

The Cornerstone

FALL 2003

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE RICE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOL. 8, NO. 4

SALVATORE “TONY” MARTINO

By Froggy Williams

How in the world did Tony Martino manage to become a double legend at the Rice Institute between 1916 and 1953? It would be difficult to set out to locate a less likely candidate. He was an immigrant from Italy, could not speak nor write one word of English upon his arrival for his second try at immigration in 1908. Despite these impediments, he became, at least regionally, famous for his ability to plant trees, bushes, and anything else that would grow in the Gulf Coast plains of Texas. His second legendary status was as the revered speaker at student-led pep rallies, particularly in the fall of the year and usually before some “Big Game” opponents on the gridiron. Stay with our story and we will lead you to at least some of the answers.

Tony Martino was born on the island of Sicily on August 21, 1885, in the small town of Alia. Tony was one of eight children. At the time Italy was still a monarchy; the king was Umberto I.

Tony was enrolled in school and went through what we would call the fifth grade. In 1896, at the age of eleven, he was sent as an apprentice to Florence, Italy, to study horticulture. He was in the apprentice program until 1901 and received an impressive title as “Director of Italian Botanica.” Tony later described this school as the “only one of its kind in the world.” At this point Tony traveled to Rome, where his brother was located in a position as a provincial in the Roman



Tony “a real campus favorite” and his brother

Catholic Church. He assisted Tony by getting him an apprenticeship as a “second gardener” at the Vatican for two years. This brother later became a cardinal of the Roman Catholic Church.

We have only a small amount of historical information about Tony. We

do have at least two articles in which reporters were directly interviewing him. I found it somewhat incredible that neither asked two obvious questions: “Tony, why were you so intent on immigrating to the United States, and why did you choose Houston

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NEWSLETTER DESIGNED
BY TOMORROW'S KEY

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*Sammy
in Aggie
Captivity,
1917*

