

The Cornerstone

SUMMER 2001

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE RICE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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THE RICE ENGINEERING SHOW: 1920 – 1956

by Karen Rogers

The April 9, 1920, *Thresher* headline announced “Rice Engineers to Have Big Exhibit.” The article that followed predicted “From the present projections this will be a date to be remembered in the annals of Rice Engineering students as plans are being made for an Engineering Show of no mean dimensions. The Engineering laboratories of the electric, mechanical, civil and chemical departments will be thrown open with all equipment on display, and in operation. Also, a great many stunts of either scientific or freakish nature will be performed 2:00 to 10:00 p.m.” According to a *Thresher* article published twelve years later, the students who first conceived the idea met with “much opposition and discouragement,” presumably from faculty and administrators, although similar shows had enjoyed great popularity at schools in the Northeast. From the beginning, the show was under the auspices of the Engineering Society.

The Engineering Society at Rice was organized in 1915 and was one of the few “men’s” organizations to survive World War I. In 1916 the *Thresher* reported that “Engineering is a comparatively new profession and the student of engineering meets many discouragements because of this fact...The [engineering] society



*Engineering Show, circa 1940.
The sign on the oil derrick reads:
“The Equipment Loaned Thru
the Courtesy of Trinity Portland
Cement Company, Houston, Texas.”*

is slowly building upon a bond of mutual interest between engineering students and practicing engineers that

should be of great benefit to both.” The article notes that the society “has

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The Rice Historical Society

PURPOSE

*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 which may be used in
future issues of The Cornerstone. Items
cannot be returned and will be donated to
our archival collection.*

NEWSLETTER DESIGNED
BY TOMORROW'S KEY

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*Who is this mysterious group
and how have they managed
to have an influence that
affects Rice University even
today? See article page 8 for
all the information.*

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done much to make the Electric Show at the [City] Auditorium a success by arranging an exhibit." During the war, "war courses" that had an engineering basis were offered but the society did not meet again until 1919. It is interesting to notice that the refreshments they offered after their meetings were coffee, sandwiches, and cigarettes. On January 29, 1920, a chemical warfare demonstration was staged (without the poisonous gases) in the field just south of Rice, and 5,000 people came to watch.

The object of the first show was primarily to acquaint the Rice students with the remarkable laboratory facilities at the school. It was free to the public but was only advertised on campus. There were sixty-two exhibits including gyroscopes, drafting room equipment, surveying instruments, moving pictures showing the manufacture and use of twist drills, tensile tests of steel and wood and crushing tests of concrete, and X-ray and cathode rays in which a person could see their bones.

The May 13, 1920, *Thresher* reported "Engineers' Show Immense

Success." As many as ten thousand people had attended. There were articles about it in the Houston newspapers. A 1932 *Thresher* noted that "it was immediately realized by the faculty and those influential campus people that such projects in the future would serve as a most desirable means of advertising Rice." Because of the immense amount of work involved in mounting these shows it was decided to have one every other year, although there were "Practical Demonstrations

by Rice Students and Faculty sponsored by the Rice Engineering Society Assisted by the Department of Physics and the Rice Architecture Society" in 1921.

By 1922 the Engineering Show had grown considerably. It was to be open on Friday afternoon

and evening for high school students and on Saturday from 2:00 until 10:00 for the general public. They had between 175 and 200 student guides to operate the 110 exhibits. At night the grounds and buildings were dramatically lit and there was a

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special attraction dubbed "steam pyrotechnics." "In front of the chemistry annex building pipes that give out great billowy volumes of steam [are] lighted with different colors forming a rainbow effect." There were two 1,000,000-watt coast defense lights, borrowed from Fort Crockett, in front the Mechanical Engineering Building. The Rice laboratories, "the most expensively and completely equipped," were considered to be well worth inspection. Newspaper articles promised "air will be made liquid by tremendous pressure, sound will be carried in beams of light, electric sparks four and five feet long will be passed from the fingers of students, music and voices from all over the South will be received by radio, sounds will be magnified so that the walk of a fly will sound like thunder." The exhibits were divided into two categories, one for scientists and another for those not scientifically inclined ("of a more spectacular nature"). The 1922 program notes four purposes of the show: give undergraduates some idea of advanced and practical work, bring this work before the public, stimulate interest in college education, and give prospective students an idea of what Rice has to offer. This time the show was widely advertised and attracted huge crowds.

