

A Child's Perspective of Early Sugar Land

A story by Sugar Land resident Bruce Kelly

I was seven years old in 1959 when the small company town of *Sugar Land* embarked on its journey toward incorporation. Not only was it a momentous year for the city, it was for me as well.

While the *City of Sugar Land* was about to set up its first City Hall in a former shoe shop, paying *Imperial Sugar* \$10 per month rent for the space—*Sugar Land ISD* promoted me from first to second grade, marking a year in which the complexion of education in eastern *Fort Bend County* would be forever changed.

That same year, Dr. Carlos Slaughter administered ether to me in *Sugar Land's Laura Eldridge Memorial Hospital* as Dr. Harold Kuykendall removed my tonsils and adenoids.

And my brother and I received a miniature Beagle puppy named *Herman* as my parents became proud homeowners, vacating our company-owned rent house on Guenther Street to occupy a new home on Oyster Creek Drive.

I would like to offer a story based on my childhood in Sugar Land--and some of the town's history as I know it.

In the summer of '59, my brother Chuck and I, seven and nine years old respectively, found ourselves perched on the hot, concrete front steps of our house on Guenther Street.

Although we were barefoot and wearing only shorts, our faces were red, bodies overheated, mouths thirsting, and lungs breathless after playing that morning with our neighbors in the so-called *alley* behind our house.

We loved the alley. It was the juvenile social center of the neighborhood, boasting a large expanse of lawn. It was shaped like a piece of pie with the pointed end sliced off. A curbed driveway surrounded it, providing access to garages of all the homes lining the perimeter of this company-owned block of houses known as *The Flats*.

I was told by long-time resident Mabel Dunkerly a few years before her death that *The Flats* was named in contrast to the first neighborhood in Sugar Land, *The Hill*.

She told me *The Hill* got its name from a footbridge spanning *Oyster Creek Bottom* where the *Main Street Bridge* is today. The bank on the north side of *The Bottom* was higher than the south, so pedestrians had to negotiate steps at the north end of the footbridge to ascend or descend the bank. Perhaps this climb, especially if you were carrying a heavy load, was a constant, aggravating reminder of the sudden change in elevation. I suppose, in contrast to the surrounding flat terrain, the area indeed stood out as a hill—thus the name.

Let me pause a minute to give you some inside information. Newcomers will often say they “live *in the Hill*” meaning “in the *Hill Residential area*”. Old-timers will invariably say they “live *on the Hill*.”

While I’m at it, please indulge me again—I’d humbly like to correct another common mistake. The *Imperial Sugar* complex was never referred to by its

employees and the townspeople as a sugar *factory* or *mill*, but rather as the sugar *refinery*, or sometimes simply as the *plant*. I think Mabel would be pleased if my dear readers would take this into consideration.

She was definitely a good source of historic information. Her family, the Dukerlys, came to this company town early in its inception. One of her first jobs was switchboard operator when the system only had a few **telephones—one installed in the home of *Imperial's*** managing partner W. T. Eldridge, the others in the plant.

W. T. Eldridge took his management responsibilities in Sugar Land very seriously. When he and financial partner I. H. Kempner added the refinery to their *Fort Bend County* holdings in 1909, Eldridge moved the old *Ellis Plantation Home* to the refinery site, fronting it on Kempner Street where Brooks Street meets it. Eldridge was a hands-on manager and chose this location so he could keep a 24-hour, watchful eye on plant operations.

In 1927, he vacated the house to occupy a new mansion at the end of Lakeview Drive, converting the old plantation home into a boarding house and coffee shop. Unfortunately in 1963, the old *Eldridge House* or *Coffee Shop* as it was then called, was razed.

I say all this because the old *Eldridge House* and its neighbor, *Imperial's* Char House, witnessed all *alley* activities from across the highway. **However, this wasn't always so.**

Originally, *The Flats* had houses radiating from the *alley* in all directions. On its eastern side, houses fronted a sidewalk along *Oyster Creek*. The other houses fronted Guenther and Brooks Streets as well as Highway 90A.

However, in the late 1940s, the highway expanded from two to four lanes, and houses fronting it were sacrificed for the sake of progress. However, few things were ever wasted in Sugar Land, and the houses found a new resting place nearby.

As the state widened the highway, the *Sugarland Industries* created a new development adjoining the southern end of *The Flats* called the *Belknap Subdivision*. For the first time, employees and non-employees alike, could buy lots, build houses, and become homeowners within the confines of the company town. Around the same time, lots were also offered along the south side of Lakeview Drive and in the newly developed Alkire Lake subdivision.

