

# The M.D. Anderson Memorial Library: A Legacy of Growth

By Khalid Sheikh



*Today, the M.D. Anderson Library has a light shining through the A, A sculpture at night, projecting quotes from famous works of literature in their native language onto the side of the building.*

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston.

The M.D. Anderson Memorial Library lies at the crossroads of the sprawling University of Houston (UH) campus.<sup>1</sup> Situated between the Cullen Family Plaza and the Student Center, thousands of Houstonians pass by the massive limestone building every day. Those who enter the library's glass doors are greeted by a three-story atrium bustling with activity: students rush up and down the Grand Staircase, chatter around group study tables, and scramble behind oversized computer screens to complete assignments. Beyond the atrium, students pile into elevators for a short ride to the much quieter Brown or Blue Wings. The library is the heart of the university, serving as a retreat for students in between classes and a resource for the experienced and aspiring scholars. The 250,000-square-foot behemoth — representing just one part of the UH Library System — began quite modestly, however, as merely a few shelves of books over ninety years ago.<sup>2</sup>

When Houston Junior College was founded in 1927, administrators at San Jacinto High School (SJHS), where the college classes met, granted the fledgling school a section of the high school library to call its own. For the next few years, the college's book collection grew slowly, as President E. E. Oberholtzer focused primarily on securing space for the college's classes rather than the library. This changed in

1933 when Ruth S. Wikoff became head of the junior college's library. Even in the depths of the Great Depression, Wikoff wasted little time in adding to the collection and building a library that met her standards. In 1934, Houston Junior College officially transitioned to a four-year university and became the University of Houston. By this time, 900 students were enrolled in classes at UH, which met in various buildings throughout the day and at SJHS at night. By 1935, Wikoff's efforts had overwhelmed the high school's library, which overflowed with study tables and books. Something had to be done. In response, President Oberholtzer, who was also superintendent of the Houston Independent School District, conveniently arranged to build a new music room for the high school, thereby freeing up the old music room for the university's library.<sup>3</sup>

By 1936, President Oberholtzer and other administrators realized that the university needed its own space. The original plans called for a new campus in Memorial Park, but the deal fell through after controversy erupted over oil drilling stipulations in the contract. The controversy's press coverage proved helpful, however, when shortly thereafter the Settegast family and Captain Ben Taub agreed to donate over 100 acres of land for the university's campus. Following an aggressive fundraising campaign, which included the first



*Ruth Wikoff, shown here (second from right) in the 1949 Houstonian yearbook, spearheaded the growth of the University of Houston Library with her indomitable vision and leadership.*  
 Photo courtesy of the Houstonian Yearbook Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

of many donations by Lillie and Hugh Roy Cullen, the university drained the swampy land and began construction on its first two buildings. On Monday, June 5, 1939, classes met in the new Roy G. Cullen Memorial Building; soon after, the Science Building was completed nearby.<sup>4</sup> After twelve years, the University of Houston had its own home.

The first library space on the new campus was in the Roy Cullen Building, and consisted of a single classroom and two smaller storage rooms. In her characteristic refined manner, Wikoff continued to compete, often successfully, for funds to build the collections she felt the university should have. Shortly, the library's new quarters proved no match for Wikoff, and she began filling other classrooms with library materials. President Oberholtzer reportedly remarked, "We've got to give the library space or she'll take over the whole building!"<sup>5</sup>

Indeed, the library was not alone in needing more room. UH's enrollment had skyrocketed in the post-World War II era, growing from less than 2,000 in 1944 to 10,968 in the fall of 1948. This growth was largely due to the influx of former soldiers eager to use the education benefits under the new GI Bill. With this rapid increase in the student body, course offerings expanded and campus life took off. By 1948, the university had over fifty extracurricular organizations registered. In their free time, students could try their hand at fencing through the Foil Club or develop an appreciation for pharmacy through the Mortar and Pestle Club. This increase in enrollment came at a cost as overcrowding became the norm, even though UH added two buildings. For the library, which could only seat 150 of the nearly 11,000 students, the growth was overwhelming.<sup>6</sup>

