

## HISTORY OF THE HOUSTON CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

In May 1954, Houston businessman George Kirksey sponsored an organizational meeting for a local version of the pioneering Civil War Round Table in Chicago, which was his hometown. Joining him for the meeting were several men of diverse backgrounds and of both northern and southern sympathies: Cooper K. Ragan, Palmer Bradley, Joseph W. Petty, Walter H. Hebert, Andrew Jitkoff, George Charlton, W. B. Ferguson, Jr., and L. Daffan Gilmer. They decided to launch the Houston Civil War Round Table (HCWRT), which would meet monthly for dinner and to hear a talk from a member or an invited guest, followed by a question-and-answer period. Twenty-three attended the first meeting, on October 5, 1954, at Guy's Restaurant (\$2.50 each, including tip).

The first speaker, Stanley Horn, gave a presentation on the Army of Tennessee; the rest of the year's programs were all on Confederate armies, generals, and victories. It was not until the fall of 1956 that the Round Table got around to recognizing the Union war effort, in a three-meeting symposium on the Battle of Gettysburg. By the beginning of the second year, with 52 active members, the organization was deemed a success, a charter was secured from the Texas secretary of state, and by-laws were adopted.

Over the years, Round Table members have heard from the best Civil War teachers and writers, preservationists, purveyors of myths and legends, musicians, and re-enactors. In addition, many young historians have been encouraged—and challenged—in their studies by presentations to the HCWRT.

Membership dues are used mainly to pay speakers' expenses and to print an informative monthly newsletter called "General Orders." Beginning in 1979, the book raffle (for donated books and magazines) was initiated to help fund Round Table activities. A monthly quiz with prizes for the winners encourages members to read and research various topics.

Round Table field trips, usually in the fall, have expanded beyond the western theater of the war to include major and minor battlefields in the East and Deep South. Travel days are busy from daylight to dusk with stops of both military and cultural interest—battlefields, museums, and historic sites. Guides from the National Park Service and local historians provide in-depth information not ordinarily available to tourists. As one participant noted, "If you want to rest, stay home, but if you want to learn and be associated with knowledgeable travelers and three to four days of exciting activity, come with us!" The Round Table also sponsors occasional one-day excursions.

In 1982 the Round Table established the Frank E. Vandiver Award of Merit, named for the first recipient, who had been a member since the mid-1950s and who was a leading authority on the Civil War and past president of Rice University and Texas A&M University until his death in 2005. The award is given each year to an individual or organization making a substantial contribution to the study of the war.

Aside from the pleasure afforded its members at the monthly gatherings, the Round Table has directly stimulated interest in our national tragedy. It published a history of Terry's Texas Rangers by Lester N. Fitzhugh (1958), along with other substantive papers from the 1950s and 1960s. In 1990 and 1991, the Round Table hosted very successful weekend workshops on "Four Cavaliers in Gray" and the Battle of Shiloh and has sponsored several book and paper shows and a high school-essay contest. The organization has also co-sponsored the Confederate Research Symposium at Hill College in Hillsboro, Texas; the Deep Delta Symposium in Hammond, Louisiana; the Trans-Mississippi Symposium in Shreveport, Louisiana, and has contributed financially to the purchase of battlefield acreage, period instruments for Hill College, and to the preservation of Civil War flags.

Many officers and members of the Round Table are themselves scholars and educators. Some examples: Walter H. Hebert authored a well-respected biography of Union General Joseph Hooker. Frank E. Vandiver has written more than a dozen books, including a biography of Stonewall Jackson and a one-volume history of the Confederacy. University of Houston Professor Joseph T. Glatthaar is a nationally known Civil War historian and speaker with several titles to his credit. Dan Kennerly has written a book on Parker's Crossroads, and he and wife Joyce are producing a feature film on Van Dorn's raid on Holly Springs (MS), intended for classroom instruction.

Edward T. Cotham has published three books on the Civil War in Texas and Louisiana, *Battle on the Bay: The Civil War Struggle for Galveston* (1998), *Sabine Pass: The Confederacy's Thermopylae* (2004), and *The Southern Journey of a Civil War Marine: The Illustrated Note-Book of Henry O. Gusley* (2006). The University of Texas Press published all three. In addition to numerous magazine articles, Elizabeth W. Lewis has written a biography of Lucy Holcombe Pickens. James A. Mundie has researched and written on the final resting places of hundreds of Confederate notables, and Charles E. Chambers is a nationally known expert on Medal of Honor winners.

<http://www.houstoncivilwar.com/history.shtml>