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Julia Bedford Ideson: A WOMAN FOR ALL SEASONS

by Betty Trapp Chapman

The Rice Hotel was the setting for a festive gathering on the evening of April 30, 1929. The distinguished crowd included prominent Houstonians involved in the professions, the business world and the city's social life. Occupying the place of honor was a brown-eyed, gray-haired woman dressed in white georgette with a rose silk cape thrown gracefully over her shoulders. Her name was Julia Ideson and she was there to receive the Torchbearer of the Year Award given by the Women's Advertising Club to the city's outstanding professional woman.¹ The occasion marked the intelligent, energetic Ideson's twenty-five-year tenure directing the Houston Public Library while also recognizing her civic contributions.

Julia Bedford Ideson's life began, not in Texas, but in Hastings, Nebraska on July 15, 1880. Young Julia attended Visitation Academy, a convent school where she received an education rich in classical studies but also steeped in practical subjects such as bookkeeping, typewriting and stenography. Julia's father owned a book store in Hastings and, as a voracious reader, had a large personal library.

Thus Julia and her sister, Margaret, grew up in an atmosphere of books. The family's frequent reading sessions usually ended in lengthy discussions of the book being read.²

When Julia was twelve years old, her parents relocated to Houston. Apparently John and Rose Ideson felt that this up-and-coming city, with a population of approximately forty thousand, offered new opportunities for their family. John first worked at Baldwin Book store and later entered the field of real estate.³ Julia attended the city's public schools, graduating in 1899 from Houston High School. As part of her graduation exercises, Julia played the role of Cordelia in "The King's Awakening," one segment of *A Morning with Shakespeare*.⁴ Literature would remain important to Julia for the rest of her life.

In the fall of 1899, Julia entered the University of Texas. Enrolling in the Department of Literature, Science and Arts, she intended to become a teacher. During her second year in Austin, however, Julia discovered that the university had initiated a course in library science. Her long-time interest in books led her to change her course of study to this newly developed discipline, which was under the direction of Benjamin Wyche, the only trained librarian in the state at the time. As she pursued the required course in Library Economy, Reference Work and Bibliography, she also worked in the university library as second assistant cataloguer.⁵

In a letter dated June 20, 1902, the school's assistant librarian wrote that Julia Ideson had completed the "required quota of studies" leading to a Bachelor of Arts degree and that she had also taken the "course of library science offered by the univer-

sity."⁶ The letter continued by giving a strong recommendation for Ideson, particularly emphasizing her "admirable and obliging disposition" as well as her "quick and intelligent mind."⁷ Just one day later, Ideson applied for the position of librarian for Houston's public library, then under construction. A postscript to her letter of application pointed to her practical education as well as her literary one with this sentence: "I may add that I use the typewriter, as you probably know, a requisite of the modern librarian."⁸

Over the next several months, many letters of recommendation were sent to the Library Board from faculty members in Austin describing Ideson as being "unusually energetic, wide awake, and ambitious,"⁹ and having "an uncommonly keen intellect and a pleasing personality."¹⁰ Not until October 1903, however, was Julia Ideson officially hired as librarian by the Houston Lyceum and Carnegie Library Association.¹¹ In accepting this position, Ideson was planting herself firmly in a new field that seemed ideal for the professional woman. In

the nineteenth century, women were shut out of most professions. Only teaching and nursing were deemed appropriate for the female population. Society did not favor higher education for women even though institutions, including the University of Texas, were admitting growing numbers of women by 1900. At the same time, the public library, funded by taxes and donations, proliferated in the late nineteenth century. It sought

well-educated, low-paid workers. The role of librarian was considered suitable for women because it served as a guardian of culture in a homelike setting, where most of the users were women and children. As a result, the profession attracted more women than men. Because women were hired in larger numbers, the profession became known as a "feminized" one. These women often remained single, giving their entire lives to their library career.¹²

Ideson assumed control of a library in progress. Houston's library had been chartered by the city in August 1900, but it had taken two years to raise the money for a site and to begin construction of a building, funded by a gift from steel magnate Andrew Carnegie.¹³ There was obviously much to do in preparing for the opening of the new facility. In her first report to the Board, just one month after assuming her duties, Ideson reported on the accessioning, classifying and cataloguing of books.¹⁴ She later recalled, "These days were hectic. There was only one person to assist me, and an errand boy and janitor completed the staff. I had to do all the cataloguing, plating, mending of books, ordering—on everything! It seemed endless routine work, but I loved it."¹⁵ In this same report, Ideson noted that she would

