

Houston HISTORY

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UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON
CENTER FOR PUBLIC HISTORY

Asian Americans in Houston: A Kaleidoscope of Cultures

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PUBLISHED BY
WELCOME WILSON HOUSTON HISTORY COLLABORATIVE

THE HERITAGE SOCIETY AT SAM HOUSTON PARK

When history organizations collaborate, we all win. I have always appreciated the fact that *Houston History* magazine provides its readers the opportunity to learn about all aspects of Houston's history. The articles seek to educate and entertain while exploring important aspects of the city's history and culture. The Heritage Society, a 501(c)3 non-profit organization, has spent more than sixty years preserving Houston's past through the acquisition and preservation of historic buildings and artifacts. We also maintain a Museum Gallery that features permanent and changing exhibits focusing on the region's history. The historic buildings and museum offer visitors one of the most complete representations of Houston's cultural history. These two organizations are a natural fit to work together to tell the stories of the city's diverse history.

Therefore, we are excited to announce the partnership of *Houston History* and The Heritage Society to present the exhibition, *Asian Americans in Houston: A Kaleidoscope of Cultures*. The exhibi-

tion at The Heritage Society, like this magazine issue, focuses on the diverse Asian American communities in Houston and their many contributions to our city and its culture. The museum exhibit helps to bring to life the stories in the articles by featuring artifacts, personal mementos, photographs, and documents. It has been a privilege to work with the many

people who contributed to the magazine, and who then loaned their personal objects to the exhibition. Additionally, I want to thank the amazing staff at *Houston History* who agreed that turning this issue into a museum exhibit was a great idea. It is my hope that through this collaboration, the people of Houston will gain a new appreciation of and insight into all that the Asian American community has brought to our great city.

The exhibition is free and open to the public until January 16, 2016, at The Heritage Society, 1100 Bagby Street in downtown Houston. For information visit www.heritatesociety.org or call 713-655-1912.



Ginger Berni,
Collections Manager,
The Heritage Society

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR



Joseph A. Pratt, Editor

others that have taken on decidedly local flairs in food, art, festivals, and expressions of faith. During the last forty years Houston has seen its Asian American population grow exponentially, contributing to its status as one of the nation's most ethnically diverse cities, a moniker we wear with pride. This issue celebrates the ways in which Asian Americans and their cultures have strengthened Houston as a community and enriched our lives as individuals.

From their earliest days in Houston as laborers, shop owners, and rice farmers to becoming the business, community, and political leaders of today, Asian Americans have contributed to the growth and vibrancy of the region for over a century. All of the peoples and institutions highlighted in this issue trace their roots to the Asian continent. They represent unique cultures and traditions, some of which mirror practices in their homelands and

It also celebrates the value of collaboration among those of us who have a passion for Houston's history. This issue and the exhibit based on its contents enabled us to cooperate with The Heritage Society in reaching out to broader audiences than either of us can reach individually. By combining the historical narrative in the magazine with the images, documents, artifacts, and personal items in the exhibit, our readers and the museum's visitors can gain a greater understanding and appreciation of the contributions Asian Americans have made to Houston.

A bonus for those of us who manage the Welcome Wilson Houston History Collaborative at the University of Houston is the chance to expose our undergraduate and graduate student interns to the process of putting together historical exhibits. This allows us to improve our performance in one of our key functions: training people to research, write, and teach about our region's history.

It has been a pleasure to work side by side with the staff at The Heritage Society and with all of the authors to bring the idea for this issue to fruition. Our thanks go out to all of you.

Houston History

VOLUME 13 • NUMBER 1 • FALL 2015

Asian Americans in Houston: A Kaleidoscope of Cultures

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Houston History is published three times a year by the Welcome Wilson Houston History Collaborative in the Center for Public History at the University of Houston. We welcome manuscripts, interviews, photographic essays, and ideas for topical issues on the history and culture of the Houston region, broadly defined. Please send correspondence to *Houston History*, University of Houston, Center for Public History, 3623 Cullen Blvd., Room 320, Houston, TX 77204-3007 (713-743-3123), or email HoustonHistory@uh.edu.

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Dedication of Taoist temple in Chinatown, the first of its kind in Texas, 1988.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006-N1988-0411021.



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Asian Americans: Expanding Our Horizons

By Edward C. M. Chen and Debbie Z. Harwell



Vietnamese, Laotians, and Cambodians arriving at Houston Intercontinental Airport in 1978 are assisted by Travelers Aid workers.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006-N1978-2294-0150.

The year 2015 marks a half century since the United States passed the Immigration and Nationality Act, a comprehensive immigration reform that abolished the racial quota system based on national origin established in 1924. The new law admitted people based on criteria such as family reunification, skills needed in the U.S. workplace, and political persecution. The law limited annual immigration from the Eastern Hemisphere to 170,000 and from the Western Hemisphere to 120,000. Non-quota immigrants and immediate relatives (for example, spouses, minor children, and parents of U.S. citizens over the age of twenty-one) were not counted toward the ceilings. Later policy changes created special quotas given to about 200,000 Vietnamese, Cambodian, and Laotian refugees at the end of the Vietnam War. About 3 million illegal immigrants who had entered the country before 1982 were given legal status in 1986. Since 1993 a limit of 675,000 total immigrant visas per year worldwide has been in effect.¹

The change in law had tremendous implications for the nation and the Houston region. The Asian population in the United States grew to more than 20 million with over 1.2 million Asians in Texas at the last census. In 1910 the Houston area had fewer than 100 Asians, but a century later the number has risen to over 417,000 in the Houston-Sugar Land-Baytown, Texas Metropolitan Statistical Area

(MSA).² This special issue of *Houston History* and its companion exhibit at The Heritage Society, *Asian Americans in Houston: A Kaleidoscope of Cultures*, examine the stories of Asian Americans in Houston and the many ways in which they have enriched the community.

In the Beginning

The Western Hemisphere was first populated over 10,000 years ago, and recent DNA evidence indicates that these early immigrants came from Asia. The Chinese record outlines the 459 to 499 A.D. stay of four Buddhist monks in *Fusang* (Mexico or the Southwest United States). The writings of one monk, Hui Shen, described efforts to bring their religion to the residents of what perhaps later became *Tejas* (a Caddo word meaning friends) as described by Coronado in 1540.³

In 1587 and 1595 Filipino sailors arrived in what is now California to establish Spanish claims in the northern frontier of New Spain, known as “Nuevas Filipinas” because they were the first Asians known to cross the Pacific Ocean in the Age of Discovery. In 1763 Filipinos, who had deserted Spanish ships, established Saint Malo, the first North American Asian settlement in what is now Louisiana. Since no women accompanied them, they married Cajun and Native American women, and some of their descendants

eventually fought with Jean Lafitte at the Battle of New Orleans in 1814.⁴

The first Asian Indians came to North America as a part of the Jamestown colony in 1624. Captain George Menefie appointed “Tony, an East Indian,” as an overseer of his land.⁵ In 1788-1789 Captain John Meares, a British fur trader, established another Asian settlement in North America with 120 Chinese men in Nootka Sound. Although the Spanish destroyed the village, some Chinese escaped and went to live with the Native Americans.⁶ In the centuries that followed, millions more crossed the Pacific to put down roots in the new land.

Coming to Texas and the United States

Francisco Flores, a Filipino, was the first known Texas Asian immigrant. He arrived in the Mexican state of Coahuila y Tejas about 1822 at the age of thirteen and died in 1917 in Rockport, Texas, where he owned a fishing business. This meant he witnessed life in Texas under five of its six flags: Spain, Mexico, Republic of Texas, United States, and Confederate States of America.

Early references to Chinese residents in the Houston region appeared during the Republic of Texas years. On April 8, 1840, D. W. Babcock, the recorder for Harrisburg, Texas, fined Henry Tucker ten dollars for the assault and battery of Mr. Price, a barber of Chinese and Maltese descent, which demonstrated the equality of Chinese under Texas law at the time. In 1862, a Chinese juggler was contracted to perform a benefit for a Houston hospital, which was recorded by Confederate Army officer Gustav Forsgard who wrote, “March 17, 1862, attended To-Gon-Won’s exhibition at Perkin Auditorium with Miss Belle.”

Between 1850 and 1889, approximately 300,000 Chinese came to the United States to work in mines, agriculture, fishing, and railroad construction, although as many as half eventually returned to their homeland.⁷ After the Civil War, the expansion of Texas railroads brought Chinese workers to the state in earnest. The January 22, 1870, edition of *Harper’s Weekly* showed 250 Chinese men and one woman crossing the Missouri River en route to build the Houston and Texas Central Railroad. The contractor, Chew-Ah-Heung, advertised in 1870 that he had 240 Chinese laborers in need of employment in Calvert, Texas, in Robertson County. Several in Calvert eventually opened laundries, grocery stores, and restaurants that catered to white customers.⁸ Some of the railroad workers turned to sharecropping as indicated by a contract between James Hannah and Ah Gow, Ah Yong, and Ah Bao dated December 29, 1873. Hannah later brought in fifty-nine other Chinese laborers through Galveston.⁹

Lee Ting (also known as Sam Lee), Lee Hing, and Lee Yung were listed as laundrymen in the 1877 Houston City Directory. The 1880 Census listed seven Chinese in Houston, including Wah Yuen, age thirty-five, born in China, and proprietor of the Wah Yuen laundry at 86 Fannin Street. His nineteen-year-old Hispanic wife Annette Savilita Yuen was born in Texas.¹⁰ Their son Lincoln Yuen, just four months old, was perhaps the first Chinese born in Texas. The 1900 Census listed forty-three Chinese in Houston, including twenty-two naturalized citizens; Charlie

G. Hong was the only native-born U.S. citizen. He and his wife Savannah, a Caucasian woman, had two children who were the second and third native Chinese Houstonians. All were listed in the 1903 city directory, but by the next year, the Hong family had left Houston following passage of the Chinese Exclusion Acts in perpetuity.

Between 1886 and 1911 more than 400,000 men and women left Japan for Hawaii and the Pacific Coast, and 300 of them came to Texas. Unlike the Chinese, many were younger sons who would not inherit their family land in Japan, but they had money and were “prepared to stay.” Tsunekichi “Tom Brown” Okasaki came to Houston in the 1890s and opened a restaurant at 1111 Congress Avenue and, in 1911, started the Japan Art and Tea Company. At the invitation of the Houston Chamber of Commerce and the Southern Pacific Railroad, Japanese farmers were brought to Webster, southeast of Houston, to improve rice production by growing high-yield Shinriki rice. A member of the samurai class, a lawyer, and former member of the Japanese House of

Representatives, Seito Saibara, his family, and thirty Japanese farmers established the Gulf Coast rice industry.¹¹

Shinpei Mykawa, born in Aichi, Japan, on December 1, 1874, came to Harris County with four young Japanese to grow rice. On April 24, 1906, Mykawa died after he fell underneath a piece of agricultural equipment. In his honor, Garrat A. Dobin, the railroad agent, renamed the nearby station “Mykawa.”



Shinpei Mykawa, 1903.

Photo courtesy of
Edward C. M. Chen.

The station no longer exists, but Mykawa Road next to the railroad track remains as a tribute to this early Japanese resident.¹²

In 1921 the Texas Legislature passed a bill that prevented Japanese from owning rural land. Saburo Arai, a nurseryman who came to Houston in 1902 and ran a successful business for over forty years, lobbied successfully to allow current Japanese Texans classified as aliens to keep their land and to purchase more. Through the 1920s most Japanese Texans remained in agricultural jobs; one-third of them were located in Harris County, and half of those were women.¹³

Emigrants from other Asian countries found their way to Houston as well, but tracking them is extremely difficult. Inconsistent in how it collected data, the U.S. Census only listed two Asian groups, Chinese and Japanese, until 1930 when it added Filipinos, along with Koreans and Hindus, both of which were removed in 1950. Not until the 1980 Census, when the Asian population grew significantly, did the government track Asian groups by ethnicity with any degree of accuracy.

From Exclusion to Inclusion

As the turn of the twentieth century approached, Congress began passing laws that negatively impacted Asian immigration to the United States. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 barred Chinese laborers from coming into the country for ten years. Exceptions were made for teachers, students,



Saibara rice farm near Webster, Texas, 1904. Seito Saibara's son Kiyoaki is fourth from the left.

Photo courtesy of Edward C. M. Chen.

merchants, diplomats, and tourists. It refused citizenship to resident aliens and made it difficult for people who went home to China to reenter the United States. Congress renewed the law in 1892 and made it permanent in 1902.

In 1916, General John Pershing, who was dispatched to Mexico to capture Pancho Villa, was cut off due to the long supply lines required in the rugged terrain. After Mexican Chinese came to his rescue with food and supplies, Pershing brought 527 Chinese refugees with him when he returned to Texas as the U.S. entered World War I. Some thirty "Pershing Chinese" helped build Ellington Field in record

time on 1,280 acres of prairie located eighteen miles southeast of Houston.¹⁴ Pershing obtained legal residency for these Chinese in a rare instance of the exclusion laws being set aside.¹⁵

Another set of laws ensured that the country's racial mix continued to be dominated by northern and western Europeans. Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1917 over President Woodrow Wilson's veto. The law required literacy tests and denied access to anyone born in an "Asiatic Barred Zone," which included India, Afghanistan, Persia (Iran), Arabia, parts of the Ottoman Empire and Russia,

Southeast Asia, and the Asian-Pacific islands.¹⁶ The Immigration Act of 1924 set limits according to country of origin, establishing a quota of two percent of the number of immigrants already in the United States from a given country based on the 1890 Census and excluding immigrants from Asia, thereby extending the Chinese Exclusion Acts to all Asians except Filipinos.¹⁷

Although the U.S. Supreme Court had held in *United States v. Wong Kim Ark* (1898) that a child born in the United States to parents of foreign descent is a citizen based on the Fourteenth Amendment, they did not receive equal treatment. In 1927 in *Gong Lum v. Rice*, the Court upheld an 1890 Mississippi Supreme Court decision that ruled Chinese were "colored" and could not insist on attending a "white" school. In Texas, however, Asians were considered white, making the state an attractive destination for those seeking a better education.¹⁸ Mu Xiang-yue (H. Y. Moh) came to Texas A&M University in 1913 for a master's degree; Rudolfo Hulen Fernandez, a Filipino, was in the 1917 graduating class at Rice; and P. Watanabe was in the 1919 class. In 1923, Taro Kishi, a Japanese student at Texas A&M,



Chinese held a reception at Ellington Field for General John J. Pershing on February 6, 1920. Pershing had helped several Chinese obtain residency status after they assisted him in pursuit of Pancho Villa in Mexico in 1917 and in the construction of Ellington Field.

Photo courtesy of the University of Texas-San Antonio Libraries, Digital Collections, 068-2942.

became the first Asian to play football in the Southwest Conference.¹⁹

Asian Americans experienced racial injustices in everyday life, but wartime policies exacerbated existing stereotypes. Perhaps the most disgraceful incident of discrimination against Asian American citizens in U.S. history was the wartime evacuation and internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans that began in 1942. A year later, President Franklin Roosevelt changed his position in part by creating a regimental team of Japanese Americans. Despite being interned, thousands of young Japanese volunteered to serve in the 100th Infantry Battalion and 442nd Regimental Combat Team, which were eventually combined, fighting in Europe and with the Military Intelligence Service in the Pacific. The heroic efforts of this “Go for Broke” unit demonstrated that civil liberties should never be denied because of race or ancestry. Among their many feats, the soldiers broke through enemy lines to rescue over 200 members of the First Battalion of the 141st Regiment, Thirty-sixth Texas Division, in northern France in October 1944.²⁰ Houstonian Saburo Tanamachi, one of the many local Japanese who served admirably, lost his life in the rescue effort.²¹

Approximately 250,000 Filipino men joined the U.S. Armed Forces in the months before and the days after Pearl Harbor. Despite their service, in 1946 Congress passed and President Truman signed Public Law 70-301, stating Filipinos “shall not be deemed to be or to have been service in the military or national forces of the United States,” thereby eliminating their benefits.²²

Although the Chinese Exclusion Acts were repealed in 1943, after China became a U.S. ally against Japan, it took another twenty years before significant changes occurred in the law impacting Asian immigration. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 made it possible for Asians to become an integral part of the United States. Passed in the wake of the civil rights movement, it recognized the racial bias of the earlier quota system, even though it set limits on the number of immigrants by hemisphere. Today, the effects of these changes can be seen in the greater Houston area, which has become one of the most ethnically diverse in the nation. The 2010 Census showed Harris County was approximately 42% Hispanic, 32% non-Hispanic white, 19% black, 7% Asian, and 1% Native American.²³

Changing Houston's Landscape

The change in Houston's demographics began slowly and then mushroomed in the last half of the twentieth century. By 1965 the 2,500 Chinese living in Houston made it the hub of the state's Chinese population. Some came from other southern states and established businesses in black neighborhoods.²⁴ Approximately 5,000 Filipinos lived in Texas by 1970. Both Filipino and Korean immigrants included many wives of U.S. servicemen. Historian Bruce Glasrud notes that Koreans came to the state as early as 1905 but were sometimes counted as Japanese in the census; as a result the 2,090 Koreans tallied in 1970 may not be accurate.²⁵ The 2010 Census showed 11,813 Korean Americans living in Harris County, although community leaders believe that number to be much higher.²⁶

While Chinese, Japanese, and Filipinos initially led the



Early Korean immigrants to Houston gather after a ceremony on August 15, 1964, honoring Korea's liberation from Japan in 1945 and the creation of the Republic of Korea in 1948.

Photo courtesy of the Korean Community Center of Houston.

way in Houston's growing Asian community, other groups have expanded as well. In 1960 Houston's South Asian population was less than 400. However, passage of the 1965 immigration law enabled more Indians and Pakistanis to come to the United States as university students or professional and skilled laborers. Houston's growing job market and low cost of living attracted many of these new residents. By the 1980s, South Asians had begun to establish their own communities. The 2010 Census indicated 27,856 Pakistanis and 82,575 people with Indian ancestry resided in the Houston MSA.²⁷

The Vietnam War brought an influx of emigrants from across Southeast Asia. Historian Roy Vu explains that in early 1975 at the end of the war, approximately 30,000 Vietnamese lived in the United States, with less than one hundred in Houston, most of them wives of former servicemen, students, and educators. The war's end brought the first wave of refugees, which included many professionals and a small number of blue-collar workers. The second wave of “boat people” arrived from 1978 to 1982, and a third wave of mostly political detainees and Amerasians followed from the late 1980s to mid 1990s. By 2010 the nation had 1.7 million Vietnamese, and Harris County ranked fourth among U.S. counties in Vietnamese residents.²⁸

In 1989 Beverley Clark became both the first African American woman and the first Asian American woman elected to Houston City Council, representing a multi-ethnic ancestry tracing back to a nineteenth-century Chinese sharecropper and his African American wife. The first predominantly Asian American elected to council was second-generation Chinese American Martha Wong, who won with sixty-two percent of the vote in 1993. The former school principal received her Ed.D. at the University of Houston and went on to become an assistant superintendent with the Houston Independent School District. She later became director of Staff and Instructional Development and director of Community Resource and Development for the Houston Community College System. One of the founders of the Asian American Coalition dedicated to electing an Asian American to city council, she was reelected twice, serving three terms total. In 2002 Wong defeated the incumbent



Transitioning to American society proved difficult for many Asian Americans. Even everyday activities like grocery shopping were new and exciting challenges for some, such as these Vietnamese immigrants receiving instructions in 1979.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD00066-N1979-2727-020A.

for Texas District 134 to become the first Asian American woman elected to the state House of Representatives.²⁹

Other firsts include Hannah Chow, the first Asian American elected to a county-wide office, the Harris County Criminal Court at Law No. 5 in 1987; Council Member Gordon Quan, the first Asian American elected to city council in an at-large position in 1999; and M. J. Khan, the first Muslim and first Pakistani council member, elected in 2003 to serve District F.³⁰

In 1999 members of the Asian community formed the



Lighthouse for the Blind offered children the opportunity to broaden their horizons by learning about other cultures when they met with an Indian woman in traditional dress, 1971.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006-N1971-2537-021A.



Martha Wong was active in the city throughout her term on the Houston City Council, attending events such as the Kroger grocery store ribbon cutting in Chinatown.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS1139-016.

non-partisan Houston 80-20 Asian American Political Action Committee, following the national model created a year earlier. Its purpose was to endorse and support those candidates who best represent the interests of their community. Although Asian Americans do not comprise a large voting bloc, their constituency is certainly big enough to swing an election. This is perhaps best illustrated by the 2001 campaign strategy for Mayor Lee Brown against GOP conservative Orlando Sanchez and moderate Democrat Chris Bell. Brown's staff drafted campaign literature and recorded phone messages in a dozen languages that were "directed at households of Korean, Vietnamese, Chinese, Indian, Pakistani, and other Asian nationalities." Brown's campaign manager Craig Varoga believed this helped seal Brown's victory.³¹

Today, Asian Americans remain an integral part of the fabric of Houston – socially, culturally, politically, and economically. Asian communities can be found in areas across the Houston region with their own districts that feature shop and street signs in multiple languages. As with immigrant populations that came before them, Asian Americans have established houses of worship, community centers, media outlets, restaurants, grocery stores, and other businesses that cater to their individual ethnic needs. In the process they have motivated others to appreciate the kaleidoscope of their cultures.

Edward C. M. Chen, Ph.D., is a retired chemist and professor in the University of Houston System. He has served as an officer and board member for numerous community organizations, including the Houston Lodge of the Chinese American Citizens Association. A visiting scholar for the Chao Center for Asian Studies at Rice University, he serves on the Harris County Historical Commission and is the unofficial Chinese historian for Houston.

Debbie Z. Harwell, Ph.D., is the managing editor of *Houston History* and teaches Houston History in the Honors College at the University of Houston.

An American Chinese in Houston

By Edward C. M. Chen

My grandfather Yuen Yee Chan arrived in the United States in 1880 and worked for a company supplying food to Chinese railroad workers. He returned to China after the death of his first wife and brought his new wife, Yee Shee (Luk Oi), to California in 1908. My father, Edward King Tung Chen, was born in San Francisco on November 30, 1909. He graduated from Lincoln High School in Los Angeles, attended Columbia University, and was the editor of a Chinese language newspaper. He came to Galveston in 1932 as secretary to the first Vice Consul of the Republic of China for the southern United States. He married Janie Ng (1911-1965) in 1934, and they had two children, Margaret Fay Jane Chen Sham (1935-1989) and me.

