

expanding population. In the annals of higher education in the United States, there have been only a few significant events. One of these was the establishment of land grant colleges in the late nineteenth century, and another was the rise of the community college movement in the post-World War II years. In fact, during the 1960s, community colleges increased at the incredible rate of one every ten days. Offering tuition-free or low-cost education, these institutions enabled many first-time college students to reside at home or work part-time during their first two undergraduate years before transferring to a more expensive senior institution. In addition, these unique institutions have provided good training for a host of the nation's youth who had no intention of seeking a bachelor's degree but who needed further training before entering the job market. Finally, these colleges opened college doors to a growing number of adults, many of whom later transferred to a senior college or university.

As one of five such colleges in the Houston area, North Harris County College represents one of the more successful institutions of its type in the country. Professor Rhinehart recounts the early difficulties encountered in establishing the college and explains the factors responsible for its rapid growth in the 1970s. In fact, for North Harris County College, the future appears even brighter than the past. On January 16, 1982, the taxpayers of Tomball voted by an overwhelming margin to join the college's taxing district, thus paving the way for the building of a third campus.

The final article is an interesting photographic essay on Houston's early cinema industry, focusing on the architectural designs of movie houses. The motion picture industry revolutionized entertainment in the United States in the first three decades of the twentieth century. The photographs as well as the commentary by Linda Anderson Courtney, a former employee of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center where she was in charge of the architectural archives, provide a nostalgic view of the city for those who have lived here for some time and a look at an important aspect of its history for us newcomers.

Finally, this issue contains a delightful review by Dr. Don Carleton of Edgar W. Ray's biography of Judge Roy Hofheinz, entitled *The Grand Architect*. Dr. Carleton was the first director of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center and is now director of the Barker History Center on the campus of the University of Texas at Austin. Destined to be a controversial study, Ray's biography is the first full-length account of one of the city's more colorful characters. Known best for his role in the building of the Astrodome which was hailed locally as the eighth wonder of the world, Judge Hofheinz also served briefly in the Texas legislature, was judge of Harris County, and was elected as mayor of the city at the tender age of thirty-nine. Carleton's critical review will serve more to whet the appetite of those interested in learning something about Judge Hofheinz than to satisfy their taste for good biography.

The Open Forum, 1926-1938: The Lecture Platform and the First Amendment in the Bayou City

Sharon Bice Endelman

In the 1920s and 1930s, Houstonians could choose from an expanding array of educational and cultural opportunities, programs designed to appeal to a wide range of interests and tastes. This period not only witnessed the creation of Houston Junior College and its transformation into a municipal university, but also a regular series of extension lectures at Rice Institute and an increasingly conscious commitment on the part of civic groups, such as the recently formed League of Women Voters, to inform and educate the public. During these years, a similarly ambitious program of tours, lectures, and courses was launched by the Houston Art League which, in 1924, erected the first fine arts museum in Texas. Already a familiar fixture in the city, the Houston Public Library succeeded in securing tax bonds to construct a graceful Spanish-renaissance structure to house its growing collections and activities, including the nucleus of a natural history museum. A doubling of population in the 1920s, an accompanying influx of families from diverse regions and backgrounds, and the opening of the first radio stations—all these contributed to an intellectual awakening as new ideas found their way into the community.¹ One element in this cultural and educational transformation that has been largely overlooked was a group known as the Houston Open Forum active from 1926 to 1938. The Forum sought to bring distinguished and often controversial speakers into the city to spark creative debate. Committed to preserving First Amendment rights, the Forum faced a citizenry uncertain of itself, eager to hear outside ideas yet sometimes fearful of the impact these might make on traditional attitudes and lifestyles.