It is interesting to note that of the 700 students at Rice in 1922, 250 of them were engineers. They came from twenty states and the Canal Zone and Mexico.

In 1924 the show was changed from the weekend of April 4 and 5 to April 18 and 19 so that several hundred high school participants in an interscholastic track meet from Texas, Oklahoma, and Louisiana could attend. Architecture exhibits were added to the show; there were 125 exhibits this year. A newspaper article notes "A year ago or so Mr. Howard Hughes of Houston gave Rice a completely equipped radio communicat-

Continued on page 4

Photo of a bullet breaking a piece of chalk. Photo taken using a high-speed flash in the 1940 Engineering Show.



ing set...Students organized an inter-collegiate radio association...Rice had a working radius of over 1,000 miles." This year they had 15,000 visitors and the student organizers asked as many as could to come in the afternoon since the evenings were becoming too crowded.

In 1926 the new chemistry building, built at a cost of more than one million dollars, was open. Biology exhibits were added. Exhibits included tapeworms, architectural designs, dynamos, evaporators, and the manufacture of drugs like aspirin and chloroform. An automated switchboard, furnished by the Bell Telephone Company, was shown for the first time.

In the spring of 1928 plans were being made for the fifth biennial show. The program describes the purpose of the biology exhibits: "We have attempted to impress you vividly, by the use of living material, of the importance of this phase of scientific investigation and further, its partment

[sic] association of your own daily life. The striking demonstration of the blood circulation are the blood vessels of a frog, a phenomenon discovered in the reign of Queen Elizabeth and now common knowledge to everyone, which should be a powerful stimulus to acquiring the no less important facts regarding the control of disease, or the more generalized statements regarding evolution."

Special mention was made in the *Thresher* about a junior named Ernie Ross who "has designed and made a very clever device to enable the acetylene torch to be used underwater." Also in development were the remote-controlled car and a wireless steam-

boat. Exhibits in the field of economics were added. A group of students played the part of alchemists and a beam of light counted the 20,000 visitors who attended the show from all over the South.

A 1930 report mentions that the railroad companies offered special rates for people coming to Houston for the show. The department of psychology had exhibits for the first time.

They predicted that a television set, built by the electrical engineers, would be the hit of the show.

On Friday "a lively concert during the evening was given by the Rice band under the direction of Lee Chatham which gave the hundreds of spectators a chance to get their bearings after being confronted with so many wonders".

Every year the show grew larger. In 1932 the mayor of Houston cut the ribbon to begin the show. He then walked through the entrance where he intercepted a beam of light that caused a photoelectric cell to blow a whistle.

There were many logistical problems like parking and crowd movement to be worked out. The show in 1932 had 30,000 visitors and was dedicated to Thomas Alva Edison. Rice did not add any new departments but had a number of new exhibits. Exhibits included heat-treating steel, oil field equipment, cats that had been taught to do tricks, a radio car, fossil plants, optical illusions, robots, and a miniature train for children.

The 1934 show emphasized quality rather than quantity, although it was quite large. Dr. Lovett said in the program that the show "offers in perspective a considerable array of human knowledge...a perspective pleasant to contemplate of the works of man." They attempted to get a national newsreel filmed. At this eighth engineering show they promised that Lois Dawson, a senior "will demonstrate the power of hypnotism over chickens, rabbits, frogs and crayfish." They predicted that a television set, built by the electrical engineers, would be the hit of the show. They also expected to show the "heart of a mammal, dissected from its body, will continue to beat."

