

The Cornerstone

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CONGRESSMAN ALBERT THOMAS, RICE ALUMNUS

By Francelle Pruitt

Note: Significant portions of this paper appear in an article published in the April 2002 issue of the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*.

In 1916, a young man from Nacogdoches, Texas, named Albert Langston Thomas entered Rice Institute and embarked on an educational experience that would shape his future, and by extension have a significant impact on the city Houston and the nation. Destined to become a powerful figure in Washington, Thomas began his life as the son of rural East Texas merchant and cotton broker. He was an outgoing and well-liked young man. From an early age, he revealed a natural charisma and courteous demeanor that drew others to him. He also possessed a fiercely competitive nature and earned a reputation for persistently and tenaciously pursuing whatever task was before him. That characteristic was often a source of both admiration and annoyance to friends, prompting them to nickname him "Horsefly." It was readily apparent to any who might have noticed, that this young man exhibited the perfect combination of personal qualities to recommend him to public life.

Thomas quickly took a leadership role at Rice, assuming several positions in college organizations and projects. From working as manager of the Campanile to singing in the Glee Club and managing the Final Ball Committee, Thomas found ways to influence campus life and connect

personally to fellow students. In later years, he sometimes joked that his academic performance had been less than exemplary. When reporters asked the elder statesman to tell them about his experiences at Rice, he summed up his entire educational experience by saying, "I shook hands. I was the best handshaker on the campus."

Perhaps, one of his greatest achievements was a close, lifetime friendship with his roommate, George R. Brown, and, later, with George's older brother Herman. The Brown brothers later collaborated with Thomas on numerous business and political projects that were advantageous to the city of Houston. Rice Institute remained important to both Thomas and Brown throughout their lives, and the university benefited greatly from the dedication of these successful alumni. Their mutual admiration can be seen in the fact that it was Thomas who nominated Brown to the Board of Trustees, describing him as a "dyed-in-wool Rice man . . . [with] an unusual amount of good judgement and understanding . . . and an unimpeachable character." And in 1965 the Brown Foundation donated an endowment of \$500,000 to establish the Albert Thomas Chair of Political Science, honoring the congressman



Albert Thomas' graduation picture at the Rice Institute, 1920

for his "services to the people of Harris County and the nation and his deep affection for the university and its students."

As a student during the First World War, Thomas was aware of the nation's military demands. Like many of his classmates, he prepared himself for military service through the Student Army Training Corps (S.A.T.C.), in which he achieved the rank of sergeant for "B" Company. Upon completing the program and eligible for officer status, Thomas joined the U.S. Army as a second lieu-

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The Rice Historical Society

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the history of Rice University*

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future issues of The Cornerstone. Items
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NEWSLETTER DESIGNED
BY TOMORROW'S KEY

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*Albert Thomas,
spiffily dressed
and posing for the
camera at Rice.*

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tenant. However, the war ended before he was to have been shipped out, freeing him to return to his university studies. After graduating in 1920, he began studies at Harvard Law School. Shortly after, the economic crisis of the 1920s, which impoverished much of the cotton-producing South, forced his father out of business and cut short Albert's Harvard education.

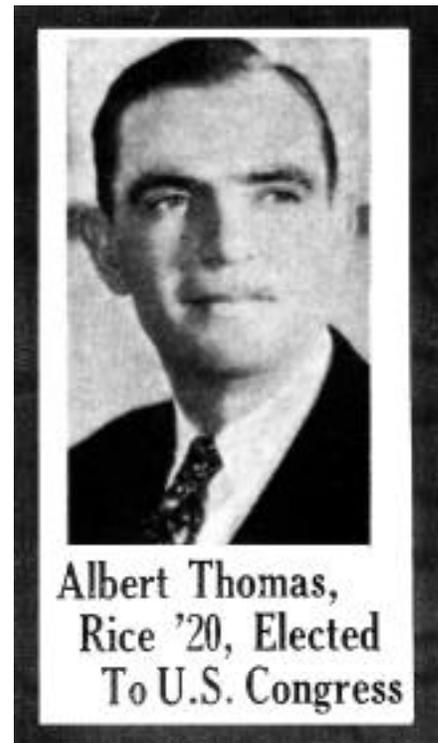
Thomas returned to Texas and enrolled in the University of Texas Law School. In late 1922 he married his hometown sweetheart, Lera Millard. Lera stayed in Nacogdoches, working at a local bank to help her husband finish law school. Meanwhile, Thomas resided in the "Little Campus Dormitory" designated for "poor boys." Thomas knew the realities of poverty that permeated the rural South. No doubt, he learned first hand the democratizing effects of economic setbacks. Thomas never lost sight of the economic lessons of his youth, as clearly demonstrated in his economic policy and anti-elitist attitudes.

