

The Cornerstone

FALL 2006

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE RICE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOL. 11, NO. 3

Rice's Most Tragic Day

By Mary S. Dix

As he would so often do in his years as chairman of the Philosophy Department, Dr. Radoslav Tsanoff captured the feeling of the entire Rice community, sharing its grief at a memorial service held at St. Paul's Methodist Church on November 18, 1953: "The disaster suffered by the families of our midshipmen is our disaster too. It has struck all of us, in our Rice family."

The disaster Dr. Tsanoff spoke of was the crash on July 17, 1953, of a

plane carrying 11 Rice NROTC midshipmen, a tragedy of proportions heretofore unknown to the Institute, and equally shocking to the city of Houston, whose official flags were lowered to half-staff.

The 11 students were part of an NROTC group leaving Pensacola for amphibious training at Norfolk, the last segment of the summer's program. Boarding the twin-engine Marine transport plane, similar to the Army's "Flying Box Car," with them

were midshipmen from Oklahoma, Missouri, and Oregon. Around midnight on July 17 the plane took off, but seconds into the flight it veered to the left, smashed into a row of trees, burst into flames, and slammed into three cars and a barn. Forty-one lost their lives; amazingly there were six survivors. Two Boy Scouts who lived on nearby farms rushed to help them, pulling them from the wreckage and tearing off burning clothes. Navy rescuers

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The Lost Midshipmen



Edward L. Bailey



Frank M. Caldwell



George W. Coyle



Edward R. Clayton



Raymond A. Daniel



Robert K. M. Dickson



Wallis C. Elston



Bowden W. Wilson



William E. Wöhn



Allen L. Wright

The Rice Historical Society

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*To collect and preserve for the future the
history of Rice University*

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*The Rice Historical Society welcomes letters to
The Cornerstone, its official newsletter.
Rice alumni and friends are encouraged to
contribute photographs and remembrances of
historical interest that may be used in future issues
of The Cornerstone. Items cannot
be returned and will be donated to our
archival collection.*

Newsletter designed by Starfall Graphics.

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RHS ARCHIVES NOTE

Our archives are not classified. We are seeking artifacts you may have preserved, then hidden away, since your years at Rice.

If you would like to give that hat or banner or dance card to the Rice Historical Society to be preserved at the Woodson Research Center or in the RHS archive collection, please contact Joyce Nagle, RHS archivist, at 713-782-0703.

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rapidly moved the survivors to the Whiting Field hospital.

Only two would live, one a member of the crew, the other, Jay Benoir Weidler, a Rice engineering student and a long-distance runner. He spent several weeks in the hospital, then went home to Philadelphia to continue his recovery before returning to Rice to begin his junior year.

Jay Weidler graduated in 1955, served as an officer in the Marine Corps, returned to Rice for his Masters' and Doctorate in civil engineering, followed by post-doctoral work at Brown University. He left academia to join Brown & Root in 1969 and rose to senior vice-president, retiring in 2000. He and his wife now reside in Brenham.

Dr. Weidler recalls that the midshipmen were seated in two long rows on the plane; duffel bags filled the space between them. As the plane crashed into the trees and burst into flames, it burst in two. Weidler remembers that he was sitting between two large men who wedged him in place and prevented his being thrown from the plane. He did not lose consciousness and was able to unbuckle his seat belt and, miraculously, escape from the burning wreckage.

Perishing in the accident were 10 Rice students, all between 18 and 22 years of age: Edward Lee Bailey, Jr., from Webster, Texas, where he was named his class's outstanding graduate; he hoped to become a Navy chaplain; Frank McFaden Caldwell from Richmond, Virginia, and a member of the Rice golf team, had just graduated with a major in physics; Edward R. Clayton was an economics major from Park Ridge, Illinois; George W. Coyle of Maplewood, Louisiana, was to have entered his junior year in business administration; Raymond A. Daniel, a graduate of Houston's John H. Reagan High School, had already received his ensign's commission and planned to return to Rice for a master's in electrical engineering before his Navy duty;



Jay Weidler survived the airplane crash.

Robert K. M. Dickson from El Paso was a junior in electrical engineering; Wallis C. Elston, whose family moved to Houston when he was a teenager, wanted to enter medical school; Bowden W. Wilson, a junior in chemical engineering, was from San Antonio; William W. Wohn, described in the press as a "pint-sized basketball guard," had been on Lamar High School's



Memorial service for lost midshipmen

1951 championship team and continued to star at Rice. He planned to make the naval air arm his career. Allen L. Wright of Sweetwater, Tennessee, expected to transfer from Rice to Georgia Tech at the beginning of his junior year.

As it happened, that year Rice had an outstanding basketball team that ended the season at play-offs in Madison Square Garden in New York City. They were playing an extraordinarily talented St. John's and were expected to lose. However, Billy Wohn's father sent the team a good luck telegram that fired up the players, who claimed that they felt the presence of a "sixth player" who led them to their 85-82 victory.