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¹On the expanding cultural and educational opportunities in Houston during t years, see Perry M. McCall, "A Progressive City during the Frivolous Decade: A Study of S Concerns in Houston, Texas, during the 1920s" (M.A. thesis, Texas A & M University, 1971), David G. McComb, *Houston: The Bayou City* (Austin: University of Texas, 1969), pp. 124

Curtis Howe Walker, Rice Institute professor of history and government, established the Forum with the assistance of several friends in the spring of 1926. The third of six Texas communities to found such a body, Houston modeled its efforts on those of Dallas which had been the first city in the South to sponsor an Open Forum in 1919.² On April 6, Houston Public Library Trustees, probably acting on the prompting of library director and Forum official Julia Ideson, agreed to cooperate with the local organization and authorized the group to use the new central building as its headquarters.³ Dr. Walker sent letters to likely supporters that defined the purpose of the Forum and stressed its commitment to intellectual freedom:

It is the purpose to make of the proposed Houston Open Forum a democratic undertaking to give the general public free play in the exercise of the American principle of free assemblage and open discussion of all matters in which the citizenship has a right to participate.

Such an institution should be of the highest educational value in that while the ablest speakers obtainable are sought for authoritative [sic] presentations of important subjects, the audience has an opportunity to express its own opinions, however they may coincide or differ with the speaker. The only restrictions imposed on this public expression are that personalities shall not be indulged in and that statements and questions shall relate closely to the day's subjects.⁴

This emphasis on the free interplay of ideas, both by platform speakers and those engaged in discussion following the lecture, remained a hallmark of the Forum in its own publications and dealings with the media. The leadership was, however, careful to remind audiences and reporters alike that a speaker's appearance before the body did not constitute an endorsement of those particular views: "It is understood that the Forum does not present these lecturers as its spokesmen and does not stand sponsor for arguments offered. The speakers' opinion may or may not express the views of those behind the Forum movement."⁵ The Forum sponsors emphasized that they only wished to encourage thought on serious questions of the day and that the best way to achieve such a result was to provide an opportunity for free and open discussion of all viewpoints.

² Elmer Scott, *88 Essential Years, Being the Intimate Story of Elmer Scott in Industry and the Humanities and of the Civic Federation of Dallas over a Third of a Century* (Dallas: Civic Federation, 1954), pp. 55-61.

³ Minutes, April 6, 1926, Houston Public Library Collection, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library (hereafter cited as HMRC).

⁴ Committee of Organization to Potential Donors, April 1926, Houston Public Library Collection, HMRC.

⁵ Houston Post-Dispatch, October 19, 1931.

In this attempt to spark a meaningful exchange of ideas, the Forum introduced over a hundred platform speakers to Houston in a twelve-year period.⁶ These lecturers came from virtually every corner of the globe and represented a wide spectrum of opinions, backgrounds, and expertise. For the first time, Houstonians had the opportunity to hear leading authorities from the general lecture circuit on a continuing basis. While other civic organizations might sponsor an occasional lecture, the Forum remained the only group during these years dedicated strictly to the task of arranging a regular series of outside speakers capable of attracting large audiences. Citizens, as a whole, responded favorably to these offerings with crowds turning out for sessions in numbers that ranged from a few hundred to as many as five or six thousand. Among the best attended programs were those addressed by such luminaries as Clarence Darrow, Bertrand Russell, Lincoln Steffens, Norman Thomas, and Margaret Sanger.

The Forum leadership consciously sought speakers able to provoke discussion and dissent. A sympathetic local journalist sketched an enthusiastic if somewhat exaggerated depiction of the ideal platform guest, underlining the degree to which controversy was to be tolerated and even encouraged:

The tribune of the day ought to be qualified by wit, eloquence, charm, certainly and as often as possible by reason, clarity, and decision. To go further, his statements ought to smack of anarchy and iconoclasm. He ought, perhaps, to have had one or more books suppressed in Boston or declared unfit for place in the circulating library of the Burman Branch of Missions. . . . Any forum member pays its dues and attends its lectures for three primary purposes (and the last is the greatest of these): to be informed, entertained, and insulted, or better, to be informed and entertained while his neighbor is being insulted.⁷

Despite these confident words, Forum leaders could not have felt entirely comfortable with their task when they recalled a number of recent developments that threatened to infringe on First Amendment freedoms in the community. Like many Southern cities, Houston had faced the specter of a revitalized and growing Klu Klux Klan through the early 1920s. In a crusade for moral and social conformity, police chief Gordon Murphy cooperated with the Klan in tapping telephone wires, intercepting telegraph messages, and posting spies at the post office.⁸ Although Klan membership had dropped

⁶ Programs, Houston Open Forum Collection, HMRC.

