

Imperial's Owners Undertook City's First Major Drainage Project

A real threat to the early Sugar Land company town was flood damage. In 1913, the Brazos spilled over its banks and flooded the land all the way to the railroad tracks and downtown Sugar Land, up to the very doors of the Imperial Refinery. What was true then, still is: heavy rains in central Texas could swell the Brazos and in another two days, it would flood in Sugar Land—hence the old saying “It could be a sunny day in Sugar Land when it floods.”

After the 1913 flood, Imperial co-owners Isaac Kempner and William Eldridge set about with a long range plan to build levees and drainage ditches and to level the land along Oyster Creek for irrigation. With primitive tools and back-breaking labor, levees were constructed, 40 feet wide at the bottom and between just a few feet and 14 feet in height. Mules and wagons moved earth to create levees and fill swamp land. Later, mechanical excavation equipment was utilized.

Even by today's standards, the drainage project was enormous—and enormously successful. Hundreds of acres of land were leveled, the earth moved to create nearly nine miles of levees. Swamps were filled. Importantly, over 20 miles of ditches were dug in order to drain the newly leveled landscape. To create those initial levees, 5,000,000 cubic yards of dirt were moved. In comparison, the recent widening of Ditch H (using that dirt to raise the height of levees about three feet) was considered a very major project, and entailed approximately 700,000 cubic yards of dirt—all done with modern earth-moving equipment.

The early drainage and levee project was completed in 1922, and it created a landscape that was amenable to housing, businesses and roadways. An added plus was that a great deal of breeding area had been taken from Sugar Land's nemesis—the mosquito. Kempner and Eldridge realized—after witnessing the 1913 flood—that Sugar Land could not be truly livable while constantly threatened by flooding. It is a premise that still holds today, and the City of Sugar Land and Fort Bend County have been diligent in their drainage efforts, most recently working with the Federal Emergency Management Agency on the new Flood Insurance Rate Maps (FIRMs); preliminary maps are due to be released to the public for a 90-day discussion period this Fall.& The new topographical data will be utilized to establish Base Flood Elevations (BFE), and this could affect insurance rates in areas outside certified levees.

In truth, drainage efforts never really ceased for any lengthy period of time after the initial Kempner-Eldridge project; as the city has grown, so has the need for comprehensive drainage efforts—dredging of Oyster Creek, widened ditches, larger drainage pipes, heightened levees and reconstructed curb and gutter streets in many parts of the city.

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