

A dozen or so years ago on a visit to Houston, my hometown, I made a sentimental journey to the Rice Hotel, which had been the centerpiece of downtown when downtown was the centerpiece of the city. It was a deserted hulk. Windows facing the street were cracked and boarded up, the Texas and Main Street entrances barricaded, the broad steps leading down to the barber shop and cafeteria closed off by steel grates.

The wide porticoed sidewalk along Texas, where in the 1930s Harry Grier had broadcast his celebrated *Man On the Street* radio show, was untidy and almost deserted. It had once teemed with pedestrians whom Grier interviewed at random, including a young woman he stopped, thrusting a microphone into her face and asking her name and then her profession. "I'm a prostitute," she replied to a shocked audience on live radio. Within a heartbeat Grier said, "Go, and sin no more," quickly turning to capture another passerby.

In those halcyon days, the Rice Roof was the place to go for dancing in sum-

The Roof closed when summer was over and there was a period when you couldn't go dancing at the Rice except at affairs in the Crystal Ballroom. Then in 1938 the air-conditioned Empire Room opened and dancing was year-round. After I went to work at the *Houston Post* in the fall of 1939 I could get in both the Roof and the Empire Room free. I wrote about the bands that played in them. They were never quite the top bands like Benny Goodman or Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey. And never, ever the great black bands such as Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, or Jimmy Lunceford. But they were close to the top — Xavier Cugat, George Olsen, Vincent Lopez, Woody Herman, Henry King, Freddie Martin, Shep Fields, and a country boy with an accordion and an accent, Lawrence Welk.

Before I ever saw the inside of the Rice Hotel I knew, and was awed by, the outside. When I was a child selling *Liberty Magazine* downtown I went bravely into office buildings but never dared enter the Rice lobby. And when I was a freshman at Rice Institute in 1933, the upperclassmen paraded us up Main Street to the Rice Hotel corner in our Slime caps (freshmen were called Slimes), green ties, and red suspenders. Tony, the Rice Institute gardener, would give a heavily-accented pep talk on a hotel balcony for the upcoming football game. And Tom Sawyer (his real name), the uniformed Houston policeman who kept order at school dances, talked to us as well.

In my band reviewing days and after, I'd often go to the hotel to interview a celebrity. One of the early ones was Lauritz Melchior, the Danish heldentenor, a big man with a big voice. His petite wife let me in. And there the great singer stood, all pink and white and jovial, in his underwear. What we call a tank top today and boxer shorts. Silk. He was a good interview, I suppose, but all I can remember was the underwear.

Liberace was a good interview, too, and one of the kindest celebrities I ever met. He came to Houston just as he was reaching the peak of his popularity, and while we were talking the phone rang. It was a long distance call from a woman he didn't know in Chicago. He asked if I would mind if he took the call. I wouldn't, and he did.

"They did?" he asked sympathetically. "You did?" He spoke to her as if she were his mother or a favorite aunt.

"Well, you did perfectly right." He listened some more. "Yes," he said. "I certainly will see that they get it right next time."

As he spoke on the phone, he explained to me it was an older fan of his

who was perturbed because the local TV station had listed the time of his television show wrong and she had missed it.

He hung up and turned back to me. I thought now I'd see how he really felt about having his privacy invaded by some eccentric old woman. He was going to let off some steam, I was sure.

But what Liberace said was, "Now wasn't that nice? That lady was upset because she'd missed my show and she took the trouble to find out where I was and tell me they had it wrong on the schedule. Aren't people nice?"

Well, some people are, and Liberace was one of them.

My interview with Groucho Marx was memorable, too. I had a tip he was at the Rice Hotel and went to his suite. A tousled lad in a robe and pajamas answered my knock. A small girl hovered in the background. I asked to speak to Groucho. Embarrassed, the boy said his father had given him strict orders not to let any reporters in and had gone to bed. A familiar but querulous voice called from a bedroom, "Who is it, Arthur?"

Arthur said it was someone from the paper.

"Tell him to beat it," the voice called. So I did.

The first time I ever stayed at the Rice Hotel, in fact the first time I ever stayed at any hotel in Houston, was the first evening of my honeymoon, in October 1945. Dody (Doris is her square handle) and I were married earlier in the evening and after taking our entire wedding party — her father and my mother — to dinner at Hebert's Cafe Ritz on McGowen, we checked into the hotel and went dancing in the Empire Room.

The second time I stayed at the Rice Hotel, also my second time to be a guest at any hotel in Houston, was in 1964. I had gained a certain amount of fame for writing *Von Ryan's Express*, and the *Post* had invited me to be among the speakers at a books and authors week and put Dody and me up in a suite, the first time I ever had a hotel suite anywhere.

But I suppose my most rewarding visit to the Rice was in 1947. I'd started writing my first novel, *Summer on the Water*, when my wife saw an article in the *Post* announcing Cecil Scott, a Macmillan senior editor, was in Houston at the Rice Hotel and prepared to look at manuscripts and interview authors. I took him my unfinished novel and left it with him. After a nervous couple of days Scott invited me to come see him again. When I did, he got right to the point. He said, "What can I offer you, short of a contract, to be sure you'll send your novel to me at Macmillan when you finish?"

He'd already offered me as much as I needed, an encouraging word, so I sent the completed novel to him. And that's when I became a novelist. And the Rice Hotel, as with so many other things in my life, played a part in it. ■

Photo Courtesy Page Southland Page



R I C E M E M O R I E S

The author of Von Ryan's Express recalls that when downtown was most alive, the Rice was at its beating heart

BY DAVID WESTHEIMER

merit. Air-conditioning had not yet arrived and men sweated through their white linen suits and clasped their dates' damp waists with wet palms, but the Roof was open to what breezes there were. It was the coolest place in town except the movie theaters, where fans blew over ice. And you couldn't dance in movie theaters.

Even in those days there was a parking problem. There was angle parking and no meters, and in the comparative cool of a summer evening folks liked to park in front of the hotel and watch the action on Main and Texas. So if you were going to the Roof you often had to park a block or two away, thinking unkind thoughts about the sightseers.