

The West Ranch: From Cattle to Space City

Amy Bacon

In the early 1900s, the city limits of Houston enclosed less than nine square miles and the heart of the city was downtown where Houstonians conducted business and interacted socially. However, with the improvement of the road and highway system in the 1920s, Houston's boundaries started to extend from its downtown nucleus. During the economic boom following World War II, the city spread further in all directions. Today, the Greater Houston area covers over 500 square miles, encompassing all of Harris County and bordering the additional counties of Montgomery, Fort Bend, and Galveston. Houston's city limits also encircle the cities of West University, Galena Park, Bellaire, and Pasadena, among others. Many large suburban communities that are included in Houston's formal boundaries nonetheless have the appearance of operating independently of the city. While downtown is still defined as the central core of Houston, it no longer represents the standard by which the city's economic, business, and social infrastructure is defined. Now, each suburban community maintains its own character while shaping Houston's profile and contributing to the definition of the Greater Houston metropolis. One of these suburbs, Clear Lake, possesses a rich history which significantly impacted the city of Houston.

The area commonly referred to as "Clear Lake" is actually a composite community of seven adjoining incorporated towns—Webster, Nassau Bay, El Lago, Taylor Lake Village, Seabrook, Kemah, Clear Lake Shores—and the Clear Lake City development. Recognized as one of Houston's premier master-planned residential, commercial, and industrial communi-

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ties, Clear Lake City has a population of over 45,000 people and is considered one of the most successful "new towns" in the United States. It also serves as an example of various forces coming together to link a closely attached region with the Houston economy. The growth of the Clear Lake area—the arrival of the Johnson Space Center (JSC), Clear Lake City's development, and the creation of the Bayport industrial complex—provided a tremendous boost to Houston's economy. As a result of the overwhelming progress and innovation accompanying the arrival of highly technological industries, particularly those related to space, the area became known as "Space City, USA."

Before there was a Clear Lake City, a space center, or a Bayport, the area was known as the vast ranching kingdom of James M. West, dotted with cattle and oil wells. The nearest inhabitants to this property lived in small municipalities along the shores of Clear Lake and Galveston Bay. The West Ranch was at the heart of the extensive developments that would be built in later years. From the 1920s to the present, the property and the intricate transactions involving it shaped the history of the area. Some of the associated entities changed over time, but the West Ranch remained at the core. By following the evolution of the West Ranch, we can see the history of Clear Lake unfold. This area's development significantly contributed to the outward growth of Houston. Without the expansive West Ranch property, this vital adjunct to Houston would not exist today.

To understand the beginnings of the vast West Ranch, one must look at the man whose fortune enabled him to acquire this large amount of property. Born in Mississippi in 1871, James Marion West, Sr. came to Texas with his parents in 1880. Upon his arrival in Houston in 1905, West had already established himself as a successful businessman in the lumber industry. In 1900, he founded the West Lumber Company, a lumber manufacturing corporation, while also owning numerous mills and timber land. In the following years, he acquired the entire holdings of the William Carlisle Lumber Company, which included 143,000 acres of rich timber land in East Texas, numerous sawmills, and the Beaumont & Great Northern Railroad. He further broadened his lumber interests by purchasing the Hawthorne Lumber Company and the C. L. Smith Lumber Company, both located in Louisiana. In 1910, he purchased the South Texas Lumber Company from Jesse Jones.¹ Cumulatively, these acquisitions gave West control

¹"Another Big Lumber Company in Houston," *Progressive Houston* 1 (January 1910): 2. See also "James M. West, Sr.," in *The New Encyclopedia of Texas*, ed. Ellis A. Davis and Edwin H. Grobe (Dallas: Texas Development Bureau, 1926), 234.

of more than two billion feet of standing timber and placed him as one of the leading lumber men of Southeast Texas.

West's business interests diversified to include banking, real estate, and ranching. He was a director of the Second National Bank and owned several large office buildings in downtown Houston, including the West Building and the 22-story Sterling Building. Like many other Houston men of this time, his attention also turned to oil production. In 1917, West established the West Production Company to oversee oil production in fields along the Gulf Coast. In addition to this interest, a passion for ranching prompted him to invest in vast ranching lands all across Texas. At one time, he owned over 600,000 acres, including the notable West Ranch in Clear Lake.

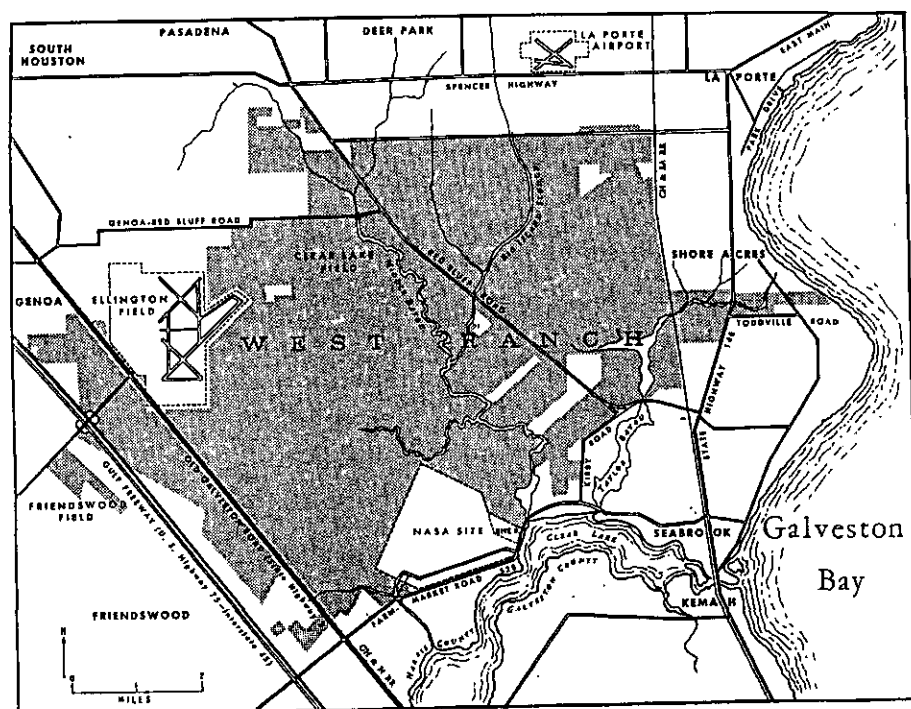
From 1925 until 1938, West pieced together a 30,000 acre ranch in southeast Harris County, stretching from the north shore of Clear Lake to Ellington Field (Figure 1). Rather than buying the land in a few large portions, he purchased this property in tracts ranging in size from one acre to 3,991 acres.² As was customary in this era, when wealthy Houstonians built extraordinary retreats along the banks of Clear Lake and Galveston Bay, West built a palatial, Italian Renaissance villa on this property facing the water. Although West regularly resided at his River Oaks home, the Clear Lake ranch and mansion served as an enjoyable haven for his family which included his wife, Jessie Dudley West, and his two sons, James M. West, Jr., and Wesley West.³ It also provided a spectacular location at which to entertain the prominent families of Houston.

