

Establishing the University of Houston: “May We All Cherish This School Always”

By Grace Conroy

Hugh Roy Cullen donated \$260,000 for the liberal arts building as a memorial for his son Roy Gustav Cullen, who died in a tragic oil-field accident. The artist's rendering is from 1938.

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Dr. Edison E. Oberholtzer served as president of Houston Junior College from 1927 to 1934 and then president of the University of Houston until his retirement in 1950.

The announcement received enthusiastic approval, and Dr. Oberholtzer took the necessary steps to establish a public junior college where costs would be affordable and competitive test scores were not required for admission. He proposed a \$2,000 loan from Houston's Board of Education to open a bank account to pay for certain "advance costs," an admission fee of \$150 for thirty semester hours, or \$6 per hour for partial enrollment. To help control costs, the junior college would be limited to night classes meeting at San Jacinto High School (SJHS). Faculty would be senior instructors pulled from HISD who "simply donn[ed] two hats," one for public school and one for the junior college. The Board of Education accepted Oberholtzer's proposal on March 7, 1927, and announced the "founding, establishment, and operation of a junior college" in Houston.³



The Roaring Twenties brought economic prosperity to Houston. Oil had been discovered around the region, the new deep-water port reached \$500 million in import and export volume, and skyscrapers appeared on the skyline. Houston's population grew by 111 percent, making it the most populous Texas city by 1930.¹ In this time of segregation, the Houston Independent School District (HISD) erected four new high schools – two black and two white – to accommodate the growing number of students. It was an exciting time for Houstonians.

In 1923, the Houston school system separated from the city government, and the following year, Dr. Edison E. Oberholtzer became superintendent of the Board of Education. He believed that post-World War I society required an expansion of public schooling and considered Houston a "fresh and energetic new city," a "can-do" town with "high caliber can-do people." Shortly after Oberholtzer took the helm, a dozen seniors from multiple Houston high schools requested an appointment to discuss creating a junior college. They yearned to further their education after graduation but had neither the financial means to attend colleges out of state nor the test scores to attend Rice Institute, Houston's only college at the time. Many of them also held part-time jobs while in high school. Oberholtzer understood their desire to continue their education, especially in the booming post-war era, so he scheduled a meeting with Houston's Board of Education to announce the idea for a junior college.²



In 1934, ice hockey became the first officially sponsored sport at UH. The 1936 men's ice hockey team, shown here, was "a fighting bunch of puck pushers."

The district moved ahead rapidly, and classes began on June 6, 1927. That first summer session at Houston Junior College (HJC) was reserved for the school's instructors to prepare them for the fall semester, which began on September 19, 1927. The college's first year saw twenty-one faculty members teaching classes for 461 students. Enrollment and faculty members increased until the end of the decade when the stock market crashed, signaling the onset of the Great Depression and a decline in enrollment.⁴

Alumni of the 1927-1934 era reminisced fondly on their time at HJC. Dr. Hampton C. Robinson recalled, "The atmosphere was generally one of informal amiability...there was soon a nucleus of faculty and staff members whom the student body recognized as the best sources of guidance and friendship." Robinson also remembers the dedication of his peers, fighting through exhaustion in night classes to take advantage of the courses offered to them. Classes began at 4:00 p.m. and ended at 9:00 p.m., with a "supper intermission" from 6:00-6:30 in the SJHS cafeteria.⁵ Night classes offered many students the opportunity to work during the day and attend classes at night.

Despite these busy schedules, some students found time for extracurricular activities. The first sport offered at HJC was men's ice hockey, an interesting activity for those familiar with Houston's swampy setting, but a team that went undefeated the first year. Football players practiced from 9:30 p.m. to midnight. The sport proved so popular that three teams formed to "show their love for the game by meeting regularly and taking their lot with a grin." Other extracurriculars included a girls basketball team in 1933, a drama club, a student-run newspaper called *The Cougar*, and a women's organization called Cougar Collegians. In a 1930 *Cougar* article, "College Life: A Student Viewpoint," George Lanaux succinctly stated that the draw of HJC was a combination of social life, applied studies, and the broadening of character and personality.⁶

Issues of *The Cougar* reveal students' social lives at the junior college. The column "Sally Ann at College" offered students a place to turn to for advice on heartache, troubles,

jealousies, and anything in between. One entry revealed a young woman's worries about attending medical school and having a family. Sally Ann favored the woman following her goals, saying, "a waste of talent is one of the saddest things in the world." Sally's response provided a feminist approach to women following their careers while maintaining a happy domestic life. Other newspaper segments highlighted marriage announcements and school dances, revealing a close-knit school community. Some students were so close they combined their funds to jointly purchase old jalopies to carpool to school.⁷

School etiquette and rules were somewhat rigid in contrast to the joyful social life HJC offered. A whole segment of *The Cougar* in 1929 was dedicated to "This Thing of Good Manners," where the author described students who cut in the cafeteria line as "selfish" and "disgusting," and deplored the "childish behavior" of those who talk over their teachers and congregate outside of open classrooms. If students had three unexcused absences, they were automatically removed from the class. Additionally, three tardies or early departures were the equivalent of one absence. In another segment of "College Life: A Student Viewpoint," George Lanaux addressed the stereotypical "rah-rah boy" pejorative title that working-class men assigned to college students. Lanaux argued that when a less-educated worker stops working, his life is done; but when a college-educated man retires, he still has his intelligence, and his life goes on.⁸ Overall, students who immersed themselves in the culture at HJC learned valuable life lessons on how to act properly in public and how to value the importance of the education they received.