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Library staff (Ideson, second from left) in front of the city's first library building, circa 1913.

be presenting a paper at the "Texas state library association," of which she was a charter member.¹⁶ This early report predicted two roles that would clearly mark Ideson's career: she would be very much a hands-on librarian attending to every detail, and she would establish a strong connection to her profession beyond the local arena.

Moreover, Ideson found herself at the helm of an institution serving a growing population. The formation of a free public library had been many years in the making. Houston had a circulating library during its early years, but it served only a limited segment of the population. When the Houston Lyceum formed in 1854, it organized a subscription library as one of the activities for its male members.¹⁷ After years of agitation by women in the community, the Lyceum opened their shelves to them. The reality, however, was a decidedly inferior institution. Female Houstonians banded together to raise money for land and successfully appealed to Carnegie for a building.¹⁸ Houston was soon poised to acquire a long-desired amenity in the form of a public library.

On March 2, 1904, the Houston Lyceum and Carnegie Library opened with a gala reception. A large crowd gathered to admire the Italian Renaissance building at the corner of Travis Street and McKinney Avenue. In his address for the dedication, Henry H. Dickson, president of the library association's Board of Trustees, welcomed the audience to "the inauguration of a means for the greater intellectual and literary advancement of the people of Houston."¹⁹ President Dickson announced that the library had 10,000 volumes on the shelves, the majority having been prepared for circulation by Ideson with the help of her one assistant.²⁰

Ideson's vision for the library, however, went beyond its one central facility. Between 1900 and 1920 Houston's population tripled,²¹ resulting in a growing number of students in the city schools. Most schools did not have a library available to their students. Furthermore, in view of the harsh Jim Crow laws in the community there was no place where the city's black residents could check out books. Ideson, seeing these needs,

began planning for an expanded library system. Book deposit stations, which made books available on a rotating basis, were established in a number of schools. One of these was placed in Colored High School. A book station, however, was not a full-service library. Thus prominent black Houstonians incorporated as the Colored Carnegie Library Association and organized their own facility. After raising funds for a lot in the Fourth Ward and receiving a grant from Andrew Carnegie, the trustees opened Colored Carnegie Library in 1913. Although it operated independently of the city's library system, Ideson supported this library by assisting in cataloguing books and by training the first librarian, Emma Myers. In 1921, the library became a branch of the Houston Public Library. At the same time, the book stations on the campuses of Heights High School and North Side Junior High School evolved into the Heights Branch and the Carnegie Branch. Ideson continued to send books to the public schools until 1938 when individual school libraries had finally been organized.²² That same year the library bought its first bookmobile, which held two thousand volumes. The bookmobile's neighborhood routes were so popular that eventually two more vehicles were added and the routes were expanded.²³ Ideson remained insistent that the library's books continue to be made available to all sections of the city.

In the meantime, Houston's phenomenal growth had made the central library inadequate. Realizing that the city needed a larger facility and that the library's standard funding was also inadequate, Ideson implemented a drive to petition the city to levy a maintenance tax of \$0.025 on a \$100 valuation for library services. Enough petitions were handed in to call for a referendum vote, and the measure for the library passed on February 9, 1921.²⁴ With the income from the new tax, the library almost doubled the amount previously received in the city budget. Ideson's acumen in financial matters enabled the library to acquire sufficient funds for the first time since its founding.

