

A Thirty Year Journey— But Not Over

By *Martin V. Melosi*,
Director, Center for Public History

No sooner had our family arrived in Houston from College Station, Texas, in August 1984 than the powers that be at UH whisked me off to Austin to testify before the Higher Education Coordinating Board. The leadership of the History Department had developed the framework for a public history program the year before, and we now needed State approval to get our new master's degree on the books. The UH Department of History was an entrepreneurial place, envisioning several ways to move beyond a traditional pedagogy and to place its graduate program on the map in a very competitive academic market. Also underway was a grant proposal for the National Endowment for the Humanities—the Humanities and the Professions project—which was meant to connect history, business, and law in both teaching and research by bridging the gap between the academic historical discipline and the professional schools. I could not have been more impressed with the energy of the department when I interviewed in February. Its ambitious goals stretched beyond the conventional activities of my old department and others I had observed. I wanted to be part of such innovation.

Now it was my turn to help advance our new initiative in public history. With a certain gift for gab and an unrealistic sense of confidence, I attempted to convince the board members that our program was ready to be unveiled. (Actually, I was told beforehand that I would not be doing the talking for the university, but at the last minute I was pushed forward to the microphone.) Our team successfully gained State approval, but then came the hard part. The basic blueprint for a degree in public history had been designed by the department chair, Jim Martin, and others. My predecessor, David Hammack, had taught a course or two the previous year. The dean's office and the department gave me a small program office and a few thousand dollars and instructed me to establish an Institute for Public History (IPH) to manage the new degree program. (To make this task more difficult, Houston was in the midst of an energy bust, which jarred its economy.)



Marty Melosi.

All photos courtesy of CPH unless otherwise noted.

The dean and chair intimated that I might also consider establishing some kind of research plan and community outreach activities. Armed with a vague notion of what constituted “public history” and the naïve belief that I actually could fulfill the aspirations of my new department, I introduced myself to colleagues throughout the city who had any resemblance to historians or who operated historically oriented institutions—museums, archives, et al. Ultimately I established the Public History Roundtable that brought together the Houston historical community twice a year to discuss

our mutual interests. Attendance was brisk in the early years, but the roundtable ultimately faded as a useful forum.

The dean also told me that if I wanted IPH to work I needed to raise some money. UH was good at giving its employees a pretty free hand in seeking outside funds—a so-called hunting license—but not great in providing internal resources. Ironically, the university wanted me to run a graduate program residing in the History Department with no supporting funds. Again, my naiveté was my greatest ally, and I worked diligently to scrape together money wherever I could find it (legally, that is).



Joe Pratt

Things lumbered along for a year or two until the university hired Joe Pratt as the holder of the first NEH-Cullen Chair in History and Business. Joe and I had been colleagues for many years at Texas

A&M University, and he possessed a deep knowledge of community and corporate history that served our new public history program well. Joe also poured money from his chair into IPH, which helped us turn the corner on several pressing needs. After thirty years he continues to be our most important financial angel—and tireless CPH participant. If the renamed Center for Public History (CPH) can claim any successes during its long life, it is because of collaborations like the one Joe and I forged.



Daniel Yergin, author of The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power, Christine Womack, Ken Lipartito, and Joe Pratt at the event sponsored by the Center for Public History to mark the debut of the documentary film based on the book.

No one person made CPH work. I can list scads of people responsible for sustaining the center, and they all deserve recognition. Our current group of Joe Pratt, Debbie Harwell, Lindsay Scovil Dove, Monica Perales, Todd Romero, Terry Tomkins-Walsh, Julie Cohn, Maria Corsi, and several others are typical of how commitment and collaboration work. Among the several deans that we served under, Lois Zamora, John Antel, and John Roberts especially understood what we were trying to do and gave us moral and financial support. Department chairs, such as John Ettling, Tom O'Brien, Joe Glatthaar, Sue Kellogg, and Nancy Young, have been good partners and allies. The spine of our organization always has been our program coordinators starting with Julie Kavitsky, through the long and excellent tenure of Christine Womack, the brief but valuable time of Stephanie Fuglaar Statz, the extraordinary work of Kristin Deville and Wyndham Bailey, and now Maria Corsi.