Construction on this grandiose home began in the late 1920s and was completed in 1930 at an estimated cost of \$500,000. The distinguished architect, Joseph S. Finger, Sr., designed the mansion which was considered one of the largest homes built in Houston during the boom years of the

²Deed of Land, J. M. West, et al. to Humble Oil and Refining Company, December 29, 1938, Harris County Clerk's Office, Volume 1111, 77-99; Deed of Land, West Production Company to Humble Oil and Refining Company, December 29, 1938, Harris County Clerk's Office, Volume 1103, 690-708; Deed of Land, West Securities Company to Humble Oil and Refining Company, December 29, 1938, Harris County Clerk's Office, Volume 1114, 84-88. Given the vast number of separate deeds recorded over the 13-year period of the West Ranch acquisition, it is more convenient to follow the purchases by reviewing the deeds processed as a result of the Humble purchase in 1938. These deeds enumerate each tract, providing the acreage and the date on which West originally purchased the property.

³West's eldest son, James M. West, Jr., was perhaps the most colorful member of the West family. He was nicknamed "Silver Dollar Jim" for his habit of carrying a large supply of silver dollars in specially made pockets to distribute as tips and "calling cards" to friends and strangers. Contrary to popular belief, the Clear Lake mansion was not constructed by "Silver Dollar Jim" West, but rather by his father.

**FIGURE 1: THE WEST RANCH PROPERTY
(30,000 ACRES)**



Source: Friendswood Development Company Archives

1920s.⁴ Finger, an Austrian immigrant who came to Houston in 1908, greatly influenced the direction of Houston's architecture from 1920 to 1946 as his work included such buildings as the Beth Israel Temple, Plaza Apartment Hotel, Houston Turn-Verein, Citizen's State Bank, City Hall, and Houston Municipal Airport Terminal Building. He also designed several private dwellings for wealthy Houstonians including the residences of the Weingartens and Sakowitzes, as well as the homes of West's sons in River Oaks.

Once described as the "most pretentious home in Harris County," this two-story, 17,000-square-foot mansion featured masonry surfaced with stucco and a clay-tiled roof.⁵ Giving consideration to poor soil conditions, flooding, and the potential for hurricanes, Finger enhanced the structural integrity of the house by using carved limestone, concrete, and steel. He stated that "no money will be spared to make this one of the showplaces of the country." The interior of the 45-room mansion contained such lavish details as hand-painted walnut ceiling beams in the great hall, fountains, marble floors, imported mosaic tiles from Tunisia, and even gold-leaf fixtures in West's private bathroom.⁶ Surrounding the house were the formal gardens, servants' quarters with an adjoining eight-car garage, assorted ranch houses for the foreman and employees, and a large barn. Additional amenities included a clay tennis court, two gazebos, a swimming pool, and a man-made 10-acre lake.

Aside from the area containing the mansion, most of the remainder of the West ranch was undeveloped land used for grazing cattle. G. I. Butler, a longtime resident of the area whose family's ranch was located in the city of Friendswood, recalls that "other than dirt roads, the ranch was vast prairie land with lots of cattle on it."⁷ However, West was also looking for oil on this property as indicated by another local resident, former Harris County Judge Thomas J. Stovall, Jr., who remembers "lots of oil wells and cattle."⁸ With the discovery of oil in 1938, the history of the property took a significant turn.

⁴"House for Mr. and Mrs. James M. West," *Houston Architectural Survey* (Houston: Southwest Center for Urban Research, 1980), vol. 2, 447-454.

⁵Mary Whatley Clarke, "Jim West of Houston," *The Cattleman* 49 (December 1952): 26, 74-80.

⁶"West To Build Palatial Home on Clear Lake," *Houston Post*, July 22, 1928. For more details on the interior of the mansion, see Dorothy M. Hoskins, "An Italian Villa of Today," *Houston Gargoyle* 3 (May 11, 1930): 10-12.

⁷G. I. Butler, interview with author, Houston, Texas, March 7, 1995.

⁸Judge Thomas J. Stovall, Jr., interview with author, Seabrook, Texas, March 14, 1995.

In the early depression years of the 1930s, the majority of oil production companies substantially scaled back their leasing and exploration programs. This lack of competition for potential oil lands created a positive situation for companies with the means and the courage to invest heavily in exploration. The Humble Oil and Refining Company was exactly the organization to take advantage of these conditions, given its net earnings and expansionist leadership.⁹ In fact, in the 1930s, Humble adopted a strategy of aggressively leasing large tracts of land for exploration, building its domestic oil and gas reserves.¹⁰ An important aspect of Humble's leasing and reserve-acquisition operation was its purchases of proven fields discovered by other individuals. One such acquisition in 1932 cemented the acquaintance of Humble and J. M. West, Sr. In 1927, Hugh Roy Cullen and West jointly brought in the Thompson field through the West Production Company. They sold their interest in the field to Humble in 1932 for \$3 million in cash and \$17 million in royalties.¹¹ Subsequently, West and Cullen ended their partnership. However, West would be involved in future transactions with Humble—this time involving his West Ranch property.

