

KUHT

PRESERVING AMERICA'S FIRST PUBLIC TELEVISION STATION

The University of Houston began as Houston Junior College in 1927 under the administration of the Houston Independent School District. In 1934, as the result of legislation signed by Governor Miriam A. Ferguson, two more years of study were added to the curriculum, and the school was reconceived as The University of Houston.

A few years later, thanks to a generous land donation and the financial support of "king of the wildcatters" Hugh Roy Cullen, a permanent campus was established. UH was a commuter college, its mission "to educate the working class men and women of Houston and the surrounding area."



The groundwork for KUHT-TV was laid in November 1950 when UH launched the nation's first university-licensed radio station, KUHF-FM. In addition to educational programming, the radio station allowed the University to provide courses in radio communication. UH President Dr. Walter Kemmerer sought to expand the concept of media instruction to a new technology. Inspired by an April 1951 meeting held by the Joint Committee on Educational Television at Pennsylvania State College, Dr. Kemmerer returned to the University of Houston where he explained to the Board of Regents that "television was expected to be the greatest educational media [sic] of all time." The board, convinced of Kemmerer's vision, authorized the UH's application for a FCC television permit.

KUHT-TV went on the air May 25, 1953. To mark the occasion, the station held an official dedication ceremony. In attendance was a great champion of educational television, FCC Commissioner Frieda Hennock. In her address she said, "For here in Houston is the practical realization of the tremendous benefit that television holds out to education. With TV, the walls of the classroom disappear, every set within viewing range of the signal is a potential classroom. With it, the finest teachers, doctors and artists may be brought right into the school or home. The accumulated riches of man's educational, cultural and spiritual development can be spread right before the viewers' eyes in a convenient and attractive format. In fact, the sky of man's constructive imagination is literally the only limit on the good that can be derived from educational television."

In the summer of 1953, Dr. Richard I. Evans taught the University's first telecourse for credit, Psychology 231, a thirty-minute program that aired every Monday through Friday for twelve weeks.



Evans was one of the early pioneers of instructional programming on KUHT. As a social scientist Evans was very aware the importance of evaluating the effectiveness of these courses, and published extensively on the topic of educational television. He went on to be a significant personality on KUHT. One of his programs, *Notable Contributors to the Psychology of Personality*, featured Evans' interviews with renowned specialists in the field including Erik Erikson and Nobel Laureate Konrad Lorenz. In other KUHT productions Evans interviewed Carl Jung and playwright Arthur Miller.



Thanks to grant-funding the station was able to create innovative television throughout the '50s and '60s. One such production, funded by the National Educational Television and Radio Center (later N.E.T.) was the groundbreaking series *People Are Taught To Be Different* (1957). The multi-part series, written by sociologist Dr. Henry Allen Bullock, and performed by students from the nearby historically black school Texas Southern University, was an anthropological study of intellectual concepts such as birth, death, and aggression. The series was distributed nationally, and went on to win second place in a world competition presented by the Institute for Education by Radio-Television.

Over the next few years, televised course offerings grew to eight or nine live instructional courses per semester, primarily aired in the evenings when working students could attend. Additional non-credit courses were also offered.

Course topics included standard classes like Life Sciences, English, photography, and piano, as well as less typical classes such as Dairying and Dairy Herd Management. One of the most popular instructors, Dr. H. Burr Roney taught engaging Biology courses. In 1954 alone his freshman biology course enrolled over 600 students, with 75% completing the course for credit.



In the late 1980s the building that stored most of the KUHT films was damaged during a storm and condemned. Without any other storage options, station management made the decision that all archival film and video holdings should be disposed of. Fortunately, before disposal began the Houston Public Library (HPL) stepped in to offer storage space for a large portion of the collection. This temporary storage arrangement lasted for the next 20 years, until HPL renovation plans necessitated the KUHT materials move once again. It was at this point, in 2003, that the audiovisual materials found their way back to the University of Houston, and into the M.D. Anderson Library Special Collection department.



KUHT, now Houston Public Media, continued to donate program materials, and today UH Special Collections holds approximately 2,000 16mm film and 10,000 video assets, including Digibeta, Umatic, and 1" and 2" open reel tape. Though accessions continued, the AV assets remained largely untouched until the spring 2015, when the Special Collections department hired me as their first Audiovisual Archivist.

In that capacity I began an on-going inventory project to gain intellectual control and increase accessibility to Library patrons. In an effort to improve preservation standards, I planned the move of video assets from flat to upright storage and began re-housing films from original cans and reels to polypropylene hubs and cans. Furthermore, thanks to a generous financial gift, I have been working towards an out-sourced film digitization project and collaborating with the Library digitization unit to establish an in-house unit capable of preserving various video formats.



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Image Sources:

Walter W. Kemmerer and two unidentified men looking at tape reels [1950-1953]. Special Collections, University of Houston Libraries. University of Houston Digital Library. Web. November 9, 2015. <http://digital.lib.uh.edu/collection/p15195coll8/item/71>.

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