The years have been filled with many highs and a few unfortunate lows. At times I wondered if we could keep CPH afloat, especially when resources were scarce (which always seems to be the case—ask any director). As weird as it may seem in these modern, technologically sophisticated times, in our first years being able to acquire working and affordable computers was a pipedream. Our first DEC desktops were little more than paperweights. And space always was the final frontier. Beg, borrow, and steal should have been etched above our door.

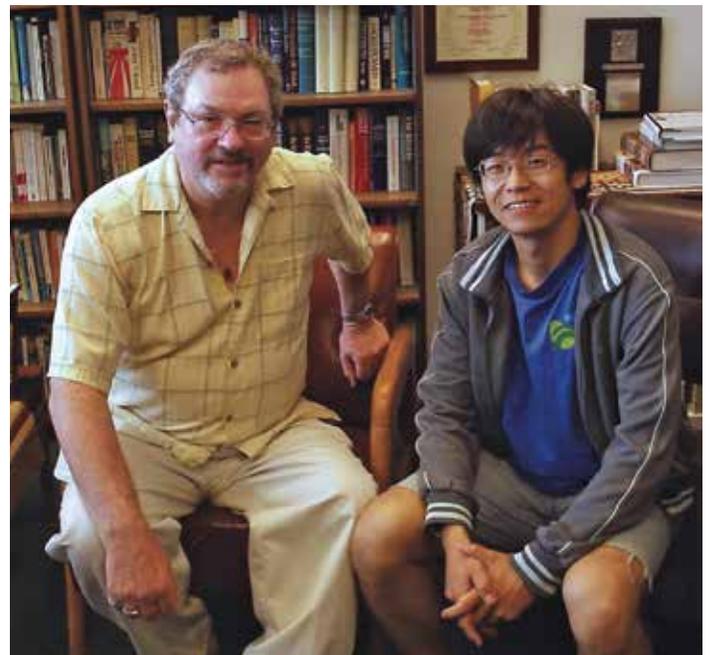
Neither time nor inclination leads me to recount all that went on in our first thirty years, but I do want to identify a few turning points. At the core of what we do is training young historians. Over the years we have ranged from twenty to twenty-five majors and minors per year to as few as five or six. Each student was important, and many went on to fine careers. Our first class had four students—Chris Castaneda, Debbie Griggs Carter, Mark Clark, and Ed Harris. Chris was our first graduate, and among his ac-



Monica Perales.

complishments was becoming a published expert in natural gas history and serving as department chair and director of the public history program at Cal State, Sacramento. Debbie developed an excellent career as an archivist at such depositories as the George H. W. Bush Presidential Library. Mark has been professor of history at Oregon Tech since 1996. And Ed built an outstanding career in institutional development and now has his own consulting firm. We could not be prouder of our students, and we hope to hear from all of them on a regular basis to catch up on their work and families. After many years of operating under the same curriculum, our associate director, Monica Perales, and her committee have given our degree program a fresh look and have recommended changes that will provide us with a better hands-on approach. Students to come will benefit from these changes.

Another key turning point was the transition from the Institute for Public History to the Center for Public History in 2004. The creation of CPH ultimately resulted in a stand-alone entity now operating under the dean in the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, rather than as a component of the Department of History. The change also broadened our scope immeasurably. Under CPH's auspices are the Public History Program, the Welcome Wilson Houston History Collaborative, the UH Center for Public History Lecture Series, a training program in energy and environmental history, an active post-doctoral program (including scholars most recently from the U.S., Belgium, China, and Brazil), and a UH faculty affiliate program. Most of these activities resulted from a merger of IPH with major components of the Humanities and Professions Program. CPH also conducts an array of research projects and incubates new programs, such as the Gulf Coast Food Project. Ever since the reorganization, we have viewed ourselves as a campus-



Mao Da, a Ph.D. student in environmental history, came to the University of Houston in August 2008 to study with Marty Melosi as part of a Joint Education Program with the School of History at Beijing Normal University. Marty Melosi coordinated Mao's studies with Professor Mei Xequin at Beijing Normal.



Kathy Brosnan.

wide, multidisciplinary program with an ever-expanding mission. The arrival of Kathy Brosnan to the History Department in 2003 added another important planning voice to CPH. As associate director, among other things, Kathy led the effort to develop a strategic plan for the program that effectively linked all of our activities together. Her uncompromising energy elevated our work to new

levels. Nancy Beck Young became our first public history coordinator from 2008-2012, which indicated how much we needed to broaden CPH's leadership responsibilities.