In 1937, Humble made a significant discovery when it brought in the Friendswood (Webster) field. However, the reservoir appeared to extend beyond Humble's leasehold and into the West Ranch property. Mr. Carl E. Reistle, Jr., Humble's chairman of the board and CEO from 1963 to 1965, clearly recalls that Humble wanted this land "because the Friendswood field was under it."¹² The recently discovered Clear Lake oil and gas field was located on this property as well. In December 1938, after months of negotiations between West and L. T. Barrow, vice-president of Humble, the company agreed to purchase the ranch property (both surface and mineral rights). A contract was signed between Humble and the West interests, which included J. M. West, Sr., the West Securities Corporation, and the West Production Company. West was paid \$8.5 million in cash plus royalties estimated between \$30 million and \$40 million. The transaction included the West family ranch and mansion, the Clear Lake oil and gas field, the West acreage in the Friendswood (Webster) field, and the entire West holdings in southern Harris County east of the old interurban right

⁹In November 1972, Humble's parent company, Standard Oil Company (New Jersey) changed its name to Exxon Corporation. On January 1, 1973, Humble Oil and Refining Company (Exxon's domestic affiliate) became Exxon Company USA.

¹⁰Henrietta M. Larson and Kenneth Wiggins Porter, *History of Humble Oil and Refining Company: A Study in Industrial Growth* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), 390.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 400.

¹²Carl E. Reistle, Jr., interview with author, Houston, Texas, April 18, 1995.

of way.¹³ The West Ranch purchase remains one of the largest single cash expenditures for oil land acquisition in Humble's history. The ramifications of this transaction would become extremely significant in the next 20 years.

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the oil and gas-producing fields which covered approximately one-fourth of the ranch property proved their profitability for Humble. Production from the Friendswood field increased from a daily average of about 8,000 barrels in 1941 to over 60,000 barrels by 1945.¹⁴ By the mid-1950s, however, the production limits of both the Friendswood and Clear Lake fields on the West Ranch had been defined and Humble pondered what to do with the remaining 23,000 acres. One of the first decisions Humble made regarding this property was to donate the West Mansion and 21 acres (excluding mineral rights) surrounding the house to Rice University. According to Reistle, it was "being vandalized and they thought they could use it to start an oceanographic school."¹⁵ The deed, filed in April 1957, stipulated that Rice had to establish a "unit for the furtherance of education in the earth sciences prior to January 1, 1958," or the title would revert to Humble.¹⁶ When actual scientific activity did not immediately take place on this portion of the West Ranch, Humble and Rice amended the deed over the next two years, negotiating the specific restrictions on the mansion and property's use. They finally agreed that the property and the mansion were to be used for research in the earth sciences (without a deadline) and if Rice used the property for any other purpose or attempted to sell the land, the property would revert to Humble. Once Rice had established an earth science institute, if the university decided that the West Ranch location was no longer effective for the research facility, it could sell the property free and clear of all restrictions as long as the proceeds from the sale were used for the acquisition of other property for the facility. Despite all this negotiation, Rice never established an earth science laboratory on their portion of the West Ranch. In fact, another fate awaited the vast ranch property which would forever change the map of southeast Harris County.

¹³"J. M. West Sells Oil Holdings to Humble: Huge Sums Involved," *Houston Chronicle*, December 30, 1938. The Interurban was an electric railway that ran from Houston to Galveston and also stopped at towns along the way. Trains left every hour and traveled over the Galveston Causeway.

¹⁴Larson and Porter, *History of Humble Oil and Refining Company*, 576.

¹⁵Reistle interview.

¹⁶Deed of Land, Humble Oil and Refining Company to William Marsh Rice Institute, April 1, 1957, Harris County Clerk's Office, Volume 3314, 146.

Following World War II, Houston experienced a surge of rapid economic growth as the population boomed and businesses prospered. In the decade of the 1940s, Houston's population grew from 384,514 to 596,163. This influx of people caused a rush on land all across Harris County, as property was bought for industrial and residential development. Developers began creating large subdivisions filled with homes that were uniform in size, cost, construction and design. Before the war, most homes were built by individuals who purchased available lots in various neighborhoods relatively near downtown Houston. In the late 1940s, Houston began experiencing "urban sprawl" as residential communities formed outside the established parameters of the city. The next 40 years saw the construction of three-fourths of all residential development existing in Houston today, with the majority of these developments located on the periphery of the central city.¹⁷ As Houston boomed, suburban land became a hot commodity.

Against the backdrop of this prosperity, one cannot overlook the significance of Houston's business leaders who helped generate this economic growth. One particular group of wealthy business leaders, known as the Suite 8-F crowd, took a leading role in shaping the city of Houston through their immense corporate and political circles of influence. This group, consisting of men such as Herman Brown (in whose Suite 8-F at the Lamar Hotel most of the informal meetings took place), George Brown, Gus Wortham, Jesse Jones, and James A. Elkins, Sr., was the most powerful force in the city's history due to its distinctive cohesion and vast array of connections in the local, state, and federal governments.¹⁸ These men were united in their commitment to use all their business and political networks to promote capitalistic ventures and economic growth in Houston.

During this prosperous time, Humble was approached on several occasions about selling the surface of the vast West Ranch for possible development purposes. A group of investors, including Gus Wortham, Ernest Cockrell, George Brown and others, reportedly made an offer on the property, but Humble refused in order to avoid the potential problems which often arise with surface owners while oil fields are still in production.¹⁹ Meanwhile, Humble began studying potential uses for the West Ranch prop-

¹⁷Joe R. Feagin, *Free Enterprise City: Houston in Political and Economic Perspective* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), 186.

¹⁸For a more detailed description of the Suite 8-F crowd, see Feagin, *Free Enterprise City*, 120-127.

