

The Cornerstone

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THE NEWSLETTER OF THE RICE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

VOL. 5, NO. 3

HELLO, HAMLET!

A HISTORY OF GEORGE GREANIAS' MUSICAL MASTERPIECE

Enter Polonius

POLONIUS: Your Majesty, look at these letters!

CLAUDIUS: Where did you get these?

POLONIUS: My daughter revealed them to me only moments ago.

CLAUDIUS: Do you realize what this is? For centuries people have been trying to answer the mystery of Hamlet, and it's all here, every bit of it!

POLONIUS: What does it say? What does it say?

CLAUDIUS: (tearing up the letters) The world must never know.

Hello, Hamlet!, George Greanias' musical travesty in too many acts, does not shed a lot of light on the mystery of the melancholy Dane, but it does pour a sufficient quantity of irreverent tomfoolery and silly songs on what is probably the most serious play ever written to have made a place for itself among the most hallowed of Rice traditions.

What is reputedly the tenth (though it may be the eleventh or twelfth) production of *Hello, Hamlet!* was staged in March of 2000 as Weiss College men and women once more donned the doublets, unsheathed their swords and sang the songs of the legendary piece, as it sloughed off its four years of hibernation to bask once more in the glorious summer of its discontent.

That the play continues to be produced when it is far older (thirty-two years and counting) than most of its

cast members is something of a miracle. That it continues to delight its audiences attests to the strength of its source material (arguably the most important play ever written combined with parodies of dozens of the most memorable songs in the history of American musical theater) and the brilliance of its concept and execution.

What is this thing? Where did it come from? And who should be blamed?



First Production of Hello, Hamlet! 1967 - Tom Bible '71 as Laertes (left), Michael Pewitt '69 as Claudius and Carol Jones '69 as Gertrude (center), and George Greanias '69 as Hamlet (right)

As one who was there, who witnessed the genesis of this affront to all that is holy, I feel it is my duty to record a few of my memories of the early productions in which I was a more than willing participant.

In the spring of 1967, the Vietnam War was raging, students were protesting across America, mankind was preparing to make a giant leap to the moon, and the Rice Players, under the combined direction of Sandy Havens

and Roger Glade, were putting on William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. Amidst a sterling cast that included Roberta Reed as Ophelia and Glade as Polonius, a lowly freshman named George Greanias was cast in the less than pivotal role of Fortinbras, the invader leading hordes of troops into Elsinore, whose big scene is at the very end of the play. After the poison has been consumed and all are stabbed that are going to be, Fortinbras enters to witness and comment upon

the tragic outcome of murderous folly.

George, waiting three hours backstage for his entrance every night, got to watch the whole play, all the way through – over and over and over. Apparently, through the in-depth analysis this forced upon him, he found room for improvement, ways to probe deeper, hidden meanings in the Bard's

noble work, and by the end of the run, he was commenting to some of us who knew him – including his roommate Bill Blanton – that all *Hamlet* needed to be a really powerful play were a few good songs.

During the days that followed, George spent hours in Larry McMurtry's freshman English class scribbling new lyrics to old Broadway songs that he felt could spice up the

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The Rice Historical Society

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the history of Rice University*

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Rice alumni and friends are encouraged to
contribute photographs and remembrances
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future issues of The Cornerstone. Items
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**NEWSLETTER DESIGNED
BY TOMORROW'S KEY**

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George Greanias, 1967



George Greanias, 2000

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ANNE HOUSTON WALKER REMEMBERS THE FIRST PRESIDENT'S HOME AT RICE

In 1949, Rice's second president, William V. Houston, and his wife Mildred moved into what we know today as O'Connor House. Of the president's new home the Houston's daughter, Anne Houston Walker, writes that her "memories of the house are few.



Dr. & Mrs. William V. Houston

I married less than a year after my parents moved in. I just remember its being a lovely place.

"I guess the kitchen was the most

impressive part as far as I was concerned. It went on and on. Also, it had the first disposal and dishwasher I had ever used. There was wonderful storage. So wonderful that we never could find anything.