That same year the system changed its name to the Houston Public Library and began seeking a new site and making plans

for a larger building.²⁵ The block bounded by McKinney and Lamar avenues and Smith and Brazos streets was selected as the location. Library trustees chose the Boston architectural firm of Cram & Ferguson to design the facility. Ideson made a tour of libraries from St. Louis to Detroit and from Chicago to Boston to gather ideas for the structure.²⁶ The library director's highest priorities were natural light, cross ventilation, and flexible space. Ideson also declared, "It is not enough to be functional; a library must offer delight to the eye."²⁷ The project was completed in seventeen months at a cost of \$500,000. The original architectural plan, however, had to be reduced with some of the components being eliminated due to construction costs.²⁸

The handsome Spanish Renaissance-styled building opened October 17, 1926. It was both elegant and functional, as Ideson had requested.²⁹ With enlarged quarters, Ideson began to expand library holdings. Soon after the building opened, Ideson explained: "Reading is no longer done only for pleasure, but business and professional men and women must keep up with the latest development of their particular work."³⁰ Accordingly, books on business technology were added. A historical reference room was another addition. The library began collecting documents pertaining to Houston and Texas history. Genealogical materials were gradually added to the Historical Room.³¹ (These collections eventually became the foundation for Clayton Genealogical Library and Houston Metropolitan Research Center.) Ideson's vision for library services never diminished.

Another of Ideson's concerns was providing library service in prisons. At the Texas Library Association (TLA) meeting in Austin in 1922, she initiated a discussion of libraries in prisons. Three years later the TLA formed a special committee on Penal Libraries. In 1935 Ideson was given the opportunity to put some of her ideas into action when she was asked to serve as library consultant to the prison in Huntsville, Texas. After several visits to Huntsville, she prepared a classified list of books for the penitentiary library. Ideson included listings of vocational books designed to be used by prisoners in their future lives. During the three years Ideson continued as a consultant, she helped in organizing a library committee which, along with a recreational and vocational committee, developed policy for the operation of the prison facility.³² In keeping with her credo that books "awaken our sense of duty, encourage our feelings of responsibility, and stimulate and refresh the idealism in our souls,"³³ Ideson wanted everyone to have access to books that both inspired and instructed them in life's journey, wherever it might lead.

For this reason, along with her strong convictions regarding First Amendment rights of free speech, Ideson refused to remove a controversial book from library shelves during World War II. *Mein Kampf* (often translated as "My Struggle," or "My Campaign") was written by Adolf Hitler in 1925 as both an autobiography and a political treatise.³⁴ When the United States entered World War II, there was strong public agitation to ban the book as contraband reading. Although Ideson did not endorse the book's contents, she allowed it to remain on the shelves. In a speech to the League of Women Voters, she defended her decision by saying, "Intellectual freedom is never permanently assured. It is especially endangered by war. But even in war time the library recognizes the right of all readers to find on its shelves both sides of controversial questions."³⁵

Soon after beginning her work in Houston, Ideson had become connected to the larger circle of librarians. Her



Ideson, a true "hands-on" librarian, at her desk in the new library.

early involvement in the Texas Library Association led to her selection as president of the state organization in 1910-11. The energetic librarian edited the *Handbook of Texas Libraries* on two occasions: the second volume in 1908 and the fourth volume in 1935. She was president of the Southwestern Library Association from 1932 to 1934, serving also as First Vice President of the American Library Association during this time. Ideson was a predictable voice in preserving library services. In 1933 when the state legislature moved to abolish the Texas State Library, Ideson, chair of the legislative committee of the Texas Library Association, acted decisively and quickly to block the action.³⁶ Julia Ideson was, undoubtedly, a person of strong convictions and was unafraid to act on those convictions.

When many women in Houston were not bold enough to join the local suffrage association, it was very much in character for Ideson to step forward and assume an active role. Suffrage schools were held to train citizens in various elements of the campaign, such as press and publicity, public speaking, funding, parliamentary law and organization. Each new session was highlighted by a presentation on the history of the woman suffrage movement. Ideson was a frequent speaker on this subject.³⁷ As treasurer of the Woman's Political Union, she spoke at the first open-air woman suffrage rally in Texas in 1915. Ideson stressed that "women will never obtain necessary reforms unless they have the right to vote." On the following day the local newspaper reported that "the speakers worked on the hearers with determined logic and quiet faith."³⁸ Texas suffragists favored a host of progressive reforms including a juvenile justice system, protection of women and children in the workplace, compulsory education and public health improvements. They strongly supported the prohibition of alcoholic beverages, which they believed contributed to family instability. Professional and working women emerged as vocal proponents of female enfranchisement. Ideson was joined by such women as attorney Hortense Ward, teacher Julia Runge, seamstress and union member Eva Goldsmith, and businesswoman Florence Sterling. These women provided the speaking skills, the professional experience, the political knowhow, the fiery enthusiasm and impatience to create a sense of urgency in the community about voting rights for women.³⁹ Ideson, in particular, was singled out