In December 2012, CPH fulfilled an important and persistent dream of acquiring sufficient space. For several years, we had a few offices in Agnes Arnold Hall, but they were really insufficient to serve all of our functions. Located in McElhinney Hall (with a small annex in Agnes Arnold Hall), CPH now boasts offices for the CPH administration, the Welcome Wilson Houston History Collaborative, post-doctoral offices, storage, a Gulf Coast Food Project office, and shared classroom and meeting space. The Houston History Association (HHA) soon will join CPH as an affiliated organization. The mutual benefit of the affiliation is to provide an institutional base and office space for HHA and to broaden CPH's reach into the Houston community. The talk about space may seem terribly mundane, but aside from the obvious need to house programs and people, the new offices proclaim our identity as an important component of the university. To receive space is to achieve a level of recognition that we have been striving for over many years.

Another turning point occurred in 2014 when former chair of the UH Board of Regents, UH alum, and promi-



Post-doc students and visiting faculty: Thomas Zhang, Yongping Wang, Matt Tribbe, Rick Mizelle, and Isabelle Parmentier.

nent Houston businessman, Welcome Wilson, Sr., gifted \$200,000 for naming rights to what became the Welcome Wilson Houston History Collaborative. The collaborative is responsible for *Houston History* magazine, the UH-Oral History of Houston Project, the Houston History Archives, and the UH Memories Project. Through the good offices of former student and local financial advisor, Chris Cookson, a connection was made between CPH and Welcome Wilson that led to the gift, which provides operating funds and a new endowment for the center. More importantly, the gift from Wilson, who is passionate about Houston history, is a first major step in expanding efforts to broaden and deepen our fundraising activities to preserve the stories of Houston's past.

There are more good days to come for CPH. I know I have left out many important events, activities, and people but also have buried some not-so-happy memories. The staying power of CPH, however, is the collaboration and cooperation of the people associated with it. We have had extraordinary staff members, despite the fact that we pay them too



CPH assistant director Monica Perales interviews Chef Hugo Ortega for the Gulf Coast Food Project, a part of the Center for Public History. The Gulf Coast Food Project promotes the study of food and encourages cross-disciplinary dialogue and interdisciplinary collaboration through the examination of the food that sustains the cultural, economic, and physical lives of our diverse communities.

Photo courtesy of Temple Northrup.



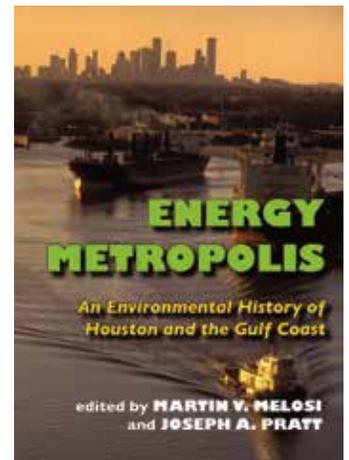
Mayor Annise Parker declared December 11, 2012, Houston History Day and congratulated the Houston History magazine on its tenth year of publication. The Mayoral Proclamation was sponsored by Council Member Melissa Noriega and presented by Council Member Ed Gonzalez. Shown left to right: Council Member Ed Gonzalez, UHAA president Mike Pede, Mayor Annise Parker, and magazine staff members Debbie Harwell, Aimee Bachari, Wyndham Bailey, Ann Lynd, and Natalie Garza. Photo courtesy of UHAA and Jeff Sutton.

little and well below what they deserve in dedication alone. Student aides have buoyed up overworked staffers, and for this we are grateful. We have been able to involve a number of our junior faculty in CPH activities, and I believe that their experiences have led to reciprocal benefits through numerous conferences and colloquia, through research activities such as the food project, the African American Houston Physicians project, and more. We have had valuable associations with several other units on campus, including various departments and centers in the College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences, the Honors College, the Law Center, the

Hilton College, the C. T. Bauer College of Business, the Hines College of Architecture, and especially the Hobby Center for Public Policy.

We have seen myriad publications and research papers on Houston history produced by faculty and students alike that never would have been written without the common bond of the Public History Program and CPH. *Energy Metropolis: An Environmental History of Houston and the Gulf Coast* (2007), which Joe Pratt and I edited, contained chapters from five of our former students—some the very best pieces in the book. We could not have been prouder. The hundreds of events that the lecture series sponsored, the dozens of colloquia and seminars we organized, the national conferences we hosted, and the enumerable lecturers we entertained have added to the university's role as a center of learning. No less important has been community outreach of all kinds. We have much to be proud of on that score as well.

