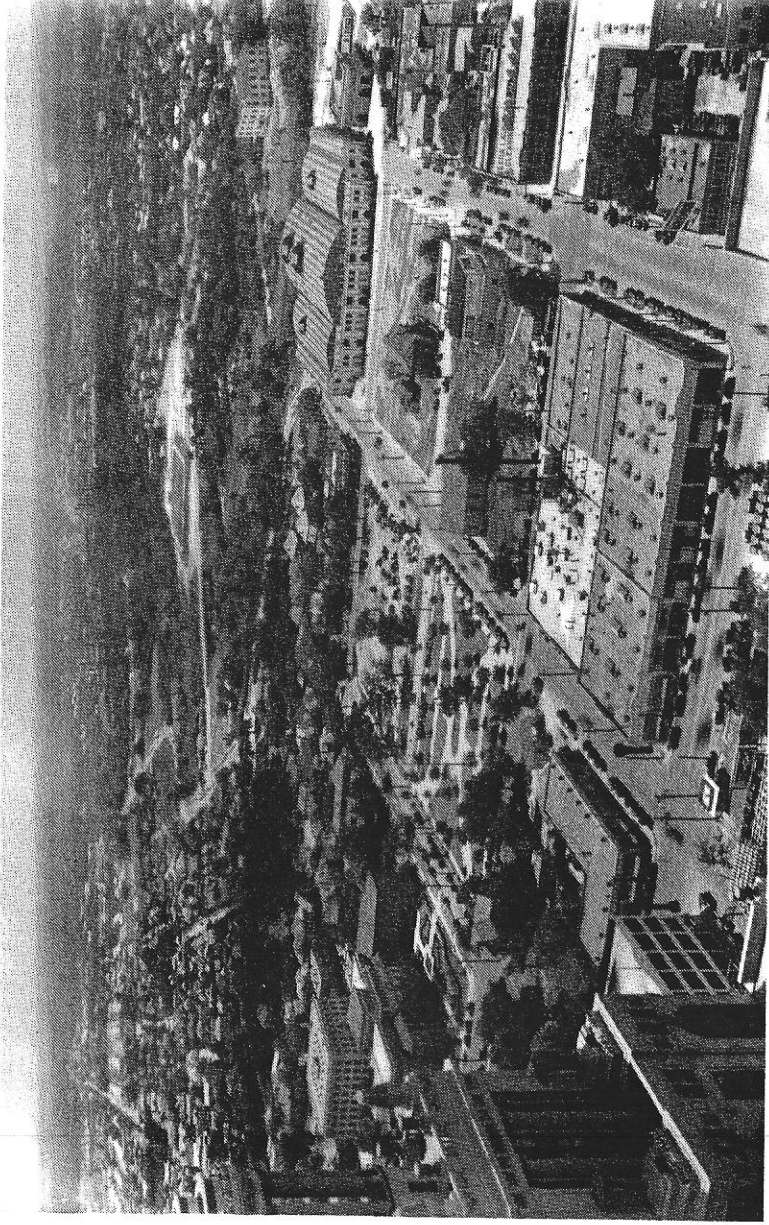
The crowds who had packed the hall on the first two days of the convention dwindled on the last day, when the vice-presidential nominee was selected. Ticket-seekers were relatively few, and the hall was only two-thirds full. At the end of the convention, Jesse Jones and Oscar Holcombe made farewell speeches to the delegates and visitors.

Despite its temporary nature, Sam Houston Hall remained in use, rented out by the city to a variety of meetings and conventions. It was demolished in 1936 to make way for the Sam Houston Coliseum, completed in 1937, which still stands. A historic marker at the corner of Bagby and Rusk streets now commemorates the 1928 Democratic Convention.