Librarians sent to Europe by American Library Association during World War I (Ideson, second from right).

in an article in *The Houstonian* which noted, "Her judgment, opinion and advice are valued so highly that if there is a question that becomes a subject of doubts someone usually suggests that Miss Ideson be consulted." Her "mental capabilities" and her "charming personality" were stressed as reasons she had become such a valuable part of the community.⁴⁰

Historical accounts have recorded that the suffrage movement was, undoubtedly, a racist operation. Minority women were not welcomed into most of the organized groups, especially in the South. Yet many of the white suffragists likely would not have considered themselves racist since this segregated way of life was accepted as normal. Whether this bothered Julia Ideson is not known since there are no records of her thoughts or actions at that time. A decade later, however, Ideson did let her views become known when she participated in an interracial organization.⁴¹

As World War I became a reality in America, Ideson, like many suffragists, turned her attention to the approaching war efforts. She served with the Harris County Women's Committee for the Liberty Loan campaign. With other women, she traveled over southeast Texas speaking for the campaign in selling war bonds.⁴² Then Ideson accepted another challenge. When the American Library Association decided to place libraries in Europe for the armed forces, she applied for overseas library service.⁴³ She requested a leave of absence from her position with the Houston Library to go to Brest, France, and oversee a library for American troops stationed there during World War I. She was sent to Camp Pontanezen where more than one million soldiers stopped en-route to a port of embarkation. The overseas staff of the ALA numbered fifty persons working in reference libraries maintained in Paris and at fourteen other places where the greatest concentrations of troops were found. Books provided one of the few sources of recreation for these men.⁴⁴ Ideson wrote back to her staff in Houston that the seating capacity in the camp library was for about two hundred men, but often in the evenings there was standing room only.⁴⁵ After eight months in France, Ideson resumed her duties in Houston. Her service abroad was not her only wartime contribution. Ideson also organized a library at Camp Logan, a National Guard mobilization camp built just west of downtown Houston.⁴⁶

In 1926 Ideson had the opportunity to become a community advocate for freedom of speech and thought—principles that she treasured in her own life and wanted others to experience. Curtis Howe Walker, a Rice Institute professor of history and government, was instrumental in establishing the Open Forum, a group committed to preserving First Amendment rights by bringing distinguished and often controversial speakers to the city. Patterning its efforts after those in Dallas, Houston was the third of six Texas communities to sponsor an Open Forum. Houston Public Library trustees, likely at the suggestion of Ideson (an Open Forum Board member), offered the new central library auditorium as the Open Forum's meeting place. Although the audiences grew so large that meetings were moved to the City Auditorium, Ideson continued to prepare lists of books to be read in conjunction with the speakers.⁴⁷ The Open Forum brought lecturers from all over the world, including Clarence Darrow, Margaret Sanger, Norman Thomas, Bertrand Russell and Lincoln Steffens.⁴⁸ The organization intentionally brought guest speakers who provoked discussion and dissent. Sanger's invitation was particularly controversial. Chief opposition to Sanger came from Catholic women's groups and Catholic clergy who objected to a lecture on contraception. After carefully weighing the situation, the Forum "nervously and doubtfully" agreed to go ahead with the event. On November 7, 1931, Margaret Sanger spoke before a crowd of 2500, using as her subject, "The Need for Birth Control in America." The lecture drew widespread publicity, some of it unfavorable, but it managed to stimulate thought and discussion on a subject much in the forefront at the time.⁴⁹

In 1938 the Open Forum folded. During its twelve years of existence, it had served as a tool for informing the public on complex issues and providing a framework for progressive-minded Houstonians to exchange ideas and to possibly work for change. After its demise, Ideson reflected, "It served a good purpose and its influence is still with us today."⁵⁰ The presence of the Open Forum had another, perhaps unintentional, effect. Women, who were frequently excluded from leadership positions in more traditional organizations, were given important roles in the Open Forum. Ideson eagerly accepted these opportunities and in doing so served as a role model for other women.