¹⁹Reistle interview.

erty, particularly looking at the plausibility of developing a major industrial complex on the eastern portion of the land which could then possibly link to the Houston Ship Channel with the digging of a deep-water channel. This industrial park envisioned for chemical companies would greatly enhance the petrochemical growth along the ship channel as well as create a consumer base for Humble's expanded Baytown Refinery. Humble secured the services of Lehman Brothers, a New York investment bank, to study the feasibility of such a project and they provided the following recommendations:

- 1) Humble should develop a major industrial complex which would in turn, "create new, long-term markets for Humble fuels and petroleum products manufactured in the nearby Baytown Refinery;"
- 2) Once the industrial complex created a large job base, Humble should "expand the industrial development into a 'new town' including residential and commercial uses;"
- 3) Humble should "retain the services of an experienced land developer to manage the new town development."²⁰

Thus, not only did consultants highly recommend that Humble create the industrial complex, but also encouraged the company to engage in residential and commercial development. Humble was wary of entering the real estate business, but the idea of developing an industrial complex appealed to the company. Reistle, president of Humble at this time, remembers that this particular development concept appeared workable to the company given "the industrial development along the ship channel and Houston growing industrially and we thought, down in the future somewhere, we might do that."²¹ As preliminary plans for development went forward in 1961, Humble was approached to play the pivotal role in a government decision that would have far-reaching consequences for the West Ranch and the city of Houston.

In the early 1960s, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), with the encouragement of the Kennedy administration, heightened its efforts to put an American on the moon. In the space race between Russia and the United States, the U.S. trailed the Russians who had already orbited a man around the earth. Rumors began flying that a new installation for the nation's space program would be created called the Manned

²⁰John B. Turner, Jr., "Presentation to the Urban Land Institute," November 8, 1967, Friendswood Development Company Archives, Houston, Texas. This speech outlined the specifics of the Lehman study done in the late 1950s.

²¹Reistle interview.

Spacecraft Center (MSC).²² It would serve as the command center and laboratory for the manned lunar landing missions. Across the nation, numerous cities coveted the prize location, anticipating the millions of dollars that would flow into local economies. Houston, given the political connections of the Suite 8-F crowd and the desire for diversified industry, fought to claim this prize. The strategy for establishing the city's suitability began to form with the West Ranch at its core.

Some of the site criteria included a favorable year-round climate, access to ice-free water transportation, nearness to universities specializing in basic sciences and space-related graduate studies, and a minimum of 1,000 acres.²³ Houston business leaders and politicians cooperated to set the wheels of boosterism into motion to satisfy these requirements. George Brown was chairman of the Rice University Board of Regents as well as a close friend of Vice-President Lyndon Johnson, who had just recently appointed him as a civilian member of the Space Council. Brown was always searching for projects that would advance Rice as well as the Houston community. Morgan J. Davis, chairman of the board of Humble at the time, was an influential business leader and an associate of Brown's. His company already had a generous philanthropic history with Rice. Brown's close friend, Congressman Albert Thomas, served as chairman of the House Independent Offices Appropriations Subcommittee, which approved funding for NASA. He had fought previous battles in an effort to get NASA projects located in Houston. Thomas was ready to try again stating, "We got passed up in the first go-round on this program, and I don't intend to see Houston get passed by again unless it is impossible to prevent."²⁴

Thomas and George Brown set the ball rolling to formulate an appeal to NASA with Rice University taking the lead role. The first task was to secure 1,000 acres. Reistle recalls that, at Thomas's urging, Brown asked Davis and Reistle if Humble would donate 1,000 acres from the West Ranch to Rice University, which would then offer it to NASA for the space center.²⁵

²²The Manned Spacecraft Center would subsequently be renamed the Johnson Space Center in honor of Lyndon B. Johnson.

²³"\$60 Million Moon Shot Lab Comes to Houston," *Houston Press*, September 19, 1961; William D. Angel, Jr., "The Politics of Space: NASA's Decision to Locate the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston," *The Houston Review* 6 (1984): 81.

²⁴Angel, "The Politics of Space," 67.

²⁵Reistle interview; Tom Wussow, vice-president of Friendswood Development Company, interview with author, Houston, Texas, April 10, 1995. In January 1996, Exxon USA sold the Houston-based residential business of Friendswood Development Company to Lennar Corporation of Miami, Florida.

Given Humble's possible development plans for the West Ranch, Davis and Reistle saw clear advantages in this transaction. The arrival of the MSC would indeed provide the impetus that Humble had been looking for to implement its industrial plans. Now they could seriously entertain the idea of residential development. Although the exact date is unknown as to when Humble first agreed to this deal, as early as June 20, 1961, George Brown wrote Rice's chancellor, Carey Croneis, on a copy of a letter sent to James Webb, Administrator of NASA, that the "verbal agreement is that we can get 1,000 acres on the interior of the ranch but contiguous to our present property."²⁶ Throughout the summer of 1961, Brown, Thomas, Croneis, and Rice's president, Kenneth Pitzer, met with Webb and NASA representatives, strengthening the case for Houston's selection as the site with Rice acting as the associated university. In fact, an informal site selection team quietly visited the West Ranch property and Rice University. By August 7, 1961, the decision was close to being settled in Houston's favor. Croneis noted that "many phrases turning up in the conversation indicated that Mr. Webb had already decided that the new Center was going to be located in the Houston district, . . . as he sometimes referred to it, 'the Rice Center.'"²⁷

On September 9, 1961, the official announcement stated that the MSC would be located 22 miles southeast of Houston on 1,020 acres of land donated by Rice University—the old West Ranch property. In addition, Rice offered NASA the opportunity to use the West Mansion and the 20 acres surrounding it as temporary headquarters until the construction of the center. In a subsequent land transaction, NASA requested 600 additional acres for the center which Humble made available to Rice through a land transfer. Rice then sold the land to NASA, receiving \$1.4 million.²⁸ Civic pride swelled as community leaders, local politicians, and citizens hailed this accomplishment. County Commissioner V. V. Ramsey predicted that it "would have an economic effect like nothing else since the war," and P. H. Robinson, president of the Houston Chamber of Commerce, added

²⁶Carey Croneis to James Webb, June 20, 1961, Carey Croneis Papers, Woodson Research Center, Rice University; Deed of Land, Humble Oil and Refining Company to William Marsh Rice University, October 11, 1961, Harris County Clerk's Office, Volume 4522, 96-100.