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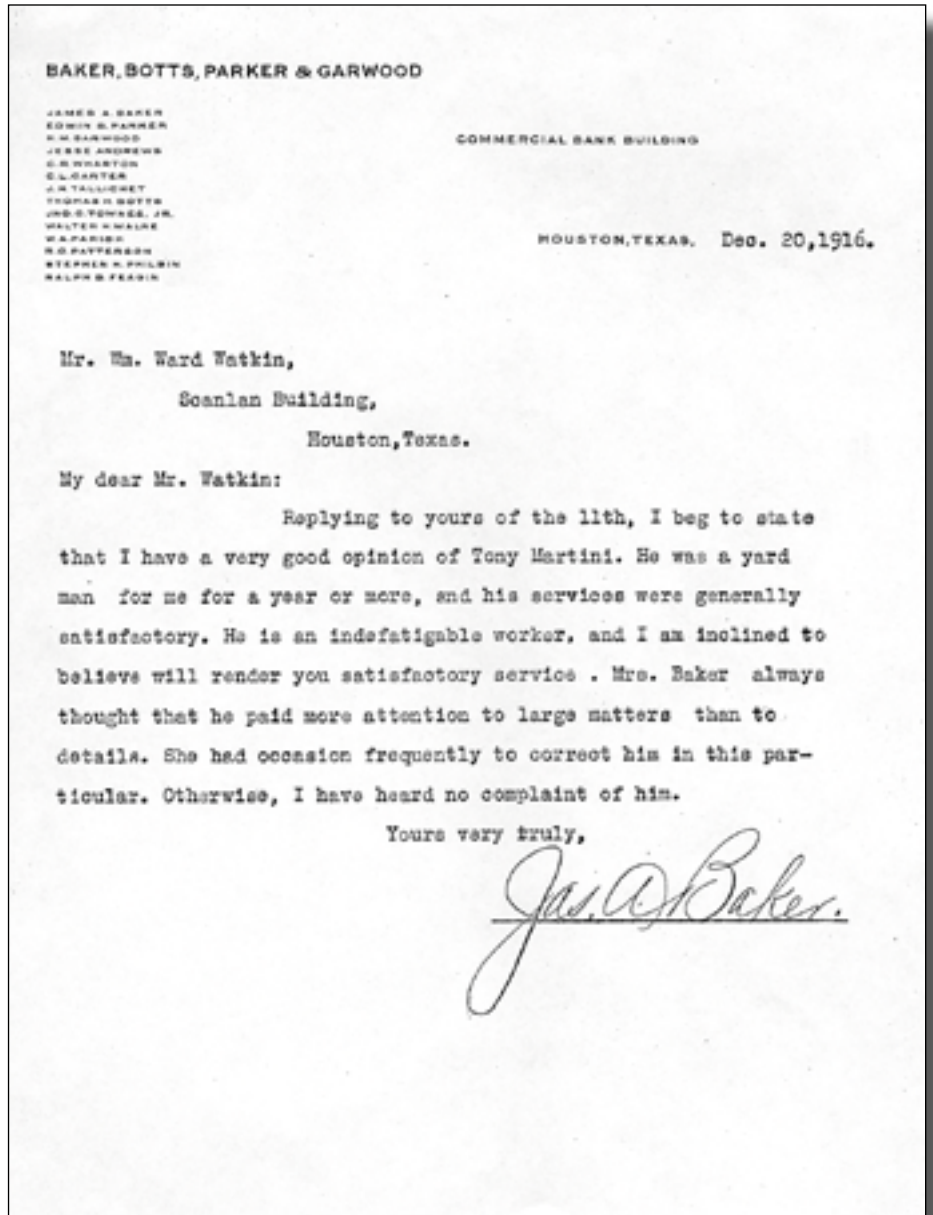
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as your destination?" It is possible that questions were raised but were edited out somewhere. We do know that Tony immigrated to Houston in 1903. This trip was short-lived. Tony was contacted by the Italian government; how is completely uncertain, but the impression is that Tony was drafted and forced to return to Italy where he was inducted into the army and served as a quartermaster. One does wonder how an unemployed immigrant in Houston, Texas, in 1903 could have been located and convinced to return to Italy for forced service in the Italian army. The next time we can locate Tony is November 2, 1908. He has arrived again in Houston. He has no money, cannot speak one word of English, and has no preconceived plan to make his way in his newfound country. It is safe to assume that Tony, after assessing his situation, knew exactly what to do. He began working in the yards of prominent Houstonians. One might ask how we know this, and the answer is simple. Although there is almost a complete blank between 1908 and 1916 we know one fact that is certain. Tony became a yard worker for James A. Baker, the legendary original chairman of the Rice board of trustees, attorney for William Marsh Rice, and the man who preserved the original funds intended for the university after the death of Mr. Rice. There is a letter in the files at the Woodson Research Center written by Mr. Baker to William Ward Watkin referencing Tony Martini [sic]. This letter is a small treasure. Just think about it. Here is one of the most prominent Houstonians of the day, taking time to recommend his yard man to the person at the Rice Institute whose many duties included the oversight of the building and maintenance of the Rice Institute campus in 1916. If one looks at the letter, one could draw the conclusion that possibly Mrs. Baker really was the person who knew more about Tony Martino than



*Letter from Captain James A. Baker to William Ward Watkin,
December 20, 1916*

anyone else. Also, what a priceless picture, for those who actually heard Tony speak in that beautiful broken Italian/English, working for Mrs. Baker and probably trying to get her to do certain things she did not want done. It appears that Mrs. Baker knew Tony well. She remarks that Tony "paid more attention to large matters than details"! What Tony needed was a larger canvas on which to paint his gardening dreams. Somewhat unwittingly, Mr. and Mrs. Baker actually put Tony in a position to wield his rather enormous floral brush on some

300 acres at the Rice Institute. The campus of the future was carefully planned by Dr. Lovett, Ralph Adams Cram and Associates, with William Ward Watkin as the direct supervisor. Here are these learned, highly intelligent people setting out to design and create a beautiful campus. But remember, someone has to dig, plant, fertilize, and select the exact plants for all this to happen. And by an enormous twist of fate, the university chose a recent Italian immigrant who could barely speak English to carry out these plans.

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Presumably, most readers of the *Cornerstone* are familiar with the Rice campus. But in case some are not, the Rice campus is a spectacular garden spot on South Main just a few blocks south of the Warwick Hotel and the Mecom Fountain. At this point both sides of South Main are lined with huge live oak trees. There was one small grove of these trees on campus as it was built; otherwise it was a typical Gulf Coast treeless prairie. The one original grove was just east of Lovett Hall. Tony and his crew ended up planting an estimated 6,000 live oaks on the campus.