Upon admittance to the bar in 1927, Thomas returned to Nacogdoches and made a successful bid for county attorney. In 1931 he was appointed assistant district attorney and moved to Houston, where he soon earned a reputation as a hard-nosed prosecutor. With strong encouragement from colleagues and friends, Thomas decided to run for congress in 1936. In a difficult and tiring campaign, the newcomer won the Democratic nomination over the city's mayor of twelve years, Oscar Holcombe. First-time voter and later congressman Bob Casey remembered the campaign as a "legendary" triumph of personality and vigor. Thomas and his wife walked door to door asking for votes, no small feat

Thomas never lost sight of the economic lessons of his youth, as clearly demonstrated in his economic policy and anti-elitist attitudes.

considering that Houston was the largest congressional constituency in the nation. The victory was due largely to the trust that Thomas instilled in the working class, rather than any substantive debate on issues. Many voters were new residents, recently arrived from the rural areas of Texas. They responded to the personal style of his campaign and felt an affinity for the East Texas country boy. Having won the Democratic nomination, the contest between Thomas and the Republican candidate was easily won with an eleven to one margin. After the 1936 election, Thomas never again faced any serious opposition and remained in office for three decades.

By the end of his career the veteran congressman could boast a long list of accomplishments that directly benefited his city. The present-day Houston infrastructure reflects Thomas's achievements. During his freshman term, he directed numerous W. P. A. projects to the district in addition to a \$9-million for badly needed flood control measures and improvements to the ship channel. From then on, he consistently directed federal programs and funding to Houston. As his political strength increased, so too did the size of the projects. Thomas's position on the powerful Appropriations Committee made him a valuable asset to the Houston economy. In 1949 he became the chairman of the Subcommittee on Independent Offices, which controlled the funding for many government agencies—including NASA. He also served on the Joint Committee on Atomic Energy and Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense. The numerous World War II contracts that so significantly transformed the Houston economy were directly attributable to his influence. A few



Thresher clipping when Albert Thomas was elected to Congress in 1936

examples of his contributions are the designation of Houston as an international air terminal, the construction of major freeways, a modern post office, the Sam Houston Coliseum, a Veteran's Administration hospital, and ultimately the Manned Spacecraft Center. As one historian put it, Thomas "had a mania for getting federal money for Texas." He was "the pork-barrel king of the Texas delegation."

Through the years Thomas remained dedicated to his *alma mater* and assisted Rice on a number of issues. In the 1940s he worked to help the university retain control of valuable property in Louisiana owned by the Rice Lumber Company. The federal government had leased the property for use as a gunnery range and was threatening to condemn to land. Sun Oil Company held a mineral lease that would have been worthless if the land were condemned. The government threat prompted Sun Oil to threaten to sue Rice for the loss of

Continued on page 4

future oil drilling profits. Thomas gladly stepped in to rescue what became an extremely profitable piece of real estate for the university. He also assisted the university in acquiring government-sponsored military training programs such as the Naval R.O.T.C. program in 1941 and Naval Engineering program in 1943. Rather blatantly, Thomas assured Rice president Edgar Odell Lovett that he would use his position on the Appropriations Committee to make sure Rice received any necessary funds for such programs.

Between 1956 and 1958 he coordinated political efforts to convince the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) to locate an Atomic Energy Laboratory and research program at Rice.

Working closely with George Brown, who was now a Rice trustee, he presented the AEC with a plan that included a joint research effort between Rice and other Texas universities. The proposals included offers to let the AEC lease acreage that was owned by Rice for a nominal fee. Thomas's letters mention several sizes of land plots available to them: 1,500 acres, 2,000 acres, and 4,000 acres. When the AEC decided against building a facility, Thomas was clearly upset. "Frankly, I don't like it," he told them. They were to "reconsider the matter," he wrote, "because I am serving notice on you now that an answer like your [last one] will not be acceptable." He reminded them that he had himself served on the AEC, was well informed about the organization, and would not be fooled by excuses.