This increase in student enrollment was not surprising. President Oberholtzer had predicted the university's growth and had begun planning a \$12 million campus expansion in 1945. The plans included the grand Ezekiel W. Cullen Building, new dormitories to attract out-of-town students, and a dedicated library building. At a meeting of the board of regents in 1946, Colonel William Bates, a trustee of the M.D. Anderson Memorial Foundation, pledged \$1.5 million from the foundation to build the M.D. Anderson Memorial Library.<sup>7</sup>

Officially opened on Christmas Eve in 1950, the new, three-story Anderson Library covered in 11,000 square feet of high-grade marble could seat 1,400 students. The builders ambitiously planned the new library to accommodate 120,000 volumes, vastly exceeding the existing collection, which was likely less than 20,000. Wikoff voiced her concern over these figures shortly before the library had finished construction. Upon hearing this, Houston businessman and philanthropist Leopold Meyer founded the Friends of the Library, an organization of bibliophiles dedicated to supporting the University of Houston Libraries. Through the efforts of this new organization and yet another donation by Hugh Roy Cullen, the library's collection grew to over 56,000 volumes by its dedication in early 1951.<sup>8</sup>

The new library was designed to be cohesive with the campus architecture without overshadowing the new Ezekiel Cullen Building, which was to be the pride of the campus. Nonetheless, the Anderson Library boasted details the Cullen Building did not have. Architectural historian Dr. Stephen James explains, "The architecture that was popular during the 1930s and 40s was trying to allude to the ancient Greek temples. The tops of these temples, or friezes, were often decorated with images of gods and goddesses. Modeling after that, the architects [of the M.D. Anderson Library] carved the names of philosophers and writers on the top of the building to give an idea of the knowledge contained within the building." Chosen by the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, R. Balfar Daniels, the names included Homer, Plato, Shakespeare, Kant, and Swift.<sup>9</sup>

With nearly \$12 million of campus additions in progress — including the construction of the university's first permanent dormitories — the Cougar experience was



*Students study in the one-room library housed in the Roy G. Cullen Building in 1945. The building, which opened in 1939, was the first one completed on the permanent campus site.*

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston Buildings Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



*The original M.D. Anderson Library building, now known as the Red Wing, occupied in 1950 and dedicated on April 1, 1951, has since seen three additions, the Blue, Brown, and Gold Wings.*

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston Buildings Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

transformed. In the fall of 1950, an article entitled “Two Campuses” appeared in *The Daily Cougar* highlighting the campus’s makeover for the last two years:

*Worms, (Frosh was the freshman’s title 24 months ago) on their way to the north campus have no more bridge to backrack upon, but reverse their steps in chalked-off areas before the wide entrance walk to the “Zeke” building. With its stately frontal appearance and internal modernism hands down it’s the most elegant educational structure on this and many another college campuses. The sign board which went up in 1948 to the west of the Reflection pool, the future site of the Ezekiel W. Cullen Building, in capital letters, was an understatement.*

*With first the Anderson Memorial library and behind and to the left of it the un conspicuous [sic] but eye-catching rear of the new power plant, the Worms haven’t a visual chance of forgetting the progressive material development of this University.*

*What can we expect in 24 more months?<sup>10</sup>*

The new library was a sanctuary for students, many of whom lived with their families and rarely had a quiet place of their own. The library gave students access to typewriters, photocopiers, and, of course, plenty of reading material. The library was so popular that students began demanding extended operating hours. As the 1950s wore on, the library continued to fill its shelves and serve an ever-increasing number of students.

By 1959, UH, still a private university, began experiencing budget deficits that student tuition and donations alone could not cover. To solve the crisis, the board of regents decided to join the state university system to provide a steady source of funding for the young university and secure support for future growth. After a few years of planning and lobbying the Texas legislature, the University of Houston began its first term as a public institution in 1963. Tuition

fell from \$700 to \$100, and student enrollment rapidly increased to nearly 17,000. Once again, the university began to feel growing pains.<sup>11</sup>

Starting in the 1960s under President Philip Guthrie Hoffman, UH underwent a second building boom that saw twenty-five new buildings added over fifteen years. With library collections creeping into the student study areas, the boom included a \$2.7 million addition to the library: an eight-story tower dubbed “the Blue Wing.” Built behind the original building, the limestone tower was flanked on either side by two smaller, three-story structures for library storage. Like the original structure, names of great thinkers adorned the tops of these additions, adding sixty-nine names that included da Vinci, Moses, Galileo, Franklin, Tolstoy, and Freud.<sup>12</sup>

The original names that once greeted students at the front of the library are no longer visible after being removed during later expansions. Only a small fraction of the names remain on the library’s rear exterior, where curious students can occasionally be spotted peering up between the trees to read the remaining names. As a freshman, I stumbled upon them while gazing up at the pine trees on my way to class. Seeing the names of familiar figures in such an unusual place intrigued me and left me wanting to know more about the great stone building I passed by every day.