⁷ Ruth West, "Wide Open Forum," Houston Gargoyle, January 15, 1929, p. 16.

⁸ Charles C. Alexander, *Crusade for Conformity: The Ku Klux Klan in Texas, 1920-1930*, The Texas Gulf Coast Historical Association Publication Series, vol. VII, no. 1 (Houston: The Association, 1962), pp. 10-13, 17, 77.

by 1927, the community still attempted to regulate morals in public amusements, stage productions, and motion pictures by a three-man city censor board. Between 1921 and 1929, this triumvirate reviewed 12,000 programs, censoring 2,600 in part and rejecting 225 completely.⁹ Just as restrictive of free speech and assemblage could be the disapproval of individual citizens; birth control advocate Margaret Sanger found opposition so overwhelming in 1924 that she cancelled her lecture tour of Houston and other Texas cities.

While most Open Forum speakers elicited no widespread protest, a small core did meet with disapproval from one or more local interests. The sharpest controversies were ignited by lectures on social and cultural mores, particularly those concerned with sex or religion. The strongest attack of this nature surfaced on December 6, 1927 when Forum speaker Ben Lindsey addressed a "monster crowd" in the City Auditorium; four thousand Houstonians were turned away from the overflowing hall.¹⁰ Although the Denver judge enjoyed an international reputation as an authority on youth delinquency, the ideas expressed in his most recent publication, *The Companionate Marriage*, drew widespread denunciation from conservative sections of the pulpit and press. In this volume, Lindsey argued for the repeal of laws forbidding the dissemination of birth control information and for divorce by mutual consent when no children were involved. He contended that many upper middle-class couples had already established companionate unions, with the wife continuing her career and delaying the arrival of a family.¹¹

Forum directors were cautious enough to stipulate that Lindsey focus on "The Revolt of Modern Youth" rather than on birth control and marriage. Local newspapers, however, led by the *Houston Chronicle*, ran stories on the judge for several weeks before the lecture which emphasized his more controversial opinions. In late November, a coalition of conservative groups—the Women's Christian Temperance Union, the Crime Suppression League, and the Loyalty to the Law League—petitioned the city censors to suppress the address, "claiming that it was a form of entertainment conducive to immorality, and under supervision of the censor board."¹² Upholding this contention would have created a dangerous precedent that Forum leaders might have found difficult to circumvent, not only in this instance but for future lectures as well. However, Chairman George Woods denied the request,

noting that "to stop a public speaker would be to attack the right of free speech."¹³ The protestors then attempted to station a policeman at the auditorium to refuse admission to anyone between the ages of ten and eighteen, a strategy that failed despite assurances from the secretary of the board of censors that she might be able to persuade the Forum to submit to this decree.¹⁴

Although the audience applauded loudly when Lindsey volunteered to discuss companionate marriage after his main address, the storm of criticism continued unabated the following week, expressing itself in editorials, letters to newspapers, Sunday sermons, and one lecture sponsored by the Catholic Church to present the opposing viewpoint. The opposition not only rejected the judge's ideas, but condemned the Forum leadership for introducing such a vile influence into the city. The morning after the lecture, the *Chronicle* asserted "that if ever there was occasion to ban a speaker from the city it was last night," contending that the Forum had "stretched its legal right under our constitution very far, and certainly . . . ignored its moral responsibility to the people."¹⁵

In one of several denunciations from area pulpits, Baptist minister W.D. Lyerle scored Lindsey as an advocate of animal morality and the Forum governors as corrupters of the public conscience:

We stand aghast, and wonder where we are drifting, when it comes to pass that in Houston, our own city, men and women will sponsor with their money and their time, the giving of a lecture that can have but one result, and that the lowering of moral standards. Why in the name of high heaven do the city authorities prostitute the people's property, our city auditorium, to a shameful purpose like this? If you will investigate, you will find that the same group of persons who are backing this lecture, are in full accord with the moving picture business. . . . With various forms of indecency and immorality being sponsored by prominent citizens, we are returning rapidly to the plane of brute morality.¹⁶

Like many Houstonians, Lyerle clearly found some of the new ideas being introduced into the community a disturbing threat to traditional values and lifestyles, particularly when organizations like the Forum enjoyed such highly-placed patrons.

