

In August 1969, Shell Oil Company announced plans to move most of its administrative offices from New York City to Houston. “Shell to Move 1,000 Workers Here” read the banner headline across the front page of the *Houston Chronicle* the day after the announcement. The final number was closer to 1,400, and the success of the move encouraged the company to consolidate others parts of its operations in the city.

The move bolstered the Bayou City’s emergence as a center of gravity for Shell. Houston had been a Shell town for many decades. It had a major refinery in Deer Park since the 1930s. Its Exploration & Production (E&P) research laboratory was in Bellaire. And most of its operations in Texas and the Mid-Continent were run out of the area office there. Shell already employed more than 5,000 people in the area, the largest single concentration of Shell employees in the country. During the early 1960s, the company started to outgrow its offices in the Shell Building, the Fannin Building, and the Prudential Building.

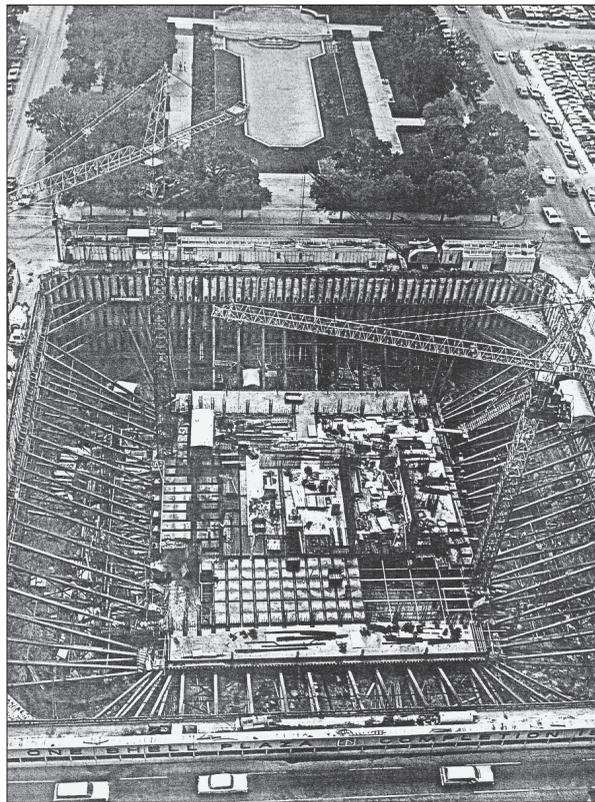
In 1966, the company arranged to install most of Shell’s Houston employees in a new skyscraper to be built by Gerald D. Hines, whose tallest building at the time was a sixteen-story apartment project. Hines’ personal charisma, his deep-pocketed local investors, an innovative design, a favorable lease, and the low cost of living in Houston helped convince Shell to commit to the project.

With Shell as the primary tenant, Hines agreed to name his building One Shell Plaza. Over the next three years, Houstonians watched a modern-style tower rise up 650 feet to dominate the downtown skyline. Clad in gleaming-white, Italian Travertine marble quarried from the same region as the marble in Rome’s Coliseum, the fifty-story One Shell Plaza laid claim to being the tallest building west of the Mississippi and the highest reinforced concrete structure in the world.¹

In 1967, as the groundwork was laid for the skyscraper, the lease on Shell Oil’s offices in New York City’s RCA building came up for renewal. Manhattan’s rising costs and deteriorating working condi-

tions prompted Shell to examine the idea of moving much its operations to another city. During eighteen months of study aided by the Stanford Research Institute, Shell collected data on a half-dozen cities but eventually narrowed the list to two, Dallas and Houston. Both cities had low costs-of-living, room for growth, and a Sunbelt ambience. And they were located in the Central Time Zone, making intra-company

Shell to Houston



One Shell Plaza stands over fifty stories tall and was the tallest building west of the Mississippi when it was completed in 1971.

communications easier. Ultimately, the availability of office space gave Houston the edge. Gerald Hines already had plans to build a high-rise garage across the street from One Shell Plaza and agreed to turn the building into a 28-story combination garage/office that became Two Shell Plaza once the company decided to move to Houston and agreed to lease half of the new building.

The company’s Texas-sized move took nearly a year beginning in November 1969. Shell’s method of moving individual offices only lost one working day at the end of each week. Each Thursday evening, equipment was loaded up in cross-country moving trucks. By the following Monday afternoon, 1,620 miles away in Houston, the equipment was unloaded and arranged. Employees reported for work Tuesday morning. Shell offered to transfer and absorb moving costs for practically all operating headquarters personnel from top managers to file clerks and secretaries.

Some 700 employees refused the offer, choosing to stay in New York City. Many others welcomed the move and adapted quickly. “I had heard about places like the Shamrock Hotel and the restaurants and

how everybody barbecued,” recalled one secretary who accepted the transfer. “When you live in New York City, you never barbeque!” Houston’s much lower housing costs meant that people were able to buy homes often twice the size of the ones they left behind in the suburbs of Connecticut or Long Island. “I happened to be a New Yorker, but I didn’t mind leaving New York,” said Jim DeNike, who became vice president of Shell Chemical a few years after the move. “And I know very few people who went back.”³ The move eliminated the long commute people had been taking into Manhattan and gave the company an hour more work per day out of each individual. Shell quickly recouped the \$35 million it spent to relocate its offices and people in the form of lower administrative and operating costs. “It paid out like a slot machine,” said DeNike.⁴

Moving most of the headquarters staff to Houston was so successful that in 1971, Shell Oil decided to pull up its entire stakes in New York City and transfer its remaining executive offices to Houston. The savings and efficiencies achieved by the move opened up the possibilities of consolidating other activities. In 1972-73, Shell moved all of its data processing, with the exception of the credit card center in Tulsa, from regional centers into a new building on the south side of Houston near the Astrodome.⁵ The final act in the centralization of Shell was the closing of the Emeryville research laboratory in

California and the construction of the Westhollow Research Center, a sprawling new research complex on the west side of Houston. Completed in 1975, the new facility housed all of Shell Development's research laboratories and offices, except those for E&P.