As they planned their 50th reunion, the Class of 1955 agreed that a plaque memorializing the 10 NROTC midshipmen should be made for placement in the Rice Memorial Center. They asked a classmate, John Joiner, an architect, to design and arrange for its production. So in 2005 with a memorial service in the Rice Chapel and the installation of the plaque, the friends of 10 gallant young men paid tribute to them and remembered what Dean George Holmes Richter described as the "worst disaster we have ever had."

Dr. Lovett and the Golden Fleece

By Froggy Williams



This is a football story. It takes place in 1934. The characters are Dr. Edgar Odell Lovett, head football coach Jimmy Kitts, and the Rice Institute football team of 1934.

As the season begins in September of 1934, there are no great expectations for the Rice football program. Rice did have 10 winning football seasons from 1912 through 1933. There was certainly nothing of a championship caliber in the past, nor were there any positive expectations on the horizon. The previous year, 1933, the team record was 3–9–9. There was only one thing new for 1934. Rice had a new football coach, Jimmy Kitts.

The previous coach, Jack Meagher, had resigned at the end of the 1933 season. Jimmy Kitts had been hired in 1932 as the basketball coach after a spectacular career as basketball coach at Athens, Texas, High School. He had been a great football star at SMU so he had been assigned to coach freshman football. This gave Kitts one advantage: he would have coached as freshmen all of the players on the 1934 squad. The negative side included Kitts's lack of experience as a football coach.

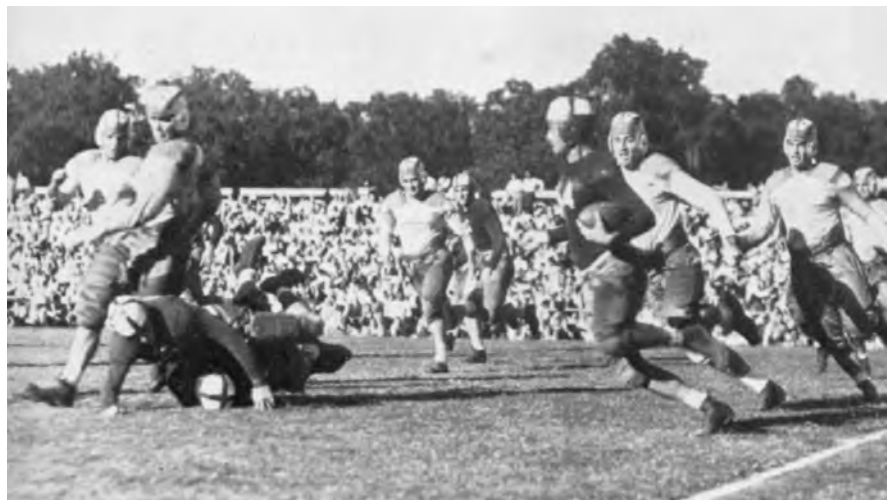
This Rice team turns out to be loaded with talented athletes. The season opens and Rice wins eight of nine games. The record is marred only by a tie with LSU in the

second game of the season. The students are delirious. The city of Houston is engaged and overwhelmed at the thought of a championship team at the Rice Institute. The team is front page news in the *Houston Chronicle*. The word is out that the Rose Bowl has Rice on its list of possible teams to invite for the annual game on January 1, 1935. Rice is scheduled to play TCU on Saturday, November 24, 1934, in Houston. Coach Jimmy Kitts contacts Dr. Lovett and asks him to come to the Rice dressing room after the game and speak to the team on this historic occasion. The win would be doubly salacious because Rice had not beaten TCU for six consecutive years. However, the football gods smiled on TCU this day, and they beat the Rice Owls 7–2. Obviously, there was great consternation on the Rice campus as a result of the upset win by TCU. However, as the shock wore off, it was noted that there was still a great prize to be captured. If Rice can beat Baylor in Waco on December 1, 1934, Rice will still be the undisputed champion of the Southwest Conference. A victory was necessary. This in itself is a huge

prize. This team is the culmination of a plan the board of trustees put into motion in 1924, and it has been ten long years coming to fruition. Some of the luster might be gone, but the main prize is still there for the taking.

Fortuitously, the Rice Institute Owls traveled to Waco and rather handily beat the hapless Bears 32–0 on a terribly wet and rainy day in Waco, at a ramshackle stadium called Carroll Field. The dressing room is flooded as the team dressed for the game. Dr. Lovett was called on to speak to the team before the game. Our research uncovered an interview with Dr. Lovett which gives us his version of the famous Golden Fleece story.

