

# 'Hubbub' of Houston, the Rice Hotel, goes to the great convention in the sky

One recent day the Rice Hotel in Houston, as its patrons had known and loved it for more than six decades, came to an end.

At midmorning of the day of the announced closing, while the last registered guests packed up and prepared to settle accounts to beat the noon checkout deadline, there occurred a poignant scene in front of the main entrance on Texas Avenue that few passersby would soon forget.

Minutes before, by arrangement with the photographer for SMITHSONIAN, the entire remaining daytime staff and management had left their posts and assembled to raise their arms in a cheery, and sad, gesture of farewell. Among the onlookers was an elderly and elegantly dressed woman who blinked away a tear, and said: "If Jesse Jones were alive today, he'd be turning over in his grave."

Some disparagers of Texas wealth, and the portions of it which Jesse Holman Jones had symbolized, have created practically an entire literature of Rich Texan jokes. One of them, sometimes heard around Houston, is that the Rice Hotel may have perpetrated a sham: The great crystal chandelier in the lobby (pp. 50-51), it is suggested, is not festooned with real diamonds at all, at least not of the finest gem quality. More likely, the crystals are nothing but leaded cut glass.

Houstonians with a flair for poking fun at themselves have been known to sidle up to out-of-state guests in the lobby and confide that suspicion. Since everybody took it as an article of faith, energy crisis or no, that the chandelier would never be dimmed, let

Standing below the venerable cast-iron balcony that shields the sidewalk from the Texas sun, Rice Hotel's daytime staff says goodbye on its last day.





*It always was the quintessence of Lone  
Star State hospitality, hoorahing and  
high jinks, but them days are gone forever*

*By David Snell*

*Color photographs by Robert Westerlage*





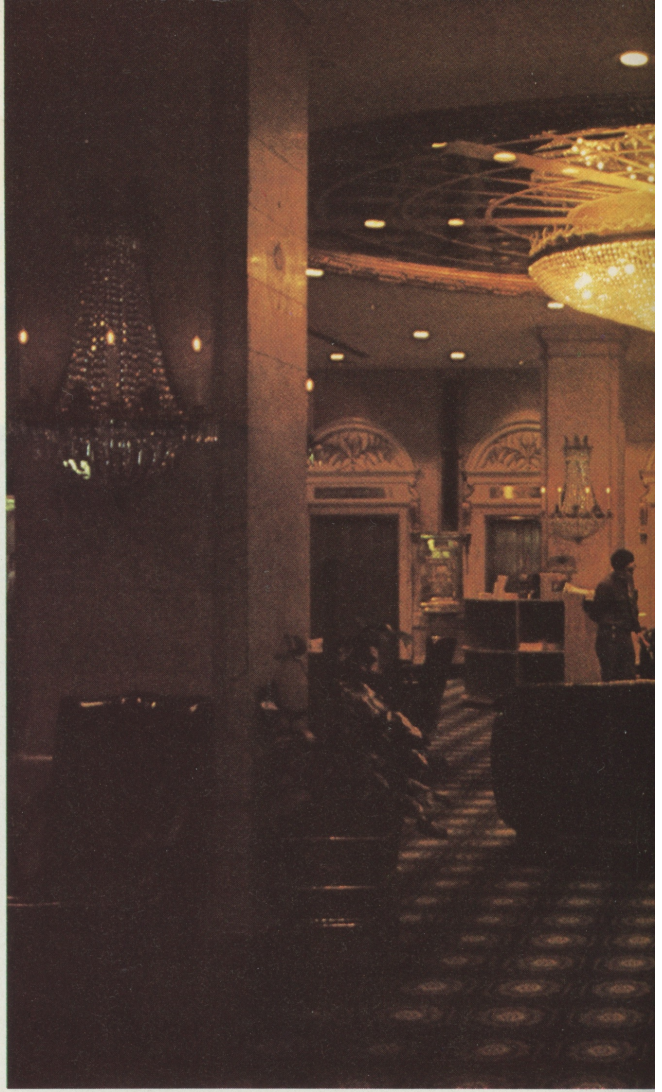
alone go dark, no one was in any great hurry to examine closely the 16,000-odd faceted baubles which comprise the 14-foot oval light fixture, to see if the joke might turn out to be a libel after all. Any notion that a wrecking ball might one day be readied to swing against *the Rice Hotel* was simply unthinkable.

