

The Cornerstone

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THE NEWSLETTER OF THE RICE HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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WILLIAM SIDIS

By Karen Rogers

In a 1989 interview with John Boles, Malcolm Lovett, Sr., recalled a well-known prodigy who came to teach at Rice in the early years of the Institute but left after a relatively short time. Mr. Lovett remarked that this young genius never lived up to his potential and finished his years in obscurity in Boston collecting subway transfers. Years later, when the alumni office staff was conducting some routine housecleaning, Meg DePriest found an article about William James Sidis, this prodigy, in a 1979 *American Heritage* magazine. It seemed like such a sad story: the child of Jewish-Russian emigrants, born to very gifted parents, received an intense “education” from the time he was born but worked most of his adult life in menial clerical jobs and avoided public attention at all costs. The article states, “William was still in his crib when his father, using alphabet blocks, began to teach him English.” When he was two, he was typing sentences on the typewriter and by age five, he produced a treatise on anatomy and worked out a formula with which he could instantly calculate what day of the week any date in



William James Sidis

Photo courtesy of the Harvard University Archives

history fell. He went through a seven-year course of study in the Brookline, Massachusetts, public school system in six months and at eight he developed a new logarithmic table. He entered

Harvard at age eleven and he graduated *cum laude* at age sixteen. He took a job in 1915 teaching math at the new Rice Institute, where he once again found himself the center of attention as the famous child prodigy. After eight months at Rice, he abruptly returned to Boston where “he began consciously dismantling the wonderful, painful intellectual mechanism nature and his father had given him,” at least according to *American Heritage*.

I was fascinated by the fact that a man once “the most famous child in the United States” had been at Rice but few people were aware of it. There were also many questions: Was his almost-unbelievable intelligence a result of his training, as his father thought, or of natural gifts? Why was he so socially awkward? Was he simply too smart to relate to his peers or was his education so focused on academic subjects that he was unable to learn social skills? What role did the media play? The Woodson

Research Center contained an extensive file on William Sidis containing various magazine articles, interviews with faculty children who remem-

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The Rice Historical Society

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the history of Rice University*

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Rice alumni and friends are encouraged to
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cannot be returned and will be donated to
our archival collection.*

NEWSLETTER DESIGNED
BY TOMORROW'S KEY

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William James Sidis

*Photo courtesy of
Harvard University Archives*

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bered him, and quite a bit of contradictory information in one form or another. After I read through the file once, I got an e-mail from Lee Pecht saying that a Sidis biography had just arrived in Woodson; this book by Amy Wallace helped to sift fact from fiction and gave an even-handed account of what happened to this genius when he returned to Boston after teaching at Rice.

William's father Boris Sidis was a pioneer in the new field of psychology around the turn of the last century and was a colleague of William James at Harvard.

His mother Sarah was one of a handful of women to graduate from medical school at that time. "Billy" Sidis was born on April 1, 1898, in New York City. His parents agreed that they would base their discipline of the child on his desire to please. "If we brought up Billy to love us, by our love and gentleness, then he would want to please us. And if we were always pleased by good conduct, he would be a good boy." Boris insisted that before a baby can talk "his mind is there, it is a tool that can be sharpened...Minds are built with use." Boris used blocks to teach Billy sounds, and he spoke his first word ("door") at the age of six months. A few months later, when his mother asked, "Why do you like the door so much?" he replied, "Door moves." He learned to spell before his first birthday. By age five he amazed everyone he encountered with his grasp of difficult subjects and soon he became fluent in Russian, French, German, Hebrew, Armenian, and Turkish. Ms. Wallace notes one omission in his training, however; the Sidises did not

believe in physical exercise or sports.

When Billy reached school age, he could read and speak eight languages. It only took him a few days to complete the first and second grades. Third grade lasted three months; fourth grade, one week; fifth grade, fifteen weeks; sixth and seventh grades, five and a half weeks. He was a constant source of trouble in the classroom and even more so on the playground, where he ignored the games and tried to lecture his classmates on the natural sciences. Between the age of six and eight, he wrote books on anatomy, astronomy, grammar,

linguistics, and mathematics. Wallace notes that, unlike most prodigies, he was not limited to a single talent but "ranked with the handful who are well rounded and acquainted with the principles underlying their studies."

