

The Cornerstone

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Autry House

By Joan Ferry

Sources for the following article include news clippings found in the Woodson Research Center at Rice University, and material from the Autry House Records in the Palmer Memorial Church archives, many of which came to light during extensive renovations of Autry House during 2002–2004.

Reminiscing about Emmanuel Community House, the rustic temporary facility he had cobbled together for Rice students in 1919 (two years before the present Autry House was built), the Rev'd Harris Masterson, Jr. recalled how “the old mess shack appeared at the beautiful gates of Rice like some ragged troubadour at a medieval city gate....”

The “medieval city” was in this case Rice Institute, which had opened in 1912. By the time its first class graduated in 1916, it was apparent that a suitable gathering place for Rice’s students was needed, an off-campus community house where they could meet during the day or in the evenings for recreation and socializing. This was especially so as there were no residential facilities on campus for women students, and they were cautioned against remaining on campus after dark for reasons of safety and propriety.

The Rev'd Masterson, an Episcopal priest, had recently returned from France, where he had served for a year with the Red Cross during World War I. Prior to that he had worked with youth in China under the auspices of the YMCA, and from these experiences he believed it essential for young people to have a wholesome environment in which to gather.



Autry House, c. 1921–22

The Episcopal Diocese of Texas, in response to Rev'd Masterson's concerns and those of the Rice community (and interested themselves in establishing a ministry to Rice's students), purchased property for a student community house in July 1919 from the City of Houston; they traded this land a year later for a plot measuring 250 feet square, located directly across Main Boulevard from Rice's third entrance and near the trolley car stop at the intersection of Fannin Street and Outer Belt Drive (convenient for students who lived off-campus).

At his own expense, Rev'd Masterson built his temporary facility on the Diocesan property, while planning was underway for the permanent community house. He acquired two Army mess shacks from Camp Logan, Houston's Army depot, and had them transported to the Diocesan land. With the help of Rice students, he put them together to form what he called the Emmanuel Community House (Emmanuel is the name of Jesus of Nazareth), which opened in the fall of 1919. He engaged Mrs. Eugene Blake, who had worked during World War I in a recreational canteen at

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Autry House Dedication, 1922

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the Light Guard armory, as hostess-matron, and together they administered the community house. Its facilities included a shop for pressing and cleaning clothes, a canteen for snacks, and a photo-developing shop, maintained and operated in whole or part by students, who shared in the profits.

In 1920, Rev'd Masterson commissioned the Boston architectural firm of Cram and Ferguson to design several additional buildings for the Diocesan land. William Ward Autry, a local architect and faculty member at Rice, collaborated in overseeing the planning and construction, as he had done earlier for the Boston firm when Rice's campus and first buildings were designed.

The resultant grand plan for the Diocesan land included a chapel, a residence for Rice's women students, and a Rectory for the director of the community house. Later, a residence for women nurses at Hermann Hospital, built in 1925, was also considered. Of these, only the chapel (which became Palmer Chapel) was built.

In 1921, Rev'd Masterson and the Rev'd Peter Gray Sears, Rector of Christ Church in downtown Houston, approached Mrs. Allie Kinsloe Autry (a member of Christ Church), who agreed to contribute \$50,000 toward building and furnishing the permanent community house as a memorial to her husband, who had died the previous year. An anonymous memorandum of the history of Autry House, written in June 1965 and "compiled from the Journals of the Diocese of Texas and the files of Autry," states that the Church Corporation of the Diocese of Texas borrowed \$50,000 from Rice Institute, with Mrs. Autry's agreement to repay the four notes involved during the year 1921.

Mrs. Autry stipulated that the community house should be called "Autry House, a Memorial to James Lockhart Autry," and should be operated on a non-sectarian basis, open to both men and women, students and faculty, of Rice Institute, and to all clubs and campus organizations. The Diocese was to retain title to the property and assume responsibility for administration, care, maintenance, and operations "in perpetuity."