E. K. T. Chen spent half his life a Texan and died a patriot in Washington, DC, on October 16, 1957, while preventing Chinese internment during the Korean War. This is the story of the extraordinary things accomplished by this ordinary son of Chinese immigrants that benefited all Americans and my efforts to continue his legacy. Born in 1937, I am the oldest native-Houstonian American Chinese male still in Houston. I prefer the term “American Chinese” because I am an American first.



FBI identification photo for Special Agent Edward King Tung Chen.

All photos courtesy of Edward C. M. Chen unless otherwise noted.

Edward King Tung Chen in Texas: 1930-1957

The Chinese Exclusion Acts passed from 1880 to 1902 prevented laborers from coming to the United States but allowed scholars, merchants, and diplomats and their families to travel between the two countries. My maternal great-grandfather, Ming King Ng, was a food merchant who settled in San Antonio with his wife and two sons. My grandfather, Lin Don Ng, married Gin Shee in China where they had a son, Richard, and a daughter, Janie, my mother. He brought his family to San Antonio where they had five more children: Tom, Butch, Sam, Jane, and Sally. My father's parents in California had six children: Edward, Charles, John, George, David, and Daisy. They moved to Houston in 1935, which makes me a fourth-generation Texas Chinese and third-generation Houston Chinese.

In 1927 the U.S. Supreme Court in *Gong Lum v. Rice* upheld a Mississippi State Supreme Court decision that established Chinese were “colored” and could not insist on attending a “white” school.¹ In Texas, however, Asians were classified as whites. The 1917 class at Rice Institute included a Filipino and subsequent classes had Chinese and Japanese students. My uncle, Charles Chan, who was instructed to use “white” for his color/race on his application, received a basketball scholarship and in 1942 became the first Chinese man to graduate from Rice. His brother, George, was the second and my aunt, Jane Eng, was the third Chinese woman admitted to Rice.

My father's work to protect the rights of American Chinese began in 1932 when Vice Consul T. L. Ouang and Secretary Edward King Tung Chen established a diplomatic office of the Republic of China in Galveston. After the office moved to Houston a year later, my parents and the Ouangs became the first Chinese accepted by the larger society, receiving numerous invitations to social events.

Three years later, Oklahoma Governor Ernest W. Marland invited E. K. T. Chen to Oklahoma to observe the trial of Lois Thompson, who was charged with attempting to murder a Chinese student, Daniel Shaw. Twelve Tahlequah farmers found Thompson guilty. This verdict overturned an 1883 ruling by Texas's Judge Roy Bean, the “Law West of the Pecos,” which held that no law existed against killing a Chinese. Shaw noted, “The state of Oklahoma has



Edward K. T. Chen and Janie Ng (center of photo) posing with family members at their wedding.

This article was written as a tribute to my father, Edward King Tung Chen, for Father's Day, June 21, 2015. I have authored two applications for Texas historical markers that cite his accomplishments, along with those of Rose Don Wu and Albert C. B. Gee who gave rise to the Houston Chinese community that, like the Phoenix, has arisen from the ashes of the Chinese Exclusion Acts.



First officers of the Houston Lodge of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance, November 1954. The first four presidents were E. K. T. Chen, at podium; Albert Gee, two left of podium; Charles Chan, far left; and Hobert Joe, seventh from left.

proven that the intimate friendship between my country and the United States shall be maintained.”²

Owners of Texas grocery stores, who felt competition from Chinese merchants during the Depression, sponsored a bill before the Texas Senate in 1937 to escheat urban property owned by Asians. E. K. T. Chen and Rose Wu, a native of the Arizona Territory and resident of San Antonio, testified against the bill in the Texas Senate, and it was killed in committee. Wu noted, “My grandfather was one of twelve hundred Chinese who helped to build the rails through Texas. I am an American citizen but I do not forget my blood. Everyone can tell I am Chinese by my color but not everyone knows I am a citizen.”³

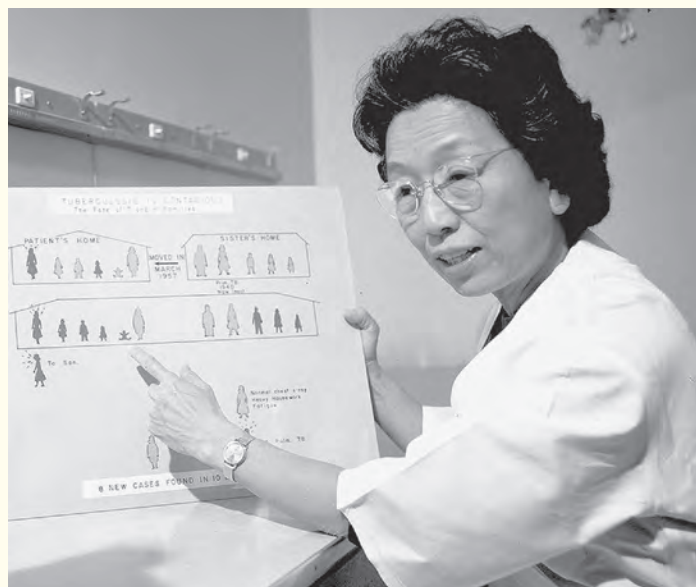
On April 8, 1940, my grandmother, Mrs. Y. Y. Chan, became the first Chinese woman to pass away in Houston. Dr. E. D. Head, pastor of the First Baptist Church, officiated her service. After that, my father helped organize a Chinese Sunday school. Its first meeting, held on May 5, 1940, marked the beginning of Houston’s first Chinese church. My mother taught English and Chinese there, and my Uncle Charles designed the first church building at 1823 Lamar Street.

The first local Chinese college graduate, E. K. T. Chen (AA, 1939; BA, 1940; MA, 1943) was cited as an outstanding scholar and became the first Asian college instructor in Houston. He taught Chinese, Spanish, history, and government part-time at the University of Houston night school and started extension courses in Galveston. In 1949, he became full-time faculty and the city’s first Asian tenured professor. He was joined at UH by professors Joyce and Paul Fan, Henry C. Chen, and C. J. Huang, and at Baylor University College of Medicine by Dr. Katharine Hsu. The professors organized the Chinese University Club in 1950. Today, its successor, the Chinese Professional Club, seeks to improve professional knowledge and business skills, promote the welfare of the community by raising funds for scholarships, and advance mutual understanding through social engagement.⁴ My father also became the first Asian to appear weekly on Houston television, serving as a panelist on KUHT, Channel 8.

George Fuermann of the *Houston Post* wrote of my father on February 13, 1952, “E. K. T. Chen is a professor of political science at the University of Houston. Once a deputy Chinese Consul here, he is frank and outspoken. Far

from wealthy, he is in his 40s and is spokesman for a small but influential group of Chinese. Albert Gee, a partner in the Ding How restaurant in his 30s, is Chinatown’s unofficial mayor. Brilliant and energetic, his goal is to organize a Houston chapter of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance (CACA).” Albert Gee was born in Michigan and also lived in New Orleans and China. He settled in Houston in 1936, where he married my aunt Jane Eng and became a respected restaurateur and community leader.

Before 1950, the majority of Houston’s five hundred Chinese worked in the grocery or restaurant businesses because no local law, dental, or medical schools accepted Chinese students. The Houston Lodge of the Chinese American Citizens Alliance (CACA), founded in 1954, helped change this.⁵ Early presidents included E. K. T. Chen, Albert Gee, Charles Chan, Hobert Joe, Henry Lee,



Dr. Katharine H. K. Hsu revolutionized tuberculosis treatment by prescribing Isoniazid as a preventive measure, administering it based on positive skin tests prior to active signs of TB appearing, and tracing additional cases by testing those with whom infected children had contact. Hsu became Houston’s first Director of Tuberculosis Control, serving from 1964 to 1968. By the 1970s, when TB no longer posed a public threat, she turned her research to asthma and respiratory disorders in children, formulating new standards and treatment protocols.

Photo courtesy of Baylor College of Medicine Archives.



E. K. T. Chen taught Chinese to FBI students from 1955 to 1957.

Wallace Gee, and Sam Eng. My uncle Sam Eng, who attended South Texas College of Law, was the first Asian judge in Houston.

During the Korean War, the FBI contacted E. K. T. Chen about the government's plans to intern the Chinese. He convinced them that most of the Chinese were loyal Americans and that he would help identify those who were not to prevent the internment of innocent citizens. He prepared a white paper, "Potentialities of Chinese Communist Intelligence Activities in the United States," leading to the Communist Control Act of 1954 that outlawed the Communist Party in the United States.⁶ He taught FBI agents Cantonese so that they could continue his work.

In 1957, my father developed ulcers and passed away in Washington, DC, at the age of forty-eight.

Edward C. M. Chen, Student to Professor: 1957 to 1980

After the death of my father, Dean George Holmes Richter, my organic chemistry professor at Rice Institute, found me a part-time job at Shell Development until I graduated in 1959. I enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of Houston, where I met and married Eugenie Han in 1960. After joining the Army and completing basic training at Ft. Hood, Texas, I was deployed to Huntsville, Alabama, and became a rocket scientist under Werner Von Braun. He said that we needed to protect the



Edward C. M. Chen and Senator Hiram Fong from Hawaii at the national CACA convention in Houston, 1967.

country, which included development of an anti-ballistic missile (ABM). Hence, I developed an ABM that used a torpedo-like gun to shoot a "bullet" and, therefore, required only enough fuel to intercept an enemy missile.

While in Alabama, my daughter Karen Sue Mae was born in 1962 at the Redstone Arsenal hospital. She became the third generation of Rice graduates in our family by earning a degree with majors in electrical engineering, computer science, and math sciences, and married another Rice graduate, Randy King.

In 1966, I became the first Texas-born Chinese to receive a doctorate in Houston. The Republic of China designated me as one of five outstanding overseas Chinese. After working in industry, I started the chemistry programs at UH-Clear Lake and UH-Victoria. I became a full-time professor and eventually published over 120 technical articles. My son, Edward Sam Don Chen, born in 1968, received a doctorate from UH and is now at Baylor College of Medicine, the third generation Professor Ed Chen in Houston.



Albert Gee and his wife, Jane Eng, pose with an early winner of the Miss Chinatown pageant, which they helped found in 1970. Albert served as local CACA president from 1955 to 1958 and national president in 1971 and 1972. Jane led the auxiliary and later became the first woman president of the Houston CACA. In 1961, Albert and Jane Gee helped organize the Houston Taipei Sister City Society to promote cultural and commercial ties between the cities.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006-N4307-001.

The Houston CACA came into national prominence in the 1960s after the election of the first American Chinese senator, Hiram Fong of Hawaii, the labeling of existing immigration laws as "nearly intolerable" by President John F. Kennedy, and the 1964 election of President Lyndon Johnson. Albert Gee represented the CACA and helped secure passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965.⁷ The youngest person elected president of the Houston chapter, I presided over the first national CACA convention held in Houston in 1967, which welcomed Senator Fong as the keynote speaker. Albert Gee became the first president of the National CACA from outside California before he passed away in 1978.



On Leong Chinese Merchants Association (which translates to Secure Prosperity & Good Conduct) was established in 1893 as a national mutual aid society for early immigrant Chinese men to provide support and social services for businesses and laborers to act as a buffer against discrimination directed toward the Chinese. The Houston chapter filed with the Texas Secretary of State in 1944, although it is known to have existed prior to that time. The building designed by Charles Chan opened in 1951 at 801 Chartres Street, serving as a meeting place for festivals and celebrations. The venue provided meeting rooms, a ballroom, and stores. It was torn down in 2011.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS-1248-0404.

Calvin Bow Tong Lee, an American Chinese educator who served as chancellor of the University of Maryland, Baltimore from 1971 to 1976, described other activities of the Houston CACA. For example, when a Chinese girl applied for an oil company job at the same time as her white classmate, the company hired the white girl. After insisting on an explanation, the Chinese girl was told the company turned her down because she was Chinese. CACA members “quietly stopped buying gas from that company.” Six months later, after a sales manager inquired why Chinese were not using their credit cards, the company “liberalized [its] employment policy.” Similarly, after a statewide

grocers’ association prohibited non-whites from becoming officers, the Chinese resigned. The organization changed its constitution in 1965, and a Chinese, Hobert Joe, joined the board of directors.⁸

In the 1940s my father served as president of the first local umbrella Chinese organization, the Wah Kew of Houston. In 1965 five civic and family organizations formed a successor, the Federation of Chinese Organizations of Houston, which I chaired twice. In 1990 the Association of Chinese Organizations of Houston (ACOH) elected me co-chair, while president of the Chen Family Association. When President Carter recognized Communist China in 1979, my wife and I, along with former consuls, formed the Texas Taiwan Cultural and Trade Association that joined the ACOH. The Taipei Economic and Cultural Office in Houston, established by Congress in 1979, continues unofficial diplomatic relations with the Republic of China.

The Professor Becomes a Historian: 1980-2007

After my grandmother Gin Shee Ng passed away in 1980, I began to search for my roots. Following my father as a newspaper columnist, I wrote articles for the *Southwest Chinese Journal* and *U.S. Asian News*. My wife translated some of these for *The Chinese Voice*. My aunt Daisy Chen Gee and I also started collecting oral histories of Chinese in Houston. A history of the Chinese in Houston, which I wrote, appeared in Rice professor Fred von der Mehden’s 1984 book, *The Ethnic Groups in Houston*.⁹ Two years later, I co-chaired the Sesquicentennial Activities of the Chinese in Houston. I was appointed to the Harris County Historical Commission and became known as the unofficial historian of the local Chinese community.

My father said he was possibly the first Asian Republican



A monument commemorating the 3,000 Chinese workers who helped build the Southern Pacific Railway on the centennial of its completion was unveiled in Hermann Park on June 29, 1983.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006N-1983-1248-3.



in Texas since he conducted a Republican primary in 1934. Continuing this legacy, I chaired the Houston Young Chinese American Council and served as president of the Chinese American Voter's League. Beverley Clark, the descendant of a nineteenth-century Chinese railroad worker and his African American wife, was elected to the Houston City Council in 1989, the first council member with Asian ancestry. The next year, I was nominated to fill the unexpired term of Judson Robinson Jr. but did not receive enough votes. Subsequently, local voters elected me the first Chinese chair of Republican Precinct 175 in 1991, Harris County Republican Party treasurer in 1992, and vice chair in 1994. With George Strake, I also helped establish the Texas Asian Republican Caucus (TARC). My wife, Eugenie, has been president of the Braes Republican Women, the oldest Republican Club in Houston. In 1998, TARC honored Governor George W. Bush and recognized my father and Rose Wu as the first Asian Republicans.

The City of Houston redrew its council districts to accommodate the newly annexed and predominantly white Kingwood suburb in 1997. Along with eleven other plaintiffs, I participated in a case to demonstrate that the new districts constituted racial gerrymandering, ignoring the one person-one vote principle, by diluting the strength of minority districts by population and voting age. The District Court and Appeals Court granted summary judgment to the City in *Chen et al v. City of Houston*, and the Supreme Court refused to hear the case, although Justice Clarence Thomas dissented.¹⁰

Into the Future: 2007 and Beyond

The Chao Center for Asian Studies at Rice University, created with a \$15 million endowment from the Ting Tsung and Wei Fong Chao Foundation, established the Houston Asian American Archives (HAAA) in 2008. Recognizing that I had not accomplished as much in the fifty years since my father's death as he did in his twenty-five years as an American Chinese in Houston, I deposited his papers in the HAAA. Two Texas historical markers were dedicated in 2009 and

2014 as permanent public testaments to the contributions of my father, Rose Wu, and Albert Gee.

A 1957 UH Faculty Assembly proclamation quoted in my father's historical marker application states, "Professor Edward K. T. Chen was a man of great ability and tremendous energy...Thousands of students at one time or another received instruction from him in American Government, International Relations, or concerning the cultural and political institutions of the Far East....Professor Chen was always regarded as a loyal and esteemed friend and colleague by members of his department, by the whole faculty, and by the University administration. He had become so much a part of the life of the University and the City that his place could never be filled." James E. Sheriff, one of my father's FBI students, described him, saying, "Undoubtedly here was a man who devoted much of his life and attention to the welfare of his country. In a way I felt that he gave his life for his country in teaching us to read, write, speak, and understand Chinese."¹¹

Much of the significance of the life of Edward King Tung Chen can be seen in the vibrant Asian community in Houston. A diplomat with the skills of a newspaperman, he introduced the Chinese to the citizens of Houston. He established the first Chinese Church in Houston, was instrumental in founding many Asian organizations, served as the first president of the Houston Chinese American Citizens Alliance, and helped prevent the internment of the American Chinese during the Korean War. My father worked throughout his life to increase the visibility of Chinese and American Chinese. Through his efforts and those of other American-born Chinese, economic and social injustices began to be righted.

Edward C. M. Chen, Ph.D., is a retired chemist and professor in the University of Houston System. He has served as an officer and board member for numerous community organizations, including the Houston Lodge of the Chinese American Citizens Association. A visiting scholar for the Chao Center for Asian Studies at Rice University, he serves on the Harris County Historical Commission and is the unofficial Chinese historian for Houston.

From "Tom Brown" to Mykawa Road: The Impact of the Japanese American Community on Houston in the Twentieth Century

By Abbie Salyers Grubb



Shown on the far right amongst his employees, Japanese Nurseries owner Saburo Arai rallied his community and challenged discriminatory legislation following spurts of growth in the Japanese population.

Photo courtesy of UTSA Institute of Texan Cultures.

In 2012 the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University declared Houston to be the most diverse city in the nation, replacing Los Angeles and New York at the top of the list. Of the nearly 2.1 million people in the city, fewer than 130,000 were Asians according to the 2010 Census, with Japanese Americans an even smaller percentage of the city's demographics. And yet, this community has had a significant impact on Houston's development, ranging from business and industry growth to cultural assimilation and street names.

In most history books, an analysis of Japanese American immigration focuses on the West Coast, but Japanese settlers reached Texas as early as the 1880s. According to the U.S. Census, three Japanese immigrants lived in Texas in 1890 and thirteen in 1900, but the numbers grew more quickly after that. By 1910 Texas had nearly 350 Japanese settlers, and by the outbreak of World War II, the number exceeded 450. Many Japanese immigrants entered Texas from the south where they had worked in Mexican mines or on the railroads, and while these early arrivals were often laborers, some established themselves as businessmen or entrepreneurs. Others came to Texas after failed business ventures elsewhere or after tragedies like the 1906 San Francisco earthquake. Their individual stories, particularly

those in the Houston area, reveal the varied origins, motivations, and experiences of the Japanese Texans.

One of these early arrivals was Tsunekichi Okasaki who arrived in the 1890s and was known around Houston as "Tom Brown," the proprietor of the "Japanese Restaurant" at 1111 Congress Avenue in downtown. Ironically, his fare was not rice and traditional Japanese foods but American food. The establishment became quite popular, perhaps because of his low prices even on full-course meals. He later expanded into two more restaurants, founded the Japan Art and Tea Company, and experimented in rice farming. Though one of his businesses burned down and his rice farming efforts failed, Tom Brown was a well-known fixture of Houston until he returned to Japan after World War II.

Rice farming was perhaps the most significant way that Japanese immigrants to the area attempted to establish themselves and their families. In 1902 Japanese Consul General Sadatsuchi Uchida visited Houston and learned that city officials were interested in recruiting Japanese immigrants to grow rice in the region. Uchida convinced former Japanese representative Seito Saibara to lead the colonization of a rice farm around Webster located on the rail line halfway between Galveston and Houston. Saibara purchased over 300 acres for \$5,750 and moved there with



The flourishing Houston economy helped establish families like the Kishis. The family was involved in rice and truck farming in Terry County, Texas, and soon discovered oil on their property. Houston remains home to descendants of the Kishi family.

Photo courtesy of UTSA Digital Collection CD#034; 068-3002.

his wife, son, and thirty other families in 1904. The new arrivals cultivated Japanese Shinriki, or God Power rice, which had a higher yield than many other Texas rice breeds.

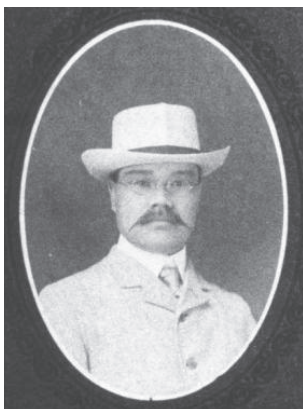
Though the rice farming and agricultural industries faced difficulties, one local Japanese American man established such a reputation that his name is still recognized by thousands of Houstonians. In 1904 Shinpei Mykawa came to the United States as part of the Japanese delegation to the St. Louis World's Fair, where he learned of the rice-growing efforts in Texas. Two years later he settled south of Houston with four young workers and began cultivating rice. Sadly, just four months into his venture, he was killed in a tragic accident while seeding his fields with a mule-driven seed roller. Though his rice investment failed and two of his followers returned to Japan, the people of Santa Fe renamed the local train station (and the subsequent connecting

road) Mykawa in his honor.¹ According to Kasoku Sawada, one of his original employees, the fact that a Texas city named a station for a Japanese man earned the state a positive reputation for many Japanese immigrants of the era. Mykawa was honored with a large granite marker in Houston's Hollywood Cemetery, though it was temporarily removed during World War II at the height of anti-Japanese sentiments.

The relationships of many of the individual Japanese immigrants with their neighbors and business partners were positive, but a general feeling of

distrust towards the Japanese as a group began to increase as their numbers grew. Some families in Texas were refused land by local committees, and the state legislature passed a 1921 Land Law forbidding new arrivals from purchasing land. Saburo Arai, who owned a prosperous nursery in Alvin, led the Texas fight against Land Laws, but he was up against a movement that was spreading with increasing strength across the nation. In 1924, Congress passed the Johnson-Reed Act, an anti-immigration bill that effectively halted all Asian immigration and significantly limited entrance by Europeans as well. For men like Seito Saibara, who had envisioned a large-scale rice colony, the new laws ended any hope of future immigration to support his agricultural development. Saibara and his wife moved to Brazil where they started a new rice farm. In 1937 when Saibara fell ill, he had to receive special permission from the State Department to re-enter the country due to the new act.² While his endeavors did not pan out as he had hoped, the land that Saibara settled is still a productive rice-growing region of the state today.