Jesse Jones was the almost legendary Tennessee-born financial wizard who, in effect, became Mr. Texas before World War I, while he was still a young man. He built not only the Rice Hotel but also most of the vintage commercial towers that surround it. The bustling downtown area of Houston was practically his private fiefdom and the Rice its castle. What he might have had to say about the closing of the hotel, had he lived to see it happen, is a fair question.

The ground on which the building stands has been described by author-historian A. Pat Daniels as the most significant city block in Texas.

This was precisely the site of the two-story frame building which served as the first capitol of the newly independent Republic of Texas from 1837 to 1839, and again in 1842. When the Texas Congress voted to move itself, and the seat of government, far away from the yellow fever-infested lowlands of Houston to the hill country hamlet of Waterloo (renamed Austin), the vacated capitol became a hotel. Hotels have occupied the site ever since.

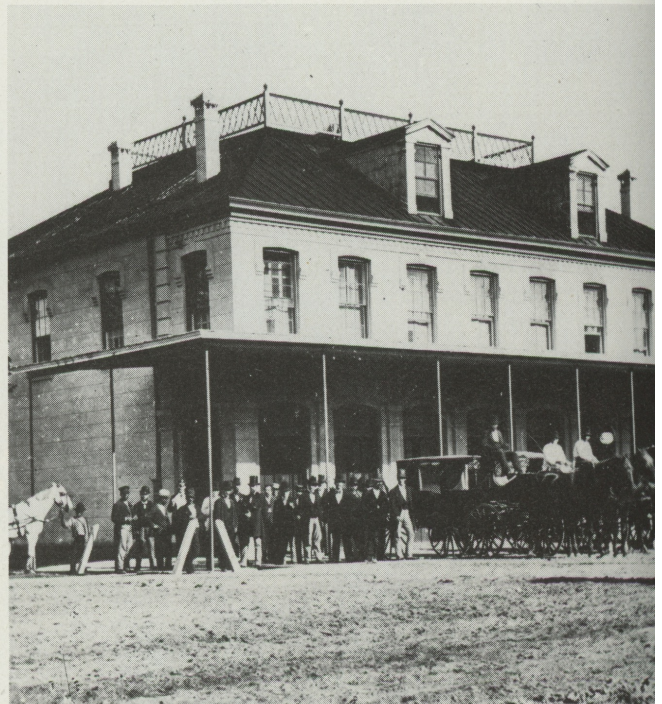
Percy Foreman (p. 57), the famous Houston criminal



The mammoth crystal chandelier, hung by a New York designer in 1960, was festooned with "diamonds."



Old Capitol Hotel, possibly sketched in 1847. Earlier and briefly it had been the capitol of the republic.



Same building about 30 years later, but considerably altered by a widow's walk and a brick facing.





lawyer, recalls the drama that unfolded the first time he laid eyes on the Rice, as a boy. He had accompanied his father to Houston on a business trip, and just as they reached the hotel, young Percy saw a notorious gambler killed in a gunfight in front of the Texas Avenue entrance.

I can recall my own first visit to the Rice with *my* father, who was an alternate delegate to the 1928 Democratic National Convention. Jesse Jones had lured the convention to Houston by handing the party's National Committee a check for \$200,000. Much of the caucusing and hoopla took place at the Rice, but my most vivid memory is of the scuffling and shoving in the lobby caused by the arrival of a man with free samples of Texas-made fig cookies.

During that convention, at which FDR made the nominating speech for Alfred E. Smith in the huge barn of a convention hall that Jesse Jones had promised for the occasion, it is a matter of record that tempers turned edgy as temperatures soared. One rancher, who had come to Houston on other business, became exasperated when the crowded elevators kept passing him up. Finally he emptied his six-shooter into an elevator door, moments after the car had descended.

John Ragley, who was a member of the Rice man-

*Mr. Snell's chronicles of life in the new and old West frequently appear in the pages of SMITHSONIAN.*



The same site, but by 1893 there was a five-story annex on Main Street. At right is the Rice Hotel today.





## *Houston's beloved Rice Hotel*

agerial staff until his retirement several years ago, vividly remembers the visit by Crown Prince Faisal of Saudi Arabia, who later became King Faisal. While bellhops and chambermaids looked on aghast, the royal bodyguards swept through the suite he was to occupy, slashing into dark corners of closets, behind draperies and under beds with their razor-sharp scimitars, just in case somebody was lurking. To discourage any knife-throwing practice, the management covered the walls with Arab tapestries.