Doris Glasser
Assistant Editor

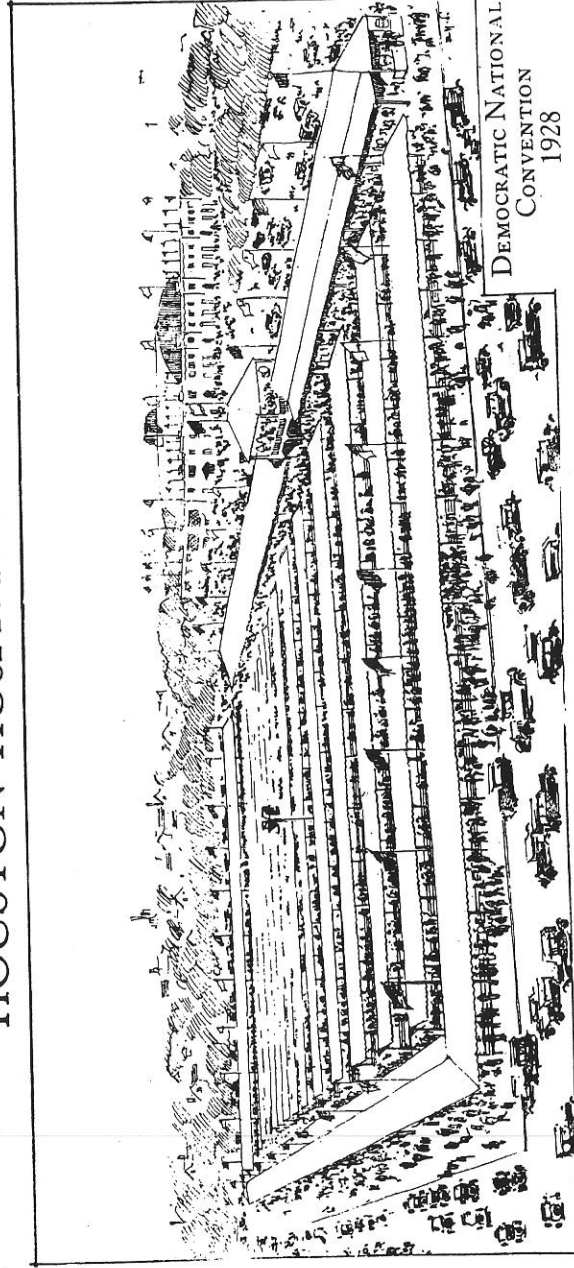
Nancy Hadley
Managing Editor

²The vote for Jones was 40 from Texas and 3 from Alabama, none of whom switched. The highest vote counts after Smith were 71 $\frac{5}{6}$ for Hull on the first call, and 52 $\frac{1}{2}$ for George after the switch.



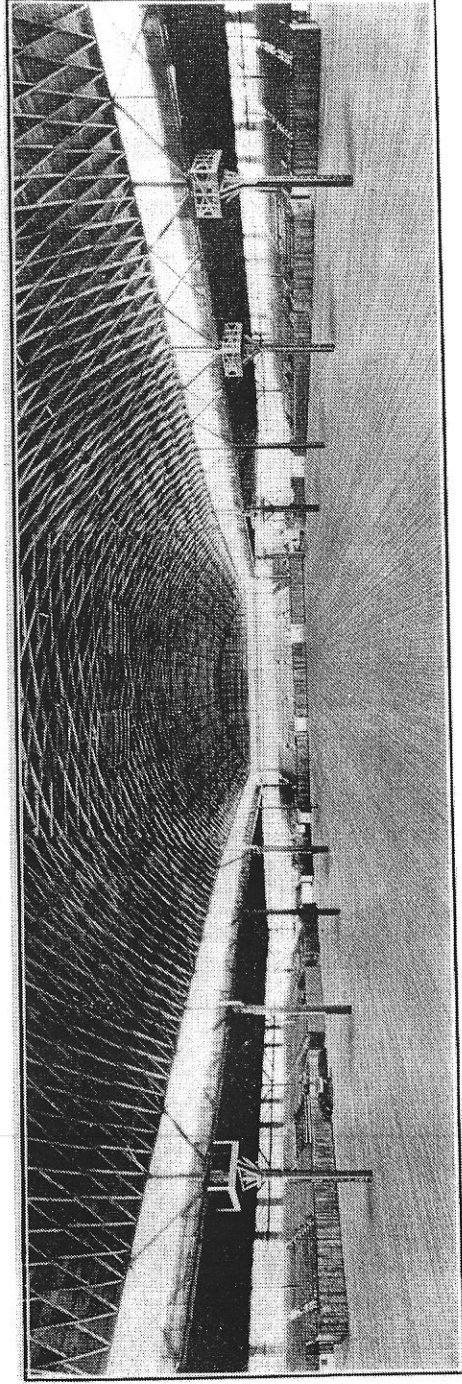
At the right side of the picture is the new convention hall, still under construction. At the left is the Houston Public Library (now its Julia Ideson Building), fronting on a park where the city hall's reflecting pool is now located. The vacant block diagonally between the convention hall and the library, where city hall now stands, was the site for the Hospitality House.