For many Japanese Americans already settled in Texas, the new law did not significantly affect them; the existing Japanese communities of Houston, the Rio Grande Valley, and El Paso continued to thrive. However, with the outbreak of war between the United States and Japan sparked by the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, immigrants' Japanese heritage raised suspicions with local authorities. Japanese Americans across the country were subject to FBI raids to interrogate them and confiscate contraband items like radios, maps, weapons, and cameras. One local man, Torata Akagi, and his family had their home searched during which the FBI agents smashed their traditional family altar, confiscated a Kodak camera and a child's radio receiver, and taunted Torata's Caucasian wife, Beatrice, for marrying a "Jap." Many Japanese Americans destroyed or hid any items that may imply they had loyalties to Japan, including letters written in Japanese, family china and heirlooms, and samurai swords. Based on lists compiled before the war, thousands of Japanese *Issei*, or first-generation immigrants, were arrested as "enemy aliens" by the FBI and confined to prisons and internment camps run by the Justice Department's Immigration and Naturalization



Early Houstonian Seito Saibara settled in Webster and introduced a dominating Japanese rice breed to rice agriculture.

Photo courtesy of UTSA Digital Collection, CD#803; 095-0600.



Tsunekichi "Tom Brown" Okasaki's store in downtown Houston sold Japanese wares.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, MSS0145-060.

Service (INS). After the search of his home, Torata Akagi and his uncle were briefly imprisoned and released, but his father Fukutaro was held in jail for three months. In a show of faith from his Sheldon-area community, a local friend gathered signed statements from ten different neighbors to present as affidavits in his enemy alien hearing, resulting in Fukutaro's eventual release from jail.

Fear and wartime panic fueled rumors that the remaining Japanese Americans on the West Coast were aiding Japan and would join forces with the Japanese military. In Texas, Japanese Americans were prohibited from traveling extensively or assembling in large groups, and many had their bank accounts frozen. While many Americans of Japanese ancestry were respected and did not suffer either physically or mentally, others felt the pressure to respond to the increasing discrimination. In downtown Houston, shop and restaurant owner Tom Brown changed the name of the "Japanese Restaurant" to "US Café," while another local establishment shifted from "Japan Café" to "Kay's Café." Though Houston did not see as much racial prejudice, anti-Japanese sentiment reached such a fevered pitch in other areas that military and political leaders called for the mass evacuation, relocation, and confinement of all Japanese Americans living along the West Coast.

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 allowing for the creation of "Exclusion Zones" near strategic locations from which any or all civilians could be removed as long as their needs were provided for. The order never used the word "Japanese," yet those of Japanese descent were the only ones affected by the new law. In addition to the curfew and contraband laws

already in effect, new directions and "Exclusion Orders" were posted in Japanese American communities instructing residents when and where to register and report for removal. The Japanese Americans left behind homes, businesses, pets, and countless personal items, only being allowed to bring what they could carry. Men, women, and children were housed in temporary assembly centers hastily constructed at fairgrounds and racetracks where the inhabitants were forced to live in horse stalls that still bore the odor of their previous residents. By late summer the newly created War Relocation Authority completed construction of ten relocation camps to accommodate the approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans removed from their homes. These families were held unconstitutionally with no criminal charges and no opportunity for a trial despite the fact that over two-thirds of them were American citizens and no Japanese Americans were ever found guilty of espionage or treason.

The Japanese in Texas were not subject to EO 9066 as they were not living within the Exclusion Zone along the West Coast. Those arrested by the FBI in Texas were legal prisoners of the U.S. government based on the Alien Enemies Act of July 6, 1798, still in effect today. Towards the end of the war, as many as 11,000 Japanese, German, and Italian "enemy aliens" from the United States and Latin America had been arrested and imprisoned in camps and prisons across the country from Fort Missoula, Montana, to Ellis Island, New York. Texas became home to three of these prisons in Kenedy, Seagoville, and Crystal City.

Despite the unconstitutional detention of thousands of Japanese Americans, many within the Japanese American community felt the call to enlist in the military to support



During World War II, Mrs. Sakahara was detained in an internment camp for four years while her husband served in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team after a brief internment.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RDGD00503-373.

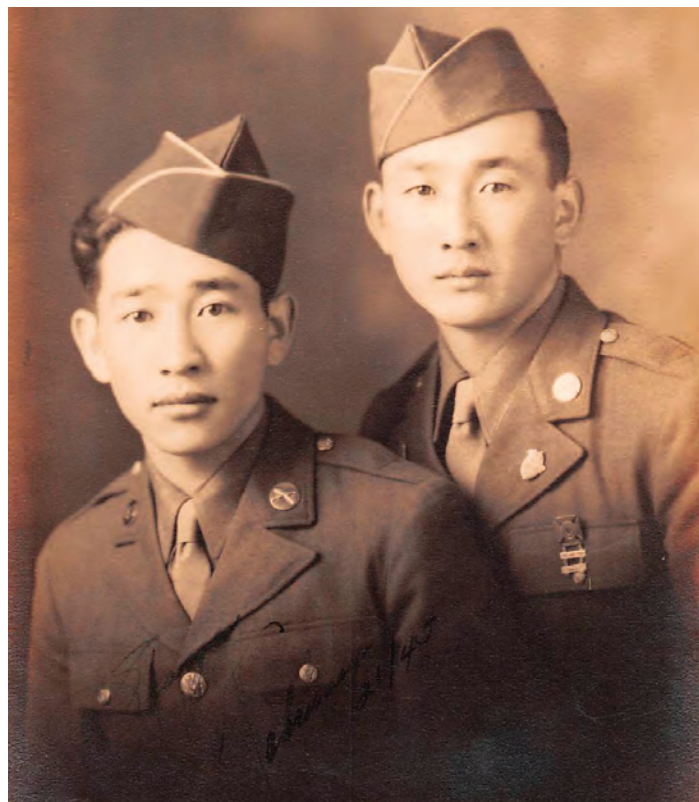
the war effort and prove their loyalty. Though all Japanese Americans were initially honorably discharged after Pearl Harbor and labelled as 4-C “Enemy Alien[s],” or ineligible for service, President Roosevelt later called for the creation of two all-Japanese American units, the 100th Infantry Battalion (Separate) and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team (RCT). The 100th Infantry served honorably through North Africa and into Italy where it was eventually combined with the 442nd RCT. Both units contributed to the liberation of Italy and southern France as well as the fall of Germany. While serving in the Vosges Mountains of southeast France, the Japanese American soldiers helped rescue 211 members of the “Lost Battalion,” soldiers of the 1st Battalion of the 141st Regiment, 36th “Texas” Division, who had been surrounded by German troops. In October 1963, Texas Governor John Connally issued a proclamation declaring all members of the 100th/442nd RCT to be Honorary Texas Citizens in appreciation for their role in rescuing the Lost Battalion.

In addition to the service of the infantry in Europe, thousands of other Japanese Americans also served in the Pacific Theater (PTO) as part of the Military Intelligence Service, which offered translation and interpretation to every Allied unit in the PTO. It is said that the service of Japanese American linguists shortened the war by as much as a year, saving over a million American and Japanese lives. The men of the 100th/442nd RCT were similarly honored with the distinction of being the most decorated unit in U.S. military

service for their size and length of service with seven total Presidential Unit Citations, twenty-one Medals of Honor, and numerous other individual awards.

Several Houston-area Japanese Americans distinguished themselves with service during the war years as both civilians and soldiers. Kiyoaki Saibara, son of early settler Seito Saibara, used his knowledge of the Japanese language to record broadcasts for the U.S. Army to distribute to the Japanese people. Kiyoaki spoke fondly of his new home, stating, “We Japanese in Texas are able to enjoy all the opportunities offered by this country. We are treated in the same friendly manner as in peacetime. This is the teaching of true Christianity and true democracy. It is indeed remarkable, and more so, it is truly gratifying to know that we live in this country. Furthermore, I have not witnessed any type of race hatred in which the motive was to harm the people of Japanese ancestry.” He also mentioned his son Robert, who was serving in the U.S. Army and eventually became the highest ranking Japanese American Army officer during World War II.³

In the midst of the famous “Rescue of the Lost Battalion,” Houstonian Saburo Tanamachi participated in the last efforts of the 100th/442nd RCT in trying to reach the surrounded Texans. Sadly, it was his death by machine-gun fire that inspired his best friend George “Joe” Sakato to lead a *bonsai* charge against the German forces, resulting in high Allied casualties but ultimately breaking through the German lines. Tanamachi was one of the first two Japanese Americans to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery and his family still resides in the Houston area.



Brothers George and Harley Fujimoto enlisted to serve in World War II despite the backlash aimed at Japanese Americans following Pearl Harbor. George (left) served in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team and Harley (right) in the Military Intelligence Service.

Photo courtesy of Donna Fujimoto Cole.



Lifelong Houston-area resident Tsutomu "Tommie" Okabayashi (1925-2015) salutes President Barrack Obama after a ceremony to recognize his service in the 442nd RCT.

Photo courtesy of the Okabayashi family.

After the war years of rationing and sacrifice, life regained some sense of normalcy for most of the Japanese Americans in Texas. Relocation and internment camps gradually closed, and families were reunited and able to put their lives back together and rebuild their communities. Between 1940 and 1990 the population of Japanese Americans in Texas increased from 458 to over 15,000, due in part to the number of Japanese "war brides" that returned to the United States with servicemen between 1950 and 1960. While earlier settlements existed primarily in rural areas, many Japanese Americans began to migrate towards urban areas in the latter part of the twentieth century, and by the end of the century, two-thirds of the 15,000 lived in the Houston, San Antonio, and Dallas-Fort Worth areas.

Japanese social and cultural organizations and businesses grew, too, providing economic stability and an opportunity to keep their Japanese heritage alive. This has been particularly true in the latter half of the twentieth century as U.S.-Japan trade relations expanded. In the late 1980s, Japan was the top trade partner in dollar volume at the Port of Houston and the third highest export market behind only Canada and Mexico. At that time, the Japanese were also the largest foreign investors in Texas with Houston serving as home to the largest concentration of Japanese businesses and families in the state. Japanese businesses grew so quickly in the 1970s that local residents created the Japanese Educational Institute of Houston to educate the children of Japanese corporate employees who were stationed in Houston. It was these same Japanese businessmen who advocated for and successfully created the Japanese Garden in Hermann Park.

Though there were occasional negative news stories of

rising crime rates or political in-fighting, much of the late-twentieth-century news reports about Japanese Americans in Houston were overtly positive, albeit without the political correctness of more recent decades. Many of the newspapers and magazines referred to the Japanese Americans and Japanese nationals as "Orientals," a term which has long since gone out of favor for its perceived connection to the European imperialism of the nineteenth century. Similarly, at least one *Houston Post* article played into the "model minority" myth, stating, "Educators give Asians A's for Achievement." Often seen on the surface as positive praise, the model minority's origins in the midst of the civil rights movement give it an ulterior motive, and the entire idea is based on racial stereotypes, however positive. To combat stereotypes and a lack of historical awareness, delegates from the Houston area testified before the State Board of Education in May 2010 to argue for the inclusion of the World War II Japanese American experience in the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) requirements. While the effort failed, it and the growing population have gradually brought about more understanding and awareness of the Japanese American experience.

As a result of progressive changes in the United States, the civil rights movement, and prosperous trade relations with Japan, Japanese Americans have carved out a permanent and significant role in Houston. Japanese Americans have served as political leaders, social advocates, soldiers and heroes, business owners, and voting citizens. Houstonians of all races drive by Mykawa Road daily and indirectly pay homage to one of the founding families of the region. Each April the Japan Festival fills Hermann Park with tens of thousands of visitors celebrating Japanese culture, food, clothing, art, and anime. The Japanese Garden welcomes visitors year round thanks to the generosity of Japanese businessmen who wanted to bring a piece of home to Houston. In the countryside, farms, orchards, and produce companies owe part of their success to their Japanese American predecessors who cleared and cultivated the land and introduced high-yield rice to Texas. Current Japanese Americans and Japanese nationals regularly impact and serve the city through organizations like the Japanese American Citizens League, the Japan America Society-Houston, and the Japan Business Association of Houston. On any given day Houstonians can likely find *teiko* drum lessons, *Ikebana* (flower arranging) classes, Japanese language classes, and (of course) Japanese food at a number of institutions around the city. While the numbers of Japanese Americans in Houston may be small, their contribution to the diverse fabric that weaves together our city is truly historic.

Abbie Salyers Grubb, Ph.D., received her BA from James Madison University and her MA and Ph.D. in history from Rice University. Her dissertation, "The Internment of Memory: Forgetting and Remembering the Japanese American Experience During World War II," traces how the Japanese American confinement and military service were largely ignored in the first decades after World War II but gradually came to light through individual efforts. Active in the local JACL-Houston chapter, Dr. Grubb is an instructor of history and the Honors Program Coordinator at San Jacinto College South Campus.

Korean Americans in Houston: Building Bridges across Cultures and Generations

By Haejin E. Koh

What do an oilman, a schoolteacher, a lawyer, a community advocate, and an energy guru have in common? They are among the 11,813 Korean Americans living in Harris County, although community leaders believe the number is twice as large.¹ The Korean American landscape is sometimes summarized by a list of organizations such as the Korean American Association of Houston (KAAH), the Houston Korean American Chamber of Commerce, and the Houston Korean School, but it goes beyond that. The five individuals highlighted here have lived in Houston for decades, with similar and dissimilar junctures in life. In many ways, they resemble anyone in Houston, attending school, attending church, working, changing careers, raising children, taking care of older parents, participating in the community, reaching for something better. Yet their stories demonstrate the diversity within the Korean American community.

JOHN H. KIM: 1960

At six-foot-two, John H. Kim is a Texas oilman as big as *Dallas*'s J. R. Ewing. John was born in Austin in 1959 when his father was studying at The University of Texas (UT), having arrived with "just a few bucks in his pocket." In 1960 the family moved to Houston where John's five siblings were born. In the 1960s and 1970s, "the big Korean Catholic family" attended the city's only Korean church, which met in a borrowed building. As John's father served as the second president of KAAH, founded in the



The Kim family at a picnic in Hermann Park after attending the Korean church, 1970.

Photo courtesy of John Kim.



Kimchi Fest, 2007.

Photo courtesy of
Kristopher Ahn.

early 1960s, John remembers its annual Christmas and social gatherings.²

He spent his childhood in an all-white neighborhood, and he and his siblings did "typical American stuff" such as participating in the Boy Scouts, where he was the only Asian American scout in his troop. Nevertheless, following Korean tradition, the Kim children had to learn an instrument Korean parents favored (piano, violin, and cello).

John learned to read and write in Korean while the family lived in Korea in 1967. When they returned, the Houston Korean School had not yet opened, and he lost those literacy skills. His conversational Korean falls into the "kitchen Korean" category, sufficient for communication with relatives but not for the professional arena.

After graduating from UT, John returned to Houston and jumped into leadership roles in the Korean American and Asian American communities. In 1985 he became the founding president of the Korean American Young Professionals Association (KAYPA), which provided networking opportunities for Korean American college graduates and united second-generation members with their first-generation elders. As John recalls how KAYPA was "so well supported by the first generation," his voice and demeanor exude respect for his parents and the parental figures in that first generation. With fifty-plus members, KAYPA became a rousing success but was eventually replaced by the Korean American Society of Houston (KASH), a younger group with younger members.

In 1990 John co-founded the Asian Chamber of Commerce with eight members and a \$5,000 budget. A membership drive brought in twelve members; years later future mayor Annise Parker joined. The chamber is not limited to those of Asian descent, and today about half of its members are non-Asians, which seems to be a point of pride.

John chaired the Asian Pacific Islander campaign for the United Way, leading to an unprecedented \$62,000 in contributions. The first second-generation officer, John served as KAAH vice president in the early 1990s while it made an effort to “reach out to the second generation.” He recalls the kindness of elders who treated him well and did not dismiss him for lacking Korean language proficiency. KAAH’s membership remains largely first-generation Korean Americans whose first language is Korean. Thus, business is conducted in Korean, and its website is in Korean.

Today, John is a proud father and a dutiful son, having relocated near his aging parents to more easily visit them. Instructed by his parents to “give back to the community,” John has instilled this same sentiment in his children. “I am so proud of Houston,” he says, “and I wouldn’t want to live anywhere else in the world.”

DR. SOON DUCK LIM: 1969

An energetic and talkative woman who seems at least a decade younger than she is, Dr. Soon Duck Lim came to Houston in 1969 with her husband and two young daughters. Her husband was in graduate school at the University of Houston (UH), so she says, “To make myself happy, I went back to school.” Having previously taught high school in Korea, she entered the UH College of Education in 1971 and in two years had earned a master’s degree and given birth to their third daughter.³

While Soon was in graduate school, her mother came to visit to help with the household, as is common for grandmothers to do in Korea. Even then Soon says, “It was so hard to do everything at the same time.” But her strength seems to belie her words – a SuperMom before the term became popular.

She read in the newspaper that math teachers were in demand. Fortunately, math was one of the fields she was certified to teach. The Houston Independent School District hired her and assigned her to teach at a school in Third Ward, a predominantly low-income, inner-city area. Reflecting on the myriad of challenges, she points out that she grew up during the Korean War and “had seen everything in Korea,” enabling her to survive anything in Third Ward.

In 1975 her husband’s job took the family to France for two years. Their two older daughters attended an American school with classes conducted in English. The youngest daughter, only three years old, enrolled in a French school, immersed in a French-speaking environment despite having no French proficiency. When the family returned to Houston, the school tested the youngest daughter, then age five, for hearing problems and English deficiency, but ruled out both. She was in fact trilingual, speaking Korean with her parents, English with her sisters, and French at school in France. Nevertheless, her trilingual ability was not recognized as an asset, and school officials placed her into a speech class, a move Soon seems to doubt was necessary.

In 1987 Soon earned a doctoral degree in education. In 2000, after twenty years at Reagan High School, she retired and enjoyed her newfound freedom until one day in 2004, when she saw an ad in a local Korean-language newspaper. The KAAH had a part-time administrative position open. She approached the president and told him that she could



Family portrait including Dr. Lim’s mother, seated, 1973. Photo courtesy of Soon Duck Lim.

take the position for no compensation if given the flexibility to travel to see her children and grandchildren.

The KAAH accepted her generous offer, and today she continues to volunteer as the office manager at the Korean Community Center of Houston (KCCH).

Occupying

the front desk, Soon is the first face one sees at the KCCH, thus, making her an unofficial representative of the Korean American community. Her official role is as a member of the KAAH advisory board, although the two organizations are separate entities. Before retiring, she did not participate much in the Korean American community, other than attending community-wide events commemorating Korean holidays. Yet Soon’s daughters went on to hold leadership roles in the Korean Student Associations (KSA) at their respective universities, and she beams with pride saying, “The kids are living well, better than me.” This, one might argue, is the realization of the Korean dream in America.

KRISTOPHER AHN: 1975

Kristopher Ahn still remembers his family arriving at the Houston airport in 1975 with his suitcase containing two big bags of *kochugaru*, a red chili powder used to season Korean dishes, including *kimchi*, in case they could not find the spice in the United States. In the mid-1970s, the Korean American community in Houston, as a cohesive unit, was “non-existent.” In the Bissonnet area, Kris’s family found one Korean grocery store and one Korean travel agency. Sometimes his parents asked strangers, “Are you Korean?” The Ahns invited anyone who answered affirmatively into their home, and they remain friends today.⁴

Eventually the area’s Korean American population grew, and Kris mentions the proliferation of Korean churches, which number more than fifty today, as an example. The church served as a gathering place “to meet Korean people, to speak Korean, and to eat Korean food.”

An outgrowth of his time as president of KSA at UH, by the mid-1990s, Kris had become involved in the Korean American Chamber of Commerce, which was founded in 1974. At that time, another Korean organization with a similar purpose and overlapping membership had also been active, but it became apparent that sustaining both organizations would be difficult and perhaps unnecessary.⁵



Kristopher Ahn, right, at the Kimchi Fest, 2007.

Photo courtesy of Kristopher Ahn.

Thus, as president, Kris consciously shifted the chamber to an English-speaking organization with meetings conducted in English. In 2006 the two organizations came to serve separate constituencies and flourished. The chamber, for example, supported Korean Airlines in creating a nonstop route between Houston and Seoul, which began in 2014.

Another Chamber achievement, under Kris's presidency, is the Kimchi Fest, first held in 2007. After two years, it became the much larger Korean Festival, held annually at Discovery Green and headed by KASH.

Another recent achievement includes establishment of the Korean Community Center of Houston in 2011, thanks to local fundraising efforts within the Korean American community and funding provided by the City of Houston and the Korean government. The center houses the KAAH, the Houston Korean School, the Korean Cultural Center, and a branch of Houston Community College (HCC).

At Kris's law office, one hears both English and Korean spoken by Kris, his staff, and clients. As Kris and I talk about language, he modestly informs me that he recently was named the chair of the board of directors of the Houston Korean School. The school holds classes on Saturday mornings for about 170 students taught by sixteen teachers, most of whom had taught in Korea. His teenaged daughter speaks Korean very well, and he admits that years ago he bribed her to watch Korean television. After just one episode of a Korean drama, she was hooked and continued watching of her own volition. Watching television helped improve her Korean language proficiency, a testament to the power of K-pop and K-drama.

GIGI LEE: 1976

Gigi Lee came to Houston with her parents in 1976 and her twenty-five years of service to Houston and its Korean American community could fill this magazine. A former newspaper reporter and beauty queen, she also served in the Office of the Mayor under three administrations. Today she is a legislative aide for Texas Senator John Whitmire.⁶

Gigi estimates that in 1976, the Korean American community had fewer than 500 members. She remembers that the one Korean church was the place for social gatherings, and her family had to shop at a Japanese grocery store.

Gigi's father wanted her to learn "what it's like to [work to] earn money," and she remembers working at a supermarket, earning minimum wage but thinking it was "big-time money." Things have "dramatically changed," she says.

A few years later, a bachelor's degree in Spanish literature from UH turned this immigrant schoolgirl into a trilingual speaker, valuable in professional and civic circles. With no hesitation, she contends that her Korean language skills were critical to her professional success and achievements.

A dutiful only child, Gigi helped her parents who owned an electronic sales and repair shop that she was expected to run someday. She took classes at HCC to learn the trade and became a manager, supervising five technicians.

In her free time, Gigi volunteered at a Korean-language newspaper. Her stories were the type of light fare shown on the morning news, such as a baby elephant born at the zoo. Then, in 1993, to her surprise, Mayor Bob Lanier accepted her request for an interview. The next year, she accepted a job as special assistant to the mayor and first lady. She humbly credits this appointment to luck, saying that she was there "at the right time."

