

## **On Its 50th Anniversary, Sugar Land Salutes Galveston's Kempners**

*Mayor James A. Thompson*

In comparison to Galveston, which was chartered in 1839, Sugar Land is quite young—50 years young. During 2009, we are celebrating our city's 50th anniversary of incorporation—and celebrating the legacy left by Galveston's Kempner family. Our celebration will culminate with a very special New Year's Eve event in Town Square.

Sugar Land's fascinating history began in 1835 when Stephen F. Austin brought 300 families to the land he'd leased from the Mexican government, the size of 13 present day counties. Austin gave one of these land leases to Galveston's Samuel May Williams. The land passed through a succession of owners until 1908 when I. H. [Ike] Kempner of Galveston and W. T. Eldridge of Eagle Lake partnered to acquire the sugar refinery and mill, the seedling of a company town, and the surrounding 12,500 acres. The main crop, sugar cane, gave the area its name.

Unlike many mining and mill towns, Sugar Land was a pretty great place to live. Mr. Kempner (who continued to live in Galveston) put his profits back into the town, building amenities in order to have a stable work force—and invested greatly in the schools and hospitals knowing that families were essential to his town's –and company's—success. Talk to any of the “old timers” in Sugar Land today and they'll tell you that as children, they knew there would always be food on the table and a roof over their heads. In fact, Imperial owned virtually all the retail outlets—mercantile, drug store,

bank, feed store, auto dealership—and what you bought would be paid for out of the Imperial paycheck. Houston was a good distance away, and the roads were bad, so it made sense to have all necessary commodities in the growing company town. In the 1940s, Herbert Kempner, Jr. took over management of the company and town and left a vision for both before his death in 1953. Ike saw to it that his late son's wishes for the expansion of the company and continuing town improvements came to fruition.

My acquaintance and fellow mayor, Lyda Ann Thomas, is not just the mayor of Galveston—she's Isaac Kempner's granddaughter. When Lyda was a child, she came to Sugar Land now and then with her grandfather Ike.

Let's jump ahead in time to 1959 and the encroaching annexation by Houston, Richmond and Missouri City. Imperial knew it was just a matter of time before the successful company town would be no more, so encouraged the citizens to incorporate before being annexed. On a cold and rainy Dec. 15, 1959, 480 voters turned out to elect the first mayor and five aldermen, and the city was created as a general law city. Sugar Land's population was 2,259.

The small city got off to a fine start, thanks to Imperial and the Kempners. The company town had streets, sewage system, electric and gas lines and levees. Now, with development beginning to take off, the first duty of the new council was to establish building codes.

In 2009, with a population in excess of 80,000, Sugar Land is one of the most successful cities anywhere. We owe a real debt of gratitude to Isaac and Herbert Kempner for establishing a well thought out company town

that became this wonderful city.

*Article as seen in The Galveston Daily News, August 7, 2009*

Money Magazine and CNNmoney.com rank Sugar Land as one of America's Best Places to Live.  
2700 Town Center Blvd. North | Sugar Land, TX 77479-0110 | tel: (281) 275-2700 | fax: (281) 275-2318

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