HOUSTON HOSPITALITY HOUSE



The Hospitality House was designed by local architect Charles W. Oliver. The long roof along the right edge marks the building area, containing amenities for the visitors. The rest of the block contained only open-air benches covered by awnings fitted with fans and lights. Loudspeakers broadcast the convention proceedings.

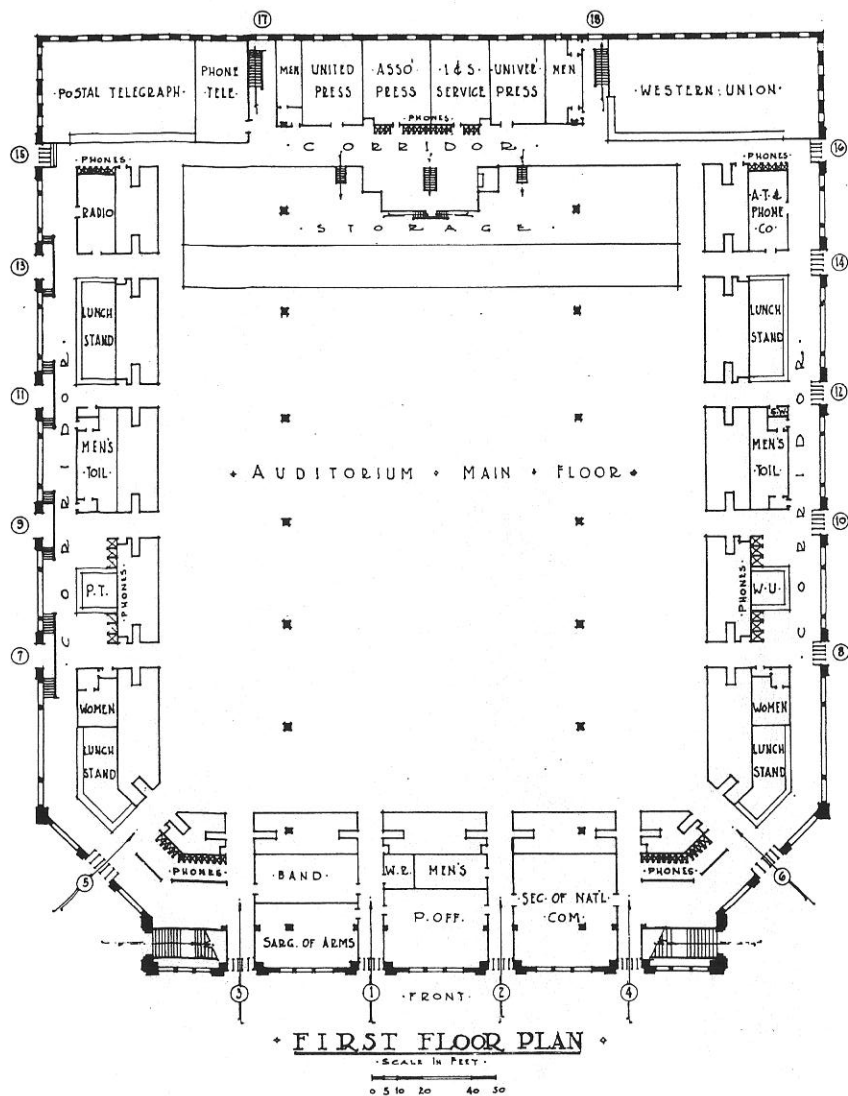
Interior View of Sam Houston Hall



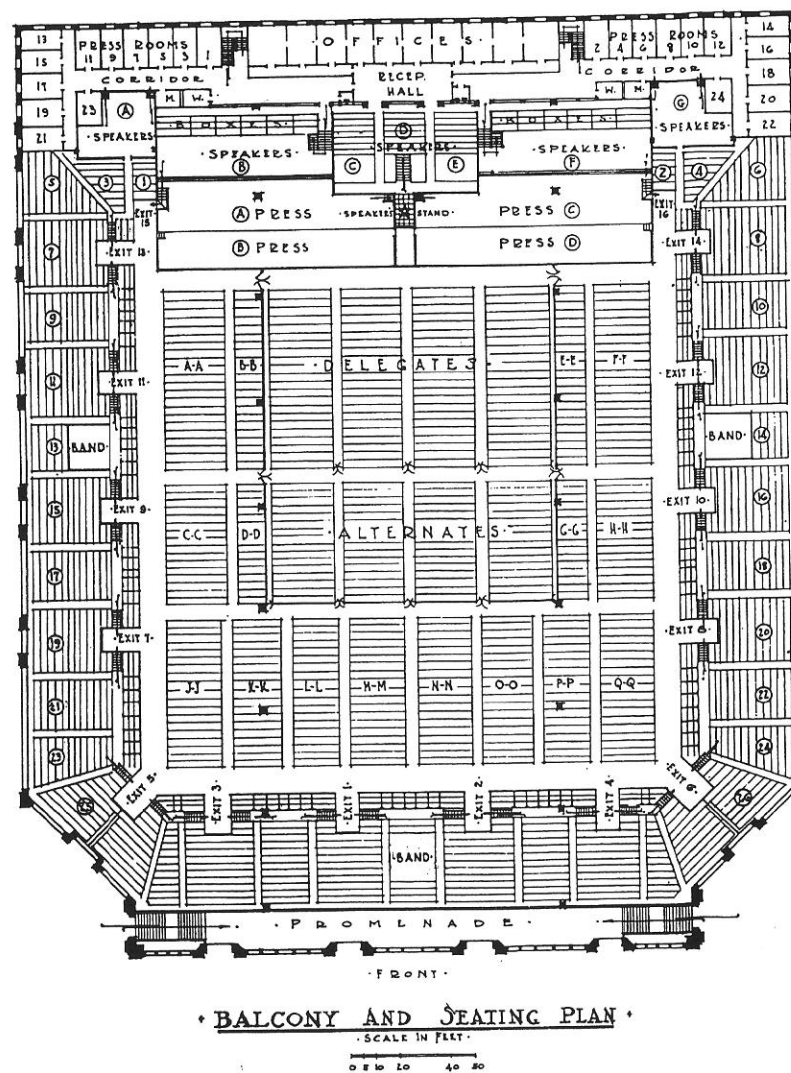
