

Sugar Land's First Developments - Neighborhoods in the Early 60s

In the late 1950s, the Imperial Sugar Company decided the upkeep of its company-owned houses was just getting to be too much of a drain on the company's profits. The rents were greatly below what it was costing the company for upkeep and infrastructure development.

The company's brick houses on The Hill, northeast of the refinery, were put on the market, and the company employees were given the option to buy them. And most of them did buy their homes, priced from about \$4,000 to \$6,000. Most of the houses had shared driveways. Houses along Main and up to 6th Street were largely wood or siding and were a bit cheaper; Sugar Land State Bank agreed to \$500 down and mortgages with a 5 percent rate to be paid off in 10 years. Buyers could opt for payroll deduction. A number of people bought their homes outright.

The land that would become Venetian Estate was a low, swampy land. Sugar Land Industries and Belknap Realty dug canals and used the dredged dirt to build up the land height. It was Mrs. Henrietta Kempner's (wife of Imperial owner Isaac Kempner) idea to call it Venetian Estates and give Italian names to many of the streets. The lots sold slowly at first—at \$5,000 these were not cheap lots. Some "spec" homes were built.

But when the US 59 service roads opened, there was a way to get into Houston without going on South Main. It was also the time when the area around Sharpstown was being developed—but Sugar Land was about the only place that had water-front lots! The lots in Venetian Estates began

selling quickly then.

Mayfield Park on the north side of the refinery was nearly exclusively Black and Hispanic. The Black children attended M.R. Wood school, while the Hispanic children attended Sugar Land Elementary since they were considered "white." The homes in Mayfield were considered out of code in the early 1950s by the City because they had an outdoor privy and just running cold water in a single faucet back of the house. Herb Kempner—son of Isaac—was over Imperial and was disturbed at the plight of the Mayfield residents. More than 200 homes were bulldozed and new brick ones built over the course of a decade in their places; residents lived in temporary housing. Herb Kempner's vision for Sugar Land was much like his father's, a city with no injustice and with opportunity for everyone. The City worked with the Federal Housing Administration on this urban renewal project, and the first FHA home was sold to Mrs. Aline McLemore in 1961. It is believed that there was never a foreclosure in the Mayfield subdivision. Sadly, Herb Kempner died in 1953 and did not see the completion of his Mayfield project.

Though Sugar Land was segregated in the 50's and early 60's, there was one thing that just about everyone had: a job.