Her presence in the mayor's office benefited the Korean American community in several ways, such as the installation of a stop sign near a Korean church and a spotlight in the Harwin area, home to many Korean-owned businesses. In 2002 when the World Cup soccer championship featured South Korea and Japan, local Korean American community leaders organized a TV-watching event in the parking lot of a Korean restaurant. About an hour before the crowd arrived, someone realized that no one had applied for a permit.

Fortunately, Gigi was able to facilitate the issuance of the permit through the proper channels.

Over the years, Gigi has been involved in various community organizations. As the vice president of the KAAH, for example, she secured a grant from AT&T to fund the Korean American



Gigi Lee at martial arts training in Galveston, 2014.

Photo courtesy of Gigi Lee.

Grassroots Internship, now in its second year. The thirty-two-week internship is part of the KAAH's Civic Empowerment project, which aims to cultivate future leaders for the Korean American community and to promote active participation of Korean Americans in the political process.

Today Gigi expresses appreciation for her bicultural and bilingual upbringing, "I'm not just Gigi Lee. I'm Gigi Lee, a representative of the Korean American community."

DR. SAM JAE CHO: 1981

Dr. Sam Jae Cho and my uncle attended the same middle school and were in the same grade in Korea. Years later, without knowing it at the time, both came to the United States in the same year. In 1976 Sam entered graduate school at UT, where he earned a doctoral degree in petroleum engineering, and in 1981, he, his wife, and their two sons moved to Houston.⁷



Dr. and Mrs. Sam Jae Cho, March 2008.
Photo courtesy of Sam Jae Cho.

In the 1980s, Sam says, Houston had few Korean restaurants and “no Korean community to speak of.” His family attended a Korean church a couple of times a month. About the size of his living room, the small space, overcrowded with benches, served as the only Korean “community center for fellowship” and annual holiday gatherings.

That small room also served as a classroom for the Houston Korean School. Although Sam’s two sons did not like going to Korean school, “We forced them,” he recalls. I probed further, asking a seemingly simple but complex question: Why? Sam paused for a moment and did not answer. “That’s a good question,” he said. After another pause, Mrs. Cho answers, “They need [to know their] identity and family roots.” Today both sons possess excellent Korean language

proficiency. Their older son also took Korean language courses at UT and spent a year studying at Yonsei University in Korea. Naturally, in this immersion environment, his language skills improved dramatically, and Sam observes, “He became very strong mentally. He became proud of being Korean. He found his roots.”

Today Sam is the CEO of TexaKor Energy LLC and remains active in professional circles and the Korean American community, often combining these two spheres. He served as president of the Houston-based Korean-American Energy Exploration and Production Society and the South Texas chapter of the Korean-American Scientists and Engineers Association. In addition to professional activities, both organizations fulfill a social function with informal gatherings and events.



These five individuals and their families are ordinary, in one sense of the word, and yet, at the same time, extraordinary. They symbolize the diversity of Houston’s Korean community as well as the city’s larger ethnic mix. They or their parents came here for new opportunities and have found ways to hold on to their Korean culture while making strides for both the local Korean community and the city. Reflecting on his life, Sam Jae Cho philosophically sums up the experience, “[We] first-generation [immigrants] know how to push. We had to push to survive. Life was tough [then]. Today life is beautiful.”

Haejin E. Koh, Ph.D., despite having spent most of her adult life outside of Texas, has called Texas home since 1981. Currently she is the Associate Director of the Chao Center for Asian Studies at Rice University. Previously she has held faculty positions at the University of Hawaii at Manoa in Honolulu and at Korea University in Seoul.

Remembering the early days...

During the Korean War, Ronald M. Smith, a member of the First Marine Division, met and married Pang Ja Chung in Korea. They had a daughter, Sonia, but when it came time for Ronald to return to the U.S. in 1954, Pang Ja and Sonia were required to wait a year before joining him in Houston. Like many Houstonians then, the Smiths had no air conditioning, and Pang Ja soon became ill from a kidney infection exacerbated by the heat, humidity, change of diet, and homesickness. She found no relief until they heard about a Korean doctor at Methodist Hospital, Dr. Yong Kak Lee, who had also served

in the First Marine Division. Dr. Lee came to their home, and Ronald recalled Pang Ja “instantly felt better,” drawing strength from the knowledge that other Koreans lived in Houston.

Pang Ja enrolled in English night classes at San Jacinto High School where she connected with other Koreans. From the early 1960s, the University of Houston’s foreign student advisor notified Pang Ja whenever a new Korean student registered. The Smiths gladly offered whatever help they could to any new arrival, returning Dr. Lee’s kindness. Ronald reminisced, “We were a small group who helped each other and talked to each other and picnicked a lot together. It was a good time.”⁸



Ronald Smith and his wife, Pang Ja Chung.
Photo courtesy of the Korean Community Center of Houston.

Vietnamese and Chinese American Cultures: Destination Houston

By Jessica Chew

For many Vietnamese during the Vietnam War, an international refuge meant hope for survival. Other Asian ethnicities, including the Chinese, looked to the United States with optimism for a better future. Several Vietnamese and Chinese immigrants found their new home in Houston, raising first-generation, American-born children while trying to preserve a piece of their old society. Vietnam War refugees faced many taxing struggles, such as cultural assimilation, which included the difficult tasks of learning the English language and American customs and adapting to a new and developing Asian culture in the United States.

Over twenty years after the fall of Saigon, Houston became only the second place in the United States, after Sacramento, California, to erect a memorial commemorating the Vietnam War.¹ For Vietnamese Houstonians, this memorial served as a cultural community core where they could gather and remember home. From the original, small Asiantown in the downtown area, the Chinese and Vietnamese communities today have expanded into the Bellaire area, which is generally bounded by Fondren, Beechnut, Westpark, and Highway 6. It acts as the main Vietnamese-Chinese center for Asian Americans, where grocery stores, restaurants, and cultural events offer up a bittersweet taste of home.

Coming to the United States

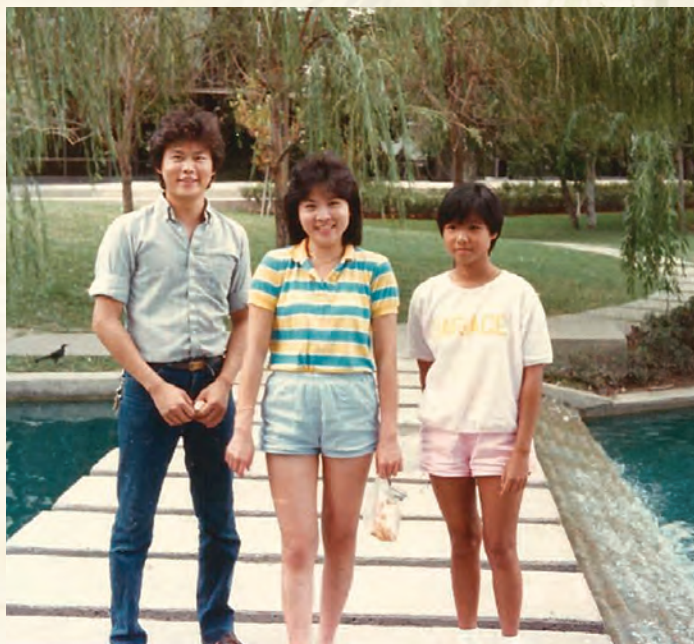
My mother Suzanne Chew is an immigrant of the Vietnam War. Chew was only a child at the time of the war, but she still remembers the “bombing[s] every night ... so [her family] always [had] to ... go down to the basement ... to sleep there. And sometime[s] the siren on the street [went off,] and kid[s] had] to get out [of] school to go home because the school was shut down.” She says that the Việt Cộng raided

the villages, causing many people to go to the beaches to escape by boat. When South Vietnamese President Nguyễn Văn Thiệu left for London with his daughter, Chew’s family decided to flee since her uncle worked with the government. Chew and her family were given a military helicopter escort from Vietnam to Paris, where they lived for about six months.²

Relatives in New York persuaded the Chews to come to the United States, promising them better opportunities and support than they would receive in France. The Chew family entered the United States as immigrants through California, settling first in Needles and then Los Angeles. Fortunately, Chew knew some English and French, since Vietnam had been a French colony, and she had studied at the International School there. Chew says that initially in Needles, her family had little difficulty “in the Asian community, because we [were] speaking the language.” But in Arcadia Middle School, she said, “I have a difficulty to fit in because I was Asian. ... [M]ost [of] the people there [were] half white and half Hispanic, and they either [spoke] Spanish or English, and we [knew] just a little bit in English, so we really have a hard time.” Furthermore, the school placed her in an English as a Second Language (ESL) class that focused on Spanish-speaking individuals because an “English and Chinese or English and Vietnamese” course did not exist.³ The Vietnamese-Chinese community was nearly absent in Needles, but in Los Angeles, Chew found a larger Chinese community with the majority of refugees coming from Hong Kong or Taiwan rather than Vietnam.



Suzanne Chew with siblings and cousin on the docks in Vietnam, 1970.



Suzanne Chew (center) with her younger brother Steve (left) and neighbor Christine (right) at the Transco Tower, now Williams Tower, near Loop 610 and Richmond in Houston, 1981.

All photos courtesy of author unless otherwise noted.

In 1981 Chew, then in her early twenties, and her brother moved to Houston, Texas, after hearing about its economic opportunities. Her brother opened a body shop, focusing on mechanical work to service the numerous Vietnamese shrimping boats. When Chew first arrived, the Leland area downtown had a small Asiantown that combined Vietnamese-Chinese cultures. She remembers the area having a couple of Chinese restaurants and that most Vietnamese people living there were fishermen. Over thirty years later, Chew continues to live in the Houston area, where she raises her American-born children with an integrated Vietnamese-Chinese cultural background.

The Vietnam War and the Incoming Refugees

Others, like Chew, fled to the United States with hopes of fulfilling the American dream. U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War lasted from 1954, supporting Ngo Dinh Diem, to the fall of Saigon in April 1975, resulting in about 130,000 refugees coming to the United States in three waves. The fall of Saigon marked the first wave of refugees who had American political connections, were well educated, or already had family in America. The next wave included less educated refugees, sometimes called “boat people.” The last and most recent wave consisted of political detainees and “Amerasians,” which were the “children of U.S. soldiers born to Vietnamese mothers during the war.” In the 1990 Census, Texas was second only to California in the number of Vietnamese residents, making up 11.3 percent of the total U.S. Vietnamese population.⁴

In Houston, the shrimping business acted as a central part of the Vietnamese community, which was familiar with the trade. Many American fishermen feared the competition from local Vietnamese shrimpers, inciting conflict on several occasions during the early 1980s. In 1981 American residents, including members of the Texas Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, set fire to Vietnamese boats

Members of the Ku Klux Klan and others set fire to a boat representing Vietnamese shrimping boats, 1980.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006N-1980-14-015.



Erected in 2012, this statue depicts a Vietnamese refugee family in honor and remembrance of the experiences of those who fled from their native land. The statue is located in the parking lot of the Universal Shopping Center plaza on Bellaire Boulevard.

and hung a Vietnamese fisherman in effigy from a deck. The Vietnamese responded by filing a lawsuit against the KKK, saying it had violated the fishermen’s civil rights. The case resulted in decreased hostilities but tensions remained.⁵

In 1987 Hermann Park hosted a Vietnam Veterans Memorial Tour with a replica of the Vietnam War Memorial wall in Washington, DC. Many people placed flowers and small American flags along the wall to pay their respects.

More recently, in 2005, Vietnamese Americans in Houston funded a Vietnam War memorial for the Universal Shopping Center, located on Bellaire Boulevard.⁶

Today, most of Houston’s Vietnamese community has moved to the Milam area in Midtown, between McGowen and Holman, nicknamed “Little Saigon,” where they have opened up Vietnamese restaurants and grocery stores. Radio Saigon, founded by Vietnam War refugees Duong Phuc and Vu Thanh Thuy in the 1980s, broadcasts in Vietnamese to help others like themselves cope with assimilating into a new environment. Bilingual street signs, which arose in 1998 in the Vietnamese communities, further ease the acculturation process. With the gentrification of Midtown, Little Saigon expanded into areas in southwest Houston, including along Bellaire Boulevard and Boone Road.⁷

Chinese Beginnings

Over a century before the waves of Vietnamese immigration, Chinese immigrants had come to the United States working in mining, agriculture, and construction of the railroads. After the completion of the transcontinental railroad in 1869, a small number of Chinese came to Texas looking for work. The *Galveston News* supported them by advertising the Chinese as “the best, cheapest and most reliable laborers ever known.” The first Chinese, numbering almost three hundred, came to work for the Houston and Texas Central Railway, but they were mysteriously discharged and had to find work elsewhere. The second wave of a few thousand Chinese immigrants arrived in 1881 with the Southern Pacific Railroad, but after the completion of its railroad lines in the region, only about 710 Chinese immigrants remained in Texas by 1890.⁸

The 1880 U.S. Census was the first to include Chinese residents. At that time, most Chinese could only get jobs at cafes and hand laundries because people labeled those as women’s work. In the 1890s the introduction of the steam laundry to Texas displaced the hand-washing Chinese, with the last hand laundry closing in 1943. Displaced workers moved into American-cuisine restaurants because Houstonians had not yet accepted the exotic flavors of Chinese foods. Coming to Houston in larger numbers during the Depression in the 1930s, the Chinese opened restaurants and grocery stores on the east side of downtown Houston. A wave of skilled Chinese workers arrived in the post-World War II era as Houston offered job opportunities with its “oil companies, universities, medical centers, and NASA.”⁹

In the 1930s the University of Houston saw its first Chinese student graduate, Edward K. T. Chen, who went on to become the first Chinese-American professor in Houston. The University of Houston also hosted an exhibition in 1980 celebrating the “Centennial of the History of Chinese in Houston since 1880,” compiled by Chen’s son, Edward C. M. Chen.¹⁰

Two main groups of Chinese exist in Houston: the Cantonese-speaking Chinese, who assimilated into the American lifestyle, and the Mandarin-speaking populace, who represent a more elitist culture. Because of this division, Chinatown started off as a small section located along Chartres Street and Highway 59 North. Chinatown included a Lucky Inn Restaurant, Sun-Deluxe Café, and an Asiatic Import Company, specializing in general Asian merchandise.¹¹

The Chinese in Houston became more readily receptive to American assimilation after the repeal of exclusion laws in 1943 and the shift to communism in their homeland in 1949. Recently, the Houston Chinatown Council redeveloped old Chinatown with “a farmer’s market, community center, [and] theater,” near the George R. Brown Convention Center, but since the 1980s, the Bellaire area has dominated as the “new suburban Chinatown.”¹²

Vietnamese-Chinese Traditions

Other than language, a major cultural aspect that sets the Vietnamese-Chinese apart from Americans is cuisine. Chew believes that the Vietnamese-Chinese foods of the Bellaire

area and downtown Houston create a “Chinese mix,” much like the Tex-Mex foods combining Mexican foods with a Texas flair, “because they cannot be too authentic ... but [they are] pretty close.” For example, Chew thinks that anchovy sauce, a dip created using the “little fish and shrimp paste mix,” found in Vietnam is slightly different from the less potent *nuoc mam* (fish sauce) in Houston. Vietnamese food also shows a strong French influence, since Vietnam was a French colony. One of the most popular sandwiches is the *banh mi*, which has grilled meats served in a mini, toasted French baguette.¹³

Rather than the Vietnamese *thịt nướng* (grilled bbq pork) in *banh mi*, *xa xiu* (grilled bbq pork) with a honey-like sauce and *siu yuk* (roasted pork) fill the butchers’ racks in Chinese grocery stores and are normally served with rice. These foods, along with roast duck, are often found at traditional cemetery ceremonies.



Suzanne Chew's family gathers to pay respects to ancestors at the cemetery in Vietnam, Easter 1965.

Chinese and Vietnamese cultures share a belief in spiritual continuity between life and death. The living “transfer food, money, and goods” to the dead in exchange for gifts of “luck, wealth, and progeny.” During a funeral ceremony, several steps are followed in the Chinese customs: mourners must “wear all white” rather than the American all black, the corpse must be bathed, material possessions are transferred by burning models of them, and other rituals are observed to help move the spirit. During the ceremony, Chew says mourners “cannot sit [in chairs]; we have to sit on the floor and bow and kneel” to pay respects to the deceased. Furthermore, members of the deceased’s family place altars inside their homes and burn incense to call their ancestors for meals. During Chinese Easter many families visit their ancestors in cemeteries bringing feasts of chicken, duck, fish, and pork. They also serve wine and tea and burn incense and paper. During the visit, Chew must “share the food with the family and burn the paper[s]” that contain the names of her ancestors to tell them that she is giving them her respects.¹⁴

Another big celebration that both the Vietnamese and Chinese observe is the Lunar New Year, which follows the lunar calendar. In 1988 KUHT aired a Vietnamese New

Year Special featuring the Year of the Dragon. Several locations in Houston host Chinese New Year celebrations, where they put together lion dances, food tastings, and a Miss Chinatown competition. At the celebrations, vendors hand out slips of paper that tell people their fortunes for the year and sell lucky money trees. Sets of two or more people in a red and gold lion costume attempt to get a ball of green cabbage and *lai see* (red envelope, usually filled with money) found on doors of businesses; after “consuming” the greens, the lion then “spits” them out at the door (but keeps the envelope), symbolizing good fortune. The people inside the costume bat the lion’s eyelashes, move its mouth, and do tricks to make the lion seem alive. In both Vietnamese and Chinese cultures, family members have a feast, including “noodles [for] long life to live,” lotus, and sweet rice. Families like Chew’s also clean out the house to sweep away the bad luck and “wear the new clothes” to welcome in the New Year.¹⁵

Suzanne Chew has noticed that growing up in America has influenced some of her native customs. For instance, rather than eating rice every day, her family eats a wide variety of foods such as pasta or pizza. Moreover, her parents were traditional Buddhists who went to temple in Vietnam, but when the family moved here, “they live and they look and they see ... change is good ... and they thought Christian wasn’t bad at all.” They embraced freedom of religion and allowed Chew and her siblings to become Christians.¹⁶

Chew returned to Vietnam in 2008 and realized that a lot had changed since she left in 1974. Saigon exhibits American and European influences, with fast food chains and high-end hotels. However, the residents in Vietnam still speak in the same way and exhibit the same clothing habits, wearing



This outdoor altar at the Vietnamese Buddhist Center is located in Southwest Houston. The VBC allows Asian Americans to explore their heritage by offering language classes, holding Buddhist festivals, and providing traditional vegetarian food to hungry guests.

pajamas as both day and sleep attire. Chew believes that for some Vietnamese-Chinese she has seen in Houston at places like Hong Kong City Mall, “their culture [was] not changing at all [in] the way they dress, they eat the food, they sleep, the way they talk, and their education” because they did not feel the need to learn English.¹⁷

Most people have moved out of the original Asiantown. Some traveled to New Orleans to follow their fishing careers, and others opened up restaurants and grocery stores in new locations while their children strived for higher education. Chew explains that life in Houston is “completely different from when ... I go back to Vietnam and see how [much] difficulty” they have there. Life here is good because people can better their lives.¹⁸

Jessica Chew is a senior majoring in geology and geophysics at the University of Houston and plans to pursue a master’s degree following graduation. She is an Asian American, born and raised in the Greater Houston area.



A group performs a traditional Lion Dance at an outdoor celebration near the intersection of Chartres and Capitol to celebrate the Chinese New Year in February of 1965. This Lion Dance features the lion, a representation of Buddha, and percussion instruments.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006N-1965-0425-006.



Filipino officers of the U.S. Armed Forces in the Far East in a mess hall months before most of them were killed or captured by invading Japanese forces at the start of World War II.

All photos courtesy of Maria Christina Sison Panis Poisot unless otherwise noted.

The Pinoys of Bayou City: Growth of a Community

By Jose Ordonez

The history of Filipinos in the southern United States stretches back to the mid-eighteenth century, when burgeoning trade routes between the two lands encouraged small numbers of Filipino migrants to settle in some of their first enclaves in the Americas. In 1763 Filipino fishermen established the small communities of St. Malo and Manila Village in present-day Louisiana near the Mississippi River delta. In the deep recesses of the Louisiana swamp, residents recreated small parcels of the Philippines on American soil.

Visitors to these villages might have been quite surprised to find authentic Southeast Asian stilt fishing houses. Although these isolated yet unified outposts survived for more than a hundred years, only the ruins of the settlements' buildings remain today after devastating hurricanes. Nevertheless, these tiny fishing villages live on in memory as progenitors of the modern Filipino American community. While substantial numbers of Filipinos did not immigrate to the region again until the 1960s, these pioneers set the template for the success of Filipino life in the United States.¹

As an ever-expanding international trade hub and desti-

nation point for thousands of immigrants, Houston has welcomed increasing numbers of Filipinos in recent decades, coinciding with the wider increase in Asian immigration to the city. For much of the twentieth century, immigration from Asia was severely limited until major policy reforms in 1965 changed that. Filipinos have become one of the fastest growing Asian communities in the Houston area, numbering over 20,000—the largest regional concentration in Texas. Significant immigration from the Philippines began in the 1980s, with few migrants arriving before the 1960s.²

Decades of political instability and the search for better opportunities have prompted waves of emigration from the Philippines. Filipinos, also known as Pinoys, have settled in countries around the world, with sizable communities forming in the United States, Europe, and the Middle East. These overseas Filipinos, while initially escaping an uncertain future in their homeland, have now been joined by more recent settlers looking for greater opportunities in business and education.³

Filipino and U.S. Histories Cross Paths

To understand Houston's deep connections to the Philippines, an appreciation of the country's history is vital. A large tropical archipelago in the Western Pacific, the Philippines straddles major oceanic transit routes, making the island chain a focal point for international trade for centuries. The first European contact with the Philippines occurred during the Spanish expedition by Ferdinand Magellan to circumnavigate the world. His death at the hands of Filipino warlord Lapu Lapu presaged the eventual colonization of the Philippines by the Spanish. Spain ruled over the islands for almost four hundred years, and its influence on Filipino identity and development continues today.

Although the United States had active trade relationships with Asian countries in the 1800s, its most direct ties with the Philippines occurred when the colony came under American control in 1898 following the U.S. victory in the Spanish-American War. American control was immediately contested by the Filipinos in the Philippine-American War, in which the U.S. military eventually quelled Filipino resistance after several years of fighting that cost more than 100,000 Filipino and 4,000 American lives.