The visit must have reminded somebody of an earlier one at the old Capitol Hotel, shortly after the government had moved to Austin. A room clerk who was racially enlightened, or protective of his scalp, permitted a party of Indian braves to check in. Apparently they felt uncomfortable about the furniture in their accommodation and had it removed. Then they settled down on buffalo hides provided by the management and proceeded to practice throwing their tomahawks at the walls.

Murder has been committed and suicide attempted at the Rice. One woman was hacked to death by her lover, and another, who happened to be a client of Percy Foreman, shot herself in a public telephone booth in the main lobby. Invariably, when such things happened, the staff maintained an impeccable decorum in order not to disturb the other guests.

There was a rigidly enforced rule against pets, but this being Texas, the no-animals rule naturally never applied to horses. In the old days the cattlemen's conventions held in Houston were wild and woolly, and it was not at all uncommon for a rancher to ride right into the lobby and sign the register without dismounting. During the Democratic National Convention a female rodeo star rode her mount up the stairs to a then-existing mezzanine and hitched it to a potted palm while she went to the powder room.

When the great quarter horse champion Cutter Bill came to Houston several years ago as a star attraction at the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo in the Astrodome, the Rice not only allowed its owner, oilman Rex Cauble, to bring the animal in for a visit but even rolled out its red carpet. Entering through the motor lobby, Cutter Bill stepped smartly into an elevator to be whisked to the fifth-floor Press Club where he was served a drink (below).

Whenever the worst happened, as it did on a carpet during Cutter Bill's visit, or when fights or other violence caused wreckage or bloodshed, the housekeeping staff would swiftly and efficiently move in to tidy up.

One tragic event which affected the future of the hotel occurred in the year 1900 in New York City. This was the murder of William Marsh Rice, at the age of 84, by his valet, who pressed a chloroform-soaked rag to Mr. Rice's face.

A merchant who had come to Houston from Massachusetts in 1838 and built a fortune in lumber and land holdings, Rice had bought the Capitol Hotel for unpaid taxes in 1886, and six years later had added a five-story annex facing Main Street. Upon his death, most of his estate, including the land under the hotel, was added to his endowment of Rice Institute (which is now Rice University). The deed stipulated that any hotel on that site, then and in the future, must be named Rice.

A little over a decade later, Jesse Jones bought the hotel and signed a 99-year lease for the land. Jones had a vision of the city that Houston would become, and he knew that the first order of business was the creation of a splendid modern hotel.

While contractors began razing the existing structure, Jones himself drew plans for the new hotel, then,



While Rice rules against pets were strictly enforced, horses were another matter. Here, champion quarter horse, Cutter Bill, receives a liquid greeting as owner Rex Cauble looks on.



on a vacant lot, erected the ground floor to scale. On May 17, 1913, the new Rice had its grand opening. The entry at the top of the first page of the register was Jesse H. Jones.

In 1932 Jesse Jones went to Washington to head the Reconstruction Finance Corporation. He stayed on to serve as President Franklin D. Roosevelt's wartime Secretary of Commerce. During his Washington years his visits back to Houston were infrequent.

On one occasion, while he was at the RFC, he flew down to attend a banquet in his honor at the Rice. With everything in readiness and 600 notables sitting at the tables in the Crystal Ballroom, a reception committee waited out front to escort the guest of honor upstairs to the dais.

The entourage arrived and a moment later Jesse Jones came striding through the lobby with the committee, toward a waiting elevator. "Now, hold on a minute," he said. "I've got to say hello to my boys."

Thereupon he sauntered to the desk and for 15 minutes swapped howdys and small talk with the night clerks, cashiers, porters and bellhops, while the business, financial and political leaders of Texas cooled their heels. He simply wanted a firsthand report on what had been going on at the Rice.

### *High jinks and homey hospitality*

Never, outside the Rice's acre, was there a stage for so heady a circus of Texas-style high jinks, hoorahing and high-rolling, highfalutin business and social hobnobbery. And never in Texas, nor anywhere else, likely, was a homier brand of hospitality bestowed so easily upon princes, potentates, presidents and just plain people who came from all over hell and gone.

"I tell you what it was about this here hotel," said a city policeman who moonlighted as a guard at the Rice during the last days, to discourage souvenir hunters. "Ever since I can remember, the Rice has always been at the very *hubbub* of Houston."