The cornerstone was laid on Rice's Commencement Day, June 5, 1921, and construction was completed over the summer. Autry House opened to Rice students in September, with the Rev'd Masterson and Mrs. Blake continuing in their earlier capacities.



Laying of Autry House cornerstone, June 5, 1921.

Identified in front row, (l-r): William Ward Autry (standing behind upright); the Rev'd Harris Masterson, Jr.; Rice President Edgar Odell Lovett; the Rev'd Herbert L. Willett; Rice student; the Rev'd Peter Gray Sears.

An Advisory Committee was established for Autry House to assist with general policy and planning. It was composed initially of Edgar Odell Lovett, Rice's first president, as Chairman; Dr. Peter Gray Sears, Rector of Christ Church; and Mrs. Autry, to be followed later by their respective successors. The Board's consistency soon changed, however, and continued to change over the years.

In addition to the amenities that had existed in the temporary community house, Autry House had a kitchen and a cafeteria with serving area. Eating soon became a favorite student activity; Rev'd Masterson reported in his 1922 report to the Diocese that in the previous year 27,180 meals had been served to 900 students, "to say nothing of the canteen." (He further noted that "one of the professors at Rice has said that he thinks the motto of Autry House is 'feed my sheep'.")

Autry House also featured a large common room with a stage, one end of which was screened off as an altar area for use during church services, when the room became the setting for Saint Bede's Chapel (named for the 8th century saint and historian); Eucharist (Holy Communion) was offered every Sunday morning, often followed by Bible class.

Upstairs was a "Girls' Lounge" and sun-porch, several offices, and a balcony overlooking the common room below.

The first year's datebook for Autry House records 240 parties, including 20 dances, along with various group and club meetings, including Cranmer Club, the Episcopal students' club named by Rev'd Masterson for



Students relaxing at Autry House.

Thomas Cranmer, Archbishop of Canterbury under King Henry VIII and composer of the *Book of Common Prayer* of the Church of England. A “Miracle Play” entitled Sister Beatrice is also recorded, performed in March 1922 during Lent, and an exhibit of artwork by Rice graduates in December.

News clippings and various other records mention movies, plays, crowds around the canteen at night in the men’s game room, receptions, Silver Tea gatherings to raise funds for Autry House, students playing games of bridge (with hints of sneaking glances at opponents’ cards), and “an hour of chamber music or poetry reading weekly, followed by afternoon tea.” The welcoming atmosphere and hospitable presence of Mrs. Blake and Rev’d Masterson, along with their availability for counsel and comfort, soon earned for Autry House the reputation as “the Fireside of Rice.”

Early signatures in the Autry House Guest Book, begun in Oct. 1921, include Rev’d Harris Masterson’s, signing “1st Rector of Autry House, Old Community House, 1919;” Edgar Odell Lovett (Rice’s first President); musicians from the St. Louis Symphony and Metropolitan Grand Opera; and visitors from abroad—Peru; Shanghai, Nanking and other cities in China; Safed, Palestine; Prague; and a guest from the American Consulate in Constantinople, Turkey.

Rev’d Masterson, reporting to the Diocese in 1922, noted that when Autry House first opened, he had written to churches of all denominations or faiths, offering them the use of Autry House for meetings with students (adding that none had yet replied to his invitation); he also reported 120 religious services or meetings with a religious motive as of 1922. He had also written to student organizations, who “used their best paper and penmanship and spelling and accepted

the use of the house.” He added that no individual or club was allowed to own any property in Autry House, “and there are no specially privileged persons on the place, myself included.”

In 1927, Mrs. Daphne Palmer Neville agreed to provide funds for construction of the collegiate chapel envisioned for Rice students, which was to be built on the remaining half of the Diocesan property. She donated \$100,000 to the Diocese as a memorial to her brother, Edward Albert Palmer, who had drowned in 1908 while attempting to save her after she had fallen from a yacht on Clear Creek.