This last exhibit proved to be rather controversial. "Experimental Operations on Dogs Cancelled" reads the newspaper headline; the article goes on to report that two biology exhibits at the Rice Engineering Show were banned when the Houston

Humane Society intervened. One of these was the “scientific decapitation of a dog – in such a manner that the veins in the throat would be sewed back together and the circulation maintained by heart action” and the other was a major operation on a dog using the same procedures as with humans (anesthetics used, incisions made correctly, blood vessels tied off with precision). Whether the dog lived depended on what sort of operation was performed. The objections were not so much as to the experiments themselves but to the detrimental effect they might have on the school children who viewed them. This year the society received \$500 from the sale of programs and \$27 in donations. The three literary societies, who received a 32% commission, were asked to sell programs so the men could help with the exhibits. Some of the girls were criticized for not making enough of an effort to produce sales. The manager noted that “crowd psychology is a queer thing – we find that as long as the programs were pushed from the start, the programs were sold, but if there was a let-down on the part of the sellers, it was an awful job to start them again.”

A unique innovation shown at the 1938 show was a small air conditioning unit, “a small electric refrigerator unit that was converted to condition the air in the little house.”

Captain Baker opened the 1940 show. They had an oilrig built to one-quarter scale, and the Rice Camera Club demonstrated a high-speed flash that enabled the taking of pictures at 1/400,000th of a second.

World War II postponed the engineering shows for ten years. Woods Martin wrote in 1948 in the *Thresher*,

A unique innovation shown at the 1938 show was a small air conditioning unit, “a small electric refrigerator unit that was converted to condition the air in the little house.”

“Hanging around the ML the past few weeks ...I’ve heard a good deal of talk from the slipstick boys about an Engineering Show next year... Well, it seems like they are in the same boat as I am – everyone thinks another show would be a fine thing but he is just a little bit hazy on what it’s for, who puts it on and what good it does.” President Houston objected to the name “Engineering Show” because it had expanded so, and he cautioned against any hint of commercial advertising. Abercrombie Lab with all of its new equipment was scheduled to open soon.

The show was postponed for one more year and the *Thresher* in 1950 announced the imminent “Review of Science and Arts,” the “descendent of the old prewar Engineering Show” on April 14. In 1952 it was still the Review of Science and Art, and the *Thresher* noted that “its audience participation, voice recordings, visual acuity tests and alchemists den are a far cry from the first Engineering Show in 1920. Occupying only the Physics

and Engineering Buildings, the first show was made up almost entirely of machinery, drafting room equipment and a few physical processes. Interesting though it may have been to engineers, it had little of the pop appeal of recent reviews.” Examples of the postwar exhibits include ultra-microscopes set up to demonstrate the Brownian movement of colloidal



Radio-controlled car in the 1928 Engineering Show driven by Finley T. Rebeddeaux.

particles by the light reflected off of them, experiments using X-rays to determine the structures of crystals and demonstrations of the use of chromatography and electrophoresis in orienting the complex protein molecules. They still, however, had the earthworm with his ten hearts beating.

The show in 1954 was larger than ever and was billed as the Exposition of Engineering, Science and Arts and all nineteen departments at Rice participated. They had band and choral concerts and moving pictures. The Nuclear Research Laboratory proudly exhibited Rice’s new “atom smasher.” the largest Van de Graff accelerator in the South. The Chemistry Department showed electron microscopes. There were history, French and Spanish exhibits, and the English Department sponsored a one-act play in which a young Bob Curl played Dan.

One more Exposition followed in 1956 and then the engineering show passed into the annals of Rice Engineering history.

ENLIGHTENED INVESTMENT: RICE INSTITUTE AND THE GROWTH OF HOUSTON, 1900-1915

by Alan Bath

**“Longhorn, Shorthorn,
Cotton, Wheat,**

**Texas Products
Can't be Beat!”**

*(Yell, used by the Texas Bankers
Association in 1905)¹*

During the first fifteen years of the twentieth century Houston bankers had something to shout about. Their town was booming. Houston's growth had been stimulated by its emergence as a major rail center in the mid-1890s, as well as by the discovery of oil at Spindletop and subsequent move of much of this new wealth from Beaumont to Houston. Work had just been completed on a ship channel from Houston to Galveston Bay, giving the city a deepwater port. Skyscrapers, some almost as high as the 18-story new Rice Hotel, began to pop up downtown. Houston was growing out as well as up. Those living in the center of town were moving

to the Heights. A new enclave called “Shadyside” was under development out Main Street near to where George Hermann had donated property for a park and a hospital, and where the recently dedicated Rice Institute was taking shape.²