"When it was under construction, Bellows company decided that there was not enough support for the living room floor. So, after the flooring had been laid, perhaps only the sub-floor, they tore it all out and poured more piers.

"Mother always felt a little exposed on the campus. In fact, when they first moved in, there were no curtains. They had to stay at the back part of the place when the lights were on as there were always people touring round the campus looking at the house.

"The decorator hired by the board was Jane Christian. At the time Tyrone Power was having a rather public affair with an actress named Linda Christian. Back in the fifties that just 'wasn't done.'

Mother could never remember which was which and often entertained her listeners with the fact that Linda was 'doing' the house.

"Mother tried, but failed, to have a rose garden outside the south window of the living room. It was much too shady and failed miserably. The gardener was Young Tony. Old Tony was

still around and came once in a while to tell her they would not grow at all in that shade. Our favorite story of Tony was his pronunciation of the words live oak. According to an unnamed source, when he presented his plans for the landscaping of the campus, he referred to lavokas. No one knew what they were.

"I do remember the wonderful mirrors in the dining room. They were on opposite walls from each other and gave you the feeling of seeing an infinite number of yourself. The walls in that room were a dark green. Mother was in Palo Alto, chaperoning me at school the summer of '49, and we stopped in front of a house to pick leaves off a magnolia tree. That was the color she wanted for the dining room. I'm not sure what condition they were in by the time the painter got them. But, the walls were green.

"The public rooms were done beautifully in a Georgian style. There was an 'Adam' mantle over the fireplace and two bookcases which had been made from an old breakfront split in half flanking the south window. That breakfront must have been huge to begin with.

"I think one reason the next occupants wanted a front porch was the shower guests would get during the migrating season. The blackbirds (grackles?) roosted in the oaks, lavokas, all around the house and ruined many a silk dress before the victim could get to the entryway."

"When it was under construction, Bellows company decided that there was not enough support for the living room floor. So, after the flooring had been laid, perhaps only the sub-floor, they tore it all out and poured more piers."



*The President's House under Construction
August, 1949*

INTERVIEW WITH JEAN PITZER

ABOUT THE PRESIDENT'S HOUSE AT RICE

February 29, 2000, Kensington, CA

Before Kenneth Pitzer accepted the post as Rice's president, he and Mrs. Pitzer met with the board of trustees and with the faculty committee. Mrs. Pitzer was invited to visit the president's house. She thought it was a very gracious home and was impressed. The Pitzers had known Dr. Houston, Dr. Pitzer's immediate predecessor at Rice, as a professor at Cal Tech. Dr. Pitzer was an undergraduate student of Dr. Houston's, and they were both members of the National Academy of Science and saw each other at academic meetings. At the time of their interview, only Dr. Houston and Dr. Bonner were members of the National Academy of Science from Rice; now there are ten or twelve.

When Mrs. Pitzer took the tour of the house, the decor represented the preferences of the fifties for dark colors. The living room and dining room were painted a very dark green and the bedrooms were also dark. There were celadon green rugs in the living and dining rooms and a light green carpet on the stairs. There were some nice antiques, including two identical secretaries, quite a few tables, the dining room table and chairs, two side tables with huge Venetian glass mirrors, and a large mirror and table and wing armchair in the front hall. Feeling that there was work to do, Mrs. Pitzer asked the board of trustees for a recommendation for an interior decorator, and they suggested Inez McHale, who had done other work on the campus, possibly at Cohen House, the Rice Memorial Center, and the Chapel. She got a copy of the house plans and sent samples of fabrics and



Jean Mosher Pitzer
Circa 1961

suggestions of furniture to Mrs. Pitzer. Mrs. Pitzer remembers that she was easy to work with and that their ideas agreed well. Mrs. Pitzer was conservative with her expenditures. The board had given her carte blanche, but "I tried not to spend excessively," she said. They decided to paint the living and dining room walls a light celadon green to go with the existing rugs and painted the woodwork white. Ms. McHale ordered a hand-made celadon green rug for the entrance hall and suggested silk damask draperies the same shade. They bought a sofa and two loveseats and upholstered them and some chairs in an ivory silk linen. With

the antiques that were already there it made an elegant combination. The Pitzers' sizeable private art collection enhanced the decor. These rooms were not used for family living. The sofas and chairs all had casters on them to facilitate pushing them back when card tables had to be set up for large buffet dinners. One of the most valuable pieces in the house was a beautiful silver Georgian coffee urn bought by Mrs. George Brown during Dr. Houston's administration; it was very useful for large morning coffees. Mrs. Pitzer left it in the care of Leo Shamblin, the university treasurer, when she departed.