The United States established an unincorporated territory and then a commonwealth over the Philippines. After liberating the country from a bloody Japanese occupation during World War II, the United States finally awarded the Philippines sovereignty in 1946. For the next half century, the Philippines struggled through turbulent periods of dictatorship, low-level conflicts, and insurgencies throughout the country.

The most notable dictator during this period was Ferdinand Marcos, whose lavish lifestyle came at the expense of millions of impoverished Filipinos. This contributed to immense political instability and eventually led to the toppling of his regime. His ouster in 1986 ultimately brought a return of democratic institutions in the country. The transition was not without setbacks, though, and the Philippines continue to be plagued by regional conflicts, poverty, and natural disasters.⁴

Although these historical developments encouraged many Filipinos to leave their homeland, it would be reductive to say that all Filipinos left because of internal strife. Many left simply for greater opportunities abroad or to experience a lifestyle unavailable to them in the Philippines. For many of these Filipinos, Houston and Southeast Texas offered the opportunity for that new life.

Filipino American Soldiers Seeking Justice

Filipino Americans have a long tradition of service in the armed forces, playing a crucial role in some of history's most momentous conflicts, such as the fight against Japan during the Second World War. The Philippines, at the time still a protectorate of the United States, was invaded in 1941 during Japan's lightning conquests of Southeast Asia. The entire island nation suffered under an oppressive occupation by Japanese forces until a concerted campaign by American and Filipino forces to oust the Japanese began in 1944.

By the time Japan surrendered in late 1945, hundreds of thousands of Filipinos had died in the war. Thousands of American soldiers also laid down their lives in the

liberation of the Philippines, but it is widely accepted that the efforts of regular and irregular Filipino soldiers fighting alongside them helped hasten the Japanese defeat. Without their efforts, the campaign might have been costlier for American forces.

The legacy of World War II veterans has left an indelible mark in the Filipino community, but the recognition of their contribution to the victory has not always been forthcoming from the U.S. government. Although the value of Filipino troops in the war was not questioned, Congress nevertheless passed the Rescission Act of 1946 that retroactively annulled benefits promised to Filipino World War II veterans as American nationals and that were available to other U.S. soldiers.⁵

Members of the Houston Filipino community have taken a leading role in recognizing the historical achievements of these Filipino Americans. While the Filipino American populations on the East and West Coasts loom large, Houston Filipinos are pulling their weight in the national conversation about their history. One native Houstonian, Maria Christina Sison Panis Poisot, has been at the forefront of the movement to honor Filipino World War II veterans.



A pre-war portrait of Captain Francisco Panis. Like most soldiers in his unit, Panis endured miseries in the Bataan Death March and prison camps after their surrender to the Japanese.



Christy Panis Poisot and Major General Antonio Taguba (Ret) flank Christy's father as he holds the medals belatedly awarded in August 2012 to Christy's grandfather, Major Francisco Panis, for his service in World War II.

For Poisot, the campaign to acknowledge the Filipino veterans' contributions is personal. Growing up, she always heard tales of her grandfather's experience during the war, but unfortunately it was not until he had passed away that she came across his service papers and truly grasped what he had gone through. Her grandfather, Francisco Panis, was an officer in the USAFFE (United States Armed Forces of the Far East) when the Japanese invaded the Philippines immediately after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Despite a valiant resistance, the American and Filipino soldiers were cut off and forced to surrender.

What happened after the surrender endures as one of the most brutal events in all of World War II: the Bataan Death March. Panis, along with over sixty thousand Filipino and American prisoners of war, were forced to march for sixty miles to a prison camp with little food or water, all the while being subjected to extreme abuse and even summary executions. Francisco Panis was lucky to survive the war, but the grueling march and barbaric conditions of the Japanese prison camp weighed heavily on him, as well as on the minds of many of the thousands of other Filipino veterans of World War II.

Christy Poisot's rediscovery of her grandfather's legacy was a wakeup call. "A story unfolded of a man I wish I had gotten to know better when he was alive," she explains.⁶ Francisco Panis was never awarded the military medals that he earned, since granting the Philippines independence immediately after the war left the status of veterans' awards and benefits in limbo. After years of collecting enlistment evidence and corroborations, Christy finally convinced the U.S. military to posthumously award her grandfather's numerous medals, and in 2012 the Chao Center for Asian Studies at Rice University hosted an event at which Major General Antonio Taguba (Ret) presented them to the family. Now, Christy is dedicating her energy to help rally the national Filipino community to recognize the sacrifices of all Filipino World War II veterans with a campaign through the Filipino Veterans Recognition and Education Project to have the Filipino soldiers collectively awarded the Congressional Gold Medal.⁷

Filipinos Caring for Houstonians

Filipino Americans in Houston have made their mark in the medical field. This corresponds with a national trend of Filipino representation in the health care industry. Since the late 1960s, the majority of foreign-born nurses practicing in the United States have come from the Philippines. Large segments of the Filipino population living overseas receive education and training in the medical profession. The famed Texas Medical Center has naturally attracted thousands of these Filipino health workers to Houston, where they have become an integral part of the wider medical community.

The recruitment of Filipino nurses and other medical staff is a direct result of the United States' shared history with the Philippines. The U.S. government established educational programs that planted the seeds of the burgeoning Filipino nursing community, with professional American curriculums and English language training that gave Filipino health workers a leg up over other foreigners seeking employment in the United States. After the Philippines



A group of mid-twentieth-century Filipina nurses training in the Philippines. Thousands of Filipinos with training in the medical field have immigrated to countries around the world.

became independent, American hospitals actively recruited Filipino nurses, especially in light of a growing post-World War II health worker shortage that intensified with the growth of Medicare and Medicaid.⁸

Melody de Guzman Barsales is an example of one of these nurses who played an important role in the local medical community. She came to Houston in 1962 as part of a visitor exchange program at age eighteen after graduating from the University of the Philippines College of Nursing. She worked at Methodist Hospital on a heart transplant team. Because her skills were needed, immigration reforms passed in 1965 allowed her to stay permanently. Barsales later mar-



Lois Moore interviews a prospective nurse in 1988, a time when large numbers of Filipino nurses were recruited to fill critical shortages in Houston.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006-N1988-0462-010.



Pugon De Manila is one of the city's popular Filipino restaurants. It serves three meals daily in addition to selling cakes, pasties, and frozen foods.

Photo courtesy of author.

ried, became a registered nurse, and then an operating room supervisor.⁹

Today Houstonians regularly come into contact with Filipino nurses, doctors, and other healthcare workers. The Texas Medical Center has been at the forefront in employing Houston's immigrants, and Filipinos have enmeshed themselves into the wider international milieu. Filipinos in the health care industry also make their voices heard through organizations. These groups, such as the Philippine Nurses Association of Metropolitan Houston founded in 1980 as part of the national entity, serve as forums for unity and recognition within the wider medical and Filipino communities.¹⁰

The experiences of Filipinos in the medical profession represent a broader trend as Filipino Americans have historically assimilated into American life and largely been accepted into the middle class. Once again, Houston is no exception to this trend as Filipinos in the city tend to have attained higher educational levels and incomes than the average Houstonian. Compared with other Asian immigrant groups, Filipino Americans have notably assimilated to a high degree, with the unfortunate effect of dampening their visibility within the wider community.¹¹

Pinoy Flavors in Houston's Food and Faith

Filipino Houstonians have also flourished in the food industry. Most Filipino restaurants are centered in southwest Houston, clustered amongst hundreds of various Asian restaurants in Chinatown. To better cater to their Filipino customers who work and live in the Medical Center area, several Filipino restaurants and bake shops have opened in

south-central Houston. One of the most notable is the popular international, Manila-based fast food chain Jollibee Filipino located near NRG Park. The opening of this Filipino fast food staple in Houston is a sure sign of the growth of the Filipino community. The nearby Pugon De Manila also has a menu composed of traditional Filipino food, serving a more epicurean dining experience.¹² These and other Filipino restaurants serve as communal centers for Filipino Americans and as ambassadors of Filipino culture to the wider community, as seen with other local ethnic eateries.

The delicious Filipino foods that Houstonians enjoy highlight a defining feature of the community's culture: its syncretism. Centuries of colonial rule by Spain and the United States added new textures to an already diverse culture. One of the most enduring legacies of the Spanish

era is in religion, with Catholicism as the Philippines' predominant faith. Filipinos have brought their faith with them wherever they have settled, and Houston's already thriving Catholic community has benefitted from the influx. Filipinos play a prominent role in church activities, with many Filipino clergymen added to the ranks of Catholic Church leaders and Filipinos filling greater percentages of the pews.¹³

A significant minority of Filipinos are Protestant Christians or Muslims. A result of Protestant missionaries that arrived in the Philippines during the American occupation, the Protestant Filipino community is represented in Houston most notably in sizable Baptist and Methodist congregations. As with their Catholic compatriots, religion is a central feature of life for these Filipinos, but their shared experience as an immigrant population ensures the vitality of their community within the various Protestant denominations.¹⁴

The history of most Filipino Americans in Houston is a relatively new one compared to that of other immigrant groups. Nevertheless, the community quickly became an integral aspect of the wider Asian American tapestry that gives Houston its world-renowned vibrancy. In the future the Filipino community in Houston will no doubt continue to help strengthen the ties that have developed between the United States and the Philippines for more than a century.

Jose Ordonez earned his undergraduate degree in history from The University of Texas. He recently completed an internship with *Houston History*, where he shared his passion for studying the past with like-minded historians.

Bhale Padharya: From Gujarat to Houston

By Roshni Patel




BIYANI
• photography •

South Asians celebrate Navratri with dancing, music, and traditional Indian cuisine at the George R. Brown Convention Center in Houston in 2011, sponsored by Gujarati Samaj of Houston.

Photo courtesy of Kaushlesh Biyani, Biyani Potography.

Walking into the George R. Brown Convention Center for the Navratri festival, I am whisked away by the South Asian culture – the vibrant colors, the smell of Indian food, the *garba* music, and conversations in my native tongue. Waiting in line to purchase tickets, I look over the ledge and see my fellow South Asian Americans on the main floor starting the traditional garba dances around the statue of the Goddess Durga. They are barefoot out of respect for the goddess. My family finds a good place to sit and keep our belongings, including our shoes, for the rest of the night. It is 9:00 p.m. on a Friday night, and the festivities have just begun.

The aerial view of Navratri is mesmerizing. Rings of dancers rotate counterclockwise within rings of other dancers in an energetic repetitive routine, spinning, raising their arms, hopping, and dancing with joy. In the final dance known as a *raas*, they use sticks when making contact with their partners. Men, women, and children participate in these dances, which to an outsider may seem crowded and chaotic but are actually very organized, with the younger crowd dancing to the center.

A kaleidoscope of colors can be seen in the variety of outfits and their designs. The women traditionally wear *saris*

or *chaniya cholis*, which are three-piece dresses that have a blouse and flared skirt adorned with beads, jewels, mirrors, and embroidery. Men typically wear *sherwanis*, long-sleeve tops that stretch far below the knees over pants.

If people can pull themselves away from the excitement of dancing, the food satisfies every Indian craving, including the popular appetizer *samosas*; more traditional foods such as *pav bhaji*, gravy eaten with bread; and *papdi lot*, spicy dough made from rice flour. Pizza and nachos appeal to the younger generations.

After hours filled with dancing and eating, exhausted families go home and rest up to repeat the celebration the next evening. Navratri happens once a year, usually at the end of September or the beginning of October depending on the lunar cycle. The festival lasts for ten days and is celebrated for its duration in the local temples and at the George R. Brown for two weekends. This festival is celebrated in honor of the Goddess Durga, who emerged victorious in a battle against evil that was fought for nine days and nine nights. The nine days also represent her nine forms.

A Pioneer's Experiences

In 1980 the U.S. Census reported Houston had an Asian Indian population of just 6,610.¹ My uncle Ghanshyam Patel, at twenty-five years old and having recently received a degree in mechanical engineering from a university in India, came to Houston in search of a better standard of living, but the thing that made the biggest impression on him when he arrived was the freeways. “[They] were too overcrowded. Driving five miles would take me an hour,” he said.

Houston was less culturally diverse than it is today.



Ghanshyam Patel's passport photo. His passport held extreme importance to him when he first immigrated to Houston from India.

Photo courtesy of author.

Ghanshyam recalled the area only had two Indian grocery stores and two Hindu temples to attend during festivals.² That has since changed significantly, with Houston boasting over thirty accommodating Hindu temples. Similarly, the number of Indian restaurants was limited, but today South Asian restaurants and authentic Indian food are in great demand because of the influx of Indians and others who have come to appreciate the culture and food.

In the 1980s before the Internet, Ghanshyam found it difficult to stay connected with his friends, family, and the culture overseas. A letter took fifteen days to reach India, and

he then waited another fifteen days to receive a response. Feeling out of place and lonely for the first three years, he sat in his car during his lunch breaks and cried. Being so out of touch with his homeland and adjusting to life in a foreign country took a certain emotional toll on him. If my uncle wanted to talk to a family member back home it took a day for the two lines to connect. “I had to do that for Daxa's wedding,” he mentioned. Daxa, one of his younger siblings residing in India, came of age to marry while Ghanshyam was away, and in keeping with Indian culture, Daxa sought the blessings from her elder brother.³

Other South Asians in Houston were homesick, too, so they started forming groups. The India Culture Center (ICC) was founded in 1973 where anyone of South Asian descent could feel at home. It catered to people from various regions in India and celebrated the annual festivals. Much like the ICC the Gujarati Samaj of Houston formed in 1979 to make Gujaratis feel at home.⁴ Located in far northwest India, Gujarat is one of the country's twenty-nine states. Gujarati Samaj organizes such events as Navratri and Holi. Having these organizations kept the South Asian culture alive in Houston and gave people like my uncle a chance to interact with other South Asians who were experiencing the same emotional adjustment.

The leaders that founded these organizations worked diligently to bring a piece of home to Houston. With their persistence, festivals became more widely celebrated. Ghanshyam recalled garba being celebrated in an elementary school gymnasium in the 1980s.⁵ The gymnasium was so small that the women carried on with the festivities inside while the men stood in the parking lot, where they talked about Indian and American politics as well as available jobs. The South Asian organizations' efforts continue to impact the younger generations by maintaining traditions.

Same Era, Different Generation

Purendra Patel, a family friend, remembers coming to Houston from India with his family in 1980 when he was six, and he has considered himself a Houstonian ever since. Purendra's parents came in search of a better life and a better education for their children. Like Ghanshyam, when first setting eyes on Houston, Purendra was awestruck by the structure of the highways, which native Houstonians take for granted. “It was not like India's roads; everything was organized,” he explained.⁶



Purendra Patel (left) stands with his grandfather and sister at home in Gujarat.

Photo courtesy of author.

One of the few South Asian children at Townwest Elementary in Fort Bend County, Purendra attended Sugar Land Middle School and Kempner High School before enrolling in the University of Houston. He remembers “a lot of Indians on campus” and the Indian Student Association, which remains popular today, bringing Indian students on campus together. A 2014 study conducted by the university showed India ranked number two in students' country of origin, trailing China by only seventeen students.⁷

Having come to Houston at such a young age, Purendra was exposed to American ways of living rather than the traditional Indian ways. Although he did not experience the same feelings of isolation as Ghanshyam, his memories of the community are similar, with the scarcity of Indians, temples, South Asian shops, and restaurants. However, now he feels the community's closeness is gone because so many Indians live in Houston.⁸

Purendra remembers the festivals were celebrated at the two temples but they did not feel as satisfying as celebrating the same festivals in India. In his early days in Houston, the festivals were community events where everyone knew everyone, and now it is nothing like that. Hundreds of people come to the festivals every year, and this has slowly eroded the closeness. "There would always be parties at someone's house on the weekend," he said. "Now everyone is so caught up in their own lives they don't have time to spend with family or friends." South Asians are traditionally very family-oriented people so to have this slowly disappearing is a significant cultural change.

South Asians as a community are evolving to a South Asian/American way of living, causing them to lose touch with traditional values. Though the younger generation still celebrates multiple festivals, the youth frequently do not know the meaning behind the triumphal stories of good conquering evil.⁹ For example, the Ganesh Chaturthi festival, a birthday celebration for the god Ganesha who removes life's obstacles, receives far less attention in Houston.

Ghanshyam and Purendra came here about the same time in the 1980s, but they saw Houston through different lenses



Worshippers are seated at prayer in the Singh Temple in northwest Houston in 1975. Men sat on one side of the temple while women and children were allowed on the other.

Photo courtesy of the Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Houston Public Library, RGD0006-N1975-1589-101A.

dictated by the differences in their ages when they arrived and the daily obstacles that they faced. Ghanshyam encountered racism in the professional field. At that time, recruiters were not open to placing foreigners in jobs. They did not appreciate him intellectually, which caused him to miss out on jobs for which he was qualified. Purendra, on the other hand, made friends with the local children but always felt the tension of race. He got into fights with children at school because of his skin color or because he was different. The students did not fully understand what was happening as they were introduced to immigrants from across the ocean, but as society started to accept foreigners, the children too began to look beyond Purendra's skin color.¹⁰

Because Purendra came to Houston at such a young age he grew to adulthood in a more accepting society. He was introduced to things Ghanshyam missed, so the two men have different perspectives. Ghanshyam was working and interacting with the older generation, which did not accept change as quickly as the younger generation. He missed out on American experiences that children growing up here only have at school, such as learning about American sports, interacting with multiple ethnicities, and creating a sense of belonging within a diverse group of friends.¹¹

The Millennial Experience

I came to Houston from London in June 1999 when I was six years old and have seen Houston grow significantly from my backyard in Alief, a small southwest Houston community. My family came here for the same reasons as many other immigrants: for educational opportunities and a better life. I respect Houston as a city and the people that populate it. Even though I came to America at about the same age as Purendra, when I started school my class had many South Asians. That soon changed when many started migrating to Sugar Land and the Katy area. Nevertheless, I did not personally experience any racism because I grew up in a time when Houston was changing and accepting people of different races and ethnicities.



Weddings and other festivities are an important part of the South Asian culture. Author Roshni Patel (right) and her family, sister Devanshi, mother Taxila, and father Hemendrarai, are dressed for a traditional wedding celebration.

Photo courtesy of author.

Like my uncle and family friend, my family had access to two main temples, though not the same two. The temple I attend is still in its original location off of Synott and Old Richmond, but the other has moved to West Bellfort and Highway 59 to a bigger facility to meet the growing demand. At one time I recognized everyone at my temple, but because of an influx of South Asians today I rarely recognize the people seated nearby during prayers.

The festivals are celebrated with all the necessities, but because of their vast size they lack the sense of unity Ghanshyam and Purendra mentioned. Nevertheless, I am very grateful for organizations like the India Culture Center and Gujarati Samaj because if it were not for them, I might not have a chance to experience the festivals. While my parents and grandparents taught me why each festival is celebrated, for the majority of young people, traditional festivals are a place to socialize. They get so caught up in dressing up and meeting their friends that they fail to remember the real reason they are there. Even though I know the basics, a girl my age in India would know the deeper meanings.

The shift in cultural awareness raises the question: is assimilation the reason we are losing traditions, or is this change inevitable? My parents are strict but open-minded when it comes to living an “American” lifestyle. When we go to temple I know how to act, what to do, what to wear, and most importantly, I know the prayers because they have taught me. But living in America makes it impossible to learn everything. Yes, I speak Gujarati and Hindi, but I know how to read, write, and speak Spanish much better than my native tongue.

The Hillcroft area, now the Mahatma Gandhi District, was already well on its way to becoming Little India when I first visited. My family and I go there mainly for the restaurants, traditional clothing, and other cultural necessities. I find myself going there multiple times a month, whether it is for Indian jewelry for an upcoming wedding or going to eat at Shri Balaji Bhavan, one of our favorite Indian restaurants.

With the growth of Houston’s Indian population has come greater acceptance of our culture. People frequently ask me questions about traditional Indian weddings and my culture in general. This reflects their awareness of and curiosity about South Asians in Houston. Though we are making our mark on Houston socially, I still find myself saying my name in an American way when I introduce myself so that a person who is not Indian can easily pronounce it. My name is Roshni, pronounced Roe'-Shnee, but when introducing myself I say Rosh'-nee. Recently I have noticed that more people say my name correctly, and I hope that is connected with the fact that more people are interacting with South Asians and thus, learning our dialects.



Aarti, a religious ritual during worship, at BAPS Swaminarayan Temple. Only men are allowed in the front while the women stay in the back.

Photo courtesy of Bochasanwasi Shri Akshar Purushottam Swaminarayan Sanstha, wikicommons.

In the End

A classmate of mine recently asked me whether I think my culture has changed, to which I replied, “Most definitely.” We cannot stop the inevitable. As Houston’s South Asian community continues to grow, we as a culture are falling out of touch with our heritage. My generation is probably the last that can speak and understand the language. New improvised traditions have replaced the old ones and temples have become places to socialize as each generation becomes more Americanized.

A recent trip to India, my first since I was six years old, helped me to appreciate the experiences of the early immigrants to Houston. The only India I remembered came from watching Bollywood movies, which is not the real India. Now I can visualize what my parents are talking about when they tell stories about life growing up in their village, and I can put faces with names of relatives. I saw India’s hospitality, humbleness, and kindness and hope that one day I can share these things with my children, teaching them the older traditions and how to speak Gujarati.

As a city of opportunity, Houston has accepted multiple diverse cultures. The South Asian community has significantly flourished over the years, spreading knowledge of its culture and traditions throughout the city. After interviewing Ghanshyam and Purendra, two men from different generations with different immigrant experiences, I have a better perspective on Houston and how far my culture has come over the last thirty years – starting with barely any awareness of the South Asian community in the 1980s to getting a spotlight in *Houston History* in the twenty-first century.

Roshni Patel is a senior at the University of Houston majoring in history with a minor in political science. She plans to pursue law after graduation.

