A New Rice Mythology

The following selection is taken from the October 19 issue of “The Nation,” an article entitled “Space Crescent II: The Brain Ghettas” by William S. Ellis. The article is particularly concerned with the effect of the Space Program in the South on industrial but especially racial mores there.—Ed.

It is imperative to the success of any suber-science endeavor that there be advanced educational facilities nearby. Where such facilities were lacking in the crescent, NASA created them, through development grants at existing colleges and universities—but always at institutions where the doctrine of separation of the races has prevailed.

It is true, however, that the generous gifts have begun to chip away at the racial walls of these institutions. It has been, done, again, through the device of “assumed pressure.” Recent developments at Rice University in Houston illustrate vividly how the process works.

William Marsh Rice founded the university that bears his name in 1891 with the intention that it be tuition-free and for whites only. It was to be a genteel institution where young people could get a very good education without being subjected to the pomposity of Princeton or the union-label democracy of City College of New York. In short, a Rice man could read his Victor Hugo and admit that Jean Valjean had a point, but still maintain that the cotton-pickers back on daddy’s Harris County spread ought to be satisfied with their 40¢ an hour.

Proximity to a first-rate university specializing in science and engineering was a prime consideration in locating NASA’s Manned Spacecraft Center at Houston. In the few years that NASA and the university have worked together, there has been a steady flow of fellowship grants and other monies from Washington to the Rice campus. At least thirty-five fellowships, worth about $5,000 each, have been awarded to Rice students. In addition, there have been outright research grants to the university.

In March of this year, a district judge agreed with trustees of Rice that the university’s flavor had gone sour in the space age. He ruled favorably on their request to set aside William Rice’s convictions, and to allow both the charging of tuition and the admission of Negroes. As part of their argument, the trustees said continuation of the university’s segregated status would jeopardize the valuable NASA research contracts.

It is not expected that Rice will take in many Negroes. In the first place, entrance requirements are so high that Negroes, handicapped by preparation at all-Negro public schools will find it difficult to qualify. Secondly, the new tuition rate has been set at $1,200 a year. The university will continue to admit as many tuition-free students as available endowment income permits, but Negroes are not likely to be among them. Unless he is brilliant, wealthy, and probably a graduate student, a Negro need not apply now at newly desegregated Rice University.