Jesse Jones would have liked that way of putting it. From the beginning of his Houston career he believed in the concept of centralized urban development. The bigger the towers of commerce, and the more tightly they were bunched, the more potent the city would become. To business and banking leaders in the Jones orbit, it must have seemed an act of madness and downright impertinence when, in the late 1940s, the wildcatter Glenn McCarthy went four miles down Main Street to stake ground for a new super-hotel, on a patch of prairie where one might have expected him to drill a test well. Houston had never seen anything to compare with the flamboyant opening of McCarthy's Shamrock Hotel on St. Patrick's Day of 1949, and likely never will again.



Legendary Houston-booster, Jesse H. Jones, shown above at age 18, about 20 years before he made his fortune, bought the Rice Hotel and, at its gala reopening in 1913, signed in as its first guest.

THE RICE		HOMER D. MATTHEWS, MANAGER HOUSTON, TEXAS	
DATE		May 17 1913	
SAFE PROVIDED IN OFFICE FOR VALUABLES. OTHERWISE NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR LOSS.			
NAME	ADDRESS	ROOM	
Jesse H. Jones	Houston Texas	1716	
Ben Campbell	"	"	
O. B. Colquitt	Austin Tex	416	
Mrs O. B. Colquitt	"	416	
Miss Mary Colquitt	"	416	
Mrs J. R. Groves	Chillicothe Mo		
" Mr. J. R. Groves	"		
W. E. Jones	Houston		
Mrs. M. A. Jones	"		





In 1925, Mrs. J. Sayles Leach, the former Daisy Ewing, wore a Russian costume to the debut party of April Jackson. Fifty years later (below), she kicked up her heels at hotel's swinging farewell party.



Artist Eugenia Howard met husband Wilmer Hunt the night of her debut at the Allegro Ball in 1929. Last spring she and Mr. Hunt, now a Texas judge, returned to help bid the Rice goodbye.





Celebrities arrived by the trainload from Hollywood, and everybody who was anybody in Texas turned out. Jesse Jones, who could have been forgiven for staying cold and aloof, of course did no such thing. Like everybody else he went to the Shamrock, and got hopelessly stuck in the mob scene at the front door. On that night the winds of change blew like a hurricane, and there was Uncle Jesse, right in its eye.

From then on it was only a matter of time before Houston would explode all over with new hotels, elegant shopping areas, and towering outpost clusters of business and commerce. Jesse Jones could hardly have failed to see it coming.

But the Rice Hotel, "Houston's traditional host," had a lot of tradition going for it. By old habits that were going to be hard to break, the Rice was where things happened.

For decades Houston's mayors and police chiefs understood without having to be told that Uncle Jesse would be pleased to have all downtown parades routed past the Rice so that the guests could go out onto the balcony and watch. Had any marching band chosen to strike out on its own along a different route, the heavens, if not the balcony, would surely have fallen.

Many of the social events and cotillions which took place at the Rice have become Houston legends. One year long, long ago, Colonel and Mrs. O. T. Holt gave some debutantes a Wagnerian opera party. At a nearby music hall they heard the first half of *Parsifal*, then repaired to the Rice for dinner during a long prearranged intermission while the cast and orchestra waited and wondered at the ways of Houston society.

The bill of fare on such occasions could be as regal as anyone cared to command. At one Allegro Ball in the 1920s, debutantes and their parents and escorts feasted with chopsticks on broiled hummingbird on toast prepared by Chinese chefs who had been flown in from San Francisco and New York. Houstonians still recall the brilliant debuts of Bess Kirby and "Bootsie" Seagraves. Kirby, a lumberman, is reported to have spent \$50,000 to have a New York decorator refurbish the ballroom for just the one night of his daughter's coming-out.

#### *Prelude to tragedy*

Never did the banquet staff face a bigger test than the 1958 banquet of Houston's Congregation B'rith Shalom. It was kosher, with meticulous rabbinical supervision. To avoid the contaminating touch of anything that had ever been used for milk or other dairy products, the hotel laid in full services of new dishes, utensils, silver vessels and glassware.

On November 21, 1963, President and Mrs. John F. Kennedy dined in private in the International Suite,

on bird's nest soup, quail with Strasbourg foie gras, a Chateaubriand from a Texas Black Angus garnished with artichoke hearts, and heart-shaped ice cream molds decorated with candied violets. They used the gold flatware that was normally kept in a vault like crown jewels. It was his last dinner.