²⁷Notes by Carey Croneis, August 7, 1961, 4, Croneis Papers. This was Croneis's impression in his typed notes from a meeting with James Webb on August 7, 1961, in Washington, D.C. He attached copies of these notes to a confidential memorandum that he sent to George Brown and Kenneth Pitzer, providing them with an overview of the meeting.

²⁸Angel, "The Politics of Space," 70; George Brown to James Webb, January 23, 1962, Croneis Papers.

that "this space laboratory will be one of Houston's most meaningful developments since the opening of the ship channel."²⁹ Upon its completion, the center was predicted to house over 3,000 employees and provide a tremendous boost to the area's economy as well as bring high-technology industry to Houston. Looking back on the deal 34 years later, Tom Wussow, current vice-president of Friendswood Development Company, sums up the site selection as an "economic development effort" led by Houston's influential businessmen and politicians.³⁰ Croneis also noted in August 1961, that if the decision was favorable to Houston, "Rice University and its powerful friends in and out of Washington will have played the leading and indeed only substantial role in bringing the Manned Space Flight Center to Houston."³¹

At the heart of this Rice/Humble connection lay a specific piece of property. For years, Humble had remained unsure of what to do with the surface of the West Ranch and had studied possible land development projects. As Reistle recalls, "these were always in the backs of our minds."³² Using the eastern part of the land for industrial development seemed the most advantageous and workable. Plans were in production even as the NASA deal was being negotiated. However, from the minute George Brown asked Morgan Davis for 1,000 acres to be used for NASA, the green light went on, signaling to Humble that the dream of developing this vast amount of land could now become a reality. Humble now had the opportunity to create a "community"—an opportunity rarely available to oil companies. The history of the West Ranch took a dramatic turn as an entire community was born. The sleepy towns surrounding the property, including Webster, Seabrook, and Kemah, would forever change with the creation of "Space City, USA."

Begun in the late 1940s, a nationwide trend in residential development established scattered subdivisions on the outskirts of cities' downtown districts. Most of Houston's new residences in the postwar era were located outside the central city as the federally subsidized highways and home mortgage programs fueled this expansion energy. In most cases, people wanted to flee the social ills of urban life. While they understood they might have to work in the city, they realized they did not have to live in it. This desire inevitably led to the gradual abandonment of downtown. Fur-

²⁹"Wonderful...Glory Be": Civic Leaders Hail Lab," *Houston Press*, September 19, 1961.

³⁰Wussow interview.

³¹Carey Croneis to Rice Board of Governors, August 31, 1961, 2, Croneis Papers.

³²Reistle interview.

ther decentralization occurred as large office and commercial buildings moved outside the downtown area. By the 1950s, the map of Houston changed with a "series of suburbs fanning out along the interstate highway spokes radiating from Houston's downtown hub."³³

Meanwhile, the nationwide population explosion and the widespread use of the automobile caused a number of city planners to investigate a possible solution to unmanaged urban sprawl. They began to study the feasibility of developing self-contained communities which would handle the overflow from nearby metropolitan areas.³⁴ Originating in the early 1900s with European architects and planning consultants, this notion suggested that residences, commercial businesses, and recreational facilities could be woven together to form a "new town." These communities would link people, social and employment opportunities, open greenbelts, and development all within set parameters. "New towns" were distinguished from large residential subdivisions because they: 1) were developed under one large comprehensive plan; 2) contained multiple land uses including single-family and multi-family residential, commercial, and recreational; and 3) planned for a minimum population.³⁵ New town experiments progressed all across England and Scandinavia where carefully planned havens for people and industry developed out in the countryside to relieve the congestion of major cities.³⁶

By the 1960s, the trend caught on in the U.S. as city planners struggled with how to strike a balance between the overcrowding in large cities and rampant spread into the suburbs. However, whereas European new towns were built by governments and nonprofit organizations, U.S. private enterprise assumed responsibility for subsidizing this concept as many of the nation's large corporations began diversifying their interests by moving into real estate development.³⁷ Specifically, these companies procured land and initiated the creation of numerous planned communities. In 1966, a joint venture between Connecticut Life Insurance Company and the Rouse Company established one of the first "new towns" in the U.S. Together,

³³Feagin, *Free Enterprise City*, 186.

³⁴"New Towns: And Fresh In-City Communities," *Architectural Record* 136 (August 1964): 129-138. For more information on the "new town" movement that surfaced in the U.S. in the 1960s, see Carlos C. Campbell, *New Towns: Another Way to Live* (Reston, Va.: Reston Publishing Company, Inc., 1976); Robert W. Murray, Jr., "New Towns for America," *House & Home* 25 (February 1964): 123-131.

³⁵Robert A. Sigafos, *Corporate Real Estate Development* (Lexington: D. C. Heath & Company, 1976), 81-82.

³⁶"Where City Planners Come Down to Earth," *Business Week* (August 20, 1966): 102.

³⁷"What's New About New Towns," *Fortune* 73 (February 1966): 158.

they created Columbia, Maryland, a satellite town to Baltimore and Washington, D.C. Designed to have a total population of 110,000 at its completion, Columbia consisted of houses clustered around a town center that provided community focus and included such amenities as swimming pools, parks, playgrounds, shopping centers, and golf courses. Additional communities sprang up all across the U.S., including Westinghouse's Coral Beach in California and Goodyear's Litchfield Park just outside of Phoenix.³⁸ Supporters of the new town movement viewed the communities as a viable solution to uncontrolled urban diffusion. The resulting exodus from major cities would even benefit those who chose to remain—reducing traffic congestion, easing strain on public utilities, and reducing the overcrowding in neighborhoods and schools. However, critics suggested that these towns diverted resources from rebuilding old cities and were “destined to become country-club communities for upper-income families.”³⁹ By 1964, land once designated as farms and pastures were transforming into cities as 75 new towns were planned or under construction by private enterprise in various regions of the country. Most of these communities would serve as satellites of central cities including a significant residential project on the old West Ranch.