A *New York Times* article dated March 12, 2001, notes that, like many prodigies, "he was hounded by the press from the instant his abilities were made public." One article in the *Times* in 1909 stated "the lad has amazed all who have come in contact with him by his marvelous grasp of mathematical subjects, the speed of his calculations, and the ease with which he assimilates the most intricate branches of the science." In his freshman year he gave a talk to the Harvard Mathematical Society on the

topic of "four-dimensional bodies." A *Times* article said "The easy manner in which, in his discussions, he approached and passed over the word 'parallelopedon' made the professors gasp, and when he began to coin a few words and between breaths slipped out such words as 'hecatonicosihedrigon' the president of the society had to open the windows to give the audience more air." Shortly after delivering the lecture to the Mathematical Society he came down with the flu which was immediately reported on the front page of the *Times*. This news led to speculation that he had suffered a mental breakdown, a rumor that continued to plague him for the rest of his life.

Shortly after graduation, he uncharacteristically granted an interview to a reporter from the *Boston Herald*. He revealed that he planned to seek out the "perfect life" living rules of his own making, resulting in the headlines:

HARVARD'S BOY PRODIGY VOWS NEVER TO MARRY

Sidis Pledges Celibacy Beneath Sturdy Oak

Has 154 Rules Which Govern His Life,

"Women Do Not Appeal to Me" He Says; He Is 16.

After graduation, William enrolled in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and one day a gang of Harvard students threatened to beat him up. His parents determined to remove him from the hostile campus environment and enlisted the aid of Griffith Evans, the Harvard

professor who had sponsored William's Math Club lecture. Evans had become the head of the math department at the new Rice Institute.

"If we brought up Billy to love us, by our love and gentleness, then he would want to please us. And if we were always pleased by good conduct, he would be a good boy."

"The easy manner in which, in his discussions, he approached and passed over the word 'parallelopedon' made the professors gasp..."

He secured a position for William as professor of mathematics with a stipend of \$750 a year. Officially he was a graduate fellow working toward his doctorate and he was expected to teach three courses: freshman math, and Euclidean and non-Euclidean geometry. He wrote his own textbook for the class in Euclidean geometry, Wallace notes, "in Greek." He arrived in Houston in December of 1915 at the age of seventeen.

Evans decided that William should lodge with him and two other professors, A. L. Hughes, a Welsh physicist, and Julian Huxley, head of the biology department, at the Bachelor House almost a mile from the campus. This arrangement did not work out well. His slovenly habits and social ineptitude kept him from forming any significant friendships. Huxley noted in his memoirs that Sidis was "brilliant at mathematics, but in all other subjects he was childishly ignorant." He remembered him as "untidy and rather dirty." His problems in the classroom were possibly a result of his being younger than the students he was expected to instruct. One Rice alumnus remembered that at the beginning of each class some of the boys would tease him about girls and his hands would start to shake and he would put his hands over his face or hold his shaking arms out in front of him. The girls pretended to pursue him. Eight months after his arrival in Houston he returned to Boston and rarely ever mentioned Rice for the rest of his life.

Wallace notes that "Misfit that he was, William found but single social pursuit at Rice – radical political organizing." He became a socialist and was anti-war at a time when anti-radical hysteria was at its peak. He was arrest-

ed during May Day riots in Boston in 1919. He was sentenced to eighteen months hard labor but was released on bail and eventually cleared. William, intellectually and emotionally alienated from his mother for years, drifted away from his father as well. When he was twenty-three they had their final quarrel.

In 1924 a reporter found him working as a clerk in a Wall Street office for twenty-three dollars a week. William said that all he wanted was anonymity, enough

money to get by, and a job that made no demands on him.

In 1926 he published *Notes on the Collection of Transfers*, a three-hundred-page book on collecting streetcar transfers. He continued his solitary wandering from job to job and was occasionally recognized and hounded by the media. He died in 1944 at the age of 46 of a cerebral hemorrhage. On the day of his death he was to

have begun a menial job at a department store. Wallace notes that William's obituaries "were an orgy of reveling in his supposed failed life." Most of them contained factual errors and, as a result of such articles, modern psychologists now refer to the Sidis fallacy – the idea that pushing gifted children may damage them.