The room they used most when they were home alone in the evenings was the study to the right of the front door. They used their own furniture in that room; it is now used in the living room of their California home. They bought a teak desk and had a little Sony television set. Dr. Pitzer used the study for private interviews with faculty.

When they had large parties they used the study for the men's cloakroom and the small room to the left of the front entrance as the ladies' cloakroom.

The living room and dining rooms had full-length windows facing the garden and on either side there were doors leading to slate terraces outside. The doors could be opened during large parties so guests could mingle outside. The terrace outside the dining room also had a door leading from the kitchen. The Pitzers would frequently have breakfast on the terrace. There was lacey wrought iron around the terraces and also on the front porch. This has been replaced, and Mrs. Pitzer thought the wrought iron was more in character with the house than what is there now.

Mrs. Houston told Mrs. Pitzer that they had been most involved with the planning of the house. She said the architect had wanted a much larger house, but the Houstons insisted that it be more modest. Mrs. Houston had planned the gardens. When the Pitzers moved in, the azaleas were not in good health and needed to be replaced. She had Glendale Hybrids planted and was pleased to see they were still there when the Gillises entertained them a few years ago. Gene Hackerman once told Mrs. Pitzer that she had remodeled every house she had ever lived in. Mrs. Pitzer thought Mrs. Hackerman might have missed her calling as an architect.

The study when the Pitzers lived at Rice was paneled in a rare South American wood which was very warm and beautiful. Mrs. Pitzer was surprised to see that it has been painted black. When the Pitzers visited the Gillises a few years ago, it was the first time they had been back in the house. There had been a large, eighteenth-century mantle in the living room that the architect had found in New Orleans, which Mrs. Hackerman replaced with a

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smaller, plainer mantle. The Pitzers had modified the serving room between the kitchen and dining room by placing the counter against the wall.

The Pitzers arrived in August or September of 1961 just in time for Hurricane Carla. The remodeling had not been completed so they were staying at the Warwick Hotel. This was Mrs. Pitzer's first hurricane; "I was glad I didn't have the responsibility of the house during that storm!" she said. The house was ready two or three weeks later. When all of the furniture was moved in, she was pleased with the way everything went together. The Pitzers paid for the furniture they used personally, including their daughter's bedroom. The university paid for the guest room furniture. The Pitzers' son occupied the back bedroom occasionally; he was in graduate school at the University of Wisconsin. His room opened onto an unfinished area that had been built strong enough to accommodate a deck.

The first big party they had after moving in was a morning coffee reception for all faculty and some of the board of trustees. Mrs. Houston had given Mrs. Pitzer a list of the traditional events the president's wife hosted, including a coffee for the women students on Rondelet weekend. Representatives from the women's associations at other universities in the area came also. If they were hosting large dinners, they would serve the meal buffet style in the dining room and would set up card tables all over the first floor. They could accommodate fifty or sixty guests. Mrs. Pitzer had a housekeeper who worked from 6:00 in the morning until noon and a cook who came in at noon and left after dinner. "They were wonderful!" she remembers. For formal dinners the manager of the faculty club helped cater, and they had a bartender. If they were hosting ten or twelve guests, they would seat them in the dining room and have student waiters either from Cohen House or the colleges. Sometimes they would entertain members of the board of governors along with faculty. The Browns were very interested in Rice affairs, as were the Lovetts.

There were always two annual events.

The first was a sherry reception at Cohen House at the beginning of the year for new faculty, and the second was a morning coffee at the president's house for wives of graduate students.