While HJC was created to offer an inclusive public education, the school remained closed to African Americans because the "social, moral, and political climate of 1927" meant that "accepting a black student at HJC was inconceivable," wrote historian Patrick Nicholson. Thus, the district simultaneously created Houston Colored Junior College – the forerunner of Texas Southern University – which met



The king and queen for the 1936 UH Royal Court were chosen from the senior class. Additionally, each of the four classes had a duchess, a duke, and two "maids" representing them.



Hugh Roy Cullen showed immediate interest in supporting a new campus for UH, especially since he was forced to drop out of elementary school to help support his family, making \$3 a week in a San Antonio candy factory.

at Jack Yates High School. Dr. Oberholtzer encouraged HJC faculty members to assist their fellow instructors at the black institution.⁹

Interest in HJC continued to multiply, and in 1934 Oberholtzer pushed for its transition to a four-year university. Once again, he succeeded, and on April 30, 1934, House Bill 194 established the “self-supporting University of Houston,” granting the university authority to “use public school buildings when not otherwise in regular use.” Thus, classes continued to meet at San Jacinto High School. The first summer session of the newfound University of Houston (UH) saw an enrollment of 682 students. As enrollment grew, UH hosted its first four semesters in local churches, making it obvious UH needed its own campus.¹⁰

Fortuitously, in 1936 Oberholtzer was introduced to Hugh Roy Cullen, a wildcatter oil-man and philanthropist with a fifth-grade education, who appreciated the idea behind UH’s founding. Cullen agreed to serve as university chairman and donate the necessary funds for the first building on campus. Cullen stipulated that the university “must always be a college for working men and women and their sons and daughters. If it were to be another rich man’s college [he] would not have been interested.” Additionally, Cullen also helped sponsor the first fundraising drive for the campus. In 1936, Ben Taub and the J. J. Settegast Estate donated 110 acres of land southeast of downtown for the site, and UH’s future prospects glimmered as attention turned to developing a dedicated campus.¹¹

On March 12, 1937, Dr. Oberholtzer invited the UH student body and the Board of Education to a picnic at the new campus, where attendees

witnessed the groundbreaking ceremony. Documenting the occasion, reporter Rosella Werlin summarized the campus’ progress as if “the magic wand had been waved for Houston’s Cinderella School.”¹²

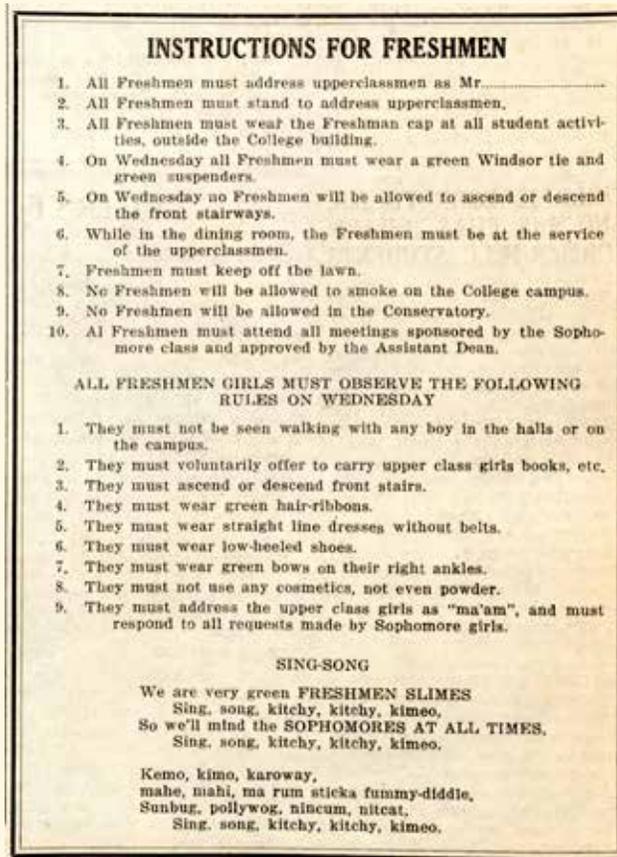
The Roy Gustav Cullen building was designed to be the first unit opened on the new university campus and the first entirely air-conditioned university facility in the United States. The dedication occurred on June 4, 1939, and classes began the next day, marking a new era for the University of Houston. The days of meeting in high school classrooms and church buildings during off hours were a thing of the past, and UH could now flourish on its own campus.¹³

Under current Chancellor and President Renu Khator who came to UH in 2008, the university achieved Tier One status in 2011, became a Phi Beta Kappa institution in 2016, and recently accepted an invitation to join the Big 12 Conference. Today, UH continues to expand its campus and its student body, which now exceeds 47,000 – even growing during the pandemic. UH ranked seventh in CNBC’s list of “50 Colleges that Pay Off the Most,” the only Texas public university in the top ten. The university continues to serve working men and women, and it has also proudly become one of the nation’s most diverse colleges, welcoming first generation college students, people of all ethnicities and faiths, and individuals from all walks of life to its community, a reflection of the city of Houston itself.¹⁴

Despite these modern changes, students still echo the sentiments that opened *The Houstonian* yearbook in 1936:

*Through these portals, we pass daily to our classes. It is there that life-long friendships are being made; it is within this building that we laugh at the humorous incidents that occur and wipe a misty eye when a touch of pathos tugs at our heart. Within these walls our lives are being reshaped, stronger characters being built, and helpful bits of knowledge imparted. The contacts and associations that we have had here probably have made indelible impressions upon our minds. May we all, in recalling memories of the past, remember and cherish this school always.*¹⁵ □

Grace Conroy graduated from the University of Houston in the spring of 2022 with a B.A. in history. She will begin a master’s program in public history in the fall to pursue her passion for presenting history to public audiences.



At the junior college, a hierarchy arose between the freshman and sophomore classes as this segment from The Cougar, October 3, 1930, reveals.