Palmer Memorial Chapel was dedicated on March 27, 1927, but remained a student chapel for less than two years. Neighborhoods in Houston’s South End had continued to grow, and there was interest in establishing an Episcopal parish nearby. In 1928, a group of members of Christ Church (including Mrs. Neville and her husband) petitioned Bishop Quin to establish a parish at Palmer Chapel; the parish was instituted at the Chapel in February 1929, after which its name officially became Palmer Memorial Church, although it continued to be referred to frequently as “Palmer Chapel.”

A parish building was soon built on the property and the Rev’d Peter Gray Sears was called from Christ Church in 1929 to serve as Palmer’s first Rector, and also as Rector of Autry House until he retired. His successor, the Rev’d Stanley L. Smith, also served in these two capacities; he is recorded as having been successful in obtaining money for needed repairs at Autry House from the Diocese, to whom he is said to have “respectfully submitted” that they should “either appropriate sufficient funds to operate Autry House or close it.”

Minutes of the Autry House Board during the 1940s note that about 200 students passed in and out of Autry House daily; the cafeteria served some 50 people per day, with weekly earnings of about \$25.00. A detailed inventory for May 1945, hand-written on yellow graph paper, indicates visitors ate heartily: the list of purchases includes large quantities of vegetables, and cooking and baking supplies. Another list entitled “Fixtures belonging to Autry House” suggests that students with a “sweet-tooth” would have no problem in satisfying it, thanks to “eight Ice cream cabinets, complete with motor; 2 Malt mix electric machines, and 4 Ice Cream dippers.”

Concerns about expenses for the constant maintenance and repair needed at Autry House appear often in the records. During the 1940s, repairs were needed for the crumbling exterior of the building and

replacement of the worn-out floor in the Ping Pong room. There were also concerns about salaries during the summer months—the hostess's position, for example, was paid only during the Rice school year.

To help with the financial problem, the Board decided at their meeting in August 1946 to ask Rice organizations who met at Autry House to increase their contributions by 50%, which they agreed to; the Diocese also increased funding by \$1,000 a year.

During World War II, students in the NROTC (Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps) stationed at Rice were welcomed to Autry House to participate in recreational activities and dances. After the war ended, the Autry House Board was presented a Certificate of Achievement at their February 1947 meeting by Navy Captain J. E. Cooper, given on behalf of the Navy Board of Personnel "in recognition of outstanding service rendered to N.R.O.T.C. and V-12 units stationed at Rice." The Navy Recreational Director also made a small cash donation to the Board in appreciation for their role in providing hospitality and care for the Navy students.

Later that year, in September, the Autry House Board agreed that nurses at Hermann Hospital and students at Baylor Medical School (which had just moved into its present site in the new Texas Medical Center) should be welcomed at Autry House dances. The results of the Board's decision were later reported to be a great success.

The Board also decided to negotiate contracts with outside groups to operate the Canteen and Café during the 1947–48 Rice school year; the groups were to assume all liabilities and report monthly expenses and profits, with Autry House receiving 25% of the net profit.

The 1950s brought many changes to the Rice campus as the post-World War II economy flourished and the building of new facilities became possible. A system of residential housing on campus for both men and women was initiated; a Rice student center (Rice Memorial Center) and the Rice Memorial Chapel were completed in 1958, and the new Hamman Hall provided a place on campus for theatrical productions. As a result, many of the facilities that Autry House had offered Rice students for some 40 years were now available on campus.

Consequently, Autry House began to form new relationships with teaching institutions in the Texas Medical Center. One of the most successful means in which this was accomplished was (once again) through good food, in the form of lunch served on weekdays in the old cafeteria at Autry House, now called the Refectory, which opened in the fall of 1959. According to Board Minutes, it soon began to attract around 40 patrons per week, growing to some 35 per day by February of 1960.

Another new initiative was the formation of a Joint Campus Ministry, which brought together other religions and church denominations. The organization has continued to the present day and now gathers annually for an Ecumenical Thanksgiving Day service and meal.