It is instructive to compare Lindsey's situation in 1927 to that of Margaret Sanger who spoke before a Forum audience of around three thousand on

⁹McComb, *Houston*, pp. 152-153.

¹⁰*Houston Chronicle*, December 7, 1927.

¹¹*Houston Chronicle*, November 27, 1927, Charles Larsen, *The Good Fight: The Life and Times of Ben B. Lindsey* (Chicago: Quadrangle Books, 1972), pp. 162-182.

¹²*Houston Chronicle*, December 2, 1927.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴*Ibid.*, December 3, 1927.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, December 7, 1927.

¹⁶*Houston Post-Dispatch*, December 7, 1927.

November 7, 1931. The reception accorded this speaker suggests that, although certain groups remained opposed to her presence, the majority of citizens no longer demanded she be silenced, whatever their personal qualms. Board members had pushed for a visit by Sanger as early as June 1930, a tactic questioned by their more cautious president, James J. Carroll, who argued this would "offend so large a part of our citizenship with small possibility of accomplishing any real good and . . . be repugnant to not a few of those who make up our Council." Notwithstanding these objections, the Forum "nervously and doubtfully agreed" to go ahead with the preparations.¹⁷

Chief opposition to Sanger came from Catholic women's groups and some of the same Catholic clergy who had earlier attacked Ben Lindsey. Following a denunciation of Sanger by Bishop C.E. Byrne in an address at the Christ the King celebration on October 25, thirteen church organizations joined in a letter of protest against the contraception lecture. At a called meeting on November 3, the Forum board voted unanimously not to cancel the engagement, claiming they had tried for several weeks to obtain a spokesman from the opposition who would consent to a debate.¹⁸ Several clergy protested this decision with sermons and letters to newspapers; Reverend Thomas Carney, rector of Saint Mary's Cathedral in Galveston, devoted his radio broadcast to refuting the speaker's views.¹⁹ There were, however, no general storms of protest as had greeted Lindsey in 1927, perhaps an indication of the degree to which the Forum had already widened the boundaries of acceptable public discussion.

Controversy also focused on speakers who advocated radical alterations in the political and economic fabric. The onset of the Great Depression intensified such fears. Although Houston experienced fewer hardships than many urban centers, economic growth had halted by 1930 as unemployment had leapt upward and wages plunged. Board members faced a community increasingly nervous over small but persistent inroads achieved by socialism and communism among the workers.²⁰ A fear, unspoken but real, persisted: that the Forum itself might become a primary center for promoting such ideas. Critics could point to the fact that, on Norman Thomas' visit in 1931, an

¹⁷ Minutes, October 17, 1930, Houston Open Forum Collection, HMRC. See also June 4, 1930.

¹⁸ James J. Carroll to the Officers and Members of Various Catholic Organizations, Houston Open Forum Collection, HMRC; Minutes, November 3, 1931, Houston Open Forum Collection, HMRC; Houston Chronicle, November 4, 1931.

¹⁹ Houston Post Dispatch, November 7, 1931; "Catholic Will Give Birth Control Talk" and Birth Control Advocate and Opponent Air Views on Platform and Pulpit" (newspaper clipping, Publicity Scrapbook, 1931), Houston Open Forum Collection, HMRC.