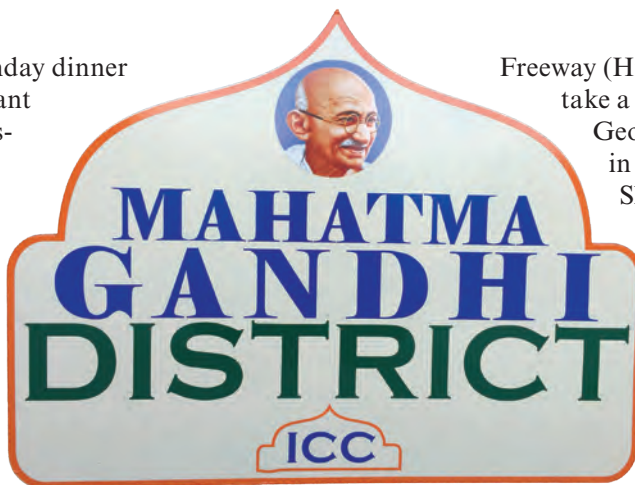
Pass the Naan

The Story of Houston's Mahatma Gandhi District

By Alex LaRotta

My wife D'Arcy had her birthday dinner at Bombay Sweets Restaurant in the Little India District of Houston in 2010. While driving down Hillcroft Avenue, we noticed new toppers adorning the neighborhood street signs proclaiming, "Mahatma Gandhi District," complete with a small engraving of the revered Indian leader. "Wait—when did that get there? Is this an official historic district now?" My search for answers to these questions formed the genesis of my doctoral study at the University of Houston as part of the Gulf Coast Food Project in the Center for Public History some years later. This project, completed with five UH film students, resulted in an oral history project and film documentary on the making of Houston's Mahatma Gandhi District, also known as Little India. It features merchants, community leaders, and Houston Mayor Annise Parker, discussing the history and significance of this district and the city's Indian and Pakistani population.

Where and what exactly is the Mahatma Gandhi District? From downtown, head south on the Southwest



One of many identical street signs welcoming Houstonians and tourists alike to Little India.

Photo courtesy of India Culture Center.

Freeway (Highway 59 South), exit Hillcroft, take a right, and there you are.

Geographically speaking, it is in Southwest Houston, near Sharpstown, outside the 610 Loop, and inside Beltway 8. North to south along Hillcroft from Westpark to the Southwest Freeway, east to west along Harwin, it is a triangular nook containing one of the largest South Asian populations in the Western Hemisphere. But if you are still unsure, look for the red-trimmed street toppers on the area's major thoroughfares welcoming you to the Mahatma Gandhi District.

The roughly half-mile-by-mile Hillcroft-Harwin corridors are brimming with Indian and Pakistani restaurants, jewelry stores, grocers, *sari* shops, salons, and various Indian- and Pakistani-owned businesses. The nearby vicinity also includes vendors, and even diplomatic consulates, from around the world. It is all so patently, expressively *Houston*.

Observing the region's magnitude suggests that, like much of Houston, the area dates back just a few decades. I sat down with Sharan Gahunia—co-manager and heir to Raja Sweets, one of the district's staple eateries—to talk about the making of the district. Sharan's late father, Joginder "Yogi" Gahunia, founded Raja Sweets in 1986. Instrumental in the civic effort to officially designate the district, Yogi helped shape the neighborhood in the same fashion as Houston's other well-known Asian American enclave: Chinatown. Unfortunately, Yogi passed away in 2002, eight years before the dream was realized.¹

The official designation brought the attention that Yogi desired for the neighborhood before his passing. "I feel like now with the Gandhi District being established, a lot of people know where we are because they can pinpoint the location," Sharan admitted. "I've had co-workers even say, 'Let's go visit the Gandhi District today. Let's go get our Indian fix.'" Sharan, who has a full-time job, helps her mother Resham Gahunia—sweet-maker-in-chief—manage the restaurant in her spare time and is next in line to take over the iconic eatery.

Yogi, along with fellow members of the India Culture Center, one of the district's foremost Indian American civic organizations, initiated a movement in the early 2000s to display Mahatma Gandhi street toppers in that area. "My dad is one of the people they call the 'founding fathers of Hillcroft,'" Sharan continued. "When he came to Houston



Joginder "Yogi" Gahunia (left), with Mayor Lee Brown, dreamed of the Mahatma Gandhi District having the same cultural impact on Houston as Chinatown.

Photo courtesy of Raja Sweets.

in the early 1980s, he realized there were no Indian restaurants here, and he wanted to build a small Indian community. Somewhere for Indian people to go to, because we didn't really have anything here."

Yogi's move to the Bayou City is a one-in-a-million immigration tale—quite literally. During the 1970s oil boom, post-industrial Houston experienced one of the largest influxes of Asian and Hispanic immigrants in the United States. Stephen L. Klineberg, director of Rice University's Kinder Institute of Urban Studies, describes this historic phenomenon as a "demographic revolution," an unprecedented wave of some one million-plus immigrants to Houston from 1970 to 1982. The early 1980s signaled another important transformation to the local economy: the gradual diversification of the oil economy into one that included human resources, service, education, and biomedical, among other sectors. This economic shift allowed Houston to slowly recover from the mid-1980s oil bust relatively intact, and newly-arrived immigrants like Yogi became the springboard for this regeneration.



"Yogi" Gahunia was the founder of the well-known Raja Sweets and a founding father of Hillcroft, having played an influential role in building an Indian community in Houston.

Photo courtesy of Raja Sweets.



Sharan Gahunia (center) and her mother Resham (second from left) now manage the popular Raja Sweets. Standing with them inside the shop are Loreal Bryant (left), Joann Brito (second from right), and Ribith Leang (far right).

Photo courtesy of Raja Sweets.

Aku Patel was one of the first Indian American entrepreneurs on Hillcroft. In 1984 Aku and his wife, Meena, opened Karat 22—currently the largest jewelry outlet in Texas—at its flagship location, 5623 Hillcroft Avenue. Other South Asian merchants shortly followed suit. Local developers, such as real estate magnate Ed Wulfe, capitalized on Houston's lucrative strip mall craze, particularly in the

Greater Sharpstown area. Hillcroft and Harwin became prime development areas for Houston's growing economy. "In the early 1980s, a lot of Indian and Pakistani businessmen established their small businesses on Hillcroft," explained Kaiser Lashkari, proprietor of Himalaya Restaurant, a popular Pakistani eatery known for its *biryani*, *hara masala* chicken, and other South Asian dishes favored by food critics and locals alike. "That's how a small, fledgling community started to put its roots on Hillcroft," he added. Although Himalaya opened in 2004, Lashkari owned a prior eatery in that area in the early 1990s.²

The tastes and smells of the subcontinent, including the hard-to-find seasonings used in South Asian recipes, can be found in the aisles of the district's local Indian groceries, which often import directly from family export operations back home. Today, ethnic food grocers are common sites in an international city like Houston, thanks in part to increased immigration over the last two decades. In the 2000 Census, Harris County reported approximately 36,000 Indians and Pakistanis, while Fort Bend County reported around 13,000. By 2010 the combined Indian/Pakistani population reached over 75,000—and that number continues to climb rapidly. Fort Bend County, which includes Sugar Land and Missouri City, recently received acclaim as the nation's single most ethnically diverse county, according to the Kinder Institute of Urban Studies.

In the early 1980s, however, Asian food grocers were few and far between in Houston. Yatin Patel's India Grocers first opened on Hillcroft in the mid-1980s as one of the district's pioneering establishments. Many of these merchants describe how Indians and Pakistanis from all over the United States come to Houston for the district's shopping experience. Celebrations of all occasions—from weddings and birthdays to Hindu holidays such as Holi and Diwali—bring out-of-town shoppers to the district all year long. The famed *gulab jamun* at Raja Sweets is known to attract people from as far away as Atlanta and London. The Gandhi District thrives on the area's affordable shopping centers, freeway proximity, and diverse suburbs.

Animesh Patel, co-owner of Subhlaxmi Grocers, attributed the district's expansion to the massive demographic growth spurt in the last few decades. Like Sharan, Animesh is a second-generation Indian American. In our interview, he switched from Urdu to English, conferring with his Punjab-born father while answering my inquiries on how his shop started. "The demand started here and then the district just started growing. And then, the restaurants started growing, as did the demand for Indian grocery products: spices, pulses [such as chick peas, lentils, and other legumes], pickles, frozen Indian items, and so on. As time went on, more and more people came in, and that's how the district really started. Just a love for food and love of our culture!"³



Animesh Patel saw the demand for Indian grocery items as the population and love for the culture grew.

Photo Courtesy of the Gulf Coast Food Project.

The Mahatma Gandhi District contains the hallmarks of a classic American ethnic neighborhood: massive immigrant population, established kinship networks, a language-friendly enclave, self-sufficiency, affordable housing and rental space, and a relatively immigrant-friendly social climate. Moreover, Houston has one other obvious advantage: a year-round subtropical climate, which closely resembles many parts of India and Pakistan.

University of Houston System Chancellor and President Renu Khator, who moved to Houston in 2008, points out that the district “embraces the culture from India,



University of Houston Chancellor and President Renu Khator epitomizes the blend of the Gandhi District with Houston's character, donning an Indian sari with cowboy boots and hat.

Photo courtesy of the University of Houston.

and it makes Indian Americans and South Asians feel at home and makes them feel valued. Mahatma Gandhi is the father of India. He is so revered. There is no language, state, caste, community, or class boundary around Gandhi's name. It was just appropriate to name that district after him.” Khator also found the people wonderful, saying, “I just cannot brag enough about Houston and about the Indian American community here. They are just so accomplished, so successful — they have fire in their belly and yet they are so humble.”⁴

The India Culture Center's chief trustee, Swapan Dhairyawan, discussed the toilsome process of getting approval for the district designation: “Way back in 2002, during India's fifty-fifth independence celebration, we decided that we needed to have something in Houston to mark Mahatma Gandhi. You see, Gandhi is a national figure of India, but he is an international figure, too; he is at the level of MLK. So, we were finally able to successfully erect the Mahatma Gandhi statue in Hermann Park, but we also wanted something along Hillcroft Avenue. There were a lot of hurdles at that time.” One of those hurdles included a failed attempt to persuade Hillcroft merchants to sign a petition to change the name of Hillcroft Avenue to “Mahatma Gandhi Avenue.” Among logistical and financial concerns, this largely failed to materialize due to significant resistance from the avenue's non-Indian population.

According to the city's planning division, “a written petition for a street name change shall be signed by at least 50% of the property owners along a public street or at least 75% of the property owners along a non-public street. Street name changes are subject to approval by City Council.” A name change seemed unlikely. Beaten but not defeated, the India Culture Center soon shifted gears to this more feasible endeavor, street sign toppers. Dhairyawan recalled, “We got

the merchants together to raise money for this project. And with these signs we said to them: ‘This is your district.’”⁵

Designating the newly-formed Mahatma Gandhi District in 2010 became one of the first agenda items for then newly elected Mayor Annise Parker. She marked the occasion with a photo opportunity and naming ceremony, recognizing that day— January 16, 2010—as “Mahatma Gandhi District Day.”



Film students and history students came together to create Pass the Naan, a documentary on Houston's Mahatma Gandhi District, for the Gulf Coast Food Project. Left to right are Emily Baker, author Alex LaRotta, Mayor Annise Parker, Rofi Tazani, and Frank Berroteran.

Photo courtesy of the Gulf Coast Food Project.

Gulf★Coast
Food Project
of the UNIVERSITY of HOUSTON

I sat down with Mayor Parker to discuss the significance of the Indian and Pakistani community in forming Houston's international character.

“The Mahatma Gandhi District is a designated part of the city where there is a concentration of Pakistani- and Indian-owned businesses,” she affirmed. “By looking at that district, it gives us an opportunity to highlight one more aspect of how international Houston is. We are arguably the most international U.S. city.” She pointed out, “One in four Houstonians is foreign born, and that translates to perhaps 100,000 Indians and Pakistanis from that region. And you know, because we are so international and we have many ethnic and cultural enclaves, they all add to the flavor of Houston. But by designating a district, it wasn't just one street; it was highlighting all of the businesses in the district. It's a way of saying, ‘You're somewhere special.’”⁶

The district certainly is special. The Hillcroft-Harwin corridor is one of the most international areas of this city, a symbol of Houston's impressive ethnic and cultural diversity.

Alex LaRotta is a first-generation Colombian American and native Houstonian. An avid record collector and deejay, as well as a history Ph.D. student at the University of Houston, he plans a dissertation on the history of Texas soul.

Welcome to Guandi's Temple – A Mystic Sanctuary of Asian Cultures in Houston

By Teresa Tomkins-Walsh

Visiting the Texas Guandi Temple is a step through the looking glass, a journey into a mystical world that invites a re-envisioning of self. Within the iron gates that surround the temple are statues of heroic figures, graceful goddesses, and temple dogs. Inside the temple are representations of gods set upon elevated altars where sticks of incense burn in giant brass bowls of sand and offerings of fruit await each god's pleasure. Texas Guandi Temple is a site for the practice of millennia-old religious traditions and celebrations, but it is also a testament to the sacrifice, survival, and heroism of earthly people who chose Houston as their home. Life inside and around the Texas Guandi Temple reflects the multicultural character of the United States and the diversity of Houston. It is both a community unto itself and a cultural site open to the city.

A large building with an elaborate exterior reflective of Asian ceremonial architecture, Texas Guandi Temple is surprisingly invisible in the sense that many pass by it on the I-45 northbound frontage road between Cullen and Scott, but few take notice. This is partly because the building sits back a block from the road and partly because those who do notice assume that it is a restaurant, similar in appearance to the nearby Kim Son Restaurant. An architect from China designed the Texas Guandi Temple, the largest temple in the United States dedicated to Guandi. Materials for the building and for the interior also came from China.

For those who venture inside the temple, an experience transcending religious beliefs and cultural assumptions awaits. Approaching the grounds, one notices the three-tiered roof laced with red and gold and the fire of dragon tongues. Immense double doors that feature fierce representations of Guandi invite visitors inside. Guandi's importance is reinforced at the entrance to the temple, where his daunting figure stands on an altar higher than a man's shoulders.

Long revered in Chinese culture and Taoist tradition, Guandi is a Chinese god, also known as Guan

Cong, Guan Y, Kuan Ti, and Wudi. Guan Yu, a soldier and a general and perhaps a bean curd peddler in his early life, was a mortal man until captured and executed. After death, he became Guandi, and his popularity increased among the common people. In 1594 a Ming dynasty emperor canonized Guandi as god of war and protector of China and all its citizens.¹

Guandi's role in the temple's founding and naming is profound and personal. Originally from China, but arriving in the United States from Vietnam in 1978, Charles Ngo and his wife Carolyn survived and thrived in Houston, working from food stamps to minimum wage to opening their first business. Their Fifth Ward grocery store had been the target of several robberies. During one particularly vicious robbery, Charles Ngo believed he would die. After Charles shot one robber, a second perpetrator seized the gun and held it to Charles's head. Feeling a strong connection to Guandi, Charles prayed to his patron, and finally, the thieves left without causing further harm. Charles Ngo credits Guandi with his survival.

Charles then felt called to build a temple honoring Guandi and recognizing his good fortune at being rescued from a Vietnamese boat and accepted into the United

States. Working with the Hainam Association, Carolyn and Charles raised money to build the temple and sought Guandi's influence as they searched for a site. After locating properties, they performed a traditional Chinese fortune quest by clapping elliptical wooden tokens together and dropping them with a prayer. If the tokens fall symmetrically, there is no answer; but if the tokens fall in opposition, the answer is yes. They performed this ritual at the temple site, asking Guandi if he liked it, and he answered "yes." The Ngo family and the Hainam Association purchased the land on Milby Street along I-45 and opened the temple in 1999.²

Guandi is not the only figure represented in the temple. Around the long U-shaped hall stand altars with representations of traditional Chinese dei-



Images of Guandi adorn the large front temple doors as protection for the temple and as a decorative element.

All photos courtesy of author unless otherwise noted.



UH anthropology students explore Chinese fortunes. By shaking a canister of numbered sticks until one separates from the others, the supplicant matches the stick to one of the numbered sheets, then reads the appropriate fortune.

ties labeled with Chinese characters and their Vietnamese names written in Latin orthography. With a ceiling as high as a cathedral's and passageways wide enough to allow a celebratory dragon, the temple is cavernous and awash in color and textures. Velvet and satin cloths with golden trim and beads adorn the figures of each god, placed on individual altars with intricately carved canopies, positioned along the walls. Red fabric, lanterns, and tall candles lend a visual vibrancy to the scene. Supplicants can appeal to the individual gods for peace, health, prosperity, or good fortune. It is customary to enter the temple, pay homage to Guandi first and then to each of the gods by bowing, kneeling, or offering incense.

As an expression of gratitude to the American people, Charles Ngo intentionally developed a multi-cultural temple. From Thailand came the golden, four-faced Buddha (actually a representation of Lord Brahma). Standing on an altar adorned with flowers and beaded objects, this statue reflects the strong connection of Thai Buddhism with Indian culture. Also from Thailand is the golden representation of Buddha on the temple's back wall. Thanyaphong Sombat, the temple's resident Buddhist monk, came from Thailand ten years ago. Carolyn and Charles Ngo intended for everyone to be welcomed at the temple, including Taoists, Buddhists, and anyone else seeking respite, meditation, or counsel.

Many gods represented in the temple arise from Taoist tradition and Chinese culture. However, towering on the back wall is an immense golden representation of Buddha seated on a lotus flower in a meditative pose with a pastel aura encircled by tiny flickering lights. It is difficult to contemplate this vision of Buddha and not feel a sense of transcendence over the vicissitudes of everyday life. With the music and incense, one feels transported to another reality. The magnificent and mesmerizing presence of Buddha

causes the uninitiated to think of the temple as Buddhist. A stone statue at the east corner of the courtyard, posed in an Indian meditative posture, represents one of the original Buddha's teachers.

In contrast to Buddha's contemplative presence, Guandi is a powerful figure in the Taoist pantheon and Chinese tradition. Guandi's importance resonates throughout the Texas Guandi Temple in its name, the representations on the front doors, Guandi's position at the entrance, and the multiple representations of Guandi throughout the temple. Life in the United States has neither weakened nor diluted devotion to Guandi for the Ngo family. In fact, they credit Guandi for the life they have built in Houston.

As the temple's volunteer manager, Ming Shui Huang stands daily at the feet of Guandi, sharing the Ngo family's devotion. Ming's role is reflective of the wonders of human experience and the diversity of Houston's culture. Carolyn and Charles Ngo saw the temple as a gift to all who enter, but it is Ming Shui Huang who welcomes visitors and worshippers on a daily basis. Ming manages the temple as he works and studies with the temple monk to perform religious rituals and instruction.

Ming's intriguing coming-to-Houston story dates to the Second World War when his father worked in the United States and joined the U.S. Army to fight in the war. Listed as Boon F. Wang on his military records, Ming's father returned to China after the war, where Chinese government officials judged him disloyal and destroyed all records of Boon Wang's association with the United States. As an



Thanyaphong Sombat, the temple's resident monk, stands with the walking stick he made from Thai clay, golden amulets, and stones.



Ming Shui Huang prepares incense for temple visitors.

adult, Ming became curious about his father's sojourn in the United States and the military. He received a grant for seven days' research and traveled to San Francisco, where he collected records about his father including a Certificate of Military Service, but after the seven days he had no more funds and nowhere to go. Ming contacted the Hainam Association because its members had connections to the area in China where Ming's family had lived. The Association invited Ming to Houston and offered him a place at the Texas Guandi Temple in 2000, where he continues as the temple's volunteer manager.³

Ming's situation is similar to that of the monk's; both live on the generosity of others. Like the monk, Ming lives at the temple, but their presence supports the temple and makes it a community within a community. In small beds around the temple, Ming's wife grows vegetables; she cooks for the monk and for temple celebrations. Troubled by robberies, they have a dog who roams at night among the statues of temple dogs. Ming opens the iron fence and temple doors in welcome at ten each morning and closes them to the public at six in the evening. His belief in Taoism is deep and his dedication to Guandi an elemental aspect of his belief.

Ming tells his own story of Guandi's power. In 2004 a fire erupting from a faulty electrical connection devastated the interior of the temple. Statues and altars throughout the temple were burned, but the statue of Guandi remained untouched. When insurance investigators evaluated the fire damage, they inquired how the one statue remained untouched. Ming relates with humor how the investigators seemed to relish the idea of a powerful protector who could ward off destruction. For Ming, the deliverance of the Guandi figure evidenced the god's power as a protector.

Texas Guandi Temple is a Taoist temple, which raises the question of the relationship between Buddhism and Taoism, both in history and in the conceptualization of the Texas Guandi Temple. It is a complicated topic and a complex relationship. Guandi's role as both the guardian and namesake of the temple offers a fascinating view of the intersections between Buddhism and Taoism and ancient Chinese culture. Buddhism is the older belief system. Ming Shui Huang suggested that Buddhism is at least five thousand years old. It arose in India where it is believed Gautama Buddha or Siddhartha Gautama lived and taught between

the sixth and fourth centuries BCE. To explain the representations of Buddha and Guandi in the temple, Ming said that in Indian Buddhism, Buddha is revered as an actual living being who taught, followed a path toward enlightenment, and achieved deification. As Buddhism filtered into China, Buddha was revered solely as a deity. Guandi, on the other hand, was a person in China whose earthly history figures into his transition to the status of a saint or god. Guandi as a deity in Taoist belief goes back about four thousand years. In the Texas Guandi Temple, Buddha's representation is larger than any other. The figure of Guandi stands at the temple's entrance to protect the temple and receive reverence, but also to protect and honor Buddha, positioned directly behind and above the statue of Guandi.⁴

In China, the intermingling of Buddhist and Taoist philosophies and Chinese tradition extends back at least 2,500 years. A lifetime of study could be devoted to the similarities and differences over time, across regions, and through interpretations of ancient texts. In a separate, nearby Taoist temple, many of the same gods appear throughout various rooms, but the representation of Buddha is a smaller statue, perhaps two-and-a-half feet high, positioned in an alcove. In that temple, Guandi's horse is a nearly life-size likeness. Such differences highlight unique combinations of belief and reverence that shape each temple's purpose.

At the Texas Guandi Temple, Buddha is clearly a commanding figure even in repose. Ming and my translator Fangyi Lu suggested a simple example of difference: a petitioner might appeal to a Taoist god for help with finding a job, succeeding in business, improving health, or seeking protection for a journey. The same supplicant might appeal to Buddha for help with learning along the path to enlightenment or insight into a better way of life. Most visitors to the temple appear to pay reverence to Guandi and Buddha as well as the other gods. In the absence of doctrinal specificity, a visitor to the temple is free to recognize, contemplate, or meditate along personal inclinations, or simply to enjoy sensory overload from color, sound, smell, texture, and light.⁵

Although the Texas Guandi Temple reveals a complicated relationship between Buddhism and Taoism, another value of the temple and its inhabitants lies in the lessons of cultural enlightenment that a visit can offer. When the temple gates are closed, the temple is like a walled city. When my students and I visited the temple one Saturday, we found the iron gates inexplicably closed. A woman



An image of the Happy Buddha greets visitors as they mount the steps to the temple.

came out and spoke to us through the gates, but she did not speak English, and I did not speak Vietnamese. One of my students became agitated, declaring, “I cannot understand her if she doesn’t speak English.” This offered a wonderful opportunity to point out that inside the gates was another world where language and customs operated independently of the larger world outside.

