Rice Suffers Mixed Blessings

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The invitation to “sound off” presents a dilemma. On the one hand it would be ungracious of me as a visitor to complain, like the man who came to dinner. On the other, to offer unmixed praise would hardly be in keeping with the sounding-off tradition.

Besides, it would hardly be honest. Seeing no easy way of avoiding impalement, I shall merely cast up a balance sheet of praise and blame. A cowardly resort, no doubt—but it does allow me to express my complex attitude towards a splendid institution which is yet a product of human contrivance and therefore short of utopian.

HIGHEST ON THE credit side I should place the students, especially the undergraduates. They strike me as among the most willing and able I have encountered anywhere. Without any loss of the vitality one expects of people between eighteen and twenty-two, they manage to show a genuine interest in ideas, in serious discussion.

Then too—though perhaps the credit here goes to the founders—I am pleased with the absence of the childish banalities of Greek-letter societies. Altogether, I might suggest as a proper motto for Rice a legend I read recently on the marquee of a theatre showing a risque French movie: “Not recommended for the immature.”

A CLOSE SECOND on the merit side is the Fondren Library, as fine a working library as an undergraduate is likely to encounter anywhere. At the University of Texas we are just now catching up by building our own open-shelf library. I stress “undergraduate” once more simply because it is impossible to make a sweeping generalization about Fondren as a research library.

In my own field it is surprisingly good—perhaps not really surprisingly when I recall the long service at Rice of one of the greatest living scholars in eighteenth-century English literature. In other fields there is great unevenness—but more of that later.

The faculty is not so strikingly different from other faculties I have known as the students are. Still, I have met some distinguished scholars, a fair number of highly able ones, and many, many agreeable people. Cohen House provides an unusual opportunity for the visitor to get to know the resident staff.

SINCE I HAVE lived all of my academic life in such gargantuan institutions as Illinois, N.Y.U., and Texas, I have almost forgotten that it is possible to be free of red tape, largely a product of size. The almost complete absence of that commodity here does make life more livable and does allow the scholar-teacher to devote more hours to things of significance.

So much for credits. Now for some of the shortcomings or desiderata. In general Rice shows some...
which would seem to be a transparent disguise for the entertainment business. Though it seems cruel to say so, I know of no other school so obviously dominated by its athletic physical plant, its mammoth parking lot, its huge stadium. The latter is a thing of beauty, in my judgment the most esthetically satisfying structure in the region, but its beauty is that of a magnificent iceberg among the shipping lanes.

Another incongruity or inconsistency appears in the common justification for continued segregation, the argument that the original bequest restricts the institution to white Texans—if my information is correct. I have seen more than one student on the campus who would hardly qualify under those terms.

And I note with some interest—and strong approval—Dr. Pitzer's statement in Time to the effect that more and more out-of-state students are to be admitted.

RICE SUFFERS from an air of complacency or apathy which seems to have settled over its faculty. Individual members have expressed concern over the need for reform but seem powerless to act. A good part of the difficulty stems from one of the blessings I began by citing; the lack of red tape, in this case the lack of adequate machinery for faculty participation. Decision making cannot be done effectively by occasional and perfunctory faculty meetings.

A not infrequent rejoinder to the call for meetings, I am told, is a question: What is there to meet about? This is called auto-levitation or millenium by fiat.

I am somewhat reminded of an account one of my graduate students in Austin gave me recently. It seems that his professor of education started the class with the observation that even some of the citizens weren't wholly satisfied with the way things went in Plato's republic.