The wood-framed, pier-and-beam, company-owned houses—once fronting the highway—now planted their footings on the western side of South Belknap Street where they continue to stand. Even a two-storied garage apartment survived and tagged along.

In its earlier days, when the *alley* was completely surrounded by houses, a tennis court on its wider, southern end, provided endless hours of recreation for management and white collar workers of *Imperial Sugar* and the *Sugarland Industries*.

With the tennis court long gone, we the Kelly boys, along with all the children of *The Flats*, shared unquestioned, collective rights to a much larger lawn in the *alley*, home of many football and baseball games. We also assumed roaming privileges throughout this enclave of 17 bungalows and cottages resting comfortably in the shadow of Imperial Sugar's towering, red-brick Char House just across Highway 90A.

Come to think of it, although our parents rented their homes from the company, it never occurred to us that we did not own the neighborhood. But back to my story—

The longer my brother and I sat on the front steps, the warmer my rear end got.

“Chuck, I’m hot.”

“Well. Go stand in the shade.”

Just as I stood up to get some relief, a long, loud, hoarse-sounding, powerful hoot filled the air.

Chuck immediately shouted, “Last one’s a rotten egg!”

“First one’s got to eat it,” I replied without hope.

By the time the refinery steam whistle finished announcing “lunchtime”, Chuck had his fanny firmly planted on the corner of Brooks and Guenther. To be sure, across-the-street-neighbors—such as the ladies Matlage, Pirtle, and Harman—often witnessed the winner refusing rotten egg as a lunchtime appetizer.

Our Daddy, a purchasing agent, walked almost daily to *Imperial’s* offices just one block over.

This time it seemed to take him a little longer making his way home for lunch. That was always a good sign.

We waited an eternity, at least two or three minutes, before I shouted, “There he is! I see him first!”

“No you don’t—I do,” Chuck replied as a matter of fact.

It really didn’t matter who saw him first. We were always happy to see our father make his way around the corner of the modern building housing *Sugarland Industries’* retail stores with *Imperial* occupying office space above.

We waited with anticipation because he occasionally, while still out of sight, picked up treats for us as he passed the drug store. There was a good chance he had something for us today.

As our father approached us, cutting through the side parking lot in his suit and tie, he shed his coat and slung it over his shoulder.

We popped up in anticipation of greeting him on our side of Brooks Street. There was no need of traffic lights in those days. No cars approached. It seemed he crossed the street without even looking out for traffic.

“Hi, boys. How ya doin’?”

He picked us up one at a time and hugged us. We took his hands and we strolled along the pecan shaded sidewalk—strips of sunlight escaping through the leaves like a dry rainfall. I can still feel his warm, fleshy hand betraying his love for us.

This handsome 34-year-old native Sugar Lander with his two young sons, all three the products of this sleepy little town, made their way to the sixth house on the street.

We entered our house through a wooden screened door onto the porch and into the small living room. *Imperial Sugar* and the *Sugarland Industries* were good about painting their properties when new renters moved in,

allowing them to pick the colors. My mother selected pastel-pink.

My father loved books. When my family first moved into the house in 1950, he built bookshelves that surrounded the large opening between the living and dining rooms, giving the two-bedroom, one bath bungalow a warm, lived-in feeling.

The Kelly family of four dined on a light lunch of tuna fish sandwiches, potato chips, fruit, and milk in their small, chartreuse-colored kitchen that had once been the back porch.

As the lunch hour was waning, our father arose from a quick nap, picked up his coat, kissed our mom and made his way to the front door.

We followed him on his way out, running and racing along the sidewalk as we made our way back to the corner. Just as he was about to step off the curb, he turned around and said, "Oh, I forgot something."

He pulled out a couple of *Cracker Jack* boxes and handed them to us. We rushed to open them before he made his way across the street. I don't remember what Chuck got, but my surprise was awesome—a black mustache. It made me feel older, maybe even old enough to beat Chuck back home.

Before I could say, "Last one's a rotten egg," the one o'clock whistle blew.

Without looking at each other, we darted through a neighbor's yard, emerging into the alley. I don't remember who got there first. It didn't matter. We were delighted. It was time for what some call children's work-

PLAY!

That was my last summer to live in *The Flats*. Looking back, I now know it was the beginning of discernible change in my life as well as Sugar Land's.

Money Magazine and CNNmoney.com rank Sugar Land as one of America's Best Places to Live.
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