When the gates are open and the doors swing wide in welcome, the temple is a community where people live, work, celebrate, worship, and most of all share. With no air



Exterior of the Texas Guandi Temple. Photo courtesy of Erik Otuomagie.

conditioning and only fans in summer, the fusion between exterior Houston and interior temple is profound. A lesson from Buddhism, that all spaces, places, and things are sacred as well as profane, becomes obvious and tangible. In the same sense, worshippers move about the temple, expressing reverence according to their beliefs or need, as Ming reads his Chinese newspaper or welcomes visitors, sometimes answering questions about etiquette or practices. The temple’s monk may lead chants for supplicants or confer with visitors, or just walk easily through the temple, with a glowing smile.

A visit to the temple can lead to deep philosophical investigation into the complexities of ancient and interwoven religious traditions or a visit to a wondrous place of sights, sounds, smells, and welcome. Pinning down a linear relationship in the religious, philosophical, or cultural traditions that inform the Taoist pantheon and its relationship to Buddhism can be challenging. History and fiction intermingle. Stories re-told and rituals practiced for thousands of years take on multiple manifestations over time and place. It could be satisfying to suspend disbelief and transcend pursuit of experiential stimuli. At the Texas Guandi Temple, Asian histories and cultural traditions mingle with personal experiences, allowing individual interpretations.

Teresa (Terry) Tomkins-Walsh, Ph.D., manages the Houston History Archives and teaches anthropology courses at the University of Houston. She writes on culture and Houston’s environmental action.

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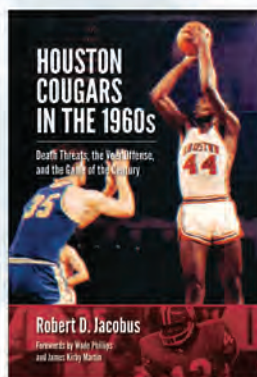
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Converging Parallel Lives: The Story of Voices Breaking Boundaries

By Matt Howard

In a world full of customs offices and immigration departments, where borders and national identities play powerful roles, thousands of individuals experience similar crises and conflicts, and joys and frustrations, no matter where they live around the globe. Although the commonality of these experiences often goes unrecognized by politicians and policy-makers, the Houston-based non-profit organization Voices Breaking Boundaries (VBB) seeks to document these parallel realities. Through an ever-increasing diversity of productions and artforms, VBB has been fulfilling its mission to “cross borders, sustain dialogue, and incite social justice through art” for fifteen years. Along the way, it has garnered funding from such prestigious entities as the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Andy Warhol Foundation, and the Houston Endowment. Founded by five women artists in 2000, Voices Breaking Boundaries has been directed by Sehba Sarwar from the beginning. A Pakistani-born writer and artist, Sarwar divides her time between Houston and Karachi, Pakistan.

From the start Sarwar has led VBB to focus on a particular form of democratization to promote social justice — that



Sehba Sarwar speaking at the What's Color Got to Do with It event hosted at the Houston Institute of Culture, January 2011.

Photo courtesy of Burnell McCray.

of shared art and experience. VBB achieves this goal in a variety of ways. It acts as a platform for up-and-coming artists, allowing them to find an audience without having to work their way into the upper circles of Houston's art society. Its exhibits also present local problems through a global perspective, highlighting similarities between the experiences of marginalized communities in the United States, South Asia, and other parts of the globe.

Most importantly, VBB has developed a variety of art productions that bring art directly into the community. As



Photos by Nalia Mahmood (Pakistan) in the home of Arlene and Mario Zamora for the Exploring Rituals Living Room Art exhibit, December 2013.

Photo courtesy of Logan Sebastian Beck.

an “unfixed” arts association that prefers to work without a permanent production space, VBB has used the community as its constant canvas, encouraging cross-cultural understanding among diverse peoples and nations each step of the way.

Voices Breaking Boundaries is unique in that it is an arts/activist association directed by a South Asian artist, with the goal of reaching a broader multi-cultural audience rooted in shared political views rather than a specific ethnic identity. In VBB’s current *Borderlines* series for example (Fall 2013-Spring 2016), productions address commonalities between Latin American and South Asian cultures, focusing not only on the impact of border conflicts in both regions but on the common struggles, joys, and cultures of individuals and neighborhoods in each place. By giving Houstonians an opportunity to experience these diverse cultures through art, VBB achieves the “mathematically impossible,” forcing parallel lines and lives to converge.

VBB’s Origins

Voices Breaking Boundaries began, as so many things have, with a phone call. In December of 1999 Marcela Descalzi, an Argentinian teacher and writer, called her close friend Sehba Sarwar to ask if she had anything that she wanted to do before the twentieth century came to a close. Sarwar responded that she would like to do a public reading of a poem she had written for her four-year-old niece, which focused on the impact of political transformations in Pakistan. Although informal poetry readings took place in Montrose-area coffee shops, Sarwar and Descalzi sought to establish a more structured forum to present their work. Sarwar submitted two grant proposals to the Cultural Arts Council (now Houston Arts Alliance), one seeking support to pursue her own writing, and the other to pay honoraria to artists for the performance series. She received both, and in February 2000, the five women organized a twice-monthly event at the Borders Bookstore off of Loop 610 and Beechnut.¹

The format of the open-mic sessions provides an apt illustration of how VBB strove to create accessible forms of art. Each event opened with music performed by a local artist followed by a reading from an up-and-coming artist. They closed with a reading by a more established writer of local or national renown. Because Sarwar taught at Jones High School during this time, many of her students took part in performances and invited their friends. In this way VBB created a vibrant, multi-generational forum that enabled mentorship of younger artists striving to find their voice.

Although the open-mic series enjoyed great success, it came to an abrupt halt after eighteen months. A number of Borders’s customers complained about the content of one presentation, and afterwards Borders’s management insisted that it be allowed to pre-screen each performer’s work. Recognizing this as an infringement on the artists’ rights of free expression, VBB refused the request and terminated its partnership with the bookstore. As a result of this early “eviction,” the organization took on an essentially mobile character, seeking out unique locations and partnerships within Houston to host its events. From this dynamic a unique form of artistic creativity emerged, one grounded



On-site artists created this altar/shrine in the home of Frank Aguilar at Exploring Rituals in December 2013.

Photo courtesy of Logan Sebastian Beck.

in extreme flexibility, artistic adaptability, and a desire to introduce diverse communities to the political power of art.

VBB’s first city-wide success occurred in 2001, when it hosted a two-weekend-long film festival-style screening of South Asian films in collaboration with the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and Himal South Asia, a non-profit arts group based in Nepal. Drawing a much larger audience than anticipated, the event provided VBB with its first self-generated revenues and placed the organization on Houston’s more traditional “culture map.” As the organization’s reputation grew and its finances became more complex, colleagues advised Sarwar that incorporating VBB as a non-profit would benefit its growth. With help from the Texas Association of Lawyers and Accountants, it gained non-profit status in 2001.

Empowering Creativity, Creating Empowerment

Since its inception, Voices Breaking Boundaries has adopted a multifaceted approach to creating art for social change. Its repertoire of productions include writing workshops, speaker and film series, and temporary exhibits held in local communities that bring together the art of local and international artists around a common theme. All of these rely on innovative uses of technology, and over the past two years, VBB has published catalogs to capture highlights of these multimedia events for posterity.

VBB’s workshop series emerged from a partnership between Sarwar and Inprint, Houston’s premier literary arts non-profit organization. In 2001, after VBB left Borders, Inprint’s directorship offered its space for VBB’s monthly readings. Simultaneously, as an individual artist Sarwar partnered with Inprint to start a girls’ writing workshop entitled Making Noise. The idea for this workshop came from Sarwar’s work with female high school students, many of whom grappled with intense personal and familial issues. The workshop was designed to illustrate the power of writing as a form of expression and healing, thereby serving as a tool for personal empowerment.

Making Noise became a model for later VBB-sponsored art workshops, beginning in 2003. VBB held the first of these at high schools in underserved communities, such as

Furr, Sharpstown, and Lee. Others took place in community centers, where elders and non-English speakers were encouraged to share their experiences through writing. Descalzi alongside writer and psychologist Victoria Jones organized a particularly innovative workshop to help teachers manage the psychological intensity that accompanied their jobs.²

Another early event that transformed VBB's artistic direction was the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center. As was the case for many Americans, 9/11 had a profound impact on the everyday lives of Sarwar and other VBB members of South Asian origin. They found themselves under new kinds of scrutiny, confronted with a host of incorrect assumptions about their cultures, home countries, and beliefs. As Sarwar explains, "That question, 'Are you Muslim?' And what that term means and what it means to be brown and Muslim, what it means to be male, brown, Muslim...it had taken on a different meaning....That was all there before, but it suddenly became...front and center...of people's consciousness....So, I think it was even more important to present an alternative view of the spaces, that were more representative of the truth of those spaces as opposed to whatever is painted through television screens."³

The series that emerged from this painful period, *Words for Peace*, remains one of the organization's most ambitious projects. VBB planned to have presentations given by speakers from South Asia such as 1997 Booker Prize winner and peace activist Arundhati Roy, Palestinian American poet Naomi Shihab Nye, Jewish poet Irena Kepfisz, and award-winning Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid. These talks would connect Houston audiences with alternative views from around the world. Rather than the intergenerational parallels and convergences generated in the writing workshops, this production encouraged convergence along cultural and national lines.



An image of Pakistani journalist Ahmed Rashid is displayed on the large screen during VBB's *Words for Peace 1* at *DiverseWorks Houston* in September 2002.

Photo courtesy of Paul Hester.

The first installment took a year to produce. Still lacking a space of its own, VBB partnered with *DiverseWorks* in the warehouse district in September of 2002. Following VBB's open-mic format, the production took place in *DiverseWorks*'s black box theater, set up with a projector, screen, speakers, and telephone with a microphone. Local

artists presented their work along with speakers invited to call in from other countries to share their writing and ideas. The seemingly patched-together production method was exceptionally innovative for its time since it facilitated a long-distance audience-artist interaction a year before Skype appeared.

Although partly born of necessity since VBB lacked the funds to fly each speaker to Houston, the use of telephones and microphones illustrates the creativity and adaptability that came to characterize VBB productions. "It was just very, very basic," said Sarwar. "But *DiverseWorks* had the capacity...And then we had Rathna Kumar, who runs an Indian dance organization, and she did classical Indian...dance performance but in that she mixed in movements that were interreligious...it was amazing."⁴ In the span of one afternoon, Sarwar estimates that 400 people came to *DiverseWorks*. Once again, VBB's flexibility and creativity paid off. Over time even after VBB began officing at Project Row Houses (2004-2006) and Houston Arts Alliance (2006-2010), VBB produced five more *Words for Peace* shows, with the last being held in 2008.

The organization also initiated a series of events called *Cultural Narratives* that brought in guest speakers to discuss their work and cultural roots. These programs were, in essence, a form of storytelling similar to what emerged from VBB's writing workshops. Like the open-mic sessions, they introduced more established artists and activists, some of them very famous, to Houston audiences. Among the most notable was the activist-musician Patti Smith, who came to Houston after the publication of her memoir *Just Kids* in September of 2010. Appearing at the UH Cullen Performance Hall, Smith read excerpts from her book, shared stories about her life, and performed a number of songs. This event, done in collaboration with Karen Farber, director of the Cynthia Woods Mitchell Center for the Performing Arts, gained greater local renown for VBB.

Living Room Art: VBB's Signature Artform

VBB's most original artform, Living Room Art (LRA), emerged in 2006. Building on its established tradition of "using the city as a canvas," Living Room Art productions brought art to the community by organizing exhibitions in private homes of people living in underserved neighborhoods. Planned as "one night stands," the productions transformed living rooms, kitchens, and hallways into an open canvas upon which artists could exhibit their art, perform live art, and create installations. The single-night gatherings also provided opportunities for people to mix and mingle. For the surrounding neighborhood, LRA productions became like a carnival with performances and artforms often extending into the yard and street.

The concept for Living Room Art came from VBB friend and artist Oskar Sonnen, who knew about nineteenth-century European *salons* and a similar Los Angeles series. The first show was held in the home of Sarwar's friend Jaspal Subhlok, who had just bought a house in Montrose and wanted to host a party. As time passed numerous other homeowners in a variety of neighborhoods volunteered their spaces. LRA productions took place in such diverse neighborhoods as Fifth Ward, Eastside, and Gulfton. The



Stashed by Jimmy Castillo at the Crossing the Lines Living Room Art exhibit, May 2014.

Photo courtesy of Logan Sebastian Beck.

intimacy of a family living room often provokes experiences that are intensely personal. Sarwar hosted one in her own home in 2009 after the death of her father, Dr. Mohammed Sarwar. Titled *Honoring Dissent/Descent*, it was dedicated to his lifelong commitment to political activism, as well as that of the still-living Daniel Bustamante, a renowned Chicano activist and the father of artist Rosie Bustamante. “It was in my house, and it was a tribute to my father...[I]t began from a very, very personal place,” Sarwar explained. “Everything that happens [in VBB] has started from that personal place.”⁵

Living Room Art productions often occur in the homes of people who have no connection with VBB. Even in these instances, highly personal connections are forged. Frank Aguilar, for example, hosted an LRA in his house in the Near Northside neighborhood in December 2013. *Exploring Rituals* was designed to explore “how ritual commemorations – shrines, altars, *ritablos*, temples, performances and gestures – mediate history and memory along two border

regions: US-Mexico and India-Pakistan-Bangladesh.” The exhibit not only addressed key community issues in the Near Northside – such as prostitution and human trafficking – but also honored Aguilar’s recently deceased mother with a *Día de los Muertos* display. After this, Aguilar had nothing but compliments for VBB, saying, “That’s what made me really, really close to them and made me realize that, ‘Hey, they not only used my house for the event, they honored me, my house, and my mother.’”⁶

Continuing the VBB Mission

Fifteen years after its founding, VBB is still going strong. Today the organization has a permanent office, professional administrative staff, and significantly more funding. Utilizing each new mode of media that emerges along with more traditional exhibition catalogs, the organization has built a global audience. There is much to admire about Voices Breaking Boundaries: its record of unique and powerful arts productions, its contributions to local communities through writing workshops and Living Room Art events, and its pursuit of social justice. Through years of hard work and dedication, accompanied by dedicated colleagues and collaborators, Sehba Sarwar has accomplished an amazing feat by transforming a grassroots art collective into an internationally renowned arts organization, forging cultural connections and raising awareness of social justice issues around the globe.

Matt Howard is a graduate student at the University of Houston, specializing in Early Modern European and World History. He earned his BA in European History and French Language and Literature from Stony Brook University in New York in 2013 and is currently researching the interactions between regional diplomatic systems in the sixteenth through eighteenth centuries.

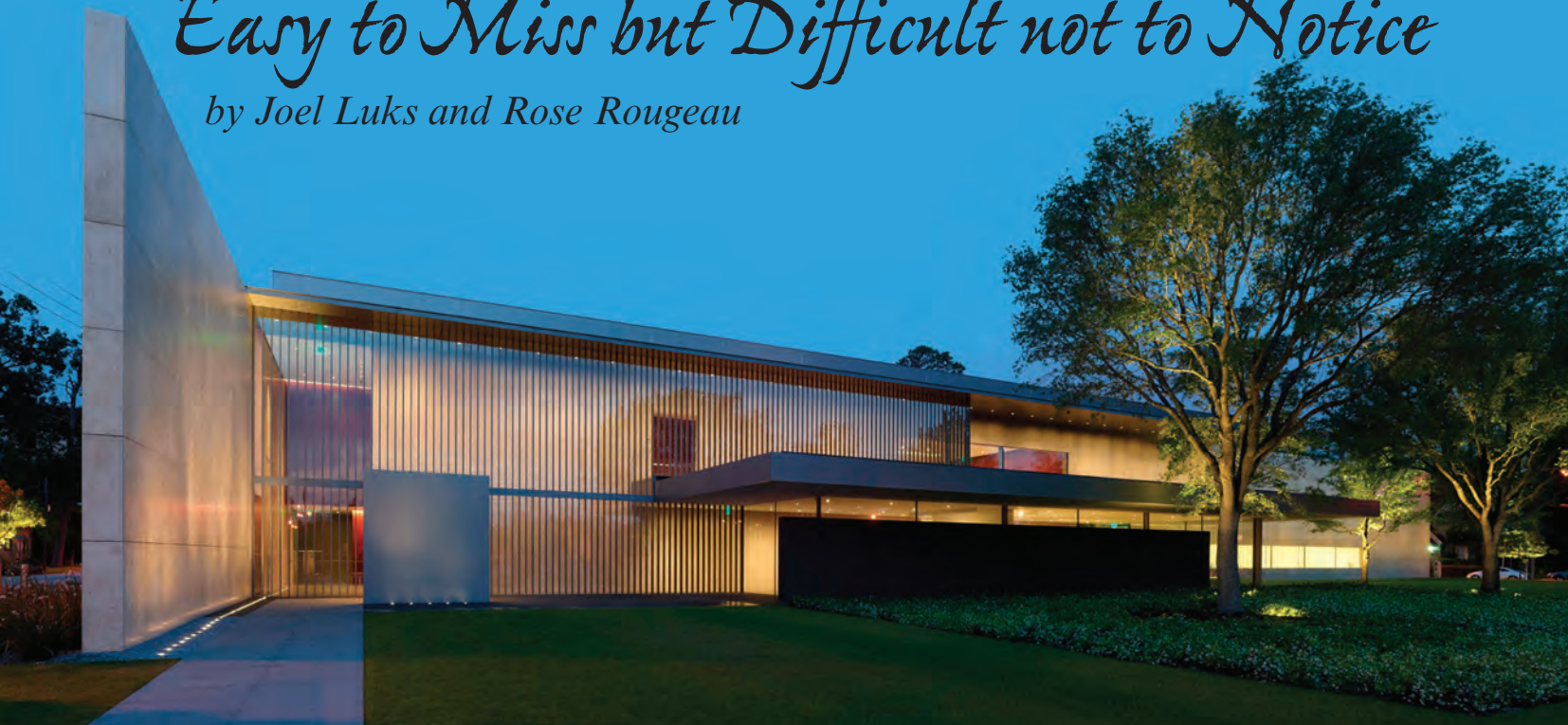


Images by Paul Hester and Andrew Baloch glued to Andrews Street during Homes and Histories, December 2012.

Photo by Burnell McCray.

Asia Society Texas Center: Easy to Miss but Difficult not to Notice

by Joel Luks and Rose Rougeau



The Houston home of Asia Society Texas Center glows in the twilight.

All photos courtesy of Asia Society Texas Center unless otherwise noted.

From some perspectives, Asia Society Texas's building of understated scale and even-tempered disposition, designed by world-renowned Japanese architect Yoshio Taniguchi, calmly melds into a tree-lined residential neighborhood within Houston's Museum District. Contrastingly, the modernist facade features walls of glass bisected by an infinity water garden terrace where steam vapors rise capriciously from its roofline.

"Taniguchi was refined," recalls Asia Society Texas supporter and chief patron Nancy C. Allen. "He was a perfectionist; every single detail was important to him from the preliminary drawings to the level of the Jura limestone imported from Germany that he and his assistant inspected with a magnifying glass. Every material had to be the best." Allen adds, the building "became a work of art."¹

Authorities on architecture consider the 40,000-square-foot structure an unparalleled example of restrained poise and simple elegance. The \$50 million project, completed in the fall of 2011, echoes the provenance of the organization. For volunteers like Allen, Taniguchi's Houston masterpiece, the architect's first free-standing design in the United States, illuminates her inextinguishable passion for the Houston chapter.

Asia Society, an international educational pioneer founded in 1956 by John D. Rockefeller III, is headquartered in New York. In 1979 the Texas Center in Houston opened as the orga-

nization's third location. Now represented in Hong Kong, Houston, Los Angeles, Manila, Mumbai, San Francisco, Seoul, Shanghai, Sydney, and Washington, DC, it creates an interchange between cultures that for much of modern history remained literally and metaphysically disconnected.

Nancy Allen's son Edward R. "Eddie" Allen III met his wife Chinhui Juhn while engaged in doctorate work at the University of Chicago. One studied macroeconomics, the other studied microeconomics; and together, he quips, they cover the world. As a family, the Allens' business and personal goals intrinsically identify with Asia Society Texas, which has grown from an organization that primarily addressed commerce and policy to one that also inclusively educates the public about Asian arts and culture.

In February 2015 the couple endowed a new curator position with a \$1.5 million gift in honor of Nancy Allen, who contributed \$15 million toward the capital campaign. Eddie Allen also funded the acquisition of a work by Korean artist Lee Ufan that is currently on display in the venue's Sculpture Garden.

The blossoming curiosity of the general public concerning Asia mirrors Houston's identity shift from being nicknamed both the "Oil Capital of the World" and "Space City" to one of the most diverse metropolitan areas in the United States. The Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 eliminated immigration quotas that gave preference to Europeans



Nancy C. Allen is a prominent volunteer and patron of the Asia Society who calls the Asia Society Texas Center "a work of art."



An art installation, *Jiu Jin (Old Gold Mountain)* by Hung Liu from The Other Side: Chinese and Mexican Immigration to America exhibit, offers commentary on the lives of Chinese immigrants who took difficult and sometimes deadly work building the Transcontinental Railroad. It features empty fortune cookies cascading over a railroad track.

over Asians, Latinos, and Africans; emphasis was placed on family relationships and skills, and as a result, Houston's immigration numbers reflected these changes. China rose in significance when reforms from the late 1970s to early 1980s ushered in unprecedented involvement from foreign investors. As Taiwan and South Korea transitioned from autocracies into vibrant democratic economies, the proliferation of trade activities meant Western societies could no longer turn a blind eye to the region's growth potential. Likewise the Asian financial crisis of 1997 that affected Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, South Korea, and the Philippines had fierce global repercussions as oil dipped to \$11 a barrel, its lowest level in twenty years.

