

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR – Reflecting on Our History



Debbie Z. Harwell, Editor.

Remember during *The Wizard of Oz* when Professor Marvel, invites Dorothy into his wagon to gaze into the crystal ball? He tells her to close her eyes for a moment so he can “be in better tune with the infinite ... We can’t do these things without reaching into the infinite.”

When I look at Joseph E. Litterst’s cover photo, I feel as if I have been

transported into the infinite. The magic of the photographer’s vision as he captures his own image in the crystal ball beckons my imagination to run wild and raises many questions. Who are those people? Where are they? Is that a house or are they in a park? Was a storm coming? What is the story behind this image? What did Litterst want to capture? I can imagine many things to fill in the blanks, but what I want most is to know the photo’s true history.

Telling stories of the past is not quite like staring into the infinite – although sometimes the research feels like it will never end! Rather, it takes a concerted effort to dig into the facts, synthesize them, and report the findings in an objective and interesting way. At *Houston History*, we see our work as a celebration of these stories, by recognizing the value of the people, organizations, institutions, and events that have helped shape our community and forge our identity. Similarly, the groups and institutions in Houston that care for that history, working to preserve and protect it for future generations, should be applauded for their efforts.

Reflecting on Houston’s history makers, “Movers and Shakers” highlights three women who elevated Houston’s arts reputation. They include artist Emma Richardson Cherry, who was a trailblazer in modern art, and Ma Graham and Johnny George, who brought notoriety to Houston’s symphony, opera, and theater in 1930s to 1970s. An article from our UH 100 Years of Stories project features Patsy Swayze – dance instructor, choreographer, and the mother of Patrick Swayze – who inspired many young dancers during her career. “Musical Migrations” shows how African Americans, Creoles of color, and ethnic Mexicans in the 1920s and 1930s shaped Houston culture through the music they brought with them. Some of Houston’s earliest “influencers,” artists like Blind Lemon Jefferson, Lightnin’ Hopkins, Amédé Ardoin, and Lydia Mendoza, helped create distinctively Houston sounds through blues, la-la, *corridos*, and *ranchera*.

Just as important as telling these stories is recognizing the organizations that are helping to maintain our region’s history. The Harris County Historical Society (HCHS) celebrated its centennial in 2023, making it the oldest organization in Houston and Harris County dedicated to preserving and sharing the stories of our past. HCHS continues to offer monthly programs and recently endowed a scholarship for students doing public history work at the University of Houston.

The Heritage Society, likewise, is marking its seventieth anniversary in 2024. Located downtown in the 125-year-old Sam Houston Park, no other place in Houston showcases the city’s history like The Heritage Society, with ten historic buildings, museum exhibits, tours, and programming. Maintaining these historic structures has its challenges, but the care taken to keep this history alive and tell the stories of those who lived in the historic homes and worshipped at St. John Church is remarkable.

Preserving our history is also central to Independence Heights, which sits northwest of downtown, and became Texas’s first African American town when it incorporated in 1915. The City of Houston annexed it in 1929, and by the latter part of the twentieth century, Independence Heights had begun to experience gentrification. At the same time, its boundaries progressively shrunk with freeways cutting into the neighborhood – a problem that persists today with the I-45 expansion. Like Freedman’s Town and parts of other African American neighborhoods, Independence Heights must continue to be protected and celebrated, so it is not reduced to a mere historical footnote.

At the University of Houston’s MD Anderson Library, Special Collections preserves stories of individuals and groups in our community. This issue spotlights the original drill team at Stephen F. Austin High School, the Scottish Brigade, which provided young women opportunities for forty years.

Students in the Anthropology and World Cultures Visual Stories classes regularly collaborate with us to show historic Houston through photography. In 2023, students explored Houston’s Near Northside, which dates to the early twentieth century. Although changing times, freeway expansion, and gentrification have taken a toll on its history, the images give you a clear vision of its valuable diversity.

Reflecting on our history as if looking through Litterst’s crystal ball, we can learn a great deal about our community’s journey from photographs, written histories, and historic structures and neighborhoods. Without community members preserving and protecting those stories, however, we would be lost in the infinite with a host of unanswered questions. ■■