In 1928, in the absolute certainty that cowboys would show up at the last minute without reservations and wouldn't object to a bit of open-air roughing it on the Rice roof, Jones built a shed on the west wing, to be used as a bunkhouse. Throughout the sweltering convention it caught the breezes off the Gulf and was the coolest place in town.

During the Depression the bunkhouse, which was intended originally to be only temporary, became the "Top Deck of the Rice" or, as people called it, the Rice Roof. The roof became the most popular dance spot



Hotel staff members keep an eye on the "gold" cutlery—for 75—which has served presidents and kings.



that Houston ever had. Most of the bigtime bands played there—led by names like Paul Whiteman, Coon Sanders, Woody Herman, Vincent Lopez, the Dorsey brothers, Gus Arnheim, Freddy Martin and Ted Weems, whose band featured a young male vocalist named Perry Como.

In 1953, Jesse Jones underwent gall-bladder surgery and three years later, in a condition of rapid physical deterioration, he entered St. Luke's hospital. On June 1, 1956, as the downtown towers cast their longest shadows in a deepening summer twilight, Jesse Jones died at the age of 82.

As though by the momentum which Jones imparted to all the things he created, the Rice continued to evolve and grow. From the beginning there had been a continuous program of refurbishing and modernization, and in the first years after Jesse Jones' death some of the changes were impressive.

Somehow, though, the Rice was showing its years, like an aging beauty who tries to hide wrinkles with pancake. Mostly it was the little things that stood out, the touch-ups, the routine repairs, the panel of wall-board here, the fake beam there. All this produced a kind of do-it-yourself eclecticism. There was a look of cross-purpose by committee, of plasticized patching and piecework, of papering-over, of caked-on paint.

"Let's face it," said one grande dame of Houston society who has aged more gracefully than the hotel, "the Rice is just plain tacky." To be sure, tackiness by itself is not necessarily terminal, but there were other considerations, some of ominous portent, and there were the inexorable turns of events.

#### *Put up or shut down*

After the death of Jesse Jones, the bulk of his holdings, including the Rice Hotel, went to Houston Endowment, Inc., a philanthropic foundation which he and his wife had set up. In 1971 Houston Endowment gave the hotel to Rice University, which already owned the land. In the first two years after this transaction, the hotel made money and the trustees were glad the university was in the business. But last year, as the recession deepened, the hotel slipped into the red. Meanwhile, the city of Houston adopted a new fire code which spelled more trouble.

From a practical standpoint, and from past experience, the Rice was considered one of the safest hotels around. The new code, however, would have required extensive modifications. By best estimate, the university figures it would cost \$1.2 million to bring the hotel up to compliance.

It was a put-up-or-shut-down situation. In the end, pragmatism took over. The day after the closing, the Rittenhouse Capital Corporation, a New York con-

cern, offered to buy the building and reopen the Rice as a very different kind of facility. It would be a kind of executive hotel and office tower, with permanent office space and meeting rooms, primarily for multinational corporations. The old Rice, with its homey and personalized touch and its clientele of people who simply liked to go there, was gone forever.

The closing of the hotel that Jesse Jones had built was a very special milestone deserving a special observance, and Houstonians by common impulse realized this even as they accepted the logic of what was happening. There *had* to be a Last Dance at the Rice.

And so, the gala event took place—dancing and cocktails on the now glass-enclosed Rice Roof, then dinner and more dancing in the Crystal Ballroom. Hundreds of Houstonians with private memories of the Rice, and some with very long ones, crowded in at \$150 a couple (or \$1,000 for a table), with proceeds going to Houston's Contemporary Arts Museum.

The dinner was excellent, the service impeccable: For there to have been any relaxing of standards would not have been in keeping with tradition. Finally, after a style show on a theme of nostalgia, there was dancing, wild and swinging, then slow and dreamy, as Buddy Brock's orchestra evoked the sounds of big bands.

At midnight the party came to an end—with the playing of *Auld Lang Syne*, of course. Only then did some members of the staff, mostly the older ones, permit themselves the privilege of stepping out of their customary roles. They wept.



An 89-year-old hotel "expert," Mrs. Byrdie Cox Sias, enjoyed a quiet moment on last day of the Rice.

Renowned defense attorney Percy Foreman received last cup of coffee at the hotel he frequented daily.