The chapel at Autry House also underwent change in 1959, when it was officially recognized as a Diocesan Chapel and became the Collegiate Chapel of Saint Bede, with its own student Vestry, Senior and Junior Warden, and Treasurer.

A troublesome new "visitor" to Autry House appears in the Board Minutes of April 1, 1959, with a report of pigeons roosting at Autry House. "Operation Pigeon" was launched immediately, with one of the Board members assigned to conduct research into the best means of getting rid of them. He reported at the November meeting that the best hope seemed to be the use of a product called "Nicalite." (Pigeons reappear in the Board records of October 1993, when the Autry House Chaplain reported expenses of \$6,000–7,000 for roof and rafter repair, including cleaning the attic from pigeons and their debris.)

In 1962, during the Semi-Centennial Celebration of Rice (now University), Autry House hosted a series



1940s, WW II era: Rice NROTC students enjoying a dance at Autry House.

of 10 lectures on the subject "The University and Its Work." Lecturers included William H. Masterson, Dean of Humanities, and several high officials of Rice.

Autry House celebrated its own 50th Anniversary in 1971, and a Re-Dedication of Autry House took place on Nov. 5, 1971. The celebration concluded in April 1972 with a series of four lectures entitled "Notes from a Lovers' Quarrel: The University and the Church," concerning the relationship between institutions of faith and learning in the 16th, 19th, and 20th centuries. Charles Garside, Jr., Associate Professor of History at Rice, opened the series with a lecture entitled "The Reformation: Issues that Abide."

In 1975, Main Street Theatre was organized by Rebecca Greene Udden, and Autry House became its home for eight years, during which the group performed classical and contemporary plays until moving to the Rice Village.

Although Autry House had undergone some alterations and additions since the original construction in 1921, the first major remodeling took place from 1974 to 1976, when a new entry was built, with a ramp to give easier access for the handicapped. Repairs were made to fences and the parking lot, and the serving room adjacent to the kitchen underwent modifications. (An Honor Award from the Texas Society of Architects and recognition by the National Trust for Historic Preservation were presented later for the quality of the remodeling and renovation.)

During the late 1970s, the Autry House Chaplain, Rev'd John Worrell, reported to the Diocesan Council that a new initiative had been launched at Autry House, called The Gallery, which displayed the work of new artists and student artists, including work of students at Rice.

Serious problems with structural settlement at Autry House resulted in the need for new piers to be installed under the apse. The problem brought out a bit of humor in the Board Minutes taken by the current recording secretary (we are not told if she sang this as she wrote): "...Autry House is falling down, falling down..."; and (in noting that movement had knocked pillars askew in the cloister): "...The building is not covered by collision insurance (maybe it should be since it is a moving object)..."

Stability seems to have returned, and during the 1980s the Guest Book records that Autry House opened its facilities to a number of groups, including the Houston Youth Chorus, Alcoholics Anonymous, the Leukemia Society, the American Cancer Society, the National Association of Social Workers, and the Hispanic Social Workers.

In 1984, Autry House was listed (along with Palmer Memorial Chapel) in the National Register of Historic Places by the U.S. Department of the Interior, and the plaque received for this award is now mounted outside the entryway, along with a Texas Historical Medallion awarded in 1994 by the Texas Historical Commission, recording the facility as a Texas Historic Landmark.

In November 1985, television station KUHT taped John Bradshaw, a nationally known inspirational speaker, in five sessions at Autry House as he presented a series of lectures entitled "John Bradshaw on the Family."

The Refectory, which had been operating at Autry House for almost 30 years (since 1959), was having difficulties in breaking even. A suggestion was made at the Board meeting in March 1988 that the Refectory should consider charging sales tax and putting it in escrow. The following month, there was discussion of closing the Refectory and reopening it under a new name and new business license, but by November the Refectory was serving more people, especially students, which was attributed to advertising in August and offering student discounts.