Abraham Sperling notes that of all the mentally superior people he has seen, nobody begins to approach the intellect of Sidis. His IQ was probably between 250 and 300. "I would

honestly say that he was the most prodigious intellect of our entire generation. And he did not burn out." Wallace says he took his intellect "underground." She says that his parents did not fail him. William Sidis was not pushed; he was taught to reason. Their failure lay in the painful emotional environment created by their deteriorating marriage and the criticizing domination of his mother and their showing him off. Norbert Wiener wrote of child prodigies: "One thing is necessarily true of the precocious child, in so far as he is not intrinsically one-sided and a freak. He is brought up against the contradictions of the world outside him at a time when he has not begun to develop the hard shell of the adult. This is the time in which exploitation by the press or the radio may do him great harm."

Erica Goode, in a *New York Times* article in 2002 writes "history suggests that the lives of children with prodigious intellects or extraordinary talents are rarely easy; indeed, in a world where such children stand out like Gulliver among the Lilliputians, they are often filled with difficulty."

Dr. David Henry Feldman, a professor of child development at Tufts University said "Such children are often regarded as freakish side shows, their successes met with gawking and their failures, with smug satisfaction."

William James Sidis did, in some ways, invent an almost normal life when he returned to Boston. He did have

a small circle of friends and maintained an impressive intellect to which *Notes on the Collection of Transfers*, however dull, testifies.

His IQ was probably between 250 and 300.

"I would honestly say that he was the most prodigious intellect of our entire generation."

Huxley noted in his memoirs that Sidis was "brilliant at mathematics, but in all other subjects he was childishly ignorant."



The Graduate Research Center, 1969

Editor's note: Most of the articles that appear in The Cornerstone draw on the superb resources available at the Woodson Research Center. What follows is a description of the Center that may entice our readers to visit there and enjoy its treasures.

A VIRTUAL VISIT TO THE WOODSON

by Lee Pecht, Associate Archivist, Woodson Research Center

While numerous historical collections of documents, photographs, and regalia languished in Fondren Library's basement for years and were available for research only through special arrangements, the idea of a permanent repository for such collections that had been in storage since the 1950s grew from planning stage to reality. Founded in 1968, Woodson Research Center has become nationally known for its materials on Texas history, Civil War history, politics, entrepreneurship, science, and literary authors. The treasure trove of materials ranges from

the papers of Julian Huxley, Carlota and Maximilian of Mexico, William Clayton, Oveta Culp Hobby, Larry McMurtry, George and Herman Brown to such prominent Texas families as Autry, Sharp, Hamman, Hutcheson, Lovett, Masterson, Townsend, and Watkin. Collections that document Rice's history are of prime importance, and include holdings of the official papers of Rice presidents and administrative officers, university committees, academic departments, student organizations, and a variety of university-related groups: campus plans, drawings and blueprints, photographs, news clippings, audio/visual materials, and memorabilia.

The center is a restricted area where materials are used only in-house, and initial access through a secure entry allows only a glimpse of what is available within, giving it a mysterious aura. Taking a tour of the center can eliminate any misgivings and can actually help a researcher discover the extent of the materials and how they are housed. Compact shelving origi-



Esposa de Miramon
Charlotte and Maximilian Collection.
Gift of Fred Koch, 1964.

nal to the center covers the largest area and holds mainly boxes of documents, photographs, and memorabilia. Everywhere there are acid-free boxes of every size to house the smallest piece of jewelry to large newspapers, while monstrous map cases hold architectural drawings and oversize material. There is a long row of file

cabinets that houses information and photographs of Rice-related – and to a lesser extent Houston-related, even though the two are intertwined – people, events, buildings, departments (anything “Rice”). And then there is the vault that contains extremely rare and valuable books and papers, and also those unsolicited items totally unrelated to Woodson's manuscript and archives collection policy: Persian miniature paintings, drawings depicting prehistoric scenes, Mussolini's shaving kit, Chinese scrolls, Hungarian edicts.