This composite photograph of the interior shows the structure of the central arched roof. The speakers' stand at the far end and the balcony seating along each side are visible. The platforms on each supporting post were for the use of press photographers during the convention.



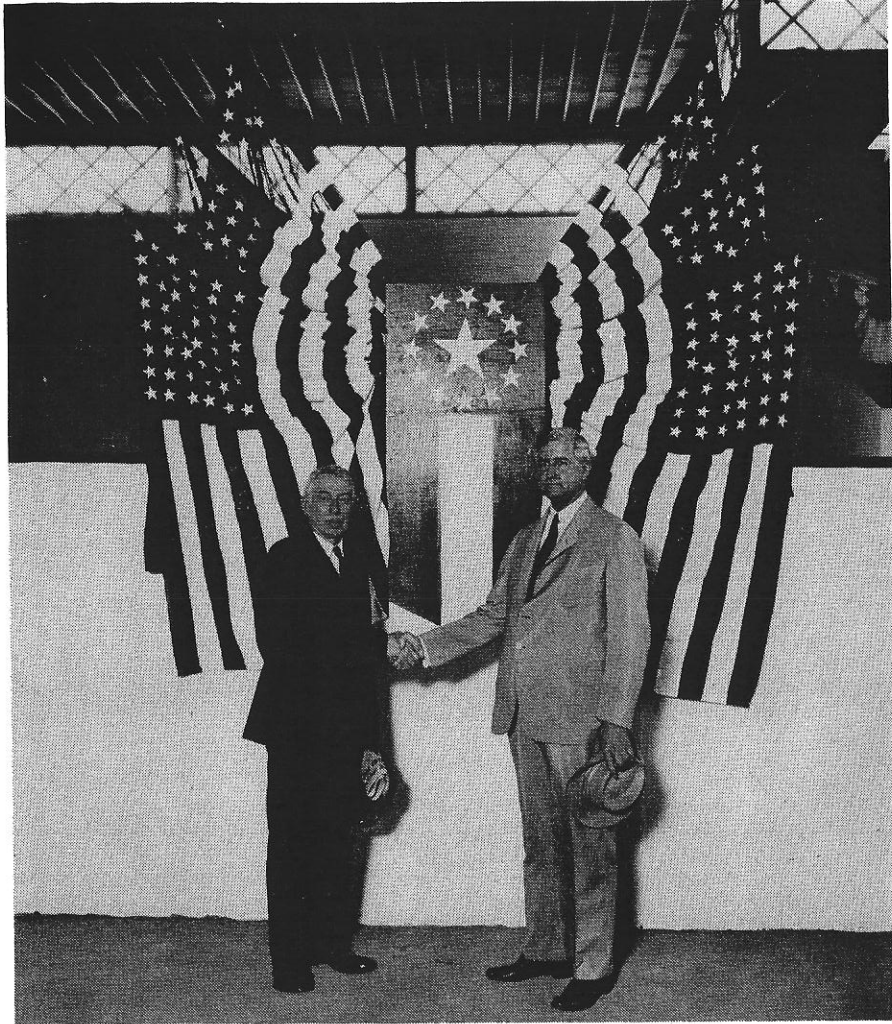
Decorated with flags and filled with delegates and spectators, the hall provided an appropriate setting for three days of national excitement.