²⁰ On communist demonstrations and other evidence of labor unrest, see Marsha G. Berryman, "Houston and the Early Depression, 1929-1932" (M.A. thesis, University of Houston,

organizational meeting of the socialists had convened immediately after the lecture with twenty new members recruited from those lingering at the auditorium. More disturbing was the revelation that same year that the communists made use of the evening sessions to distribute literature and advertise local gatherings.²¹

Criticism of the speakers' political and economic views could take several forms. Socialist spokesman Kirby Page, for example, found himself facing a vociferous and determined heckler when he urged that citizens resist the government's wars.²² More frequent were complaints from individuals and organizations on the Forum's choice of speakers. Board members turned down repeated petitions from the American Legion's Reserve Officer Corps urging them to sponsor sessions on such topics as "national defense in all its branches including 'Red hunting in the U.S.'"²³

Accusations levelled by established newspapers such as the Houston Chronicle were more difficult to dismiss. The Chronicle implied on several occasions that the Open Forum was not really "open," since its sponsors favored liberal spokesmen and neglected to provide a platform for more conservative views. This allegation contained a measure of truth: Forum leaders regarded themselves as progressive and preferred to schedule speakers whose opinions were to the left of majority sentiment.²⁴ In 1930, after a succession of liberal critics of the established order including Bertrand Russell and Norman Thomas, the paper offered these caustic comments on the arrival of noted free thinker and pro-Bolshevik journalist Max Eastman: "The Forum has dealt in iconoclasm and extremists this season. . . . Apparently the ultra ultra will be reached in Mr. Eastman. Anyone who has read *The Liberator* or the *Masses*, which he has edited, must believe so."²⁵

Similar charges found expression on several occasions, but never more sharply than in November 1933 with the appearance of Samuel Schmalhausen, psychiatrist, author, and editor of *Recovery through Revolution*. Politically, Schmalhausen was the most radical figure to speak under Forum auspices. Arguing that fascism was the last and inevitable posture of capitalism struggling to retain its power over the masses, he predicted that "democracy, that is capitalistic democracy is doomed. . . . The

²¹ Houston Press, December 9, 1931; Allen V. Peden, "Red Wrangle and a Third Party," Houston Garçoyle, April 19, 1931, p. 14.

²² Houston Press, December 12, 1934.

²³ Minutes, December 1, 1932, Houston Open Forum Collection, HMRC. See also November 1, 1931 and February 20, 1933.

²⁴ Among the conservatives who did speak under Forum auspices were fundamentalist W.B. Riley, prohibitionist Clarence True Wilson, and anti-Stalinist Mme. Pierre Pontfadine.

world . . . has one choice—to advance to communism or revert to barbarianism.”²⁶ Even the usually friendly *Press* remarked that “had he made the same speech anonymously in Martha Hermann Square all precedent indicates that he would have been jailed,” a situation, however, which they deplored.²⁷ More direct in its editorial denunciation, the *Chronicle* condemned the proceedings as heavily one-sided:

Objection can be made to the spread of communistic propaganda, or any other propaganda under the label of an open forum discussion, when there is, in fact, no real provision made for a forum—for the adequate expression of opposite views by persons qualified to express them. . . . The only way in which a subject so controversial and of such deep ramifications as communism could be presented for bona fide open forum discussion would be in the form of a debate between qualified men. . . . The business of providing a sounding board for the most violent and offensive kind of communist propaganda without being able to provide a counter blast of any kind is certainly not the occupation which truly nonpartisan promoters of intellectual interest should be engaged in.²⁸

The crude tactics of 1927 to battle ideas by banning a speaker outright were no longer being urged by the media or citizenry; the Forum had succeeded in raising the level of debate to a more subtle plain, compelling Houstonians to wrestle with complex questions that still occasion dissenting views today.

The Forum's success in withstanding its critics was not merely a matter of chance. Prudently soliciting the support of leading citizens whose names were then prominently displayed on all promotional literature, the founders of the Forum managed to endow the organization with an aura of respectability that opponents found difficult to combat. In a letter written after the group's dissolution, former board member Julia Ideson recalled that Dr. Walker had given special consideration to finding the “right person” for president; only after careful thought did he recommend that this post be tendered to James J. Carroll, native Texan, son of a Baptist minister, and successful lumber industrialist. According to Ideson, Carroll was not only an individual of “intellectual courage” and independence of thought,²⁹ but a man “whose prominent position in life made him free to enjoy his independence without catering about business” or social repercussions.²⁹

²⁶Houston *Press*, November 15, 1933.

²⁷*Ibid.*, November 17, 1933.

²⁸Houston *Chronicle*, November 16, 1933.