Mrs. Weiss was still active when the Pitzers were at Rice. She was very helpful with planning and decorating and gave (the president's house) a number of antiques that her decorator found in New York. She entertained the Pitzers frequently in her home and said once, "I've always thought that after I'm gone, this would make a suitable president's house." Mr. Weiss had died by this time, but Mrs. Pitzer remembered that he had been instrumental in getting the Rincon Oilfield for Rice.

The Pitzers' daughter, who had graduated from the University of California at Davis, had been living in Hawaii and serving as an Agriculture Department advisor. She decided to come to Houston and went to work at a shop called Handmakers on Main Street. She soon became the manager.



*Newly Completed President's House
1949*

The Faculty Wives Club held an annual Easter egg hunt on Easter Sunday at the president's home. The members of the club brought in the tables and punch and placed them on the outside terraces. The children and grandchildren would come in their Sunday best.

Jean Pitzer thought it was important for the president to live on campus. Kenneth Pitzer ate lunch every day at Cohen House with the faculty and it was easy to get to events on campus.

When told that the Weiss mansion may be renovated for the president, she said, "but I *do* think the Weiss House is close enough".

There was a gardener named Lupe assigned to the grounds of the president's house. Mrs. Houston had a rose garden where Brown College was built. It was relocated across the drive from the president's house, and they always had fresh roses. Sometimes Mrs. Pitzer would buy the main arrangement for the dining table and do her own arrangements for the other tables.

The swimming pool was built during Dr. Pitzer's administration. The Pitzers loved to swim and contributed half of the cost of the pool. When asked if the students ever climbed the wall and jumped in the pool, she said, "We sometimes heard splashes in the night but didn't investigate." They had the garden illuminated artistically. She said they could have used more bookcases. The solution was to buy freestanding teak bookcases and arrange them in the hallway upstairs.

Mrs. Pitzer inquired whether George Ellery Hale, one of the founders of the modern Cal-Tech campus, was related to Mrs. Edgar Odell Lovett, whose maiden name was Hale. Martha Sears Pitzer, one of the Pitzers' daughters-in-law, had a grandfather who was an assistant to Dr. Hale at the Mount Wilson Observatory. His name was Frederick Sears and he had spent a year in Paris where he met Dr. and Mrs. Lovett. Martha had the announcement of Malcolm Lovett's birth in her family archives. When Dr. Pitzer was president of Rice, he presented the announcement to Malcolm and Martha Lovett.

In Memoriam

Jean Pitzer died peacefully

in her sleep on

April 22, 2000.

old tragedy. By the time finals were finalized and all of us were packing up to leave for home, he was declaring to everyone that he was onto something and by the end of the summer he would return with a new play for the Weiss Tabletop Theater to produce.

In the fall, like many of the upperclassmen, I returned to Houston early to try to catch a glimpse of freshmen week activities and the new young women who were going to make Rice their home. I unpacked my car and began to settle into the off-campus apartment I would be sharing with Mike Pewitt and Ben Teague, and headed over to Weiss College where I ran into George. He was carrying around a sheaf of papers. "Is that it?" I asked. He smiled and nodded. "Hello, Hamlet!"

I recall at least two times during the next day or two when a bunch of us gathered around – once in his room and once at my apartment – and George read his script and sang the songs to us. There was not a question as to whether we were going to do the play. Roger Glade, who had started the Weiss Tabletop Theater, had moved on to other performance spaces, and it was obvious that we had to keep the theater going and this musical tragedy would be the first production of the year.

Unfortunately, when George checked the university's calendar of events, it was already pretty full. In fact, the only open weekend without a home football game or other major functions scheduled was barely two weeks away.

Two weeks. Would it be possible to mount a production of any sort within that period? We didn't have time for try-outs. Since he already knew the part (and by some strange coincidence had about half the songs) George, we all knew, would play Hamlet as well as direct. My roommate, Mike Pewitt, was cast as the villain of the piece, King Claudius. Bill Blanton, whose talents lay more in his acting than singing ability, was cast as the Ghost, a spooky

character who had probably the best song in the play ("Trouble, with a Capital T and that Rhymes with P and that Stands for Perfidy"). Fortunately, it was the one song that was spoken rather than sung – it did not require a melodic

tune-carrying voice, but rather one that was bold and expressive. I do not think there has ever been better casting for a role. Blanton was brilliant.