The first-floor plan shows the main floor where most of the seating was located. Underneath the balconies, between the 18 entrances, were service areas—especially the massive communications facilities.



The seating plan shows main floor seating as well as the balconies and the speakers and press stands. Boxes at the edge of the balconies were reserved for party dignitaries. Balcony section 6, in the extreme upper right corner, was designated "colored." A band was located in each of the three marked sections throughout the convention.



Jesse Jones (right) poses for an official photograph in the new hall with Democratic National Party Chairman Clem Shaver. This photograph was reproduced on the back of the official convention program.



The convention hall was painted white with green and gold trim. The many American flags used as decoration made a festive counterpoint to the green and gold color scheme.



Tickets to the convention were hard to get. Many Houstonians expected that all citizens would be able to view the convention in their city, but spectator seating was severely limited. Tickets were distributed locally in accordance with the size of contribution made to the convention fund.

Book Reviews

Ethnicity in the Sunbelt: A History of Mexican Americans in Houston. By Arnolde De Leon. (Houston: University of Houston, 1989.) Pp. xix + 234.

Arnolde De Leon has written a much-needed study of the history of Mexican Americans in Houston. As he states in his preface, no other comprehensive scholarly work on Mexican Americans in Houston exists¹ and, as a result, scholars have missed an opportunity to study the pattern of assimilation and urbanization of the fourth largest Mexican American community in the United States. De Leon's study more than fills the vacuum and he has shown adequately the importance of such a study in both American ethnic and urban historiography.

De Leon divides his study into three parts. In the first, he addresses the origins of Houston's Mexican American "colonia" and accurately characterizes the earliest Mexican settlers in Houston as the "Immigrant Generation." By analyzing how the Immigrant Generation formed numerous social and civic clubs (e.g., the Club Mexico Bello) to preserve and celebrate Mexican culture in Houston, he shows how they held onto their Mexican heritage and continued to identify very strongly with Mexico through the 1940s. In the second part of his study, De Leon analyzes how some members of Houston's Mexican American community began to assimilate and become what has been characterized as the "Mexican American Generation." This part of his study also shows the emergence of groups in Houston such as LULAC Council #60, the Houston chapter of the League of United Latin American Citizens. LULACers identified with "American culture," sought to emulate its positive aspects, and worked to obtain for all Mexican Americans the benefits that citizenship provided all "loyal Americans."

Finally, De Leon addresses the recent and contemporary history of Mexican Americans in Houston and describes the growth and diversity of the community. In this part he also explains the diversity of leadership in the community and how the leadership attempted to address problems such as segregation, poor housing, segregated education, and political empowerment. He clearly shows that Mexican Americans in Houston were as diverse in socioeconomic backgrounds and political attitudes as any other group of

¹Thomas H. Kreneck's *Del Pueblo: A Pictorial History of Houston's Hispanic Community*, which was published about the same time, provides a well-researched overview but does not attempt to treat the subject with the depth and detail of *Ethnicity in the Sunbelt*.