²⁹Julia Ideson to J.C. Flanagan, September 18, 1940, Houston Open Forum Collection.

A similar effort was mounted to induce well-known Houstonians of a liberal bent to serve on a fifty-member advisory council. The stipulation of a ten to fifty dollar donation successfully restricted membership to the more affluent in the city. Council members represented such diverse but respected elements of the community as banking, real estate, textiles, the law, the clergy, and medicine as well as a scattering of clubwomen, wives and daughters of established families. Among the key council backers were such distinguished figures as Ima Hogg, Will Clayton, Oveta Culp Hobby, Episcopal bishop Clinton Quin, school superintendent Dr. E.F. Oberholzer, and Hugh Potter, developer of River Oaks.³⁰

The officers and executive board who comprised the working core of the Forum generally came from the middle ranks of Houston's business and professional classes.³¹ Membership of this group, however, differed from that of the council in two respects. While clubwomen predominated among the female council backers, the officers and executive board boasted a talented contingent of business and professional women, a constituency that had found increasing voice in American society during the 1920s. In addition to Julia Ideson, the Forum leadership included Ethel Brostus, city planner and realtor; Ray K. Daily, ophthalmologist; Blanche Higginbotham, principal of Lanier School for twenty-six years until her retirement in 1952; and Ramona Brady Hardiman, journalist. Moreover, of the Forum's twenty-eight active board members and officers, at least eight, or 28 percent, had ties outside Texas, either through birth or attendance at an out-of-state university.³² Some, like Julia Ideson, had resided in Houston for sufficient time to be accepted as virtual natives; others like Harry Freeman, Ray K. Daily, and Mrs. Max Nathan, all Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, would always be regarded as outsiders to some degree.

Beyond the support of individuals, the Forum received additional backing from several local institutions, chief among them the public library. Library director Julia Ideson not only made available lists of books to be read in conjunction with the programs, but also urged staff to attend the lectures and sometimes lent pages to aid as ushers.³³ The Forum originally intended to

³⁰Information on council members was collected from Programs, Houston Open Forum collection, HMRC, and *Houston City Directory, 1926-1940*.

³¹Information on officers and board members was collected from Programs, Houston Open Forum Collection, HMRC; *Houston City Directory, 1926-1940*; and *Texas Biography* *Yearbooks*, Texas and Local History Department, Houston Public Library.

³²These included W.O. Combs, Ray K. Daily, Harry Freeman, Ramona Brady Hardiman, Blanche Higginbotham, Julia Ideson, Mrs. Max Nathan, and Lee Sharrar.

³³Strapbooks, 1926 and 1927, Houston Public Library Collection, HMRC; booklists and bookmarks, Houston Open Forum Collection, HMRC; “Open Forum” in the vertical file, Texas

hold all lectures in the library auditorium, a feature discontinued after only two sessions when overflow crowds forced the group to seek more spacious quarters.³⁴ The university community at Rice, from which several Forum sponsors were drawn, supplied additional student ushers and helped to arrange a debate with Baylor College in 1928.³⁵ Assistance of another sort came from the Houston *Gargoyle*, a progressive weekly geared to the city's business and professional classes published between 1928 and 1932. Owned and edited by board member Allen V. Peden, this magazine gave extensive and generally favorable coverage to speakers and made its mailing list available for the solicitation of funds.³⁶ The Forum took pains to initiate friendly relations with a number of other groups, ranging from the area men's clubs and the Forum of Civics to local chapters of the League of Women Voters and the National Council of Jewish Women.

While carefully cultivating middle and upper-class allies, the organization made few attempts to establish closer ties with individuals or bodies who could represent the city's laboring man and woman.³⁷ This limited base of support created an ironic situation for the Forum: prestigious backers ensured the freedom to bring in controversial speakers, a task that might otherwise have proven too difficult to accomplish. Yet, although these lecturers raised doubts about prevailing social, political, economic, and religious codes, their challenge was heard in the context of an organization controlled by solid middle and upper-class interests. Thousands of Houstonians—"rich and poor, men and women, employed and unemployed, members of many races and creeds, persons of substance and victims of poverty"³⁸ could turn out to hear a socialist spokesman before the Forum in 1931, but these same working-class interests found no representation on the governing board.

