

From Company Town to Thriving City

The Imperial Sugar Company began its operation in Sugar Land in 1906, and throughout the years the company owned virtually everything else in the town—the land, the mercantile store, the bank, the grocery. It was a true company town, but unlike many company towns (the mining towns in Kentucky and West Virginia or the mill towns in New England) Sugar Land was a very good place to live and work. This was due in large part to the generosity of Mr. Ike Kempner, owner of Imperial, who poured much of his profits back into the town for streets, the school, infrastructure and employee pay and benefits. Mr. William Eldridge was Kempner's partner in the sense that he managed the town, sometimes sternly but almost always fairly.

Talk to any of the people who worked for Imperial, or their children, and they will say Sugar Land was an ideal place. And it was Kempner's vision to have a kind of capitalist utopia.

By 1950, Imperial was automated and production up 25 percent after the war's rationing. But by the mid-50's, Kempner wanted out of the land business, especially after the death in 1953 of his son Herbert who had been most responsible for operations of the company and town. Nearly all of the towns in Fort Bend County were considering incorporation, so there was a natural protectionism that arose so other towns did not encroach. Some of the towns had gambling and saloons—establishments that Sugar Land was dead set against. Kempner began selling the 500+ homes owned by the company—for very fair prices—and supported the initiative to

incorporate. A quorum of voters petitioned for a vote on the matter, and on Dec. 15, 1959, 408 voters braved a rainy and cold day to elect the first mayor and aldermen (city council).

Imperial gave the infant city a good start: Kempner, Eldridge and their associates had put in streets, sewer lines, levees and the electric, gas and telephone lines. Most importantly, the incorporated city had citizens filled with enthusiasm and a spirit of cooperation ingrained during the Imperial years.

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