In July 1958, when Congress passed the Space Act establishing the National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Thomas diverted his attention to getting a space research facility for Rice. Keith Glennan, NASA administrator, became the target of his energies. On October 30, 1958, Thomas spoke to Glennan about the possibility of putting a research program at Rice. He followed

up the meeting with a letter in which he mentioned that Rice had 2,000 acres of land about forty miles from Houston, which it would lease for a nominal fee. Glennan sent a very polite reply in which he attempted to brush off the congressman. He soon received another letter on the matter and a follow-up visit from George Brown. Again, Glennan tried to avoid any commitment to the insistent Rice promoters. He assured Thomas that he was not avoiding the issue, but it would take some time to develop a program. At this point NASA had no plans for a new facility.

Throughout the fall of that year, Thomas continued to pressure Glennan. Glennan repeated that there were no plans to construct a research facility other than the one currently under construction in Beltsville, Maryland (Goddard Space Center). Thomas obviously had reason to think otherwise, and retorted that funding for Beltsville had gone through without his approval and only during his absence. Glennan tried to hold his own, telling Thomas that was not his fault—and NASA would proceed as planned. He obviously did not comprehend the potent threat behind Thomas's words, and failed to understand the power that Thomas wielded as chairman of the committee in charge of allocating funding for NASA. Thomas assured him that the issue would not go away and the two of them would have further discussion. However, Glennan continued to underestimate his adversary. As soon



Congressman Albert Thomas

as the NASA budget for 1960 fiscal year reached the Appropriations Committee in the spring of 1959, Thomas made another call at the NASA office. Glennan resorted to the avoidance tactics he had used before. As he recalled, "I thought [I] was getting away with it," when Thomas suddenly set aside his courtly manners and interrupted the administrator in mid-sentence. His message was clear: "Now look here, Doctor, let's cut out the bull! Your budget calls for \$14 million for Beltsville and I am telling you that you won't get a God-damned cent of it unless that laboratory is moved to Houston."

In truth, there were no new facilities built during Glennan's administration. Nonetheless, Thomas continually reminded Glennan of who was really in charge. Normally, a "shrewd inquisitor" in budget hearings, Thomas thoroughly scrutinized each agency's budget and demonstrated a

remarkable knowledge of each agency's activities. He prided himself on cutting budgets and forcing applicants to justify fully their requests. Under the best of circumstances a hearing before the Subcommittee on Independent Offices was known as the "Thomas Obstacle Course." As one reporter put it, "few bureaucrats emerged from it unshaken." Moreover, Thomas had never supported space research, thinking rocketry was a waste of taxpayer money. One historian stated that Thomas was the "nemesis of the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics [forerunner of NASA]" and "waged a one-man war against the program."

Now Glennan and his associates had to satisfy this formidable reviewer, after having made the lethal mistake of insulting him with a patronizing attitude. Thomas had little toleration for "cocky" witnesses or insubordination. He systematically antagonized the NASA staff in every budget hearing, making it clear that Glennan could not win a battle of will against the man who held the purse strings. Glennan dreaded each day of the hearings before "Albert Thomas and his Subcommittee." Thomas made Glennan and his associates account for every penny. On one occasion he required them to double the volume of their printed report. Another time, he threatened to cut the entire budget for the Huntsville administrative offices. Moreover, he humiliated and embarrassed them repeatedly by making them look incompetent with biting questions and bold insults.

This behavior was more than posturing. After putting Glennan's staff through the grueling defense, Thomas cut the NASA budget enough to make operation difficult. Glennan was doubly frustrated by the knowledge that Thomas's influence extended well beyond the subcommittee. "It is said to be a losing game to attempt to beat Thomas on the floor." Thomas was by all accounts a brilliant debater, and

Glennan had been advised that his only hope lay in taking the matter directly to the more favorably inclined Senate. A compromise might then be struck between the House and Senate.

But this, of course, created twice the work for Glennan—as Thomas well knew.

In early 1961 James Webb replaced Glennan as head of NASA and Thomas's strong-arm tactic was no longer necessary. Thomas had a good rapport with Webb, with whom he had served on the Atomic Energy Commission. Webb was an

Oklahoman and had at one point run a Houston oil supply company. He was also a Johnson appointee. Johnson was not only the vice-president, he was also head of the Space Council. Unlike Thomas, Johnson took an early interest in space exploration and strongly supported the programs. Yet Johnson's role in the MSC deal is unclear. He and Webb both insisted on giving Thomas credit. However, LBJ was in a powerful position and closely allied with all the main players. In April George Brown joined the Space Council also. Brown was an extremely important member of the coalition. Not only was he chairman of the Rice board, he was a good friend to Thomas and Johnson, as well as a financial backer of both. Morgan Davis, Chairman of the Humble Oil & Refining Company, was a major figure also. This group knew one another well, and they all agreed that the space program should incorporate industries and universities. And, with the possible exception of James Webb, they all had interest in promoting Houston.