Julia Ideson died on her birthday, July 15, 1945, while visiting a friend in New Hope, Pennsylvania.⁵¹ She lacked three months of serving forty-two years as director of the Houston Public Library. During that time she developed a library system that offered the community endless roadways to learning and pleasure through the printed word. Yet Ideson gave vastly more to her community than buildings filled with books. As a long-time member of the library staff commented after her death, "Her ceaseless energy, her sense of honor and fairness, her sincerity of purpose, her quick and flexible judgments, her sense of humor, her personal charm and her respect for the opinions of others, gave to her leadership a quality of greatness."⁵² Julia Bedford Ideson was truly a woman for all seasons.

• **Betty Trapp Chapman** is a historian who researches, writes, and lectures on Houston's history. Although she delves into all aspects of local history, her special areas of interest are women's history and historic preservation. She currently chairs the Houston Archaeological and Historical Commission.

The Preservation and Expansion of the Julia Ideson Building

by Barry Moore



The Ideson Library, as it appeared upon completion of construction in 1926.

The Julia Ideson building, located in downtown Houston at 500 McKinney and opened in 1926, is one of the most important historic buildings in Houston. By the criteria established by the Secretary of Interior, the building meets the most important standards: it is a superb example of Spanish Renaissance style; it was designed by one of the most prominent architects of the early twentieth century; as the Houston Central Library, it was one of the most important public buildings in Houston; and its long time director, Julia Ideson, was one of the most prominent citizens of her generation. For these reasons, the building is on the National Register of Historic Places, is a Texas Historical Landmark, a Texas State Archeological Landmark, and a City of Houston Protected Landmark.

In 1924, with the assistance of Julia Ideson, the Houston Library Board selected Architect Ralph Adams Cram of the Boston firm Cram and Ferguson to design a new central library. Houstonians were already familiar with his work, which included the Rice Institute campus and Trinity Episcopal Church. William Ward Watkin, head of the architecture department at Rice, was chosen as Associate Architect. Cram selected a Spanish Renaissance style for the building, and, in the words of architectural historian Steven Fox, "he stretched a modest program into a scenic expression of civic pride, with cross ventilation." The Houston Metropolitan Research Center (HMRC), housed in the building since the 1970s, owns an incomplete set of preliminary drawings, including a site plan, floor plans, two

elevations and two building sections. These historical records show that the building was realized substantially as originally designed. Due to shortage of funds, however, several notable features in the original plans were not included in the library as built. Missing were a south wing and loggia, as well as a fenced reading garden on the corner of Smith and Lamar Streets.

The Ideson served as Houston's main library until 1976, when the much larger Jesse H. Jones building opened across the plaza. At that time, the newly created Houston Metropolitan Research Center was housed in the Ideson building, which was altered to accommodate archival and historical materials. For more than thirty years, the Ideson has served as an important repository for records and photographs documenting Houston's history; highlights include the Texas Room—where historians conduct research aimed at recapturing the region's past, a center for oral history, and the home of the *Houston Review of History and Culture* (the predecessor of the *Houston History* magazine).

Throughout these years, the building has been well-maintained by the city, but the stacks had become badly crowded, the air-conditioning systems detrimental to an archival collection, and the security of the collection badly compromised. Acting on the initiative of Mayor Bill White, in 2006 Phoebe Tudor, Margaret Skidmore, and Minette Boesel formed the Julia Ideson Library Preservation Partners, a 501C3 organization charged with raising funds

for restoration and addition to the Ideson. With the City of Houston contributing \$10 million to the project, the Partners are raising the additional \$28 million required by the project budget in private funds.

The Ideson project is part of a thirty-eight million dollar campaign; the Partners have raised more than half in a little more than a year. An early decision was made to relocate the bulk of the archival collection to a new south wing, using the original Cram drawings as a starting point. A public reference room, replacing functions now offered in the Texas Room, will be located on the first floor, with high density archival shelving on the three floors above and a new rare book vault located on the second stack floor. An appropriate climate control system will be installed, as well as separate elevators for staff and the public.