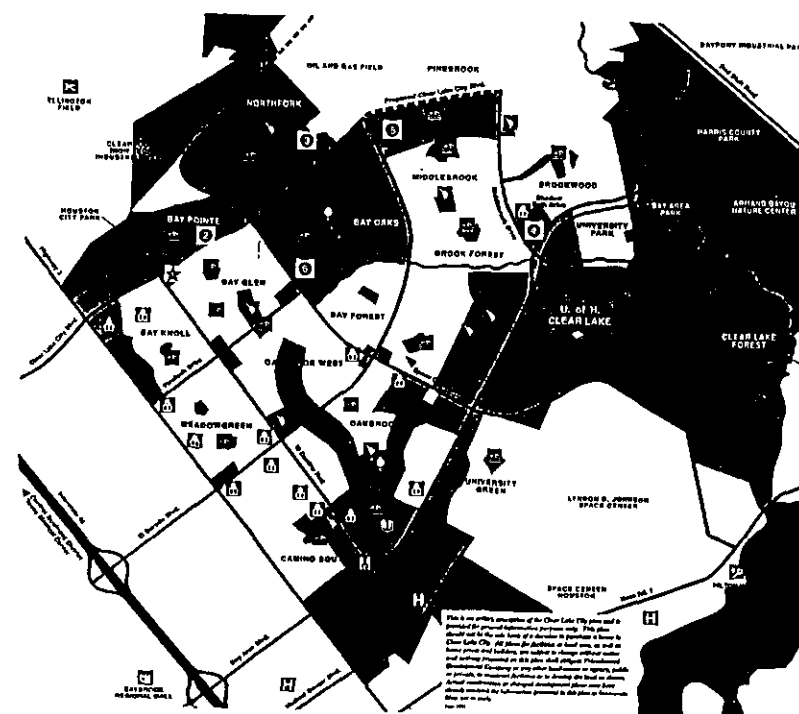
Although Humble was already planning to create an industrial complex on part of the West Ranch, the NASA announcement brought Humble's long-range plans involving the creation of a residential development to the forefront. “With the industrial complex on one side of the property and the spacecraft center on the other, somebody in the old Humble Company said isn't this a good place to do the residential development,” acknowledges Tom Wussow.⁴⁰ While Humble could easily manage the creation of the industrial complex, the company had no experience in residential development. However, they were familiar with a company with vast experience in this field. In January 1962, Humble formally announced the development of Clear Lake City on approximately 15,000 acres of the old West Ranch in a joint venture with the Del Webb Corporation of Phoenix. Humble put the land into the venture and Webb developed the master plan. Upon completion of the plan, the Friendswood Development Company was formed, with Humble as majority owner, to develop the property. Webb was responsible for overseeing the management of the project. Later in 1965, Humble acquired all of Webb's interest in the Clear Lake City project

³⁸“Big Business Backs ‘Blueprint’ Cities,” *Philadelphia Daily News*, May 23, 1967.

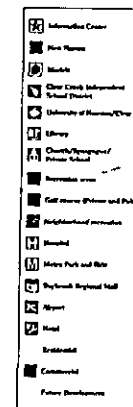
³⁹“Where City Planners Come Down to Earth,” 104.

⁴⁰Wussow interview.

FIGURE 2: THE RESIDENTIAL DEVELOPMENT PHASES OF CLEAR LAKE CITY



Phase I	Phase II	Phase III
Bay Terrace -	Bay Forest	Bay Pointe
Business District	Bay Oaks	Northfork
Camino South	Bay Glen	Pinebrook
Oakbrook	Bay Knoll	
Oakbrook West	Brookwood	
University Green		
Meadowgreen		
Brookforest		
Middlebrook		



Source: Friendswood Development Company—Insert in promotional packet for Clear Lake City (June 1994)

and Friendswood Development became a wholly-owned Humble subsidiary. Considered one of the "largest and most completely pre-planned communities in the nation," this residential and commercial development was designed to have over 40,000 homes and contain all the elements of a "new town"—shopping centers, office buildings, hotels, a hospital and other medical facilities, utilities, roads, schools, churches, parks, recreational centers, and golf courses.⁴¹ The West Ranch was being transformed piece by piece.

By the end of 1962, the first phase of construction had begun at the northwest border of the MSC. The original 15-year plan called for 3,000 acres to be developed during the first five-year period, 5,000 acres during the second five-year period, and 7,000 acres during the third five-year period. Figure 2 is a current map of Clear Lake City, highlighting the development phases of specific subdivisions. Not included in the original 15,000 acres designated for the development was the Clear Lake oil and gas field and the small portion of the Friendswood oil field.⁴² There were some delays between the various phases which included the controversy surrounding the creation of Clear Lake City Water Authority, annexation by Houston in 1977, and conflicts involving the development of Clear Lake City Boulevard in the late 1980s. However, these delays could not halt the success of this development.

The excitement surrounding the creation of the space center and the planned community was electrifying. Most residents of nearby towns such as Webster, Seabrook, and Kemah not only awaited the arrival of astronauts and scientists, but also eagerly anticipated the economic boom that would hit the area as construction progressed on the "new town." Judge Stovall, who would witness firsthand the evolution of the West Ranch, considered it "a blessing to the area."⁴³ Civic leaders of Houston were extremely thrilled with the birth of Clear Lake City as it was projected to attract numerous companies affiliated with the space industry and could mean \$375-\$500 million in development for the Houston area. Although the initial growth of Clear Lake City would depend upon the MSC, Humble made another announcement in 1964 which ultimately guaranteed the success of its planned community. Once again, the ranch land played the pivotal role—providing the foundation for a complex which would ensure the survival of Clear Lake City.

⁴¹"The Birth of a City," *The Humble Way* 2 (Fall 1963): 3.

⁴²Press release from Humble Oil and Refining Company, January 19, 1962, Friendswood Development Company Archives.

⁴³Stovall interview.