Houston's expansion was fueled by investment, but in the early years of the century entrepreneurs found cash hard to come by. Banks and bankers tended to be conservative, looking more for stability than growth. Many of Houston's banks were funded by sources outside the state and thus were less responsive to the city's needs. The banks had the money but were reluctant to let go of it.³

One place that had money and was making loans to local businessmen was Rice Institute. In the 1890s William Marsh Rice had made substantial gifts of property to the trustees he had chosen to carry out his vision. Once the legal challenges to his will were decided in favor of the trustees, these holdings were vastly increased. By May 1, 1908, the trust-

ees' books showed assets of over \$6.7 million.

These stewards of Mr. Rice's fortune were themselves successful businessmen. Chairman of the Board, Captain James Baker, an attorney,

Jesse Jones borrowed five notes aggregating \$50,000 at 7% interest. John H. Kirby had a 6% note for \$30,000, and C. H. Bering had one for \$3,500 at 7%.

had handled much of Mr. Rice's business affairs. Vice Chair, James Everett McAshan, was president of the South Texas Bank, located at Main and Franklin. Cesar Maurice Lombardi was a businessman and former president of the Houston School Board. Emanuel Raphael, an attorney and real estate investor, had been president of the Houston Electric Company. These and other trustees had a solid understanding of the Houston business climate and lent money both prudently and profitably.

Financial records show that in April 1908 Rice Institute held notes that totaled almost one million dollars. Most were for relatively small sums, with varying maturities, at interest rates of from five to eight percent. Jesse Jones borrowed five notes aggregating \$50,000 at 7% interest. John H. Kirby had a 6% note for \$30,000, and C. H. Bering had one for \$3,500 at 7%. Larger sums were lent to institutions: the M & P Oil Company had outstanding 16 notes totaling \$160,000 at 6% and “J. S.



Shadyside (lower third) and Main Street (long street on right).



Main Street, before World War I.

on October 12, 1912, President Edgar Odell Lovett spoke of the ties Rice shares with the city, saying “I need hardly remind that during recent years the Rice Institute has contributed in a substantial manner to the upbuilding of Greater Houston. On a conservative basis – always on a conservative basis – certain of the foundation’s funds have been invested in various enterprises which have sustained in no small measure the steady and continuous advance of the city in industrial and commercial property.”⁶ How right he was!

Stewart et al” had 2 notes with a total of \$211,614, at 7% interest.⁴

In 1909 Judge Harris Masterson, attorney and businessman with widespread interests in land, cotton, and timber, requested in the name of his Texas Town Lot and Improvement Company a \$50,000 loan for five years at 6%, payable semi-annually. He offered as security lots the company owned on Rusk between Main and Fannin. The Rice Institute trustees’ policy at the time required that the property offered as loan security must have twice the value of the loan itself. The trustees also required that the insurance on property used as security be issued in the name of the Institute as well as that of the owners.⁵ Presumably Judge Masterson got his loan, because he continued to finance his projects over the next few years with funds borrowed from Rice.

Not all transactions, however, were made with an eye to profit. In 1902 the trustees granted a lease on forty-five acres on Old San Felipe Road to establish the Houston Golf Club

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In 1902 the trustees granted a lease on forty-five acres on Old San Felipe Road to establish the Houston Golf Club – at a rent of one dollar per year!

– at a rent of one dollar per year!

Rice also contributed to the growth of Houston and to its own prosperity by investment in the city’s business. In 1907 the Institute received substantial dividends from its holdings in the South Texas National Bank, Texas Land and Syndicate Company, the Houston Gas Company, and the Houston Drug Company – to name just a few.