It is not unusual for staff to receive requests for materials that have been



Mrs. George R. Brown Collection of
Civil War Photographs.
Received 1955.



Persian Illuminated Manuscript.
Gift of Stanley Marcus, 1960.

erroneously cited as being housed at Woodson Research Center. Some of the cited materials were collected and retained by professors (before the founding of the center) for their personal use, and only word-of-mouth revealed that a collection was available on the Rice campus. Citations were not always checked for accuracy or completeness and may never have been credited to an author, only Rice University. Collections may have left campus upon the owner's retirement, death, or merely been dispersed. There are research requests that involve digging through numerous sources and even field trips around campus. There have been questions about the original campus landscaping, if the campus gates were locked and campus access blocked by students after a football victory, the relation between Rice and the West Mansion on Clear Lake, was John Heisman (as in *Heisman Trophy*) a coach at

Rice, and whose likenesses are carved on the capitals of Lovett Hall. All are valid questions that require insight to the resources available at the center.

The work of the center focuses on surveying, appraising, arranging, describing, inventorying, and preserving records. The work can be dirty, but dedication to the job is essential especially when it involves digging through attics, storerooms, and sheds, often without any climate control. Some collections are received in pristine condition in sturdy boxes with organized files and inventories. Some collections appear to have been whisked off desks and tossed into containers, removed from damp basements, and arrive in fruit crates, old dilapidated mildewed cardboard boxes, or suitcases, and have surprises such as rodent droppings, silverfish, and insect carcasses. Preservation can involve fumigation, removing mold and mildew, rescuing wet materials, rehusing into acid-free folders and containers, removing rusty fasteners, encapsulating fragile items.

A treasure within the center is its staff, highly motivated, accessible, and knowledgeable professionals. Keeping abreast of little known facts about the campus, offering insights into collections, and having a keen eye for detail helps with the intricacies of working with materials that have become the envy of researchers and historians.

R.M.L. Majestic,
the World's Largest Liner,
from the Lovett's trip around the world

Lovett Family Papers.
Gift of Lovett Family Members, 2002.



The center's staff brings experience from Catholic Archives of Texas, Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History, Southwest Texas State University, Oregon Historical Society, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, Houston Grand Opera, Houston Metropolitan Research Center, Walter P. Moore and Associates, Houston Medical Center Archives, Rice Office of News and Publications, Houston Post, Compaq (Rice), Brown Art and Architecture Library, SCIPPR (South Central Intellectual Property Partnership at Rice), [Rice] Patents and Trademark Office.

The center itself retains its original footprint at the back main floor corner of Fondren Library, with an additional storage space in the basement. However, the center is slated for remodeling to accommodate the ever-expanding collections of manuscripts (over 3,500 cubic feet), university archives (2,000+ cubic feet) and over 31,000 rare books. Reception, research, processing, and staff space will be refurbished to modernize the facility.



Vladivostok, Russia.
Postcard from the Lovett's
trip around the world.

WHEN THE OWL (NO PUSSYCAT) WENT TO SEA

by Alan Bath

As Franklin D. Roosevelt's massive naval expansion began to reach fruition in the late 1930s, it became evident that the numbers of ships joining the fleet would soon outstrip the numbers of trained officers to man them. To meet this need, in 1939 the United States Congress augmented the Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps (NROTC) program, already in being since 1927, with an additional twenty-seven units. The Navy Department established criteria for selection of institutions competing for the new units: large male enrollment, adequate housing, geographical location (preferably near the coast), and willingness of the institution chosen to grant academic credit for naval subjects. With the help of Senator Tom Connally and Representative Albert Thomas two of these new units came to Texas, one to the University of Texas at Austin in 1940, and the other to Rice the following year.

The first NROTC class entered Rice in September, 1941. The initial input of 100 was drawn from a pool of 182 applicants who had been screened by means of an aptitude test, personal interview, and physical examination. An additional 92 students entered the program in the fall of 1942. The four-year course, divided into two years basic and two years advanced training, included five hours per week of naval subjects – three hours lecture and two hours physical



Anchors Aweigh!