One of Tony's great charms was his Italian English. For example, he was once advising Dorothy Neely, wife of legendary athletic director and football coach, of some flowers she should be planting at their home just off University. He was advising her to plant some "baga de villa." After several trips to nurseries where they could not find such a plant and then a return visit by Mrs. Neely to talk to Tony she was finally able to ascertain that he was talking about bougainvillea. Probably the best known story was about the contingent of Texas Tech University people who came to town in the 1940s to study the Rice campus to try to emulate what had been done here for the Tech campus. As part of the discussion they inquired about the trees and Tony told them they were "livioca trees." All the people dutifully wrote it down exactly as Tony pronounced it. You will not be surprised to know that there was no nursery in all of West Texas that had any "livioca trees" in stock and, furthermore, none had heard of such a tree. I am sure you can see where this story is going. After several phone calls back and forth someone was able to tell them they were looking for live oak trees. Paul Hochuli, Rice graduate and long-time newspaper columnist, described beautifully Tony's handiwork as "every tree and shrub on the Rice campus stands as a living monu-



Rice Campus in the Snow, 1930

ment to his memory."

One of his more memorable efforts was the enormous hedge of cape jasmine in the quadrangle. This was an integral part of the Rice campus from the early days and up into the 1950s. As a happenstance, they were always in bloom at graduation time and generations of Rice graduates will remember their pungent odor while the graduation ceremonies were taking place. The Italian cypress trees were a notable fixture on the campus. Tony, for whatever reason, was able to construct a tunnel-like garden walkway from then West Hall, down by the old Rice Stadium. This was the accepted route to Bill Williams to get a ham-

burger or to splurge and eat some shrimp at Christy's.

There is a wonderful factual story that must be told. It goes back to February 5, 1920. On that date there was a gathering to honor the famous World War I general John J. Pershing. The information we have does not explain why General Pershing was in Houston, but it does give us a few particulars. There was a sizable gathering of faculty and staff and students. Included also was the mayor of Houston. Dr. Edgar Odell Lovett and General Pershing made some sort of speech. At the same time, a pecan tree was planted with General Pershing turning the first shovel of



General Pershing with Tony at his feet.



Governor Hobby breaking ground for pecan tree planted by General Pershing.

dirt. There was an article from the *Houston Post* of October 8, 1933, and a picture of Tony examining pecans on the tree. Tony remarked that the Pershing Memorial Pecan Tree was his most prized plant on the campus, and he was constantly watching over it. At the writing of an article in 1933, he still had the shovel that General Pershing used to turn the first dirt for planting the tree. Maybe Tony forgot to leave instructions when he retired in 1948. In effect, no one knows for sure whether it survived. It is certainly more exciting to feed a legend than to debunk one. I spoke to Ron Smith who has been at Rice for twenty years and is in charge of grounds maintenance. He advises me that there is one pecan tree on the campus. It is near Martel College. Ron, of course, cannot tell us that this is the Pershing Tree. But, for crying out loud, where in the world would that one pecan tree come from except the one Tony planted? It is a mature tree. Assuming it is that tree, it would now be eighty-three years old. I say, let's form a committee (we'll stack the committee), give them all the facts we have and

then let's go put a marker by that tree and say it is "highly probable" that this is the Pershing Memorial Pecan Tree planted on February 5, 1920. Also, let's be sure we look after that pecan tree as a part of this legend. By the way, Ron Smith passed on a very valuable piece of information to me. The Harris County Champion Live Oak Tree is on the Rice campus. It is in the area of the Founder's Court. This assembly is one of the original few trees that were on the campus at the time of the purchase of the land for the Rice Institute.

In the 1920s and 1930s Tony had a beautiful rose garden just west of the statue of Mr. Rice. There are many anecdotes about Tony and his love affair with plants. The most famous is concerned with the 1920s annual tradition of the sophomores to kidnap the freshman president. In the fall of 1923 the freshmen brazenly reversed the usual pattern and kidnapped the sophomore president. A great battle developed in front of what is now Lovett Hall. There was boxing and wrestling and pushing by a large group and they were falling over

hedges. Suddenly Tony appears and with a scream heard on South Main demanded that the students leave his hedges and go somewhere else to do battle. Believe it or not, that whole group backed off and that was the end of the fighting. All the participants slunk away and left Tony in command of the field of battle.