At the Institute’s formal opening

ENDNOTES

1. The yell is found in T. Harris Gotten, “*The First Century*”: *The Texas Bankers Association 1885-1985* (Austin, TX: Texas Bankers Assn., 1984), 76.
2. Marguerite Johnston, *Houston: The Unknown City, 1836-1946* (College Station, TX: Texas A & M Press, 1991).
3. Much of the information on Houston’s financial situation is drawn from Walter L. Buenger and Joseph Pratt, *But Also Good Business: Texas Commerce Banks and the Financing of Houston and Texas, 1886-1986* (College Station: Texas A & M Press, 1986).
4. Business Managers Papers, Series IV, Woodson Research Center.
5. Harris Masterson Papers, Woodson Research Center.
6. Excerpt from Dr. Lovett’s address: “The Meaning of the New Institution,” in *Edgar Odell Lovett and the Creation of Rice University* (Houston: Rice Historical Society, 2000).

THE THRESHER

ITS DEBUT AS STUDENT VOICE

by Elionne Walker

This article is the first in a series about the Rice student newspaper which debuted in 1916 and remains an important voice and forum for student life. The first article about the paper's origins and early formations will be followed by an article about the controversies in and about the publication from 1916 to 2001.

Rice students, whose very presence at the university is predicated on their intelligence and critical thinking, are an expressive and articulate group as well. Since its debut on January 15, 1916, only a few months before the first class graduated, the students' official voice has been *The Thresher*. The paper serves the Rice community with news of student and campus events not only in a straight news style but often in a witty sardonic manner (remember the occasional *double-entendre* moniker of *The Thrasher!*). Not only is it the official newspaper, it is published entirely by students in an autonomous fashion which at times garners controversy in tandem with news reports on sports and student elections; editorial views on administrative policies and commencement speakers; and a classified advertising section that sometimes concisely targets the liberally-minded in a manner which clearly sets them apart from the right-wing thinkers.

From the first issue of *The Thresher*, we have reported that "While there have been several attempts in the past to start a student publication at the Rice Institute, *The Thresher* is the first which has actually appeared. The history of the organization is as follows: During the first term of the present academic year two students thought that the school needed a paper and planned to start one as a private

enterprise. However, when they began to consider the selection of the rest of the staff they decided that such a publication should be in the hands of the students, and that private ownership of such a publication might later on give rise to grave abuses. The promoters then intended to drop the matter, but Dr. Lovett, with whom they had already conferred, asked that [they continue] their work in starting a paper. After discussing the project fully, it was decided to give it into the hands of the three literary societies with the recommendation that each society elect three members to a committee which was to organize the paper in any way they saw fit."

In December 1915, a local Houston newspaper reported that nine (three women and six men) composed the staff, representing three students each from the literary societies of the Rice Institute: The Riceonians, The Elizabeth Baldwin Literary Society, and The Owls. Dr. Lovett suggested that the three literary societies that would publish the paper should also name a special committee to which all authority should be delegated.

Although it was a little while before a name was chosen for the paper, the staff began to select among themselves the editors and department manager. According to a local Houston newspaper, they were "W. M. Standish, Eugene R. Millis, and S. Raymond Brooks of the Owl Society; Clinton H. Wooten, C. P. McKenzie, and C. H. Markham of the Riceonian; and Misses Ruth Robinson, Ruth Sullivan, and Elsbeth Rowe of the Elizabeth Baldwin Society.

"Mr. Standish was chosen temporary chairman of the committee, and Miss Sullivan secretary.

"Mr. Standish was unanimously elected editor in chief; Mr. Mills was chosen managing editor; Miss Ruth Sullivan, associate editor; S. Raymond Brooks, Miss Robinson, and Mr. C. H. Wooten assistant editors; C. H. Markhan, business manager; C. P. McKenzie, circulation manager. An assistant business manager will be named later. The three assistant editors will be given charge of departments. The athletic department will be made a large feature of the paper."

When the paper finally debuted January 15, 1916, a Houston paper announced it as the *Rice Institute Journal*, a "semi-monthly paper, four pages and five columns to the page. Contract for the publication will be awarded within the next few weeks. The subscription price will be 50 cents for the remainder of the term of the institute. Branches will be established downtown where the subscriptions may be made."

Further research did not reveal how long the paper sold – or sat on the stands – at that price. Five hundred copies were published in the first edition. *The Galveston News* the next day reported that the Rice paper was "filled with current news of student activities, and of things of particular interest to the students. A review of the clubs and societies of the undergraduate body was a feature."