The last Open Forum lecturer appeared in Houston on April 19, 1938. The disbanding of the group thereafter can be attributed to several factors: the gradual decline in annual subscriptions after president Carrol's resignation,

³⁴Minutes, December 7, 1926, Houston Open Forum Collection, HMRC; Annual Report, 1927, Houston Public Library Collection, HMRC; Houston *Press*, November 25, 1926.

³⁵Minutes, October 1926 and April 17, 1928, Houston Open Forum Collection, HMRC; "Houston Open Forum Programs" (mimeograph sheet), Houston Open Forum Collection, HMRC.

³⁶Minutes, May 9, 1930, Houston Open Forum Collection, HMRC.

³⁷Of the seventy-seven active council and board members (defined as those serving five years or more), only two had working-class roots: George Wilson, secretary of the Labor and Trades Council, who served on the council from 1926 through 1931 and Valdemar Bernhard, teamster and columnist for the Houston *Labor Journal*, also a councilor from 1931 to 1938. There is no evidence that either Wilson or Bernhard actually attended a council meeting.

³⁸"Thomas Urges Socialism for Economic Ills" (newspaper clipping, Publicity Scrapbook, 1931), Houston Open Forum Collection, HMRC.



Julia Ideson, director of the Houston Public Library, was one of the principal initiators of the Open Forum and an early leader of Houston's liberal community.

an unsuccessful policy of charging admissions to lectures adopted in 1936, and, perhaps most crucial, a diminished interest in alternative political and social systems as economic conditions improved. The group might have weathered these obstacles if it had retained a clear idea of its purpose and the best means of accomplishing that purpose. What ultimately undermined the organization was not the attack of outside critics but the inability of Forum backers to develop a coherent sense of their own mission.

Essentially, the Forum could not decide how to maintain the balance between defending First Amendment freedoms and advancing a liberal political view, or even whether that balance should be maintained. On a number of occasions, the membership had turned down a proposed lecturer because some felt the Forum might become too closely identified with a left-wing political line. One clear example of this occurred in 1935 when Julia Ideson requested that the organization sponsor six speakers from the League of Industrial Democracy, a group with pronounced leftist sympathies. In its promotional literature for that year, the L.I.D. asserted that the "basic cause of the present social distress lies in the operation of our industrial machine by a small section of the population for private profit," and urged education for a new society "in which industry is owned and operated by the community for the common good."³⁹ With such noted Americans as Norman Thomas, Upton Sinclair, and Clarence Darrow at its helm, this association sought to promote an interest in socialism through radio broadcasts, college recruitment, workshops, and publications. The L.I.D., however, attracted a number of persons with more radical sympathies such as J.B. Matthews, head of the communist front group American League against War and Fascism, and university organizer Joseph P. Lash who would win ascendancy over the campus L.I.D. branches by late 1935 and merge with the Communist American Student Union to form a new organization, the American Student Union, firmly under communist control.⁴⁰

On May 10, 1935, Lee Sharrar, elected president of the Forum after Carroll's resignation for ill health, presented the board and council with an L.I.D. proposal to furnish six speakers for the following winter at a flat fee of \$350. Protracted debate ensued in which most present objected on the grounds of propaganda and the fear of unfavorable publicity. Of the twenty-three present, only three voted to accept the package. After further argument, the group agreed that "the L.I.D. offer should be rejected as a unit, but that certain

of the speakers on their course would be valuable if they could be secured singly."⁴¹

In an effort to generate additional support, Ideson approached her own employees six days later and "spoke of a series of lectures sponsored by the League of Industrial Democracy which she suggested that the staff consider bringing to Houston next winter."⁴² Sometime during this same year, she gave permission for the local L.I.D. to distribute its pamphlets at the central library. In October 1935, when Ideson officially requested that the library be one of six organizations to underwrite the speakers, the trustees declined this suggestion, "also any official connection of the Library Staff."⁴³ She made a final plea to the Open Forum on November 1 "for an expression of opinion from the Board in the matter of joining with three other civic groups to sponsor the lecturers," but met with no further success.⁴⁴ In the end, it was not six or three but only one organization, the Houston Labor and Trades Council, that consented to underwrite the series.