Tony had a probing mind, a love of horticulture, and was in love with every plant he touched. Tony always wanted a hot house to experiment and develop his own plants for the campus. This one thing he was not to have. However, one thing becomes crystal clear as you try to capture the essence of Tony Martino. He was a master horticulturist. He thought big and one is reminded of the comments of Mrs. Baker alluded to earlier. Tony was inclined to "pay more attention to large matters than to details." In essence, Tony could see the big picture and wanted it to be perfect. He also needed a large venue and the Rice campus was the result of Tony's handiwork.

Tony is properly eulogized for his enormous contribution in fashion-

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Rice Fight Never Dies

By GUS KRANZ

Does that mean anything to you—the slogan that began when Rice began, that will live as long as Rice lives? It has been the feeling back of that slogan that has kept the fighting spirit here at Rice, not only when it came to backing that football team, but also in every activity Rice ever entered into. Will that fighting spirit die out now?

Bunch, it is true that we have not made a wonderful showing in the conference this year, but just because of that are you going to cease to back that team? Are you going to be the kind that yells for them when they are winning and when they are losing sit back with closed mouth and disgustedly criticize them, or are you going to be the kind that sticks with them through thick and thin—always willing to back them, winning or losing? Bunch, it remains entirely with you as individuals as to which kind

you will be! The latter is a real sportsman—the man who never recognizes defeat. If that team of ours can't win when we back them, what chance do you think they stand without our support?

Every man on that team has fought hard this year and has come through with his part of the bargain. It has just so happened that the conference this year has been unusually fast. **DON'T RUN THAT TEAM DOWN**—that is the poorest sportsmanship in the world—but stick back of them for these last three games, yell for them, and show them that they have our support and that no matter what happens they are Rice's Own and we are proud of them!

..The eyes of many an outsider are upon us. They are waiting to see whether or not we will continue to support that team. Well, bunch, let's show them that win or lose—"Rice Fight Never Dies"!

Thresher article, March 4, 1927

ing a garden spot on a piece of flat land at the far south side of Houston. However, Tony had another great talent to bestow upon the Rice Institute, and it had nothing to do with the grounds of the university. We cannot locate an actual beginning point of the Tony Martino legend as it is related to Rice athletics. We do know that by the 1930s Tony was the revered attraction at pep rallies in the fall of the year during football season. We spoke to "Zubie" Zuber '30, Harry Chavanne '33, Red Bale '35, and Phil Peden '38. All clearly remember Tony's performances in those years and all remember that he had been doing it for a "long time." It is safe to assume that at least as early as the 1920s, Tony was a traditional part of pep rallies and bonfires for big game preparation. How he was able to arrive at this exalted position I am not perfectly clear. But we know he continued to appear all during the 1940s and into the early 1950s. So what is it that made Tony a legend? Well, his oratory was short, succinct, and rather unintelligible. But all of those



Bonfire before the Aggie Game, 1941

who were privileged to hear Tony at his best know precisely why he was so revered. Tony's masterpiece was his ending. Every Rice student knew exactly what he was going to say, waited with bated breath for it to happen, and gave a monumental cheer as he ended his speech. The way it came out was that Rice was certainly going to win because "Rice-a-fite-a-nev-a-die." This was always followed by the loudest cheer of the evening and the pep rally ended on that note. Tony was a treasure. He was most certainly one of a kind and to those of us of the 20s, 30s, 40s and 50s he shall never be forgotten.

As a side note it was always assumed that Tony must have coined the phrase. A diligent search was made and it turned out that he most likely did not. The search located an article in the Rice *Thresher* of November 4, 1927. Written by Gus Kranz, it states simply that the phrase "Rice Fight

Never Dies" began when Rice began. Tony may not have coined the phrase, but he certainly turned it into an art form and preserved it as part of the Rice tradition.

