

FROM OUR ARCHIVES

Reuben and Hilda Askanase

by Vickie Vogel

This column is based on information available in the TJHS archives, supplemented by some online research. If you have corrections or additions to this information, please submit them in writing to the TJHS editor at editor@txjhs.org. We want the TJHS archives to be as complete and accurate as possible.

Reuben W. Askanase was born in 1908 in Fargo, North Dakota. He started his working life early, selling newspapers and helping his mother who ran a “chuck wagon” following migrant workers, feeding them, and even boarding them in their home. His father was a peddler, who was limited in his ability to work due to asthma. His mother was the breadwinner. Reuben joined ROTC as a requirement, and, in order to have the clothes needed for school.¹ He worked his way through both the University of North Dakota and graduate work at Washington University. He became a successful merchant at the New York department store, Abraham & Strauss. Starting as an office boy, he worked his way up to a vice-presidency. It was there he met his future wife, Hilda Graham.²

Hilda was born in 1906 in Old Town, Maine. She graduated from the University of Maine with a major in French. She worked at the cafeteria through college, taking a year off to



Hilda and Reuben Askanase, 1966. Photo courtesy of Dr. Josh Furman, Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives, Rice University.

earn money as an accountant to finish her degree. When she returned, she made up enough course work to graduate with her class as both a Phi Beta Kappa and Phi Kappa Phi honor graduate. She completed the Lord & Taylor training program in New York before finding employment at Abraham & Strauss where she was soon

promoted to buyer.³ Hilda and Reuben married in 1931 in Akron, Ohio, where they lived for several years. Two children, Phyllis and David, were born there before they returned to New York briefly.⁴

The Askanase family moved to Houston in 1945, where Reuben purchased Columbia Dry Goods

continued on page 14



Hilda and Reuben Askanase. Photo courtesy of Susan Askanase.



Reuben Askanase, 1966. Photo courtesy Dr. Josh Furman, Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives, Rice University.

Store. He later bought Evenflo infant feeding products with partners, acquired Spaulding sporting goods, and merged with Dunhill International, which owned American Bank Note and Coty Cosmetics. Reuben was chairman of the board. In 1950, the Houston Chronicle profiled him as “a smiling salesman with quick hands and a voice full of the voltage of assurance.”⁵

Reuben and Hilda were philanthropists in the Houston Jewish and non-Jewish communities. They raised funds for Citizens for Good Schools, the Houston Area Women’s Center, and many others. They were members of Congregation Beth Israel. Hilda volunteered for the Jewish Home

for the Aged, but she considered her most important job, “taking care of Rube.” She was his calming force and inspiration.⁶ Reuben was “a force to be reckoned with,” according to his daughter-in-law, Susie Askanase. “He had street smarts and Hilda had brain smarts.”⁷ Together, they made things happen.

Reuben was active in the Houston Council on Human Relations, the Houston Symphony, and the Alley Theater. He served in leadership positions on the Houston Sports Association, the Jewish Community Center, the United Jewish Campaign, the Rothko Chapel, North Dakota State University (establishing Askanase Hall for theater arts,) and others. In

addition to many other awards, in 1964, he received the Max H. Nathan Award for community service from the American Jewish Committee.

In 1972, Reuben was asked by Judge Roy Hofheinz to serve as CEO of the Astrodomain Corporation, and he subsequently salvaged the troubled corporation. Although he was active in Democratic politics, often as a fundraiser for candidates like Mayor Fred Hofheinz and Congresswoman Barbara Jordan, he chose individuals over politics. He was a friend to both Senator Lloyd Bentsen and President George H. W. Bush.

Reuben and Hilda loved to travel and went all over the world, both

continued on page 15



Hilda Askanase and MJ Dittermar at the Calf Scramble February 8, 1948. Photo courtesy Dr. Josh Furman, Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives, Rice University.

Howard Binford's
GUIDE

**FARGO, N. D.
Moorhead, Minn.
West Fargo, N. D.**
JANUARY 1982
Volume 14, Number 7
(Our 163rd Issue)

January Features


Vice President George Bush Confirmed My Choice
(See Page 4)

What's Happening In January?
(See Page 6)


Parents Anonymous Seeks to Improve Family Relationships
(See Page 9)

Nancy's Plan To Banish Those Christmas Blahs
(See Page 17)

Plus Continuing Coverage of Dining Out In the F-M Area
(See Page 36)



Reuben and Hilda ASKANASE
(See Page 21)



THIS BRILLIANT CONTEMPORARY has all the special features you would expect in a home. Contact Jim Reilly at 223-0207 for a personal showing. See Other Guide Reader Listings on Page 49-51.

Where to Worship
(See Pages 13-16)

Where to Stay
(See Pages 10-11)

Who's Playing Where
(See Pages 18-19)

Reuben Askanase was born and raised in Fargo. He attended NDSU for two years, but then after graduating from the University of North Dakota, wasn't around his hometown much for some 35 years while he was compiling a fantastically successful business career. But his roots are still deeply rooted here, as he describes in this month's cover profile interview with Guide Publisher Howard Binford.

Take Your Free Copy

Cover Colorphoto by
Gross Studio of Photography
in Moorhead

Photo courtesy Dr. Josh Furman, Joan and Stanford Alexander South Texas Jewish Archives, Rice University.

for business and pleasure. They were married for 59 years.


Reuben Askanase died on January 3, 1991, and Hilda on August 4, 2013, at the age of 106. When asked the secret of her longevity, she said, "If you can survive the Maine winters, you can survive anything."⁹ Reuben and Hilda had seven grandchildren and twelve great-grandchildren.

The Askanase family papers are housed in the Houston Jewish History Archive at Rice University.⁹

Endnotes

¹ Telephone conversation with Susie Askanase, August 29, 2023.
² <http://archives.library.rice.edu/repositories/2/resources/1223>

³ <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/114986715/hilda-askanase>; Obituary from *Houston Chronicle*, August 6, 2013. <https://jhvonline.com/hilda-graham-askanase-p15565-124.htm>
⁴ David graduated from Harvard Law School and practiced bankruptcy law in Houston, with his firm, Hughes, Watters and Askanase, for 40 years. Phyllis was a community leader in Jewish organizations, primarily in New Orleans. David's wife, Susie, was an executive assistant to Houston Mayor Kathy Whitmire and had her own business contracting residential renovations. Askanase op.cit.
⁵ <https://www.facebook.com/188614335071118/photos/a.1889331883725667571139026818645/?type=3>
⁶ findagrave op. cit.

⁷ Askanase, op. cit.
⁸ findagrave op. cit.
⁹ <http://archives.library.rice.edu/repositories/2/resources/1223> 

Save the Date

January 26-28, 2024

TJHS Board Meeting,
McAllen, Texas