The pattern of Refectory financial problems followed by periods of success continued until 1994, when a health inspection in September revealed a broken freezer, requiring that all of the food be thrown out. The television report by the colorful Marvin Zindler ("Slime in the ice machine!"), and failure after much discussion to find possible options for restoring the Refectory, resulted in its closure in December 1994, although it reopened in April 1995 under new management, finally closing permanently in June 2001.

[It should be noted, however, that the Rev'd James Nutter, current Rector of Palmer Church, announced plans in December 2007 to open a refectory within the near future in Palmer's Parish Hall, located upstairs in the "Bridge Building" that connects to Autry House.]

The Rev'd James Nutter's arrival at Palmer Church in late 1994 resulted in a vigorous new program of outreach and rapid growth in church membership. By the late 1990s there was need for an expansion of the church's facilities, including more Sunday School classrooms and a larger Parish Hall.

In 2001, leaders at Palmer Church drew up plans for an extensive renovation and expansion, which would include a large "Bridge Building" connecting Palmer with Autry House. Diocesan officials agreed to the plans, but with the understanding that Palmer would incorporate Autry House within itself and

assume future costs of operating and maintaining the facility.

The large downstairs area in Autry House that had accommodated the Refectory and a variety of activities and gatherings, along with services in St. Bede's Chapel, would now be dedicated specifically to chapel use, with priority for use by campus ministry, but also, when available, by Palmer Church. The Chaplain would continue to be appointed by the bishop, with concurrent approval of the Rector of Palmer, but would now be a part of the Palmer staff as well, with duties at Palmer in addition to campus ministry. (The Diocese would continue to fund part of the Chaplain's salary and help with the costs of Autry House programs.)

The Rev'd Mark Crawford, who holds a D. Min. in Spiritual Formation, is the present Chaplain of Autry House (his official title is Director of Campus Ministries); he is also Associate Rector of Palmer Church. On a recent tour, he pointed out some of the original features of Autry House, including an outside staircase on the north side that leads to the second floor, and the original windows along the south side of the building.

Inside, he pointed out a tile embedded in the arch framing the altar, which records in Arabic two of "the Names of God," a reminder of the original ecumenical nature of the building.

On the second floor is the large Canterbury Room, with walls of warm red, comfortable seating, and (naturally!) space for serving meals to hungry students. Rice's Canterbury members meet on Sunday in the late afternoon for communion in the Chapel, then move upstairs for supper, followed usually by a guest speaker and discussion. (Rev'd Crawford also offers Compline (evening prayer) weekly in the Rice Memorial Chapel, and Bible study in Hanzen's Common Room on Fridays.)

On Thursday evenings, Texas Medical Center student members of the Christian Medical and Dental Associations (CMDA) gather in the Canterbury Room for supper, which students take turns in providing. This is followed by guest speakers and discussion on topics ranging from providing spiritual comfort as well as medical treatment when patients request it, to medical ethics and other issues in current medical and dental practice.

The author of an anonymous review of Autry House, written in March 1990 as preface to a capital campaign for reconstruction, muses about the role Autry House has filled over the years, both in the Rice community and the city at large. The writer sees Autry



Rev'd Masterson and Mrs. Blake

House as "a kind of tideland, a 'place-in-between,' where the communities of faith and of learning, of reflection and of action, meet and interact.... (we) stand for the proposition that we are not called upon to check our faith at the door of the university nor our brains at the door of the church."

Judging by the number of Rice-affiliated individuals and Rice alumni who are members of Palmer and attend services at Palmer Church or in St. Bede's Chapel at Autry House (some with children or grandchildren in tow), it is likely that the strong connection between both institutions—Rice and Autry House—will remain strong over the years to come.

The Rev'd Masterson would be pleased that his "ragged troubadour," now well matured and still vigorous, has continued a lively relationship with the flourishing "medieval city" across the street.



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Nancy Boles, John Boles signing his biography of Edgar Odell Lovett, University Builder



Froggy and Robbie Williams

Photos courtesy of Greg Davis