In most of the articles in the archives, there were references to the fact that Tony was a devout Roman Catholic. He did many things for his church. We are indebted to a recent article in the *Cornerstone* concerning the memories of J. Raymond Peterson in which he tells a story of being unable to go home at Christmastime. He was working at the chemistry lab on Christmas Eve and as he was leaving, he ran into Tony Martino. Tony inquired to why he was on campus. He invited Peterson to his home. Tony lived on the campus. His house was somewhere near the present tennis and baseball stadiums. This was also the area where the mules were kept that were necessary to maintain the campus grounds. He sat with Tony

and his family and had a glass of wine and a lot of conversation with Tony and his wife. There were children there as well. Mr. Peterson thought they were all Tony's children but that would not be correct. Tony and his wife had one child; presumably, the other would have been his nephew. Tony's brother was in Houston but left to return to Italy. He left his son, "Little" Tony Martino with Tony and his wife. He grew up in Tony's home and, in fact, spent his life on the Rice campus. He worked for Rice until his retirement. Unfortunately, Tony's only son died at the age of 14 in 1928. It was a great tragedy for Tony and Matilda. They donated a room in honor of their son at the St. Joseph Infirmary.

It might seem somewhat incongruous in 2003 to imagine, but in 1946 and beyond, all work on campus was still using mule power for the grounds keeping. Consequently, there was a stable of mules and a large contingent of grounds workers. It is so memorable, that on rather quiet days in 1946-47, you could be sitting in your dorm room (with no air conditioning) and you could hear the mules snort, hooves clapping and trace chains jangle and, above all,



Tony speaking at the Aggie bonfire, 1941



Tony Martino and his wife Matilda

you heard Tony shouting at the crew. It was presumably his "management style." I can assure you that there was a constant stream of instructions and prodding going on. You could hear the crews at work from almost any point on the campus as it was in 1946. In case you need some assistance with the mental picture just drawn, you can attempt to picture the scene by imagining that the buildings on campus consisted of only Lovett Hall, the Physics Building, the Engineering Building, Naval ROTC, the Chemistry Building, and Cohen House. Beyond that there were only the Power House and three men's dormitories called East, South, and West Hall. There was besides this, the old football stadium and the semblance of a field house at the corner of South Main and University. So when Tony and his crew were working you could hear the clatter all over the grounds. There were virtually no cars on campus in 1946.

The writer took some pain to go and stand in a quiet place just east of Lovett Hall and in that original grove of trees in late spring. It was relatively easy to travel backward to 1946 and imagine that Tony was out there somewhere, shouting, prodding his crews and digging. In fact, I became convinced somewhere along the way in my reverie that Tony was still there. I could feel it. I would hypothesize that had you been at Rice in the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s you would have felt the same as I. Try it some time.

Notes: A large amount of the historical information came from numerous articles in the *Houston Chronicle*, *Houston Post*, and *Houston Press*. These are in the archives at the Woodson Research Center. Also, we need to recognize some salient comments from Ray Watkin Strange, daughter of William Ward Watkin.



Sammy the Owl with A & M captors

SAMMY THE OWL

By Nancy Burch

How did Sammy get his name, a question frequently asked by newcomers to the Rice campus? The answer is rooted in the rivalry that began between the Rice Institute and Texas A&M, probably with the first athletic competition between the two. In an interview in the 1970s with Hattie Lel Red, a member of Rice's first graduating class in 1916, she commented, "We didn't like the Aggies even back then."

In a draft of an essay begun by Professor Julian Huxley in 1918 but never finished, he told of how the owl became Rice's mascot. He wrote, "The president of the university had secured the acceptance...of an owl as badge and symbol of the place. It

was a delightful ancient Greek owl, taken from an Athenian drachma. He looked at you with his wise eyes from unexpected corners of the buildings and sat in a guardant family of three on the university coat of arms. Not unnaturally, owls were the rage among the undergraduates as well and eventually an enormous mascot of an owl was made and paraded with great pride by the undergraduate band and cheering section at football games."

It was on a winter's night in January of 1917 when Rice's owl mascot, still unnamed at the time, mysteriously took flight from Houston. The occasion was a basketball game between Rice and A&M on January 16. Without appropriate athletic

facilities on campus, the teams played downtown. Conflicting sources cite the location as either the YMCA or the City Auditorium. Throughout its three years of competition, the Owl cagers had owned a perfect record against the Aggies, including a 19-16 victory the night before, but the jinx was broken that night as A&M prevailed, 21-13.

As the jubilant Aggies were leaving, they noticed that the Rice students had left their six-foot-tall, stuffed owl mascot unattended and the opportunity was simply too good to miss. The giant bird soon was on its way north to College Station.