In February 1964, Humble formally unveiled the 20-year plan for its long-awaited industrial project, Bayport. Covering approximately 7,250 acres (later it would total 10,500 acres) of the eastern portion of the ranch property, the plan for this industrial district and port included numerous plant sites, a network of railways, pipelines, roads, utilities, sophisticated waste treatment, and drainage systems (Figure 3). What made this particular project a reality was the simultaneous announcement by the Harris County Navigation District that it would build, own, and operate a channel and deepwater port to serve the area, giving Bayport access to the Houston Ship Channel and the coastal and inland waterways. Humble donated approximately 725 acres of land to the Navigation District as the site for the channel and port facilities.⁴⁴ From its inception, Bayport was a 100 percent Humble project. When Webb sold its interest in Friendswood Development to Humble, the development company managed this project as well as Clear Lake City. Considered to be the ultimate model for heavy industrial development, Bayport was expected to attract capital investment in plants and facilities of about \$900 million and create an estimated 25,000 new jobs.⁴⁵ With Bayport, Humble created the other vital economic base for its "new town." The rapid growth of Clear Lake City only accelerated as industrial workers bought residences in the planned community. In time, the West Ranch was completely transformed from relatively quiet grazing land into a mecca of modern developments all designed by one company and all relying upon each other significantly for survival and success.

While bulldozers and construction crews built the space center, Clear Lake City, and Bayport, the only landmark remaining of the original West Ranch was the mansion that Rice University received in 1957. This mansion and its surrounding property experienced several alterations with the arrival of the space industry, but through all its various transformations it served as a reminder of the man who single-handedly pieced together all the acreage that the "new town" was sitting upon.

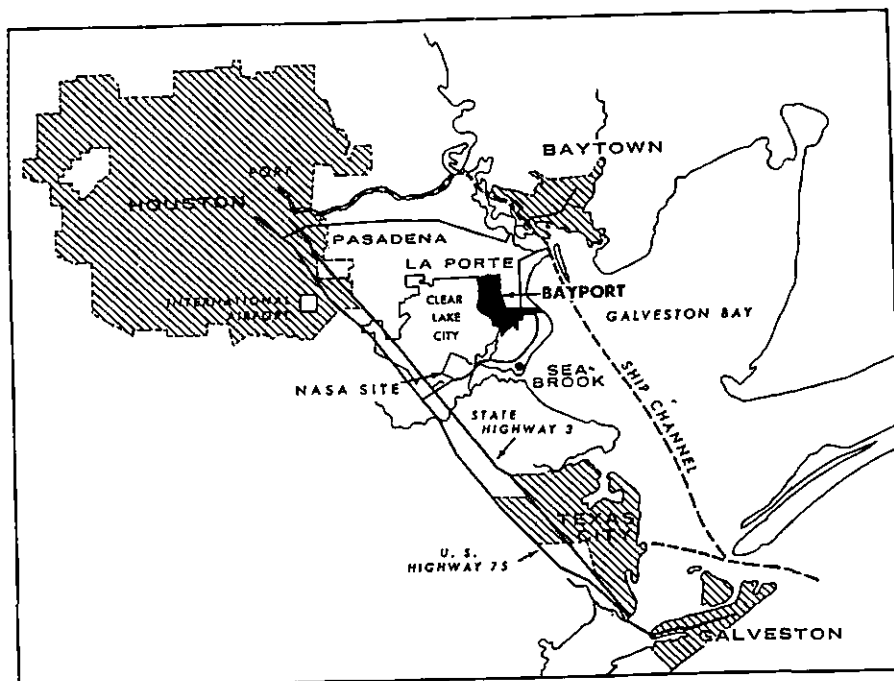
In March 1962, Humble deeded Rice another 78 acres adjoining the 21-acre mansion property and the NASA 1,600 acres.⁴⁶ The same restrictions

⁴⁴"Bayport: Industrial Complex of the Future," *The Humble Way* 3 (Winter 1963-1964): 6; "\$900 Million Humble Project Is Planned," *Houston Post*, February 5, 1964.

⁴⁵"Bayport: Industrial Complex of the Future," 6.

⁴⁶Deed of Land, Humble Oil and Refining Company to William Marsh Rice University, March 6, 1962, Harris County Clerk's Office, File #3467977; H. Malcolm Lovett to W. Nelson Jones, August 9, 1963, Kenneth Pitzer Papers, Woodson Research Center, Rice University. Lovett was an attorney with Baker, Botts, Shepherd & Coates, who represented Rice. Jones was the Humble representative. In the letter, there is a reference made to the 78.52 acres.

FIGURE 3: LOCATION OF BAYPORT



Source: Friendswood Development Company Archives

applying to the 21 acres regarding the usage of the property for the furtherance of earth science education applied to this tract as well. From 1965 to 1967, President Pitzer at Rice received numerous requests for the utilization of the mansion and the surrounding acres such as the establishment of a biomedical engineering laboratory. However, the restrictive terms of the deeds were not altered and the mansion and property remained unused. Around this time, James Webb of NASA requested that the National Academy of Sciences develop a mechanism to involve U.S. scientists in the Apollo program. In 1968, the academy formed a consortium of universities, known as the Universities Space Research Association (USRA), to engage in joint and cooperative investigations with NASA. The USRA would administer the facility that supported this space research—the Lunar Science Institute (later renamed the Lunar Planetary Institute). With the desire to place the institute within close proximity to the space center, Rice offered to lease over a 20-year period the West Mansion and surrounding acres to the USRA for the site of the institute.⁴⁷ Major renovations were needed in the mansion. At a reported cost of \$580,000 (almost the same as the cost of original construction), bedrooms were turned into offices, the ballroom was transformed into a lecture room, and the solarium and music room became conference rooms. Unfortunately, the renovations were utilitarian, with little regard to the overall historical significance of the structure; carpet was placed over hardwood floors and ceiling fans were implanted into the center of ornate molding.