“From the Main Street footpath come Dick Wheelock, Sara Nan Snoddy and Bill Broyles,” 1943.

training – overseen by a staff of naval personnel including a commanding officer, who was designated professor of Naval Science, two assisting naval officers, and four enlisted chief petty officers, the chiefs having been recalled from retirement to teach. Basic training covered such topics as naval history, ordnance, navigation, communications, and gunnery. Advanced training in the last two years was more technical in nature. The government furnished uniforms, the same as those worn by midshipmen at the U. S. Naval Academy at

Annapolis, and books. Rice, for its part, built a new NROTC building in the engineering group at a cost of \$18,000, consisting of space for new classrooms, staff offices, and a social area (wardroom) for the midshipmen. Later, the Institute constructed a rifle range behind the stadium for NROTC use.

Commander (later Captain) Dallas D. Dupree, USN, the first professor of Naval Science was something of a bellwether for the NROTC program. He helped organize the unit at the University of Texas, then came to Rice one year later, only to be reassigned shortly thereafter to Marquette University to inaugurate the program there. He returned to Rice in 1943 and continued as head of both the NROTC and the Navy V-12 programs for the greater part of the war years. A

1915 graduate of the Naval Academy, Dupree served at sea in destroyers and cruis-

ers, and ashore as assistant naval attaché, Paris, France, and in the Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Navy. Along the way he attended the Naval War College and obtained a masters degree in electrical engineering from Columbia.

Mindful of Rice's reputation for excellence in engineering, in the spring of 1943 the Navy Department selected it as one of several institutions for the Navy's new V-12 program. This program was designed to take men, from the civilian world and

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NROTC Unit Member, 1943.

from the fleet, place or keep them in enlisted status, train them for an engineering degree, then send them off to Officer Candidate School and eventual service as naval officers. The NROTC was continued as a parallel, but separate program. This division is graphically illustrated by photographs of students in the 1944 Campanile, where NROTC members are in officer-like uniforms and V-12, enlisted.

The advent of the V-12 program made significant changes in life at Rice. The 514 navy types comprised almost half of the student body in 1944, probably to the great relief of the 341 undergraduate women, who already outnumbered the 286 civilian men. Rice spent almost \$40,000 to construct



Twenty-ninth Commencement Exercises, St. Paul's Methodist Church, February 28, 1944

for Navy Students.

The daily routine for V-12 trainees was rigorous: reveille at 6:00 a.m., followed by a half-hour of calisthenics, then breakfast and inspection. Classes were from 8:00 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. with a short break for lunch. This was

followed by physical training, dinner, study, and taps at 10:30. There were classes on Saturday morning, but the students had some free time Saturday afternoon and Sunday. Navy students were encouraged to participate in non-military campus activities and many were members of the Institute's social and religious organizations. There is evidence that some of the would-be officers and gentlemen

a new cafeteria and to renovate East Hall, South Hall, West Hall and North Hall (Tower) for Navy use. While the professor of Naval Science had military jurisdiction over the Navy students, academic supervision was provided by Professor of Civil Engineering Lewis B. Ryon, who had been designated official representative for naval matters at Rice. He was secretary of the Naval Training Committee and chaired the Committee on Faculty Counselors

might have taken this encouragement too much to heart. For, at the request of Dean Weiser, trainees were directed not to "loungue on the grass around the campus (nor) show undue signs of affection towards the women, either on campus or in any other public place."¹



Twenty-ninth Commencement. Left to right: Capt. Dallas D. Dupre, Mr. George R. Brown, Dr. Edgar Odell Lovett, and Mr. H. C. Hanszen

The V-12 program was discontinued at the war's end, but the NROTC program continued without interruption and is currently alive and well on campus. In all, 250 men received commissions through the Rice NROTC and V-12 programs. The first 80 NROTC students were commissioned and graduated in 1944. Dr. E. O. Lovett, principal speaker at the 1944 ceremonies told the new officers, "This occasion is of great significance to you... You will fight for what you believe, for aggression is aggression, slavery is slavery, wrong is wrong, whenever, wherever, and by whomever it is committed" – words equally meaningful in today's unsettled world.

1. *Navy V-12 Unit, Rice Institute, Commanding Officers Order 20-44 of 2 September 1944.*