In 1974 David Chapman, Rice '67, interviewed Hans Rothe, a student

at Texas A&M during those days. According to Rothe, "They paraded that owl around there (the campus). [W.B.] Bizzell was president at the time and they brought it over there to his residence. He came out and had his picture made with it. They published it in the Houston papers and it got those Rice Owl boys kind of stirred up."

Ronald Fritze, writing in the Winter 1984 issue of the Friends of Fondren Library's *Flyleaf* noted, "The A&M student paper *Battalion* carried a story about the captured owl." It ended with, "If Rice wishes to claim their Bird and ever think they are able to take him safely back to the 'Institoot,' they can find him at 37 Milner Hall, College Station, Texas."

By January 19, a rescue squad of students calling itself the Owl Protective Association (OPA) had hired a private detective and dispatched him to College Station in search of the Rice mascot. The next day, 13 members of the OPA disguised themselves as cadets and met up with him on the A&M campus. Posing as bull sergeants, according to Fritze, they boldly conducted a room-by-room search until forced by daybreak to discontinue their efforts without success and return home.

Undaunted, the OPA hired another detective, Sam Snow, referred to in some accounts of the tale as "Snowball." He traveled to College Station on January 29, posing as a magazine writer there to do a story on the "owl-napping" prank. Gaining the confidence of the Aggies, Snow verified the location of the mascot and on January 30 sent the famous telegram back to Rice saying, "Sammy is better and would like to see his parents tonight at 11 o'clock."

In the May 1953 issue of *The Rice Engineer* Tom Flynn recounted, "an assault party of 17 men left Houston in a fast Super Six and two sleek 1915 rented Fords." Arriving in College Station just before midnight, they

learned from the detective that the owl was being held captive in the most secure room on the campus, on the third floor of the U.S. Armory. According to Flynn, hope of rescuing Sammy by stealth was dashed after Jimmy Waters, better known in later years as Electrical Engineering Professor James E. Waters, was forced to escape a night watchman by climbing out of a window and descending the fire escape. "A second watchman on the ground complicated matters by firing after Mr. Waters with a .44," related Flynn.

Writing in the 1923 *Campanile* Waters described the ensuing scene. "The door to the Armory had to be broken down while the watchman was kept in conversation. One very worthy football star splattered himself all over that door and the floor beneath. Sammy, the precious, was rushed to the waiting cars just as the whole Cadet Corps was awakened by the shooting of the watchman's .44 and the subsequent hullabaloo."

The rescuers had doused the owl with gasoline in the event they might have to burn him as a last resort. Retreating to their cars at a dead run, the Rice men took flight. "The Hudson Super Six rocked around the campus giving the cadets a serenade of honks and yells," related Flynn. Before leaving the campus, the Rice men also managed to paint the 20-0 score of the previous year's Owl football victory over the Aggies.

The OPA had succeeded in its mission but trouble lay ahead. A short distance down the road the lights on both of the Fords went out and the trailing one rammed the leader when it broke down. Abandoning the rental cars, the group piled into the Super Six – 17 men and a gasoline-soaked owl.

Soon the overloaded car was passed by a train with several hundred cadets on board, planning to intercept the raiders before they reached Houston. Seeking an alternate route, the Rice

men turned off onto a side road only to have the Hudson run out of gas after its fuel tank was punctured. Forced to spend the remainder of the night in the country, the group then stopped for repairs in the town of Milliken.

(Note: accounts differ on exactly what happened along the road. Fritze reported that one of the Fords was towed for some distance by the Hudson before being left in a ditch while the other was able to continue on until it broke down completely.)

Now the 17 OPA members were being pursued by between several hundred to 1200 angry cadets, depending on which version of the story is accurate. Fritze cites it as "one of the biggest manhunts in Texas," undoubtedly true in 1917 and certainly the largest owl hunt ever. Nine students and two cars were captured at the garage in Milliken. "The remaining eight students now found themselves marooned with a 191-pound, stuffed owl to lug around," said Fritze.

The decision was made to save the canvas skin and burn the stuffing. Attracted by the smoke, a party of cadets captured four more of the Rice group but the other four managed to escape with the owl's skin. They were now stranded in the countryside swarming with Aggie search parties. "Cadets occupied the towns of Milliken and Navasota, and had seized control of the public transport, the telegraph and the telephone system," reported Fritze.