This same problem surfaced in more dramatic guise on June 10, 1937, at the final recorded meeting of the Forum council. This time, as the group debated whether to disband the organization or continue it in its present form, Ray K. Dailly put forward an alternative proposal "that the Forum change its policy from the impartial to the definitely liberal."⁴⁵ Lengthy argument ensued in which the majority asserted with board member Lewis Fogle that "it has been a source of great pride . . . that the forum had been open to any good speaker so long as he was sincere in his point of view."⁴⁶ Additionally, Fogle expressed the fear that adopting a political stance would "subject the Forum to unnecessary criticism."⁴⁷

Dailly's measure failed despite the heated support of attorney Harry Freeman who reminded his colleagues that under "the liberal point of view we will not feel obliged to give a hearing to reactionaries" as has sometimes been done in the past.⁴⁸ The final decision that the Forum continue in its present form could not erase the deep differences revealed by this debate; the ideas communicated undoubtedly mirrored a similar division of opinion among the many attending the lectures who were not members of the board or council. On the one hand stood those individuals, the majority, who through commitment to First Amendment rights, desire to hear different viewpoints,

³⁹ "What is the L.I.D.?" (pamphlet, 1935), Houston Public Library Collection, HMRC.

⁴⁰ Benjamin Gitlow, *I Confess: The Truth About American Communism* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1940), pp. 578-579, 581-582; Earl Latham, *The Communist Controversy in Washington from the New Deal to McCarthy* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1966), pp. 50, 67, 196; Donald D. Eggett and Stow Parsons, eds., *Socialism and American Life* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1952), pp. 359-361, 382.

⁴¹ Minutes, May 10, 1935, Houston Open Forum Collection, HMRC.

⁴² Staff Meeting Minutes, May 16, 1935, Houston Public Library Collection, HMRC.

⁴³ Minutes, October 16, 1935, Houston Public Library Collection, HMRC.

⁴⁴ Minutes, November 1, 1935, Houston Open Forum Collection, HMRC.

⁴⁵ Minutes, June 10, 1937, Houston Open Forum Collection, HMRC.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

or less of public criticism and domination by radicals, preferred to retain a *galadima* open to all speakers, at least in theory. On the other side were those who wished to transform the Forum into a political action group. This *unabiding tension* goes far towards explaining the demise of the Houston Forum in 1938.

In 1940, corresponding with a Louisiana businessman who inquired about the possibility of establishing a Forum in his locale, Julia Ideson offered this assessment of the defunct Houston group: "It served a good purpose and its influence is still with us today."⁴⁹ Ideson was undoubtedly correct in her assessment that the Forum left an indelible imprint on the city. The Houston Forum expanded the limits of permissible public debate, providing one of the few organized, well-patronized channels for bringing distinguished speakers into the community who could stimulate thought on vital questions of the day. In addition to fostering rights of free speech and free association, the group helped to meet a variety of needs, acting as a tool for adult education, an impetus for liberal opinion, and though few board members might have consciously acknowledged it, a safety valve for the average citizen threatened by the economic hardships of the Great Depression.

If the Open Forum enriched the community as a whole, those individuals who served as board members and officers also derived special benefits from their association with the group. The Forum provided an institutional framework for progressive Houstonians, many of them personal friends, to exchange ideas and work for change. Although the executive board made no attempt to attract working-class representatives, it offered an open door to the business and professional classes. Women, newcomers to the region, even those from immigrant backgrounds, all persons who might have been excluded from positions of authority in older, more traditional organizations, found a voice and an opportunity to exercise leadership within the Forum. These progressive, upwardly mobile individuals must have benefited in a personal sense from their contact with councilors, many of the latter representatives of established Houston families. The Forum, then, helped to institute change both by aggressively safeguarding First Amendment rights and by allowing many outside the traditional power structure to play a small but meaningful part in a vital aspect of Houston's cultural and educational development.

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 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 anomaly" began to thrive in the early decades of the twentieth century, largely

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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.