Webb denied that any political consideration factored into his selection

of Houston. He was correct in asserting that the Houston site was beautifully suited to meet NASA's requirements. However, the politics are undeniable. Webb specifically distanced Johnson from the collaboration as much as possible, although he kept up regular communication with the vice president. Webb claimed that he did not tell Johnson or Thomas when he first began to consider Houston. He reported directly to President Kennedy, who then used the knowledge in a friendly bargain to get Thomas's support on three House bills.

Unfortunately, Webb did not divulge exactly when the conversation took place. Nonetheless, Thomas believed that sometime early in the process Kennedy had made a commitment to Houston.

The Houston group was busily at work, probably in February, if not earlier. On May 23, 1961, two days before Kennedy made his address to Congress announcing his desire to accelerate the program, Webb sent Johnson a memorandum on the subject. He told the vice-president that Brown and Thomas had on more than one occasion "made it clear" that they wanted Rice University to "make a real contribution." Rice had 3,800 acres set aside near the Houston Ship Channel for use as a research facility. He believed that access to deep-water transportation was crucial, and he intended to give Rice careful consideration.

On June 10, 1961, friends and relatives attended the wedding of Thomas's daughter in Washington. The next morning George Brown hosted a Sunday brunch at his country home in Middleburg, Virginia. Soon after arriving, Thomas asked his

"I want to make Houston the largest city in the South, and this will do it," he said. "It [NASA] will bring some of the smartest people in the world to Houston to work and raise their families. We really need this."

wife's cousin, Robert Millard, to join him in the game room to witness a private meeting with George Brown, James Webb, and Morgan Davis. Clearly, these men had engaged in previous discussion about a joint effort to bring a space flight center to Houston. Now Thomas wanted them to make a firm commitment. He argued that Houston had everything the center needed. "I want to make Houston the largest city in the South, and this will do it," he said. "It [NASA] will bring some of the smartest people in the world to Houston to work and raise their families. We really need this." He thought that they were very close to accomplishing this goal. "We can do it!" he said, "But it's up to you, Morgan. If you'll give the land—Mr. Brown, you can build it. I'll appropriate all the money you need. And Mr. Webb, you can send your man to the moon!" Davis gave it some brief thought, then said, "Alright." The men then shook hands over a game table and proceeded to take a tour of the house and enjoy their brunch.

On Monday Thomas informed Houston newspapers that the city had a good chance of getting the center but cautioned that no decision had been made yet. On Wednesday Webb wrote to George Brown in Houston about future negotiations and sent enclosures for Rice's consideration. "We are waiting for word from you as to our next move," Brown replied. He then apprised Rice's chancellor, Carey Croneis, of the status of negotiations. *Dear Carey: I am enclosing [the] complete file on the West property as owned by the Humble Company. The verbal agreement is that we can get 1000 acres on the interior of the ranch but contiguous to our present property, so as not to take the land fronting on the lake which they think is worth a lot of money. I have drawn a little pencil sketch of the way Morgan thought it ought to [be arranged].*

Often the land deal has been



Albert Thomas with unidentified man at the opening of the Federal Building in Houston

regarded as the clinching factor in NASA's decision. Humble Oil had deeded a portion of the West Estate in 1956 with the provision that Rice use the West Mansion and property for a scientific research facility. The donation consisted of the abandoned mansion and twenty acres surrounding the house. Rice purchased additional acreage to increase the holding to about one hundred acres.

Amendments later withdrew restrictions on the donated land to accommodate future prospects. Rice offered its twenty acres and the West mansion for NASA's use. In consideration of the NASA project, Humble donated 1,000 acres to Rice, who in turn donated it to NASA. After the decision was already confirmed, NASA requested an additional 600 acres. Humble gave Rice the 600 acres, who then sold it to NASA for \$1.4 million.