*A vestige of an earlier architectural style, the names of great thinkers can still be seen on the rear of the library. Photo courtesy of Trinity Rinear.*

President Hoffman’s building campaign in the 1960s and 1970s not only relieved crowded conditions but also fostered an improved learning experience and sense of community at UH. The construction of the eighteen-story Moody Towers, the A. D. Bruce Religion Center, and a 186,000-square-foot University Center deepened students’ connection to the campus and truly provided a home away from home. This was an exciting time to be a Cougar. The football team under legendary Coach Bill Yeoman was dominating opponents with the Veer offense, and the 1968 “Game of the Century,” saw the UH basketball team led by Coach Guy V. Lewis beat the first-ranked UCLA Bruins in the Astrodome. With a record number of students living on campus, the library offered movies in its theater every Sunday to entertain them.<sup>13</sup>

The library had its share of the excitement in the 1960s as well with high-profile donations such as Colonel Bates’s Collection of Texana and Western Americana, The George Fuerman Collection, and the Franzheim Memorial





Librarians Bill Jackson and Deborah Dawson work at the *New York Times* Information Bank terminal, which accessed the *New York Times* newspaper through a dial-up connection, circa 1980s. Librarians administered searches for the users.

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston Buildings Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Collection in Architecture. Referring to the Fuerman Collection, Nancy Clark, Alumni Legacy Programs officer, recalls, “It was fabulous, and a lot of doctoral students used it as a primary source in Texas history and Houston history.”<sup>14</sup> Both UH academics and athletics were on the rise.

In 1971, enrollment hit a record 27,000 students. With enrollment projected to continue increasing, it was clear to administrators that even the recent eight-story addition would be unable to meet the university’s needs for much longer.<sup>15</sup> In 1975, famed architect and UH alumnus Kenneth Bentsen (‘52) was hired to develop a three-phase plan for library expansion. Phase I of the plan, a five-story addition to the north side of the library, was completed in 1978 and is



The *USS Houston* (CA-30) was sunk on March 1, 1942, during the Battle of Sunda Strait. Shown left to right, survivors Howard Brooks (EM3/c), David Flynn (RM2/c), Clarence “Skip” Schilperoort (EM2/c), and Jordan “Joe” Garrett (SI1/c) visited the *Cruiser Houston* exhibit on the second floor of M.D. Anderson Memorial Library in 2007.

Photo courtesy of Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

commonly referred to as the “Brown Wing.” The remaining two phases never came to fruition, as the hard economic times of the 1970s and 1980s drastically limited state funding for construction projects.

For the next twenty-five years, the library’s exterior remained relatively unchanged. The interior, however, continued to be reconfigured as new needs developed. In the early 1980s, a group of survivors from the *USS Houston*, a cruiser sunk in the Pacific Theater during World War II, approached the library’s development officer Liz Wachendorfer to open a room dedicated to displaying items they had collected. Realizing that the *USS Houston* was built by the Brown Shipbuilding Company, Wachendorfer set her sights on company cofounder George R. Brown to fund the room. “Getting to Mr. Brown was like getting to Fort Knox,” Wachendorfer recalls. “So I went to Leopold Meyer, who founded the Friends of the Library. He said, ‘You feel really passionate about this, don’t you? Okay, I’ll call George.’” After some pushing and prodding by Wachendorfer the aging Brown agreed to fund the room and allow it to bear his name. The library dedicated the George R. Brown Room, located on the fifth floor of the Brown Wing, on May 15, 1981. The *USS Houston* exhibit, which includes a model of the ship, uniforms of crew members, artifacts, and one of the ship’s bells, serves as a tribute to the approximately 1,100-member crew, most of whom were lost at sea when the ship sunk, and the approximately 360 officers and enlisted men captured by the Japanese.<sup>16</sup>

The Brown Room provided a popular venue for organizations to host meetings and events. The Friends of the Libraries, which had reemerged in the 1980s from a decades-long hiatus, held events in the room with notable guests, such as sports writer George Plimpton and radio host John Henry Faulk. The first organization to offer a UH scholarship, The Houston Assembly of Delphian Chapters, or simply Delphians, also met regularly in the Brown Room.