Many other Weissmen were quickly added to the cast. Tom Bible was recruited to play Hamlet's sparring partner, Laertes; Jim Caldwell was assigned to the role of Horatio; and I was handed the part that Roger Glade had played in the Players' production the previous spring. In fact, when we got through borrowing furniture, props, and wardrobe left over from *Hamlet* (a godsend), I even ended up wearing Glade's Polonius costume.

Since Weiss in those days had no female residents, Roberta Reed helped us recruit a freshman from Brown named Linda Todd to play Ophelia and Carol Jones joined our cast as Hamlet's mom Gertrude. Our need for an orchestra was soon filled to a fare-thee-well by a cute and extremely talented Brown girl named Ginger Young, whose great humor and skill on the piano were nothing short of phenomenal.

I remember helping George scour the Houston Public Library and numerous music stores for the sheet music from the dozen or so Broadway musicals from which we were parodying songs: *Flower Drum Song* ("Put on a Tragic Face"), *Camelot* ("Elsinore!"), *Oklahoma!* ("Polonius is Dead"), *Stop the World* ("What Kind of King am I?"), *Oliver* ("Plotting Assassinations"), *South Pacific* ("Nothing Like a Dane"), *My Fair Lady* ("Every Duke and Earl and Peer is Here"), *Funny Girl* ("Olga, Olga, from the Volga"), *Gigi* ("Yorick"), *Mame*

("You Charm the Corn Right Off the Ear, Hamlet"), *The King and I* ("Shall we Fight?"), *The Sound of Music* ("How do you Solve a Problem like Ophelia?"), and, of course, *Hello, Dolly* – to name but a few. We even needed the music for "Mammy," "America the Beautiful," "The Battle Hymn of the Republic" ("Glory, Glory, William Shakespeare") and "Here Comes Santa Claus" ("Here Comes Fortinbras"). Nothing was sacred.

As the first week of our rehearsal progressed and more upperclassmen began to arrive, other supporting roles were filled – Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, the three witches from *Macbeth*, the Russian Ballet Master, the Ballet Troupe, Macbeth, MacDuff, Fortinbras, Richard III ("My kingdom for a horse!"), and the Lady of the Night ("no, no, I said 'horse!'"). It was quite a cast.

Props, including swords, flagons for



*Third Production of Hello, Hamlet! - 1972
Yvonne Senturia as Ophelia, Doug Killgore as
Polonius, and Brian Domning as Hamlet*

poison wine, the Statue of Liberty's torch, and Yorick's skull were bought, rented, borrowed, or built. The relatively simple (by current standard) set

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was under construction at the north end of Weiss Commons. Songs and production numbers never staged before had to be choreographed and rehearsed, hundreds of lines (several of them in iambic pentameter) had to be memorized. Costs continued to rise as the rehearsal period approached an end. Weiss's theater budget for the entire year had been consumed. The rest of the season (essentially the entire school year) rode on the success of *Hello, Hamlet!*

Final dress rehearsal, the night before opening, was a mess. Set changes took forever, entrances were late, lines were blocked. We were awful. When

we finished the last scene at 11:30 p.m., writer/producer/director/lead actor Greanias, hoarse with laryngitis from the strain his vocal chords had been under, sat wearily on Claudius' throne and croaked our notes to us. The play couldn't go on the way it was. Audiences should not have to suffer through long blackouts, clumsy set changes, lousy dancing, muffed lines, and unintelligible singing. We were not ready to open. There was only one thing that could be done to save the show. We rehearsed it again.

I remember sitting backstage opening night listening to the audience. Word of our insane undertaking had spread around the campus and brought us a good-sized crowd. The hubbub of conversation as they sat waiting for the show to start was casual and unconcerned. Would they appreciate the humor of the script, the cleverness of George's parodies, the work we had done to bring this behemoth to the stage in two weeks? Would they like it at all?