It is unclear as to who actually received the \$1.4 million, but certainly Humble reaped financial benefits from tax breaks and from the subsequent industrial and residential development on property adjoining the

NASA complex. Humble had had plans for such a development for a while, but the MSC gave them even greater assurance of profit. The Humble development included the city of Clear Lake and the industrial complex of Bayport.

Certainly, the offer of donated land appealed to NASA and saved them a considerable amount of money. However, it was not the sole consideration, or even the most important one. Morgan Davis helped to cement the deal with the land donation, but Webb could have purchased land. Moreover, NASA did have to pay for the additional acreage. Although the price may have been reasonable, it was still an additional expense. It seems that the land deal was the metaphorical "icing on the cake." After all,

Houston met the entire list of requirements that the agency claimed were important—large industrial complex, water transportation, mild climate, skilled labor force, convenient airport, modern communications, and so forth, at least as well as any other contemplated location.

Although Thomas, Brown, and Morgan had Webb's assurance that he would select Houston, they still had to negotiate the details. All parties had to make good on their promised contributions. George Brown represented Rice University's interests. He not only facilitated the land deal between Humble Oil, Rice, and NASA; he also helped work out the educational and research program. The academic aspect seemed to be of utmost importance to Webb. In the May 23 memorandum, he indicated his interest in developing intellectual resources. On the morning of August 7 Rice University Chancellor Carey Croneis and colleagues met in Washington with the Dr. Hugh Odishaw, executive director of the Space Science Board of the National Academy of Sciences, to

discuss Rice's possible contribution to the NASA program. The meeting lasted less than an hour and resulted in no new or specific ideas for academic or research plans. More important, Croneis reported that Webb had obviously informed Odishaw that "the facility to be allotted to Houston, and Rice University, was going to be a large one." Odishaw also indicated that Webb "not only wanted to be able to justify his actions politically, but also to defend it on all non-political bases as well."

That afternoon the Rice delegation met with James Webb in Odishaw's office. The meeting confirmed for Croneis that Webb had decided in favor of Rice and Houston. However, as he put it, Webb was in a "horse-trading mood." He wanted to "drive as hard a bargain as he [could]...to get the university greatly to enlarge its graduate faculty, chiefly in the science program." He told the group that Congress had approved the budget for \$1.7 billion for 1961 and expected that to increase to \$5 billion by 1962. For 1961 he had at his disposal \$60 million for a Manned Space Flight Center, with a payroll of \$25 million per year, and he expected the appropriations to "increase several fold." Webb emphasized that he alone controlled the expenditures, answering only to the president and congress. He felt a grave responsibility for the large NASA budget and expected Rice and Houston to help him justify his decisions. Webb told them that he could be very "bold" in his decisions but "he want[ed] scientific, economic, and social justification for his actions so that he [could] confront his critics with logical statements and arguments." To be specific, . . . he want[ed] to be able to say to disappointed supplicants "well, you can't match what Rice and the rich Texans can offer to insure the success of the Center."

Webb did not have a specific program in mind, but he expressed great

interest in having Chancellor Croneis and President Kenneth Pitzer make significant contributions to the Center or at least lend their names to the project. Both were preeminent scientists of international reputation. Croneis went to Rice University during the 1950s when the university created its geology department, which along with physics research was of substantial academic reputation. Pitzer had been a chemistry professor at the University of California for twenty-four years. He also served as the director of research for the Atomic Energy Commission and as chairman of the AEC's Advisory Council. He assumed the duties of university president on July 6, 1961. Webb stated that he possibly would have chosen a site other than Texas had Pitzer not become Rice's president. It should be noted that the date of Pitzer's appointment coincided with the handshake deal in George Brown's game room. The *Houston Chronicle* carried news of Pitzer's selection as president of Rice University on the same day that it carried Thomas's announcement that Houston was in good standing for the NASA center.

Above all, Webb wanted Rice's assurance that the university program would have national appeal and would be of particular benefit to other southern and southwestern states. The meeting ended with the exact nature of Rice's relationship to the space center undetermined, but with all parties eager to proceed to the next planning stage. The political die had been cast, to use Croneis's words, and Webb needed Rice's full cooperation to insure the center's success. The land offer was of little consideration. Webb was not even interested in seeing maps or proposals for land use. Croneis's assessment was that Rice's "bit of choice land" had only limited value as a bargaining chip. The real issue was the development of a highly prestigious, nationally relevant science program, which would have a wide range

of benefits and the power to diffuse political grumbling.

