

## **The End of the "Company Store"**

From 1908 until the city incorporated in 1959, Sugar Land was a true company town. The Imperial Sugar Company and its affiliate, Sugarland Industries, owned **virtually all the enterprises—mercantile, car dealership, bank, pharmacy, grocery store.** But it was a successful town: everyone had a job. Even during the depression, Imperial did not lay off employees. And purchases at the company stores were charged against your Imperial paycheck.

The concept of a company town worked well because Sugar Land was remote; in the early days, roads were poor and Houston seemed to be a **great distance. People simply didn't have the time to go there to shop—especially with just about everything right there in Sugar Land.**

In the late 1950s, Frank Sharp donated a 300-foot wide right-of-way through the land he owned and was developing into one of the first suburban communities, Sharpstown. This roadway served as the feeder lanes for what would become U.S. 59, one of the busiest freeways in the U.S.; the feeder roads reached to where U.S. 90 intersects U.S. 59. in Sugar Land. Thus, in 1962, Houston was suddenly much closer to Sugar Land. Once Sharpstown Mall opened, residents of Sugar Land had new places to shop.

The Kempner family—owners of Imperial and Sugarland Industries—realized in the mid-1950s that the company town model would be fading quickly. Certainly the retail businesses they owned would be losing money. Once work began on extending U.S. 59, they also realized

that Houston would be annexing from the north, and Richmond from the south. Consequently, the Kempners wholeheartedly supported the incorporation of the City of Sugar Land in 1959. The building of U.S. 59 was greatly sped up when Sugarland Industries donated all the land needed as a right-of-way for the freeway through the city limits of Sugar Land.

And all the enterprises owned by Imperial? Individuals bought the grocery and dry goods stores and operated them for a number of years. The Western Auto closed. Hugh Rouse, who managed the drug store for Sugarland Industries, bought it and operated it for some years, adding a nice eating area and fountain to it. The John Deer Implement store closed because there was less farming. The cotton gin closed after Sugarland Industries sold the farming and grazing land to Gerald Hines for the development of First Colony; Nalco (then Visco) incorporated the gin building into its complex. The Farm and Home Center and the MixRite Feed Mill closed soon afterwards.

**As former Sugar Land mayor Bill Little puts it, "You can see how the building of the Southwest Freeway led, in part, to the end of the company store—and the company town."**

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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