There is little doubt that an earlier incident caused Dr. Lovett to choose Jason and the Golden Fleece as his subject matter for the football team. On an earlier occasion the Rice team traveled to Arkansas, and one of the better Rice backs, John McCauley, had taken only one shoe. A telegraph was sent to send the other shoe. Dr. Lovett was immediately reminded of Jason, of Greek mythology, appearing at Iolkos to claim the throne wearing





only one sandal. Somehow this incident stayed with Dr. Lovett as he prepared to speak to the team after the TCU game. That was cancelled, due to the loss of the game. He was called on rather suddenly in Waco, and he used the same thoughts he had prepared for the TCU game.

Dr. Lovett begins his story by noting that Jimmy Kitts's name was also Jason. His story denotes the parallels of the Rice football team of 1934 and Jason's adventures on the good ship *Argo*. Dr. Lovett begins by a comparison of Jason and Jimmy Kitts. "Jason was a hero of curly hair and one of the handsomest and fairest of men, gentle in speech, and genial of spirit." Jimmy Kitts is always described as handsome, charming, and gregarious. "Jason praised his men and numbered them every one, just like Jimmy Kitts. When Jason sent out his messengers for men to build and man the *Argo*, 11 men immediately responded, and later 50 others followed." Dr. Lovett goes on to describe Jason's first 11: "three sons of Zeus, two were sons of Poseidon; Hermes sent two sons, and Boreas the North Wind sent two others, and there was added Tiphys the steersman, and Mopsos, the seer. And so the Argonauts began their journey just as Jimmy and his team did last September."

Dr. Lovett proceeds to describe the events of Jimmy Kitts and his Owls with parallel adventures recorded in the log book of the *Argo*. "Jason and his Argonauts encountered and subdued beasts with horns, harpy birds with talons of steel and feathers two edged as a knife, and men with six arms, one from each shoulder and two from each side, and Jason finally slew the



Coach Jimmy Kitts

Dragon that guarded the Golden Fleece." Compare this with the Owls who battled and subdued Boilermakers (Purdue), Mustangs (SMU), Longhorns (Texas U.), Razorbacks (Arkansas), Wild Dogs (A&M), and finally vanquished the Bears of Baylor.

Dr. Lovett finishes his wonderful story full of similes by reminding us

that Jason went out to bring back the Golden Fleece, but also to return the spirit of the Greek hero Phryxus to his native Greece. He finalizes the speech by referencing that "Jimmy Kitts has brought home the spirits of Charley Rudd, of Oliver Garnett, of Marion Lindsey, and of Phil Arbuckle, all heroes in their day of our good ship *Argo*."

It is almost certain that not one of those in the dressing room had the faintest idea about a story of Jason and the Golden Fleece before Dr. Lovett made his speech. One can almost see those football players nudging the one next to them and rolling their eyes as if asking, "You got any idea what he's talking about?" All things considered, this was a great ending for a great team that set the standard for other Rice football teams of the future.

Your scribe has long been aware of this incident. It was referred to occasionally during the late 1940s. However, no details were ever provided. At different times, much later, I spoke to two members of that team and asked them about Dr. Lovett's speech to them. I got very little in the way of information. However, Red Bale did describe the deplorable dressing room conditions. There are a couple of stories that have come down through the years. One was that as a tribute and reward to the total squad, Coach Kitts elected to take many of those members of the team that did not get to play at all. These players were spoken of as "Ragnots." One of these players who got to make the trip excitedly told another, "they are going to start the Ragnots!" This story came to me from Frank Steen, a member of the 1934 and also the 1937 teams. Both teams won championships. The other story that comes out of this incident is that Frank Steen reportedly asked Jack McCauley, "what position does Jason

play?” Frank always denied that he actually said it, but I will attest to the fact that it did sound like something Steen would say. Steen was the legendary “class clown” of the 1930s football history.

In closing, it would be safe to say that no other Rice athletic team has had the opportunity of a private pre-game meeting with the president

of the university. It is probable that it will never again take place. Somehow or other, I detected in the re-telling of the incident that Dr. Lovett was enjoying himself hugely by firing off a large volley of similes that he could see between stories written 2,400 years apart. Dr. Lovett’s knowledge and fondness of Greek mythology is a further tribute to his

interests, character, and vast storehouse of knowledge. This was a “fight talk” for the ages. I had hoped that we could locate Dr. Lovett’s original notes, but seemingly they do not exist. We are indebted to the *Houston Press* of September 26, 1950, for most of the crucial and accurate details of this amazing story.