In 1990, the Lunar Planetary Institute moved from its historic location to another facility in one of Clear Lake City's business parks. Over the next three years, Rice entertained several offers to develop the property but none were acceptable. In 1994, Rice quietly sold the mansion and approximately 93 acres of the surrounding property to PHCG Investments. This company is owned by the Pappas family, prominent Houstonian restaurateurs. Although no formal plans were disclosed as to the possible development of the property, Rice's vice-president for investments, Scott Wise, commented that the deed stipulated "the buyer must maintain the building for a minimum of 20 years during which time Rice would continue to seek its

⁴⁷David C. Black, director of the Lunar Planetary Institute, "Space Institute Going Nowhere But Higher, Further in Houston," *Houston Chronicle*, February 3, 1991; National Academy of Sciences to NASA, "Proposal for the Creation of University-Related Facilities in Support of Education," February 28, 1968, Woodson Research Center, Rice University. This facility sufficiently fulfilled the original intent of the mansion's deed restriction, which required that it be used for science-related purposes.

listing on the National Register of Historic Places.⁴⁸ Hopefully, the development plans for the property will include restoring the mansion to its original grandeur. As the only visual remnant of what was once the ranching enclave of James M. West, the mansion serves as a reminder to those driving by of a time long past—long before the creation of the space center, Clear Lake City, or Bayport.

The developments involving the West Ranch have had far-reaching economic benefits for the entire Houston metropolitan area. With its blend of aerospace and petrochemical industry, upscale commercial and retail facilities, as well as tourism and pleasure-boating activities, Clear Lake remains a vital contributor to Houston's growth. For example, the Johnson Space Center (JSC) spent approximately \$1.3 billion in the Houston area during the 1994 fiscal year, providing the major economic stimulus that Houston's business elite envisioned in 1961.⁴⁹ Over the last 10 years, JSC's economic contribution to the Houston area has grown at an average rate of 6.7 percent per year.⁵⁰ JSC has not only brought an influx of dollars to the Houston area, but has also located numerous highly-educated, technical workers to the Houston area. At its inception in 1961, the space center employed approximately 800 people. Today, the combined JSC-related employment has risen to 15,809.⁵¹ The Houston area is now home to a large aerospace contractor community which is located in Clear Lake and includes such major firms as Boeing, McDonnell Douglas, Rockwell, and Lockheed. Coupled with JSC's expansion, the petrochemical industry in the Clear Lake area has grown steadily over the past 25 years. Bayport is home to over 60 operating chemical plants and sites such as Big Three Industries, Hoechst-Celanese, Kaneka Texas Corporation, and Rohm & Haas. The industrial complex generates over \$400 million in salaries annually and provides a significant economic impact to the Clear Lake area as well as Greater Houston.

However, some competition does exist between Clear Lake and the central city as Clear Lake's residential population has boomed, while Houston's

⁴⁸"Landmark West Mansion Bought By Pappas Family," *Houston Business Journal* (March 14, 1994): 1.

⁴⁹Robert R. Beyer, "Johnson Space Center—FY94 Economic Impact Study (Internal)," JSC Office of the Comptroller, April 1995, 2.

⁵⁰"Clear Lake Demographic and Economic Supplement," *Clear Lake Area Magazine* (April-June 1993): 18.

⁵¹This total reflects 3,630 civil service workers, 11,916 aerospace and other industry contractors and subcontractors working directly on JSC contracts, and another 263 miscellaneous government and service employees.

Table 1: Population Growth of Houston and Clear Lake
1970-1990

Year	Houston	Clear Lake
1970	1,233,505	55,000
1980	1,595,138	100,000
1990	1,888,102	152,000

Source: Houston's population figures (incorporated areas) from Feagin, *Free Enterprise City*, 8-9. Clear Lake population figures from "Clear Lake Demographic and Economic Supplement," *Clear Lake Area Magazine*, Clear Lake Chamber of Commerce (April-June 1993), 7.

has risen more slowly. Clear Lake's population now totals 154,000, growing rapidly over the last 20 years while sustaining a 4 percent annual growth rate. Current projections indicate that while Houston's annual population growth rate is about 1.5 percent, the Clear Lake population will continue to grow 3 percent to 4 percent annually for the next five years (Table 1).⁵² Although the majority of Clear Lake's residents work in the local aerospace and petrochemical industries, approximately 20,000 people drive over 30 to 44 minute intervals to work.⁵³ The majority of these people travel into the central city of Houston for employment while residing in Clear Lake. This data illustrates the widespread trend affecting large cities such as Houston in which people work within the central city limits but choose to reside in suburbs and planned communities located farther outside these boundaries. Friendswood Development's Tom Wussow recalls that in 1994, about "half of the new home sales in the Clear Lake City development were to people working in the Texas Medical Center or in Houston. A lot of folks have discovered that Clear Lake is a short commute to downtown Houston."⁵⁴ As a "separate entity," Clear Lake currently sur-

⁵²Robert F. Hodgin, "Clear Lake Area Industry and Projections—1994," Center for Economic Development and Research, May 1994, 1.

⁵³Robert F. Hodgin, "Clear Lake Area 1990 Census Profile," *Perspectives: School of Business and Public Administration, University of Houston-Clear Lake* 2 (1992): 2.

⁵⁴Wussow interview.

passes Houston in its population growth rate, but it still remains a significant extension of the entire city. The evolution of the Clear Lake area has extensively shaped Houston's configuration.

The history of Clear Lake comes to life when looking at the specific transactions involving the West Ranch. With James M. West's realization that valuable resources lay underneath his ranch, his enterprising actions immediately set off a chain of events that forever altered the landscape of Clear Lake's shores. Once Humble and others entered into the picture, a series of consequential philanthropic, business, and political deals took place that ultimately led to the birth of a vibrant community, yielding an expanded population, new industries, and new jobs for the Houston area. Here was an adjunct to the city of Houston whose own progress significantly contributed to the expansion and the characterization of Houston as a sprawling metropolis. It is important to remember that this growth took place on and around a 30,000 acre ranch in southeast Harris County. Even today, along Clear Lake City Boulevard near the heart of the planned community, cattle graze beside oil wells, symbolizing the rich history of the West Ranch.