The February 15th issue of the *Rice Thresher*, which devoted nine columns to the story, identified the final four by last names only – Dain, Payne, Waters and Drummond – but described them as well chosen for their task. Rice alumni records list James W. Dain '22, John P. Payne '18 or Brittain F. Payne '22, William A. Waters '22 and John George Drummond '19.

Pursued by a band of cadets, the

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Rescued Sammy with "the Men Who Went After the Owl" – Rice students (top row) Vernor and Clark, (middle row) Moore (only arm, shoulder and knee are visible), Bright, Carr, Fulweiler, J. Parker, and (bottom row) Dain, Payn, Waters,

four managed to outdistance them and head toward Navasota. Without food and water for almost 24 hours, they were so exhausted that, according to the article, Waters, an all-state high jumper, "could not clear a one-foot

fence and left part of his trousers and shirt thereon. Payne was unable to jump a four-foot creek and lit in the middle of it," reported the Thresher.

Taking refuge in some thick undergrowth, the foursome slept for several

hours, taking turns on watch. Then the decision was made to divide the owl skin into two parts. Two of the men each wrapped a one-half section around his body. The four then separated, with two going each way, one

bearer of the precious skin and the other to “sacrifice [himself] if necessity arose to make sure the escape of the [man] bearing the hide” reported the *Thresher*.

After a cautious advance through the woods, the four made it past the cordon of “would-be soldiers” as the *Thresher* described them and reunited. Now on the road to Navasota, they had to halt at the river, which was impassable. The goddess Athena and her wise owl must have been watching, however, for two hunters in a car came driving through the brush toward them. The protectors went to investigate, while the skin bearers remained in hiding.

The Rice men inquired as to the best way to cross the river. The *Thresher* reported the following exchange. “Who’s got the owl?”

“What owl?”

“You know, tell us and we can help you out.”

Eventually, the hunters were deemed trustworthy and their offer of assistance was accepted. One changed clothes with Dain, while Drummond crawled into the box (trunk) on the rear of the car. The other two remained with the second hunter to wait for the car to return for them. Stopped by cadets on the road and the men scrutinized, the car was allowed to pass and continued on to the home of the hunter, a doctor, where “the two Rice men ate their first meal in 36 hours” reported the *Thresher*.

When the doctor was unable to

return for his hunting companion and Payne and Waters, the second hunter hiked to town where he was stopped by cadets until he could prove his identity. Calling the doctor, he inquired as to what he should do with the capsules he had been given.

The two hunters then enlisted the help of a third friend who owned a fast car and went to rescue the two Rice men still hiding in the brush outside Navasota. Ignoring all orders to halt, the group successfully outran their pursuers and safely deposited the two weary men at the doctor’s home with their friends. The next morning, the man with the fast car reappeared to pick up all four of the Rice rescuers and their precious skin. He drove them past Aggie sentries posted all the way to Hempstead and on to Houston. Fritze said, “...what was left of the owl was safely deposited at the campus of the Rice Institute.”

The owl was back but 13 Rice students remained imprisoned by Aggie cadets. Fritze reported that Rice president Edgar Odell Lovett called the A&M president and said, “There’s enough of that horseplay going around. Have those Rice students turned loose and let them come back and go to school.”

President Bizzell complied with the request. The detective, however, was not so fortunate. His head was shaved, his clothes confiscated and after being paraded around campus, he was taken to the train station and told to leave town.

More than eight years later, a *Thresher* headline in the November 25, 1925 issue trumpeted, “Sammy, Prodigal is back; bird of tradition is reinstated at Rice.” The article beneath told of an official reception held in the Commons in his honor. “All upperclassmen were seated when the freshmen filed into the room at lockstep, emitting the war cry of the Owls,” reported the *Thresher*. “Bedlam broke loose when the lights all went out. In the confusion Sammy took position in the middle of the professors’ table. The band and cheerleader[s] were in the balcony. As the blanket was removed from Sammy, the spotlight was turned on the prodigal.”

According to the *Thresher*, “The newly formed Rally Squad is responsible for the reincarnation of the mascot of pre-war days. Sammy will be used for the purpose of arousing spirit for important games or furthering the best interests of Rice in whatever branch possible.”

Sammy continued to be a commanding presence at Owl sports events up through the 1960s, by then an imposing blue and gray fiberglass version carried into the football stadium on the shoulders of freshmen before each home game. Older male alumni can recall being summoned out of the stands to bow before the great bird before the freshmen traditions were done away with. As for Sammy, there are rumors that he still nests in the basement of Hanzen College.