When Eddie Allen, a senior partner at Eagle Global Advisors, first became involved with Asia Society's Houston location in the early 1990s, a staff of three members focused on developing programming for non-Asians to study Asian policy and its effects and pressures on the American way of life. But as Asia Society's network evolved, the scope needed some adjustments if it desired to reach beyond its inner circle. "We have to provide programs and services for our two main clienteles," he explains. "Those interested in policy, and those with a penchant for cultural affairs." Sometimes those two cohorts overlap; but often, they do not.

Immigration lawyer Charles C. Foster, who is also the Honorary Consul General of the Kingdom of Thailand in Houston, concurs. The Galveston-born attorney served as chairman of Asia Society Texas Center for twenty-five years, in addition to serving as a trustee for the national division. In his modestly decorated office in downtown Houston hangs an article titled "Foster: A steady boat to China" from *China Daily*. The brief details Foster's role in shaping U.S.-China relations, which, Foster jokes, began with a song his babysitter used to croon when he was six years old – "On a Slow Boat to China." In the media, Foster is remembered

as the person who negotiated an international controversy between the Houston Ballet, Chinese ballet dancer Li Cunxin, and the Chinese government when Cunxin married an American and refused to return to China. The incident, publicized by hundreds of reporters and every television network, was the impetus behind the film *Mao's Last Dancer*.

"Asia Society has to more fully embrace the fastest growing part of our community – the Asian community," Foster notes. "That's going to be our strength." Foster speaks from personal experience and he cites his wife, acclaimed Chinese actress Chen Ye, as one of his biggest strengths.

The next real challenge, Foster explains, is to build a sustainable infrastructure to support the expanded operational capacity of the organization. Since his

involvement, the staff has grown from a handful to thirty employees, including executive director Bonna Kol.

"Although we recently celebrated our 35th anniversary, I still see Asia Society in its infancy years, as we recently gained a permanent home in the Museum District," Kol says. "We are continuing to evolve as an agency, enhancing our public offerings to the community beyond business and policy. We are adding new and exciting offerings, and we have a robust calendar of unique programs and events that help build global competency while celebrating the beauty of our diverse city." As such, the center's strategic plan consists of four programming pillars – Business and Policy, Education and Outreach, Exhibitions, and Performing Arts and Culture.

The Business and Policy pillar concentrates on fostering a platform to discuss timely and relevant foreign relations and their influence on local issues. As part of this content



Making sure young people of all backgrounds have an opportunity to learn about the depth of Asian culture is central to the mission of the Asia Society.

cornerstone, the center has hosted Australian Prime Minister Tony Abbott, China Vice Premier Madame Liu Yandong and her delegation, including Minister of Education Yuan Guiren and Minister of National Health Li Bin, and former Chinese President Jiang Zemin.

“My goal is that Asia Society be considered the premier cultural and education destination,” Kol explains. “Asia Society is the place where leaders convene in a non-partisan manner as it relates to closing the divide between East and West.” The Cambodian-born leader, the organization’s fourth executive director, believes it is critical that Asians and non-Asians engage in dialogue about universal similarities that create a common bond regardless of ethnicity and socioeconomic status.

The Education and Outreach pillar enriches families, students, educators, adults, and communities with gallery tours and experiential offerings that nurture international awareness. The effort also aims to forge strong partnerships with schools to build global competency in Houston’s youth. ExploreAsia Culture Camps for Kids expose participants to Asian culture, food, games, languages, and art activities within a framework that surveys history and imagines the future.

Asia Society brings in creative and thoughtful leaders from around the globe in support of its Performing Arts and Culture pillar. Its first commissioned production, *Tsuru*, opened to a full house and was done in collaboration with the Houston Ballet, blending contemporary choreography with ballet and Japanese theatrical elements.

Each region of Asia has a unique historical context and is equally represented in the Exhibitions pillar, which highlights the distinctive fine art, craft, and folkloric traditions that have thrived and continue to flourish within the continent. Through the works of Andrea Bowers, Blane De St. Croix, Margarita Cabrera, Zhi Lin, Hung Liu, and Tony de los Reyes, the 2015 exhibition *The Other Side: Chinese and Mexican Immigration to America* analyzed immigration, border relations, and labor practices through the lens of two seemingly contrasting origins and viewpoints. In collaboration with the Blaffer Art Museum at the University of Houston, Contemporary Art Museum Houston, and the Station Museum of Contemporary Art, Asia Society Texas



Manjari Sharma portrays Vishnu, an important deity from the Indian subcontinent.

Center presented *Mel Chin: Rematch* as the most comprehensive retrospective of the Houston-born artist.

The exhibition *Traditions Transfigured: The Noh Masks of Bidou Yamaguchi* comprised a collection of masks inspired by Japanese Noh Theater, a time-honored practice from the fourteenth century, in which celestial beings and earthly creatures collide. The art, a reflection of the spirit of Asia Society past and present synergistically coming together, pays homage to, while reinventing, a storied convention.

“My hope is that all these efforts help diversify the city of Houston,” Nancy Allen states. “For Asian Americans, Asians, Americans, and people from all over to begin to get to know one another. Let’s hope this will be something for peace, a beacon for knowledge and understanding.”

Architect Taniguchi once said, “I hope they will enjoy not so much the teacup but the tea,” as a metaphor for architecture becoming a container for something. Having peace, knowledge, and understanding as the building’s thesis renders this ambitious venture a beautiful gift for anyone who devotes time to become acquainted with it.

Joel Luks is a freelance journalist and digital strategist with The CKP Group.

Rose Rougeau is senior director of communication for Asia Society Texas Center.



A dancer strikes a pose during the dress rehearsal of *Tsuru*, performed at the Houston Ballet.
Photo by Lynn Lane.

Asia Society Texas Center is open to the public Tuesday to Friday from 11:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday from 10:00 a.m. until 6:00 p.m. Admission to the building is free. Admission to the Sarofim Gallery is free for members and children 12 and under, \$5 for nonmembers. 1370 Southmore Boulevard, Houston 77004.

North America Taiwanese Women's Association: Sisterhood is Powerful!

by Vince Lee

Living between two worlds is nothing new for Asian Americans. They must juggle their heritage, derived from the culture and identity of the homeland they left behind, with the pressure to assimilate into western culture in the United States. Though the change is difficult, immigration can lead to new expectations, values, and opportunities. Taiwanese American women often had to play a behind-the-scenes role while men led most of the overseas Taiwanese organizations and activities. Not content with the status quo and lacking an organization to represent them, a small group of thirty Taiwanese women from the United States and Canada formed what became the North America Taiwanese Women's Association (NATWA) in March of 1988. Through a two-day conference held in Los Angeles, these women outlined their mission: "To evoke a sense of self-esteem and enhance women's dignity, to oppose gender discrimination and promote gender equality, and to fully develop women's potential and encourage the participation in public affairs."¹

With well over 1,000 members, the organization is divided into seven geographic regions and seventeen local chapters. Exploring the North America Taiwanese Women's Association Collection in the Carey C. Shuart Women's Archive Collections at the University of Houston – which contains photographs, publications, scrapbooks, and ephemera – reveals the organization's historic connection to the Houston region. Although Houston does not currently have a local chapter, it has been an active city for NATWA and its membership over the years and has produced two of its presidents, Gin Ru Lee (1995) and Cecilia Tsai (2005). During their terms, the city twice played host to the annual convention. Additionally, many of its annual magazines have been published within the region.

The one underlying emphasis and theme found throughout NATWA's archival collection is a celebration of self-worth as Taiwanese and Taiwanese American women. A non-profit run primarily by volunteers, NATWA created a non-governmental organization (NGO) to address major issues relating to women such as education, health, economy,



The banner of the North America Taiwanese Women's Association has flown over many meetings, presentations, and protests.

All photos courtesy of the Carey C. Shuart Women's Archive Collections, University of Houston Libraries.

domestic violence, aging, human rights, leadership training, and empowerment.² NATWA and its members have also advocated for the human rights and democracy of Taiwan, provided career panels and mentorship for young women at their national conferences, and given workshops on health and well-being for women.

Cecelia Tsai, the eighteenth president, introduced NATWA II to NATWA at her annual meeting to provide a network to "1.5 and 2nd-generation Taiwanese American and Canadian women," to cultivate and promote their tal-



Members of NATWA are seen here in front of the Taiwanese Heritage Society of Houston.

ents, and to preserve the Taiwanese culture and Taiwanese American and Canadian identity. As a result, NATWA II created and administered Sunday morning programs that have become a permanent fixture at NATWA annual meetings.

NATWA produces a biannual magazine that provides updates from their conferences, messages from the president, annual budgets and reports, and most importantly reflections from their members about the conference and what they learned. Topics can be personal, political, social, and controversial. One author, Kristie Wang, wrote a second generation report, "How I became a Taiwanese American and why it matters," encompassing all these aspects. Her realization of her identity as a Taiwanese American went beyond her language, her culture, and how she was perceived both in America and in Taiwan. The report stresses educating oneself and educating others on ancestry, heritage, and distinctions. Wang emphasizes that "if you are of Taiwanese descent and you identify yourself as 'Chinese' because you think that the use of 'Taiwanese' is 'political' and 'Chinese' is 'neutral,' then you are not only wrong, but you are committing a great disservice." Wang adds, "[I]f we do not make the distinction between Taiwanese and Chinese, then nobody will do it for us. To take it a step further, if you don't determine your own identity, then it will be imposed upon you, as Taiwan's history has demonstrated time and time again."³

The archival collection contains materials on NATWA's involvement with such projects as Race for the Cure, Team Taiwan, scholarships, and reports on NATWA's work with the Caring for Soldiers project. Started in 2006 by Vandy Chang in Kansas, Caring for Soldiers supports service members wounded in battle and their families through meetings, support, and care packages. NATWA has also fo-

cused more recently, especially with its NATWA II second-generation members, on Asian Americans and their role in serving human rights communities.

Annual NATWA conferences are held in April in cities across the United States and Canada, allowing members to come together to learn, discuss, and enjoy one another's company. They bring in experts and consultants to hold workshops that discuss such topics as fundraising, cardiovascular health, and issues of Medicare and benefits. They offer career panels to young women graduates and memorial scholarships to students. On the lighter side, during NATWA Night the women participate in an art show and line dancing.

Gin Ru Lee, seventh president of NATWA, hosted the annual meeting in Houston in 1995. The theme for the conference was "My Body, My Mind, My Spirit." In line with the theme, the president openly discussed a topic traditionally considered taboo in Asian communities: sex and women. Members also broke into groups for a more intimate dis-



A slideshow presentation given at the 1995 NATWA Conference held in Houston was on "Sex and Women."



Part of the collection, this flier is from the 1995 NATWA conference, "My Body, My Mind, My Spirit," which included a number of small group sessions where women discussed health issues.



NATWA addresses current events and issues worldwide while also working to preserve cultural heritage for Taiwanese immigrants and their children living in the United States. This calendar, published by NATWA in 1996, features a number of female artists from Taiwan.



This cookbook published by NATWA contains a number of recipes from the island nation. Food is an important way for both immigrants and their children to maintain a sense of culture.

cussion. Additionally, President Lee was instrumental in implementing the NATWA Fund System. The Fund System allocates money contributed by members to points of need such as student scholarships, aid for natural disasters, or other causes strongly supported by the members. In 2005 Cecelia Tsai sent funds donated by NATWA to their sisters in New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina.

Part of NATWA's success and growth, both financially and through increased membership, can be attributed to the publication of the NATWA calendar. In 1990, the second president of NATWA, Grace Chou, invited Annette Lu of

Taiwan to attend the annual meeting in Dallas. After her visit, Lu suggested to incoming president Dorothy Hung that NATWA publish a calendar containing every important date relating to Taiwan's democratic movement.⁴ With the support and generous donation of \$10,000 from noted businessman and physician, Mr. Ing-ke Kao of Japan, NATWA set out to design and publish its first calendar in November of 1991. The calendar's appeal to NATWA members and international supporters lies in its richly illustrated design. Each year the calendar depicts an aspect or theme important to Taiwan's cultural heritage, such as Taiwanese women artists, crafts, landscapes, and native indigenous populations and their dress.

The archival collection also includes many editions of cookbooks on Taiwanese homestyle cooking published by NATWA's Northern California chapter and the Taiwanese American Citizens League-San Francisco Chapter. For Taiwanese Americans, food has a cultural and nostalgic connotation not only of their heritage and homeland, but also of family, home, and growing up watching meals being prepared. Food evokes customs and traditions that bring members closer together. Recipes for the Taiwanese dishes are richly illustrated and the directions are written on corresponding pages in both Chinese and English.

For the past twenty-seven years NATWA has embodied one of its central themes from its 2008 annual meeting: "Sisterhood is Powerful!" Through the courage and vision of a small group of Taiwanese American women looking for equality and dignity, a long-standing network was forged within the United States, Canada, and abroad, burgeoning their call for respect and independence for themselves and their homeland. Through their network of sisterhood they not only have become powerful in public affairs but also have retained compassion on an individual level to support one another through difficulties. Many NATWA members have discovered that they are openly welcomed at annual meetings and conferences as evidenced in their writings. They are encouraged to be themselves without fear or worry that others will not understand them. The support of the NATWA sisterhood assures them that they are not alone and that others have shared and will share their own experiences and similar perspectives. Many members have forged lifelong friendships.

The North America Taiwanese Women's Association and its mission and values were not formed from a model or template but grew from within the hearts, minds, and spirits of these Taiwanese American women. Many of these values resonated with what they felt at home and abroad in their journeys, as Asian Americans and Asian American women in particular, living in dual worlds while retaining their identity and culture.

Vince Lee is the history archivist for the Carey C. Shuart Women's Archive Collections, University of Houston Libraries.



Members of NATWA hold a banner at a protest for Taiwan's sovereignty and self-determination.

The North America Taiwanese Women's Association Collection resides in Special Collections in the M. D. Anderson Library at the University of Houston. Special Collections is open from 9:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. Monday to Friday and 12:00 p.m. to 4:00 p.m. on Saturday. For more information, visit, <http://info.lib.uh.edu/about/campus-libraries-collections/special-collections>.

News Updates & Books *by Barbara Eaves*

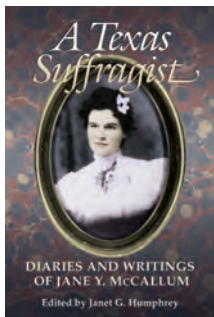
BOOKS



The Archaeology of Engagement: Conflict and Revolution in the United States, eds. Dana L. Petermann and Holly K. Norton, \$50. The authors assemble archaeological studies of sites of conflict between widely divergent cultures. Half of the book is devoted to a case study of the San Jacinto Battlefield, one of America's most storied and heavily trafficked sites, with work led by Roger Moore, Douglas

Mangum, and Michael Strutt with support by volunteers from the Houston and Texas archaeological societies.

Houston Cougars in the 1960s: Death Threats, The Veer Offense, and the Game of the Century, by Robert D. Jacobus, \$29.95. Jacobus conducted over 200 interviews with the visionary coaches, courageous players, and committed supporters who blazed the trail for athletic success and racial equality by integrating University of Houston athletics.



A Texas Suffragist: Diaries and Writings of Jane Y. McCallum, ed. Janet G. Humphrey, \$22.95. Jane McCallum was a typical busy wife and mother. Unlike most, she was also a suffrage leader, lobbyist, journalist, publicist, Democratic Party worker, and secretary of state. This book brings to print her diaries from October 1916 to December 1919, chronicling the struggle for suffrage.

Citizens at Last: The Woman Suffrage Movement in Texas, eds. Ellen C. Temple, Ruthe Winegarten, and Judith N. McArthur, \$24.95. This richly illustrated book is an essential resource for anyone interested in the history of the suffrage movement in Texas. It features more than thirty primary documents that reveal what it took for women to gain the vote.



The above books are published by Texas A&M University Press, www.tamu.edu/upress.

Texas Almanac 2016-2017, Texas State Historical Association, hardcover \$39.95; flexbound \$24.95. The *Texas Almanac* has chronicled the geography, history, economy, and culture of Texas since 1857. This edition also features articles on Texas's food regions and wine industry and the 70th anniversary of the 1946 Triple Crown victory by

Assault, the King Ranch's feisty thoroughbred who overcame a near-fatal injury as a colt. www.TSHAonline.org.

Oveta Culp Hobby: Colonel, Cabinet Member, Philanthropist, by Debra L. Winegarten, \$14.95. Written for younger readers, this biography follows Hobby from her childhood in Killeen to her successes and achievements in both Houston and Washington, DC. Through Hobby's experiences, Winegarten inspires young adults to see challenges as opportunities, encouraging them to follow their own dreams.



ACCOMPLISHMENTS



LIFE-SIZED BRONZE STATUES of Augustus Chapman and John Kirby Allen, the men who envisioned building a "great interior commercial emporium" on the muddy banks of Buffalo Bayou, have been executed by sculptor Lori Betz. In November they will be installed on the limestone pedestals built for them on the east side terrace of City Hall in 1939. Commissioned by members of the Oran M. Roberts Chapter 440, UDC, the statues were funded by Allen descendants and private contributors. Contact Lynna Kay Shuffield at 713-560-8152.

BRETT DERBES is the new managing editor for the 26,000-entry digital *Handbook of Texas*. As a graduate student in history at the University of North Texas, Derbes was tapped by Texas State Historical Association Chief Historian Randolph "Mike" Campbell to assist with the *Handbook of Civil War Texas*, for which Derbes researched and wrote thirty-three entries.



HOUSTON WOMEN BUSINESS OWNERS – Meredith May, a Ph.D. history student at TCU, is researching a dissertation exploring female business owners and entrepreneurs in Houston (defined broadly) during the post-World War II years. If you have information about a woman who operated her own business, large or small, during the 1950s through early 1970s, contact Meredith May at m.l.may@tcu.edu.

HOUSTON ARTS & MEDIA has released two new documentaries, *The Alamo and San Antonio* and *Goliad*, making six in HAM's Birth of Texas series with two more due in 2016. These are now in use in seventy Texas school districts. Visit www.houstonartsandmedia.org.

THE BRYAN MUSEUM has been awarded Galveston's Annual Landmark Commission Rehabilitation Award for its restoration, renovation, and use of the 1902 Galveston Orphans' Home. The museum, which hosted some 4,000 visitors in its first two months, now offers self-guided and docent-led tours. This fall the new *San Jacinto Diorama* will be installed, with 2,000 hand-painted toy soldiers accurately representing the battle on a custom-made landscape. Visit www.thebryanmuseum.org.

THE HARRIS COUNTY HISTORICAL COMMISSION AND THE COURTLANDT PLACE HISTORICAL FOUNDATION dedicated sixteen Recorded Texas Historical Landmark markers on residences and one Official Texas Historical Marker for Courtlandt Place, the City of Houston's first Historic District, on September 27.



No. 5 Courtlandt Place was built in 1912 as the residence of James L. Autry.

SAN ANTONIO won a World Heritage Site designation for the city's five Spanish Colonial missions, which includes the Alamo. The city and the state governments committed nearly \$50 million for improvements, a master plan, and museum.

ANNOUNCEMENTS



***Asian Americans in Houston:
A Kaleidoscope of Cultures***,
showing through mid-January at
The Heritage Society, is a team

effort between The Heritage Society and *Houston History*. Artifacts and exhibit panels offer an overview of Asian immigration and stories of Houstonians who trace their ancestry to China, Japan, Korea, the Philippines, Taiwan, Southeast and South Asia. Local institutions are also featured. Visit www.heritagesociety.org.

Virgin of Guadalupe: Empress of the Americas opens December 11 at the Houston Museum of Natural Science. The tale begins in eighth-century Spain and ends in twenty-first-century Americas. In between is a fascinating story of faith, conquest, and conversion – a clash between different worlds and expressions of devotion. Actors include Muslim forces, Catholic kings, Aztecs, the Virgin of Guadalupe, and a humble peasant, Juan Diego, canonized by Pope John Paul II. Visit www.hmns.org.



The Houston Arts Alliance's Folklife + Traditional Arts program presents various Winter Celebrations, including a series of installations, live performances, and interactive events: the Virgin of Guadalupe (Dec. 2-8), Lunar New Year (Jan. 13-19), and African American trail riders (Feb. 10-16). Midtown Arts & Theater Center Houston (MATCH), 3400 Main Street, 77002. All events are free. Visit www.houstonartsalliance.com/folklife.

A Destined Conflict: The U.S.-Mexican War, a new exhibit at the San Jacinto Museum of History, will be up through mid-2016. It showcases prints, political cartoons, photographs, art, and newspapers relating to this decisive war in which, between 1846 and 1848, Mexico lost nearly half of its territory. This second bloodiest conflict in American history was our first foreign war covered comprehensively by war correspondents. Visit www.sanjacinto-museum.org.



A Mexican eagle, snake, and cactus are carved in relief on the bone handle of this Smith and Wesson .44-caliber revolver.

ArCH Walking Tour season continues through Jan. 2, with tours on Saturdays from 10:00 a.m. to noon and Thursdays at 6:00 p.m. of places such as Buffalo Bayou, the Museum District, Downtown, Third Ward, and Montrose. Visit www.aiahouston.org, click on "Committees," and select ArCH Walking Tours.

The San Jacinto Symposium will be held Saturday, April 9, 2016. Following prior symposia focusing on Tejanos and Texas Indians in the Texas Revolution, the 2016 meeting turns to another often overlooked group of people of color – African Americans in Texas History: from Spanish-Colonial Times to Annexation in 1845. Speakers break this complex subject into periods of sovereignty – Spanish, Mexican, and Republic – and also concentrate on two individuals, Joe, William B. Travis's slave at the Alamo, and the Yellow Rose at San Jacinto. Visit www.sanjacintoconservancy.org.

Thank You!

Thank you to the M. D. Anderson Library, especially Houston History Archivist Terry Tomkins-Walsh and Carolyn Meanley, for hosting the launch party for our summer digital issue, “Houstonians in Action.” Attendees had a wonderful time touring the library exhibit created by Dr. Tomkins-Walsh, *Houston History: Archives, Magazine, and Oral History*, talking with the authors, and enjoying the delicious hors d’oeuvres and great conversations. The exhibit is on display on the first floor of the M. D. Anderson Library through December 18, 2015.

Launch party attendees Monica Perales and another guest talk with article authors Denise Gomez, Natalie Garza, and Mikaela Selley. The works of Gomez, Garza, and Selley are represented in the magazine and the exhibit, part of which can be seen in the background.

Photo courtesy of Gabby Davila and Ricardo Uribe.



ENDNOTES

ASIAN AMERICANS

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