Ginger played an opening chord



*Third Production of Hello, Hamlet!
1972 - Doug Killgore as Polonius*

on her piano, the lights started to dim, the audience quieted down, and she began to play the overture. That afternoon, George had Xeroxed pages from the score, taken segments from half the songs in the play and melded them together into a single piece. As the main theme from Camelot transitioned into "Shall we Dance?" the audience listened quietly in the dark. When a snippet from Gigi appeared, then segued into "Climb Every Mountain," there were a few titters. By the time Ginger got to "The Street Where You Live" and "Hello, Dolly," they began to realize what they were in for. Every new song earned an appreciative laugh and the end of the overture got a resounding applause.

I knew then, before the first actor had set foot onstage, that we were going to be okay. The audience was with us.

And, boy, were they.

It is frequently said that theater is a collaborative effort. It is a communication between the actors and the audience. There is magic in this that brings out more than the sum of its parts. The opening night audience for *Hello, Hamlet!* inspired all of us to perform better, much better than we ever had in rehearsal, and, as the show progressed, we realized for the first time, how really, really splendid it was.

The weekend run was over before we knew it. But something had been born, something that would live a life of its own.

George went off for a junior year at Cambridge. He was elected president of Weiss College in absentia in a campaign masterminded by Bill Blanton, who, as a senior, was serving as president that year.

When George returned, he readily agreed to reprise his role, resurrect (even revise and augment) his script and mount the second production of *Hello, Hamlet!* (fall of 1969), with the sterling additions of Becky Bonar as Gertrude and Ellen Horr as choreographer and Lady of the Night (a role for which, as "the only Horr in the phone book"[her words], she was naturally suited and which she played to great effect in many subsequent productions).

Becky and I joined forces to direct the third production in 1972. I had returned to Houston after completing a short tour in the navy, and George was at Harvard Law School studying to be a politician (we flew him down for opening night). Brian Domning did a swell job in the role of Hamlet.

Once bitten by the bug, one could not forget the show. While in film school at UT Austin in 1974, I managed to get Becky Bonar, Bill Blanton, and Ben Teague (who played Claudius in the second production) to join three UT students and me in a scaled-down production at the student pub. We all played multiple roles (which was probably a bit confusing for the audience), but we had a lot of fun. After a weekend in Austin, we took *Hello, Hamlet!* on the road back



*George Greanias Sharing Memories
with the Hello, Hamlet! Cast
Spring, 2000*

to Houston and performed it at Main Street Theater, which had just opened at Autry House.

In subsequent years, when George

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was running for political office, Main Street Theater produced *Hello, Hamlet!* two more times for fund-raisers at the Tower Theater. Several of us from earlier productions got to reprise our roles again, and, in spite of having appeared in a tutu in public, George won his elections. If only he had thought to play Hamlet again when he was running for mayor!

When it was pointed out that every Rice student should have the opportunity to see this classic, Weiss College

decided to bring it back every four years. The year 2000 production has just closed, and we can all look forward to 2004.

With each new production, changes have been made, songs have been dropped or added, and the play has evolved from its humble beginnings. Somehow, though, it continues to thrill an audience, and its future seems assured. As a tribute to *Hello, Hamlet!*'s incomparable source material and the talent of its author, it can only be said,

"Now it belongs to the ages."

CLAUDIUS: Hearken, Laertes, and you will see that I am guiltless of your father's death,

Guiltless! Hamlet done it.

LAERTES: Hamlet DID it.

CLAUDIUS: That's what I said, he ran him though the arras.

LAERTES: (rubbing his backside)
Ooooo!

—Doug Killgore

Mark Your Calendars!

Sunday, June 4, 2000

2:00 p.m.

Kyle Morrow Room

Fondren Library

Melissa Kean

"A Most Uncomfortable Speed:
Racial Desegregation at
Rice University"

Reception Following

Sunday, July 23, 2000

2:00 p.m.

Kyle Morrow Room

Fondren Library

Bill Barnett

Chairman of the Board of Trustees
"Events that Changed the Course
of Rice History"

Reception Following

**Coming in the
Fall of 2000**

Nancy Niedzielski will explore changes in the use of the English language in the last 100 years. Her subject is compelling in its own right but is especially interesting in the context of Rice historical research.

**WHAT IS YOUR
FAVORITE RICE PRANK?**

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