

Houston's Younger Neighbor Celebrates its 50th

Mayor James A. Thompson

More than a decade before Augustus and John Allen stood on the banks of Buffalo Bayou, founding Houston in August 1836, Stephen F. Austin brought 300 families to settle under Mexican rule on chartered land he'd been granted from the Mexican government. It was a large lease, roughly 120 miles wide and 125 miles deep—bordered on the east by the San Jacinto River and on the west by Richmond and the Brazos. Texas independence brought huge changes, including two counties—Harris and Fort Bend—halving Austin's land grant. Houston was founded and named after the president of the new republic.

Austin's thriving community was called Oak Land, after the several varieties of the tree in the area. A few years later, after Cuban sugar cane had been planted and was being harvested by the wagon full, the community became Sugar Land. But the city was not incorporated for over 100 years.

Sugar Land became a company town in 1908 with the founding of Imperial Sugar, and it thrived as a company town for five decades under the leadership of Isaac Kempner, the owner of Imperial and his son Herbert, and their partner William Eldridge who essentially managed the town. Ike Kempner put much of his profits from the company back into the town, trying to turn what was once called "Hell Hole on the Brazos" into an attractive town for prospective employees. And it was! Everyone had a job—either at Imperial or Sugarland Industries, Kempner's other company

that owned everything else—stores, the bank, the cattle ranch, the canning company, the mercantile. What you bought—food, clothes, even a car—was paid off through payroll deduction. Health care was virtually free.

In the mid 1950s Imperial began selling off its houses and land. Residents quickly thought to incorporate—or get annexed by Houston, Missouri City or Richmond. Imperial supported incorporation and so, on a rainy and cold Dec. 15, 1959, 480 citizens (over 70 percent of the registered voters) turned out to elect the city's first mayor and five aldermen. Sugar Land was now officially a general law city, population about 2,000. Sugar Land's success as a company town carried over to the success of Sugar Land's development.

Imperial had put in streets, sewer lines, gas and electric lines and had built a network of levees and canals. Now with developers poised to build homes, the City Council set about creating building codes. Some of the meetings of that first Council lasted to midnight.

Jump ahead 50 years, to a population of nearly 80,000 in 2009, and the city's 50th celebration of its incorporation. It's a celebration not limited to Sugar Land—it's an invitation to join us! In fact, consider joining us for our Historic Walking Tour of Old Sugar Land, the first Saturday of each month, 9-11 a.m. And take a look at the city's website, www.sugarlandtx.gov, for other activities celebrating our 50th—culminating with our New Year's Eve 50th Celebration at Town Square.

From the earliest neighborhood developments on the near north and south sides of US 90 and the Southern Pacific Railroad to the development of First Colony (Gerald Hines' purchase of 10,000 acres was one of the largest

land deals in Texas history) to the future annexations of Sugar Land's extra territorial jurisdictions Greatwood and New Territory, what's been remarkable about Sugar Land is the careful planning that has gone into the city's expansion. During the decade of the 90s, Sugar Land was the fastest growing city in Texas many years—yet through the planned development, the city was able to provide very adequate infrastructure to the increasing need.

It's been a terrific 50 years. Sugar Land has great neighborhoods, great stores in which to shop, wonderful restaurants, and lots of greenspace. And a college campus with the University of Houston-Sugar Land and Wharton County Junior College. In a few months, the Houston Museum of Natural Science at Sugar Land will open. The Sugar Land Regional Airport was just named the best fixed-base operations airport in the Americas. And Sugar Land is developing what will be one of the premiere conservation areas and parklands in the state, the Brazos River Park. To me, a weekend evening at Town Plaza is about as good as it gets.

Know another really great thing about Sugar Land? Its proximity to Houston. Many of us frequently go to the "big city" for sports events, concerts and of course the night life. Today, you won't find more fanatical Astros', Rockets' Texans' or Aeros' fans than those of us in Sugar Land—and many of Houston's professional athletes call Sugar Land home.

Houston and Sugar Land actually have much in common—a spirit of optimism and enterprise and neighborliness and pride. Visit us as we celebrate our 50th anniversary—we're just a short drive down U.S. 59.

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