On a personal note, let me observe that I had few expectations coming to UH in 1984 other than accepting what appeared to be an excellent opportunity for a relatively young full professor to build on his career and gain some valuable new experiences.



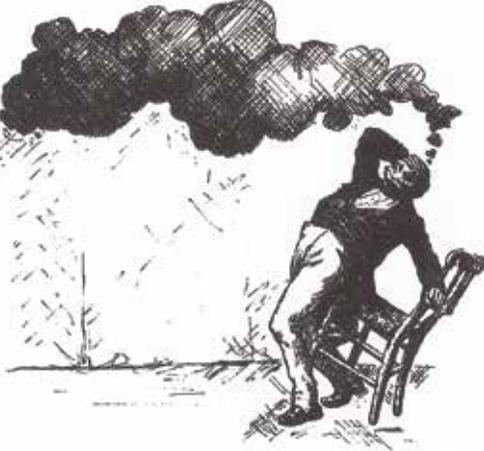
Released in 2007, *Energy Metropolis* grew out of a conference on the environmental history of Houston and the Gulf Coast held at the University of Houston in 2003. Graduate students in CPH contributed chapters.



University of Houston alumnus and proud Houstonian Welcome Wilson, Sr., stands outside the newly named Welcome Wilson Houston History Collaborative offices that house Houston History and UH-Oral History of Houston, February 2014. The third component, the Houston History Archives, is housed at the UH M.D. Anderson Library.



American Urban History class, Spring 2007, clockwise from bottom right: Marty Melosi, Jason Theriot, Jamie Quiroga, Hunter Lundquist, Jordan Bauer, Matt Christensen, Mao Da, Vicki Myers, and Natalie Schuster. Not pictured: Stephanie Fuglaar.



CANCERPHOBIA
in American History

A lecture by
James T. Patterson
Professor of History
Brown University

Wednesday, August 31, 1988, 7 p.m.

University of Houston

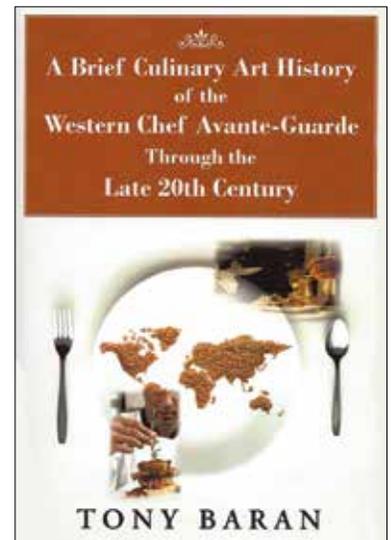
Tenneco Lectures
in Ethics and the
Professions

I had the good fortune—and serendipity—of attending the NEH Summer Seminar in Public History in Tempe, Arizona, in July 1984. What I knew about public history before arriving in Houston I was exposed to there, and I was able to apply much of what I learned in my new job. Yet I came to Houston viewing myself as an academic historian, eager to write more books, looking forward to new students and new courses. I no more saw myself as a public historian as the man in the moon. Had I thought about it for a while, I would have realized what I know now—that I had an abiding interest in connecting my historical scholarship to important issues of the present. The best compliment I ever received was, “Marty writes history as if it matters.”

Coming to Houston I had no idea that history done for the public benefit, history done in the community, history that connected our past with concerns of our own time, would be so important and so satisfying. I would not trade my thirty years of wearing two hats—one as an academic historian and the other as CPH director—for any other professional life. CPH, and especially the people who have helped it to grow, make me delighted to share these few words with you.

Martin V. Melosi is the director of CPH and the Hugh Roy and Lillie Cranz Cullen University Professor at the University of Houston. His research specialties are urban, environmental, and energy history.

The Tenneco Distinguished Lecture Series, now the Center for Public History Lecture Series, brings many renowned speakers to the university such as historian James T. Patterson, who spoke on campus a few months before the release of his book The Dread Disease: Cancer and Modern American Culture.



A well-known chef and public history graduate, Tony Baran, recently published a book on food as art.