This marked the end of a decade of major reorganization and centraliza-

tion of Shell Oil Company's nation-wide operations. Shell benefited from the consolidation of its operations in Houston through better communications and reductions in overhead during a period of tight budgets. It could more closely coordinate its activities in oil, petrochemicals, and natural gas, while also taking advantage of the services of the many oil-related

specialists headquartered in Houston. The city also reaped great benefits from Shell's move, which gave Houston a major new company headquarters, a potent symbol of its status as the nation's energy capital, and a company that quickly established itself as a leading corporate citizen.

—Tyler Priest⁶

“MAMA” NINFÁ RODRIGUEZ LAURENZO



Photo by AlFin.
Courtesy Mama Ninfa's

Often deemed Houston's first lady of Mexican cooking, Mama Ninfa Rodriguez Laurenzo was a restaurateur, innovator, community leader, and role model whose family, friends, and dining customers simply called her “Mama.” During her five decades in Houston, the founder of Ninfa's restaurants was credited with expanding the city's food frontier by introducing the fajita-meat dish called “*tacos al carbon*,” later evolving into “*tacos a la Ninfa*,” and eventually known widely as “fajitas.”¹ “I

grew up in the lower Rio Grande Valley,” Mama Ninfa once said. “I was just serving the same kind of good, honest food at my restaurant that we used to eat at home. Fajitas were an old family recipe.” Mama Ninfa's indulgence of this old family recipe to the Houston community was largely responsible for the fajita craze that swept the country in the late twentieth century.²

Maria Ninfa Rodriguez was a Mexican American Catholic, born May 11, 1924, and raised with her eleven siblings in Harlingen, Texas. On a small patch of farmland in the Rio Grande Valley, her parents grew peppers, tomatoes, and squash, and raised cows, chickens, and pigs. After graduation from Henrietta High School in Kingsville, Texas and Durhan Business School in Harlingen, Mama Ninfa traveled to Rhode Island in 1945 to visit her twin sister, Pilar. There, she met and married an Italian American and Rhode Island native, Domenic Thomas (D.T.) Laurenzo. In 1947, the couple's first child, Roland, was born, and they began to look for opportunities in Los Angeles and Houston. A son-in-law later recalled that the family came to Houston as a result of a coin toss.³

The Laurenzos opened Rio Grande Tortilla Co. in Houston's East End in 1949 and had four more children. For two decades, they woke up daily at 3:30 a.m. to begin a sixteen-hour day of rolling out corn tortillas at the factory on Navigation Boulevard. The business prospered, but the Laurenzos continued to live in a small frame house next to the factory in order to send their children to a private parochial school. Daughter Phyllis Mandola remembered, “Mama would always tell us: ‘Education is your passport to opportunity.’ It was very important to her.” When D.T. Laurenzo died suddenly in 1969, Mama Ninfa was left a widow with five children to raise. The tortilla company was struggling, but she continued to run the business until 1972 when new equipment

regulations forced her to turn the factory into a restaurant.⁴

After banks turned her down for a loan, Mama Ninfa borrowed several thousand dollars from a friend in Mexico City to transform the factory into a makeshift ten-table restaurant. She stocked the kitchen with dishes, pots, and pans from her home and furnished the dining area with tables and chairs she salvaged from another restaurant that had discarded them after a fire. With help from her children, the original Ninfa's opened in July 1973.⁵ The little restaurant sold about 250 *tacos al carbon* on its first day in business, and was so prosperous that Mama Ninfa tripled its size and eventually opened a second location on Westheimer three years later. By the early 1980s, the Laurenzo family's Rio Star Corporation boasted nine Houston restaurants; currently, more than fifty Ninfa's restaurants are open in Texas, Georgia, and Louisiana.⁶

Mama Ninfa's success as an entrepreneur and restaurateur inspired others in Houston to pursue the restaurant business. Doneraki restaurant founder Cesar Rodriguez recalled how she changed people's perception of Mexican food. “She took our food to the Anglo people. Before Ninfa's, most people considered Mexican food cheap street food. Señora Ninfa changed all that. She said to me, ‘If they like our food, they need to pay for it.’ So she doubled the prices. It was incredible,” he said. Although typical in “Tex-Mex” restaurants today, at the time that Ninfa's began, dishes like *chalupas*, *sopapillas*, *avocado* and *tomatillo green sauce*, *flautas de pollo*, *chorizo con queso*, and *tacos al carbon* were brand new to people.⁷

Mama Ninfa's fame spread far beyond the kitchen, as charity work and other civic endeavors made her a Houston institution. She sat on various public boards of directors and received numerous local and national honors and awards.⁸ Her children have said that her proudest moment was in 1984, when then Vice President George Bush appointed her to be one of five goodwill ambassadors to welcome Pope John Paul II in Puerto Rico.⁹ In 1992, she was in the national spotlight when she seconded Bush's nomination for presidency at the Republican National Convention in Houston.¹⁰ Mama Ninfa died of bone cancer in 2001 at the age of 77.

Despite the expansion of Ninfa's into a chain spreading across multiple cities, a meal at the restaurant's original location on Navigation Boulevard in Houston's East End neighborhood still attracts customers from around the city and the world. Diners continually return to savor the home cooking that changed the face of “Tex-Mex,” a legacy that Mama Ninfa Laurenzo, a true entrepreneur in a city of bustling economic opportunity, left to the Houston restaurant community.

—Leigh Cutler