THE ROMEOS

By Art Bleimeyer

Calvin Clausel, class of ’50, and Alan James, B.A. ’46, B.S. ’47, were the founding fathers of a group of male Rice alumni that would later come to be known as the ROMEOs or “Rice Old Men Eating Out.”

Calvin and Alan had been long-

time friends, but had not kept this friendship alive after their days together on the Rice campus. Then one day in 1990 or ’91, Calvin heard on the news that Alan James had died of a heart attack while jogging in Memorial Park. Deeply disturbed upon hearing this, Calvin called to

express his condolences to Alan’s wife Betty, only to be surprised to have Alan answer the phone. Calvin said, “I thought you were dead!”

Alan said, “No, I’m not.”

It turned out that it was a different Alan James who died in Memorial Park that day. Because of this inci-

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dent Calvin and Alan decided to have lunch together to reinvigorate their old friendship. The thought occurred to them that other Rice male alumni might be interested in getting together over lunch occasionally to keep old friendships alive while *they* were still alive.

At the outset, they decided that this group of Rice alumni should be unique in keeping with the fact that Rice University is unique in many aspects. They preferred to refer to this as a “group” rather than as an “organization.” They did not want to be organized in the usual sense of the word.

For example, they did not see fit to have a president, vice president, secretary, or treasurer, and minutes of meetings would not be recorded and read at subsequent meetings for additions or corrections. Nor should the group have a constitution and bylaws or have meetings conducted in accordance with Robert’s Rules of Order. In fact, in the beginning the group did not even have a name. But that came somewhat later when Joe Reilly, class of ’48, said his wife Sidney suggested ROMEIO for “Rice Old Men Eating Out” and that name stuck like flypaper.

Calvin and Alan just wanted this to be group of old men and some not-so-old who would enjoy each other’s fellowship at a luncheon held four times a year where they can reminisce and swap lies or half-truths or brag about making the honor roll in their freshman year, be it true or false.

So they contacted a small group of friends who began meeting quarterly at country clubs where different ones had memberships. Usually about twenty-five or thirty would attend, but meeting at a different location each time was not very satisfactory and this format ended when the Houston Country Club provided a bowl of non-alcoholic punch and a hamburger at a charge of \$25 per person. When Frank Biggi and I (Art



*Art Bleimeyer presenting award to Calvin Clausel, honoring him as “Founder and Spark Plug of ROMEIOs,” April 2, 1995.
Left to right: Football Coach Ken Hatfield, Calvin and Art*

Bleimeyer) left there we swore never again to pay \$25 for a hamburger and a cup of punch.

By this time attendance had been on the rise and we found very suitable accommodations, good food, and good service at a reasonable price in the banquet room at Kaphan’s on South Main. Then began the practice of having guest speakers at our luncheons. This served our needs very well until Kaphan’s went out of business.

The next location was at the H.E.S.S., the Houston Engineering and Scientific Society, meeting room in the Great Southern Life Insurance Company on Buffalo Speedway across from the Exxon Research Lab. This lasted until the building was demolished to make room for construction of condominiums. We then followed H.E.S.S to their present locations at the 5430 Westheimer in the building which had been Harold Farb’s Carlyle Restaurant where we now meet beginning at 11:15 a.m. on the third Friday in the months of January, April, June and October. A buffet lunch is served at noon with a guest speaker to follow.

Harry Chavanne, class of ’33,

has been instrumental in arranging for many notable speakers such as Malcolm Gillis, Norman Hackerman, Ed Djerejian, and others; athletic coaches, Wayne Graham, Ken Hatfield, and Willis Wilson have also been invited to address the group. Speakers come from a wide range of academic disciplines and different ROMEIOs assist in making arrangements for this speaker.

When Alan James’ health began to decline, he enlisted the help of Woods Martin, class of ’49, to assume the duties he had performed so ably for a number of years following Calvin’s death in 1998. Woods has done a marvelous job of carrying on in the ROMEIO tradition following Alan’s death in 2002. Woods enlists the help of fifteen telephone callers who contact approximately two hundred ninety alumni to advise them of the next luncheon meeting.

Attendance at these meetings has been averaging approximately one hundred fifteen. Any male alumnus who would like to have his name added to the calling list should contact Woods Martin at 713.621.3786.