The original building will have a renewed life as a multi-purpose public library. On the first floor the Auditorium, the Meldrum Room, and the Reynolds Room will be upgraded for continued use as meeting rooms. A selection of the original children's furniture will be installed in the north alcove of the Meldrum, and old, but not rare, children's books from the collection will again inhabit the shelves. In the space where the stacks begin, a new photo lab will be provided, with enhanced capability for scanning and digitizing the image collection.

The floor between the first and second floor on the west end of the building will be renovated to house the conservation lab, with appropriate equipment and mechanical systems. The second floor, the piano nobile in Cram's original

scheme, will enjoy enhanced public amenities: the existing Texas Room will again be a public reading room, with the alcove on the north side dedicated to objects and memorabilia from Houston's original 1904 Carnegie Library.

Across the central atrium, in the vacated stack space, a large exhibition hall will be made available. The Partners and the City anticipate that the reading room, the atrium, and the exhibit hall will be popular sites for all types of public and private events. The offices of the Director of Libraries and the Library Foundation will occupy the west end of the floor. The floor between the second and third, on the west end of the building, will be dedicated to a volunteer's lounge and HMRC staff.

The third floor will house the architectural archives in the space currently occupied by special collections, with the same environmental systems that will be provided in the stacks. A restored conference room, additional staff workspace and break room occupy the remainder of the floor. The original decorative features, almost totally intact, will be restored. Original light fixtures will be rewired and reconditioned. For the first time, WPA artwork from the 1930s will be lighted. The existing Texas Room will be furnished with refinished



The new Exhibition Hall, located where six levels of stacks now stand, in an architectural rendering.

Left: The Central Reading Room (currently the Texas Room) as it appeared when completed in 1926.



The Restored Central Reading Room, in an architectural rendering.



The new south wing, loggia and reading garden, in an architectural rendering.



Groundbreaking on January 12, 2009; Mayor Bill White, Partner Chair Phoebe Tudor, Gensler Project Manager Barry Moore, HMRC Director Kemo Curry.

original furniture. Art original to the building up to the 1940s will be relocated from the library vault, restored and rehung, in most cases, in original locations.

The exterior of the new south wing will match the existing building as well as Cram's design, with brown brick, cast stone trim, red tile roofs and cast decorative elements. A new south loggia will be added, providing direct access to the outdoors from the existing Reynolds, Meldrum and Texas Room. The new reading garden, a quiet landscaped square, will be realized, inspired by the Cram design. It will be surrounded by a black metal fence supported by stone gate posts. The resulting public space in the center of downtown will be open to the public during the day but closed at night and for special events.

Although the completed building will recapture the spirit and look of the original plans from more than eighty years ago, it will also incorporate one important aspect of modern construction, an energy and environmentally friendly design.

It will be among the first Texas Historic Landmark projects to qualify for LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certification. It also will seek to qualify for a "Silver" designation from the U.S. Green Building Council. An efficient air conditioning system and the use of indigenous plant materials along with recycled and low-emitting materials during construction are among the key components needed to achieve LEED certification. When completed, the new Ideson will combine the best of the old and the new.

For the library department, the non-profit board, the mayor, and the architects, a great sense of satisfaction arises from the opportunity to complete an eighty-three year old architectural concept, but to enhance the interior with a state of the art archival and research facility that can be enjoyed by Houstonians for generations to come.

A sense of promise floated in the air at the formal groundbreaking for the construction of the new south wing on January 12, 2009. On this cool, crisp day, hundreds of Houstonians came to watch Mayor White, Houston's Director of Libraries Dr. Rhea Brown Lawson, and prominent members of the Julia Ideson Preservation Partners celebrate the beginning of construction. There was good cause for celebration. Sustained by a private-public partnership of a sort so common in Houston's past, this project marks a turning point in historic preservation in Houston. It will produce a beautifully restored and expanded facility to serve as a repository for historical records that will help students, citizens, and scholars alike explore our region's history. The restored Julia Ideson building will become a symbol of the debt we owe to those who came before us; it will also be a message to those who come after us of the value of history and the logic of preserving and adapting historic buildings for current and future uses.

✦ **Barry Moore**, Houston architect and historian, is a member of the Gensler architectural firm, a Houston-based, internationally active firm with a strong commitment to historic preservation. He took the lead in the design for the preservation and expansion of the Julia Ideson building. He has been an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Gerald D. Hines College of Architecture at UH for twenty-one years.