

Sugar Land Makes It To The Big Leagues

by Chuck Kelly, longtime Sugar Land resident

During Major League Baseball's winter meeting in 1960, Houston was awarded a National League franchise. The new owners, all prominent Houstonians, named the team the Colt .45s and announced they would start play in April 1962.

In the winter of 1961, the owners began constructing a temporary wooden stadium just north of the eventual site of the Astrodome, roughly where Reliant Center is now located. Houston and neighboring towns like Sugar Land were excited about the new team, but there was no frenzied promotion like there is today. The three Houston newspapers carried stories about the development of the new team, and the Colt .45s opened their stadium's construction site to the public. There wasn't much to see except a dusty parking lot and a rapidly assembled stadium behind a chain-link fence, but fans could visit a temporary building where they could get pennants, decals, caps, schedules and other items meant to drum up interest.

Sugar Land's interest cranked up a notch or two in March 1962 when a local newspaper, *The Triad*, announced that Luman Harris, third base coach for the Colt .45s, would move his family to Sugar Land. Several Sugar Land families are now connected with professional sports, but the Harris family was the first, and Sugar Land was a small town of roughly 2,500 people back then. Their arrival in Sugar Land was big news.

The Triad article detailed Lum's baseball background. He had pitched for

the Washington Senators and coached in the big leagues for several years. The article also said Lum, his wife Margaret, and their teenage son Johnny were moving into a home in Venetian Estates -- the finger lakes and the chance to fish were big attractions. Plus, they liked the quiet, small-town atmosphere Sugar Land offered.

The Colt .45s were a typical expansion team with typical expansion team problems. At the end of the '62 season they would finish 36-1/2 games out of first, but ahead of the Chicago Cubs and the New York Mets who began play in the same year. The Colts won-loss record didn't matter; Houston was happy to see major league baseball.

Prior to opening day, the Colts announced they would honor local towns with special nights at home games through the course of the season. Sugar Land's night was Friday, June 8 when the Colts would play the Dodgers. On each of these special nights, team officials and town dignitaries participated in a ceremony at home plate before the first pitch. Fans from the honored town had reserved seats so they could all enjoy the game together.

Sugar Land's baseball fans were excited about their special night at Colt Stadium. The Fort Bend Mirror published a front-page article on Thursday, June 7 about Sugar Land Night. It said Lum Harris, Sugar Land resident and third-base coach for the Colts, would be honored at the game. A caravan of cars and buses left the Sugar Land Shopping Center (now Imperial Sugar headquarters) at 7 p.m. Fort Bend County sheriff's deputies escorted the caravan to the county line, where Harris County deputies took over. Prior to the first pitch, Margaret and Johnny joined

Lum, Sugar Land Mayor Bill Little, Sugar Land City Council members and Fort Bend County Sheriff R. L. "Tiny" Gaston for a ceremony honoring Sugar Land. City dignitaries sat behind the third-base dugout, so they could kibitz Lum and ensure a win. Other Sugar Land residents sat behind the Dodger dugout on the first-base line.

The next issue of the *Mirror*, published on June 14, contained a post-game article about Sugar Land Night at Colt Stadium. It focused on the pre-game ceremonies at home plate. According to the article, Mayor Bill Little "did himself proud" as he gave Lum a proclamation making him honorary mayor during the game. Gaston gave him a certificate giving him permission to speed in any Texas county **except** Fort Bend. Lum received a fishing rod and reel as a gift from the City of Sugar Land. Margaret Harris received a big bouquet of flowers. Photos accompanied the article. One showed Loel Passe acting as master of ceremonies at home plate with the Harris family and Sugar Land dignitaries along side him. Another showed team photos of Sugar Land's two little league teams, the St. Theresa Knights and Sugar Land Lions, taken at the shopping center before leaving for the game. A third showed Sugar Land citizen collecting in front of the shopping center and arranging their cars in caravan.

My family attended the game. I was a member of the Sugar Land Lions Little League team. Like other members of the team, I wore my flannel uniform. I don't remember the night as unbearably hot or humid. I don't remember a problem with mosquitoes either, but I don't doubt the truth of old Colt Stadium's reputation. Newspaper accounts of a double header with the Dodgers on the following Sunday, June 10 said fans were overcome by heat during the first game played in the afternoon. Several fans were taken

for treatment under the stadium.

I do remember a few things about the game. First, Sandy Koufax pitched for the Dodgers. I don't recall how well he pitched - he didn't win or lose the game - but real baseball fans were excited about seeing the league's premier left-handed pitcher on the mound. Second, Frank Howard, the Dodger's gigantic outfielder, hit a mammoth home run to left field. Those of us behind the Dodger dugout on the first-base line had a perfect view. We watched the ball rise on an arc that took it above the stadium lights and into the darkness before falling back into view in the parking lot behind the bleachers. Finally, the Colts lost the game 4-3 in 13 innings.

It didn't really matter to a 12-year old. It probably didn't matter to many of the Sugar Land baseball fans enjoying Sugar Land Night at old Colt Stadium. We got a police escort to the game. We shared a spotlight with one of our own during pre-game ceremonies. We saw Sandy Koufax pitch. We had a good time. What more could you ask for?

Article as seen in the Fort Bend Star

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