Webb expressed his eagerness to exchange clearer ideas with Rice representatives at their next meeting. Meanwhile, he activated the NASA site selection team, which gave the appearance of ongoing competition among the cities. The next meeting took place on August 17 between James Webb, Albert Thomas, George Brown, Kenneth Pitzer, and Carey Croneis. Within a few days, Pitzer signed a formal proposal for a cooperative effort with NASA, which set in motion the process for developing the nation's only Space Science department, funded largely by federal grants. On August 25 a four-man site selection team visited Houston.

By September 7, 1961, the site selection team had completed visits to twenty-three cities. The site selection team said that MacDill Air Force Base at Tampa, Florida, was their number one choice. At the last minute, the military base was no longer available for consideration, which put Houston at the top of their list. Webb made the official decision on September 14 and informed President Kennedy. Few were surprised when Albert Thomas made the announcement that the center would be in Houston and that Rice University would lead the university research program. Keith Glennan and others within NASA predicted the outcome well in advance based on their experiences with Thomas.

Albert Thomas did not single-handedly bring NASA to Houston, but he was certainly not just the "waterboy," as he modestly told reporters. Thomas orchestrated the political strategy for a team effort. After decades in Washington, he had become a major political power. As a freshman congressman, he cultivated the loyalty of his constituency, the local press, and community leaders. That loyalty only increased with time. Thomas consistently rose to influential positions through hard work and determina-

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tion. He used his Texas manner and southern charm to put others at ease and win friends. He also mastered the skill of knowing when to put aside his charm and play hardball politics. By 1961 he had built a powerhouse of supporters and like-minded allies, on whom he relied to assist in such major projects as the Manned Spacecraft Center.

The NASA deal was indeed the pinnacle of his career. It represented the culmination of many years of work, work that steadily brought bigger and better things to his district. NASA, he believed, would transform Houston, and in many ways it did. It brought international attention and put Houston at the center of the romantic space-age fever. The MSC stimulated the economy quite significantly, particularly in the first few years. It enhanced the academic prestige of Rice University and changed the way the city thought of itself. It even helped bring about the desegregation of Rice University, which understood that a nationally competitive school had to be racially integrated.

Putting a NASA laboratory in Houston would have been unthinkable had it not been for many of the

earlier projects in which Albert Thomas had participated. The Houston Ship Channel was one of most important factors in the decision—not only the physical improvements, which provided suitable water transportation, but also the industrial development, which had its beginnings in World War II contracts. Thomas had helped make international air travel commonplace in Houston, linking the Bayou City to the world and modernity. The various programs that Thomas supported for Rice University enhanced the quality of the school and gave the administration and Thomas experience with collaborative programs. Even the failed attempts to bring federal research programs to Rice taught significant lessons on about how to make appealing offers and avoid pitfalls. His association with prominent scientists through the AEC and other independent agencies provided the university with an influential advocate in recruiting world-renowned scholars. The many improvements to Houston's infrastructure, access to cutting-edge medical facilities, and many other support facilities, added inducements to the overall package.

In the 1960s, the establishment of

MSC was the biggest and most exciting thing that Houstonians could imagine. Thomas gloried in the spotlight as a political hero. On November 1, 1961, Rice honored him with a banquet attended by such space-age élites as Edward Teller and Robert Gilruth, director of MSC. President Kennedy and Vice-President Johnson each sent telegrams to be read aloud. The university presented him with a scroll of tribute, which was the closest thing to an honorary doctorate that Rice bestows. Thomas received further recognition during the citywide celebration to welcome the astronauts in on July 4, 1962. He shared the lime-light with Kennedy and Johnson when the president spoke at Rice University stadium on September 12, 1962, and called for putting a man on the moon. And, on November 21, 1963—the night before the Kennedy assassination—the city of Houston sponsored a grand appreciation/retirement dinner attended by over three thousand guests, including President Kennedy and Vice President Johnson and other dignitaries. Then shortly before Thomas's death, in 1965 the Brown Foundation endowed of the Albert Thomas Chair in Political Science at Rice University.

IN THE NEWS



Above: Rice Historical Society Spring Fling at the Kruse Ranch in March



Right: Buffalo moms-to-be at the RHS Spring Fling

Rice Historical Society Catering (not Melange!) at the annual meeting June 1 at the Heritage Society Tearoom. Left to right: Lee Kobayashi, Maydelle Burkhalter, Lee Seureau and Madge Jones



John Boles and Ed Oppenheimer at the annual meeting