“The Delphians began as an organization to help women complete college,” explains Ann Herbage, a Delphian of thirty years. “Eventually, we decided that we wanted to contribute to something that benefited the whole student body, so we began to support the library.”<sup>17</sup> In 1956, the Delphians awarded their first grant to the library and continue to provide support to this day. Now, the once-prominent space is occupied by rows of bookshelves and study tables — a totally nondescript section of the library. Although the Brown Room no longer exists, the artifacts from the *USS Houston* can still be found in a more prominent location on the second floor of the Red Wing, interspersed between group study tables.

After nearly two decades without major renovations, the M.D. Anderson Library underwent a \$20 million construction project in 2004 that nearly doubled the amount of space available.



*The foyer of the library hosted a month-long exhibit showing samples of books donated by the Houston Assembly of Delphians. Shown left to right are Dr. Mary Elizabeth Schlayer, regional director of the Delphian Society; Dr. Edward G. Holley, director of libraries for UH; and Mrs. C. W. Hammond, Jr., immediate past president of the Houston Assembly of Delphians.*

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston Archives, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

The entire library was renovated, and the Gold Wing was added to the south side of the building, where Bentsen had originally planned Phase II. The renovation enabled the library to keep up with the rapidly growing pace of technology and the shift away from libraries as strictly silent spaces. Johanna Wolfe, who oversaw the renovation's fundraising campaign as executive director of major gifts, explains that the new library space was designed to meet the students' changing needs. She adds, "The way that people interact with libraries now is very different. Studying, and doing projects and assignments are much more collegial and more partnership-driven, while they used to be more one-on-one." Pam Covington, who worked in the library as a student in the early seventies, agrees, saying, "What we did then, and what libraries did then, was store information."<sup>18</sup> Today the scope goes far beyond that. The large computer labs and open study spaces included in the renovation facilitated accessing information and working cooperatively.

One area that has become a mainstay of the library's outreach to the university community was the addition of the Rockwell Pavilion in honor of 1996 UH Alumni Association Distinguished Alumnus Elizabeth Rockwell. A fourth generation Houstonian, Rockwell endowed the chairs for the deans of the M.D. Anderson Library, the College of Education, and the Cullen College of Engineering, and provided funding for numerous other facilities at the university.

The renovation also saw the addition of *A, A* (pronounced A comma A), a bronze sculpture built by Jim Sanborn. Shaped like a comma and placed in the center of the walkway, the structure displays quotes from famous works of literature in their native language, including Gustave



*A student takes advantage of the peace and quiet found in the library study carrels. Although today the library offers numerous places for students to talk and study together, these quiet respites are still favored by many researchers.*

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston Buildings Collection, Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* in French, *The Neggesto Azeb* in Ethiopian, and *An Ideal Husband* by Oscar Wilde in English.<sup>19</sup> Not unlike the names that adorned the top of the original M.D. Anderson Building, the piece provides a powerful reminder of the beauty, and diversity, of words and the library's role in preserving them.

Established in borrowed space for a noble cause, the library has grown with UH to serve generations of students and Houstonians on their quest for knowledge. The M.D. Anderson Library holds the memories of thousands of students who have entered its doors and the stories of countless authors whose pages fill the shelves. The library also tells a story of its own. The names carved into the limestone, the bells ringing from the Blue Wing's carillon, and the portraits hanging from the library's walls all tell part of the library's—and the university's—story. All one has to do is look closely and ask questions.

Khalid Sheikh is a graduating senior majoring in biology and minoring in history and medicine and society. Although born in Houston, he spent most of his life in West Dundee, Illinois, a small suburb of Chicago. A semi-finalist for a Fulbright U.S. Student Program grant at press time, Khalid enjoys reading and working out when he is not studying.