Also of high interest undoubtedly was a review of the "flunk-outs" during the four years of the Institute. That feature may have attracted more attention than the details of the new dormitory, and the visits of Miss Pendleton, president of Wellesley, and Dr. Hibben, president of Princeton.

The name of the publication was selected sometime after the philo-

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THE CAMPANILE

THE THRESHER



STANDING: MARKHAM, TOMFOHRDE, MCKENZIE, BROOKS
SITTING: ROWE, MILLIS, SULLIVAN, STANDISH, ROBINSON, WOOTEN

Editor-in-Chief, WILLIAM M. STANDISH

Managing Editor, EUGENE MILLIS

Associate Editor, RUTH SULLIVAN

Assistant Editors

C. H. WOOTEN, A. TOMFOHRDE, S. RAYMOND BROOKS, RUTH ROBINSON, ELSBETH ROWE

Circulation Manager, J. E. NILAND

Business Manager, J. P. MARKHAM, JR.



sophical choice of the paper and the critical mechanics were in place. A number of suggested titles were considered, and the goal was to find one to be most representative of the spirit of Rice. So much less importance was put on the name before the first issue was published that the editorial board decided to get the first issue of the paper out the second week after school opened for the spring semester. As a Houston paper reported in December of 1915, "The authority has been conferred upon the officials to begin at once the preparatory work in their departments.

"There has been a movement on foot for some time to begin a student publication at the Rice Institute, and a number of interested students have already given the matter considerable thought in trying to choose a method that would enable the student body to get out a newspaper that would do justice to the school. Each step has been carefully worked out, and it is virtually an assured act that the journal will be a permanent one."

But who finally chose the paper's name?

It was Harcourt Wooten, class president 1913, first assistant editor, and Rice graduate of 1916 who proposed the name. The information comes from a memorandum in which he suggested a name for the Rice Alumni Quarterly: "The Rice Kernel." In Mr. Wooten's words is the following explanation:

"The RICE KERNEL"

Kernel – meaning "the central, most important part of some-

thing; core, essence
A rice kernel is *refined* and *polished* as should be a magazine for the Alumni of a great institution of learning, such as Rice University. In addition, the kernel of [sic] rice as a food strengthens, energises [sic] and builds up the physical body and hence the mental faculties and potentialities. It tends to reduce tension.

Submitted by -

C. Harcourt Wooten, B.A. '16
306 Terrace Drive
Houston 7, Texas

P. S. I might mention that when Dr. Lovett asked the student body, about 1914, to suggest names for a weekly publication my suggestion was "The Thresher" – a thresher, of course, in the rice field separates the good from the bad just as such a publication should do. And, now the rice kernel would go a step beyond *The Thresher*.

Only a few days before the first Rice commencement, it was reported that *The Thresher* remained under the management of the three literary societies "until it is taken over by the student body, for it is strictly a student newspaper and will in time be taken over by the student body at large.



Harcourt Wooten

"The new staff of *The Thresher* states that the paper will very probably be made a weekly next year and that the idea is that it shall ultimately, when the growth of the university justifies it, become a daily.

"The eleventh and last number of *The Thresher* this year will appear on commencement day, June 12."

Just three years later the *Houston Post* reported,

"The Rice Institute newspaper, *The Thresher*, this week made its second appearance for the present year. This publication now is being issued weekly for the first time in the history of the institute.

"The periodical has not been previously published this year because of the strict military regime at Rice. Many student activities, among them *The Thresher*, were disposed of with the coming of the students' army training corps last fall."

As we know, *The Thresher* returned as a constant voice on campus. It now appears on newspaper stands throughout the campus every Friday of the school terms, and it continues to report news as well as editorial content which often provides an intelligent, controversial platform replete with diverse perspectives.

Next in the series: "Scandal is a close associate of The Thresher"

RHS FOOTNOTE

(Left) Russ Pittman and Mary Dix share a laugh at the Galveston luncheon on May 19. Fred and Pat Burns graciously opened their beautifully restored home to Rice Historical Society members.

(Right) David Rosenthal and Pat Zumwalt on the Burns's patio at the RHS May 19 Galveston trip.