Photos from Froggy Williams’ Lecture



(At left) Froggy Williams and Quin McWhirter prior to Froggy’s lecture. Quin presented him with a photograph taken in July of Froggy’s receiving a replacement of the Bob Quin Award he originally won in 1950. The first award was lost during a home burglary. Quin inscribed the photo “To Froggy—my all-time hero.” Photo courtesy of Greg Davis



Van Ballard, Ron Conn, and Art Bleimeyer at the lecture by Froggy Williams, September 23, “Rice Football: 1912–1939” Photo courtesy of Greg Davis



Karen Rogers, Maydelle Burkhalter, Norman Kittrell, Lee Duggan



Doris and John Tessieri



Nancy Boothe

In Memoriam



The Rice Historical Society lost a valued member when **Georgia Meisner Tipton** passed away May 15, 2006.

A native Houstonian, a product of Houston schools, a Rice graduate in 1944, with a Masters degree in psychology later, Georgia taught in Houston schools for over 50 years, retiring in 1995 after more than 30 years at St. Francis Episcopal Day School.

Georgia was a member of Memorial Drive Presbyterian Church, a board member of Delta Kappa Gamma, and a dedicated board member of the Rice Historical Society with a lifelong interest in Rice University.

She was preceded in death by her husband, John, and is survived by her daughter, three sons, nine grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

July 25, 2006
Rice Historical Society
Rice University
P.O. Box 1892
Houston, TX 77251-1892

Dear Friends:

A great deal more can be said about "Rice at War, 1942-1945" than appeared on the back cover of your Summer 2006 issue. Not many are old enough to remember, but I do.

Captain T. A. Thomson, Jr., USN, was acting commandant of the Eighth Naval District in New Orleans in 1942 and perhaps early 1943. A commandant must be a rear admiral, and as a surprise to everyone in the New Orleans headquarters (including me; I spent three years there), he was passed over by the Navy Selection Board and ordered to Houston to assume command of the NROTC unit, which he did. He and his wife rented a nice house close to Rice.

I know very little of his service in command of the ROTC, but he was an experienced Navy officer and a very capable organizer. He also had a prickly disposition and was inclined to run a "tight ship," one heavy on discipline.

He has several great-nieces and -nephews in Houston available for interview should you decide to enlarge on the subject.

Sincerely,
Thomas D. Anderson
Rice '34



Join us for the

Rice Historical Society Holiday Party

Wednesday, December 13, 2006

4-6 p.m.

Look for your invitation in the mail!

FROM THE ARCHIVES

By Alan Bath



From the First Issue of the *Thresher*, 15 January 1916

The lead story concerned plans for a new dormitory for Rice men that was to cost \$98,000 and house 125 students. The building, the first of the second residential group, was expected to be ready for occupancy in the fall of 1916.

Postscript to “Rice at War”

Capt. Kermit K. Beahan, former guard on the 1939 Rice football team, was the bombardier who dropped the second atomic bomb, on Nagasaki. (*Thresher*, 16 August 1945)

Snow

On 19 January 1918, the *Thresher* reported the first snowfall in the history of the Institute. Students enjoyed snowballing, washing co-eds’ faces in the snow, cutting classes, and diving over the hedges into banks of drifting snow, causing one of the gardeners to comment, “Them hedges are sure ketchin’ Hell this morning!”

Well Oiled

“Arrangements had been completed Thursday (3 December 1942) between the trustees of the Institute and representatives of the Rincon Corporation and four interested banks in the proposed purchase of rich oil land in Starr County for the Institute. The purchase, when effected, will give the Institute 29/64 of the working interest of the Rincon Oil Field and will net an estimated yearly income of \$1,000,000.” (*Thresher*, 4 December 1942).

Political Football

The *Thresher* reported on 30 September 1932 that U.S. Senator Huey Long will lead the Louisiana delegation to Houston for Saturday’s game between Rice and LSU. (It should be noted that the Fighting Owls came from behind with a field goal in the last few minutes to defeat LSU, 10–8.)

Spring Hats

It's spring — the first thought of dress that turns to men is getting a new hat. Choose a style with a spring time atmosphere, light weight and one that conforms to your build.

You'll find it here in the better makes, at the lowest possible price.

\$6 \$7.50 \$10

Sakowitz Bros.

Ad from the *Thresher*, 1930s

“Those were the Days”

A selection of advertisements that appeared in various issues of the 1921 *Thresher*:

“No Student Should be Without a Typewriter.”
Rent \$3.00 per month. Houston Typewriter Exchange.

Brogue Oxford Shoes, Genuine Wine Cordovan, \$15.00. Tuffly & Scoggins Shoe Company.

Hart Schaffner & Marx Fall Suits, \$40.00. Sakowitz Brothers.

Rice Sweaters, \$10.00. Shotwells

“New Evening Gowns Have Arrived.
Lovely Creations from \$39.50.”
Foley Bros. Dry Goods Co.

Car Rentals: Clevelands, Fords, and Maxwells—
Sedans & Roadsters, \$1.20–\$2.50 per hour.

Intriguing Headline:

“Dr. Chandler Discovers Tapeworm”
(From the November 25, 1920, *Thresher*)



Rice vs. LSU, 1932