

KATY: WEST HOUSTON WONDER

By James E. Thornock

Long before the Katy Mills mall bustled with customers, the Katy rice mills watched over the area. Earlier still, the Missouri-Kansas-Texas (MKT) railroad traversed the fertile prairie near Cane Island Creek. The first records of the community are about Cane Island, named for the creek. Those who settled there received land grants from Stephen F. Austin, including James J. Crawford whose land included a part of the prairie west of Houston that was later named Katy and incorporated in 1945.¹

By 1847 the San Felipe Road connected Houston and San Antonio, running through Cane Island, which had become a stagecoach stop. Remaining mostly undeveloped, Cane Island drew few settlers to the area, and many of those were freed slaves. That all changed, however, with the arrival of the railroad. In 1890 the MKT railroad announced plans to build rails through Cane Island and started the project three years later. In 1900 after several years of construction, trains started coming through the area.²

With the railroad construction underway, ambitious men planned the city layout. In 1893, Milton August Beckendorff and his partners began surveying the land and determining county lines. They set a marker at the place where Waller, Fort Bend, and Harris Counties met. James Oliver Thomas along with the Cash and Luckel Company platted the town in 1895. Soon after, he applied for a post office, which was approved, and Katy was founded on January 23, 1896. Once the railroad began service, Thomas constructed another building downtown that became the post office and the location of social services for many years to come.³

Several explanations for choosing “Katy” for the community’s name have surfaced. Carol Adams, resident and Katy historian, described one favorite legend that Katy, short

for Katherine, was an early settler of the area. Her husband Charles owned a saloon, but Katy was the face of the place. Customers came for her hospitality, good food, and drinks. More likely the town drew its name directly from the MKT Railroad, which had brought life and residents to the area.⁴

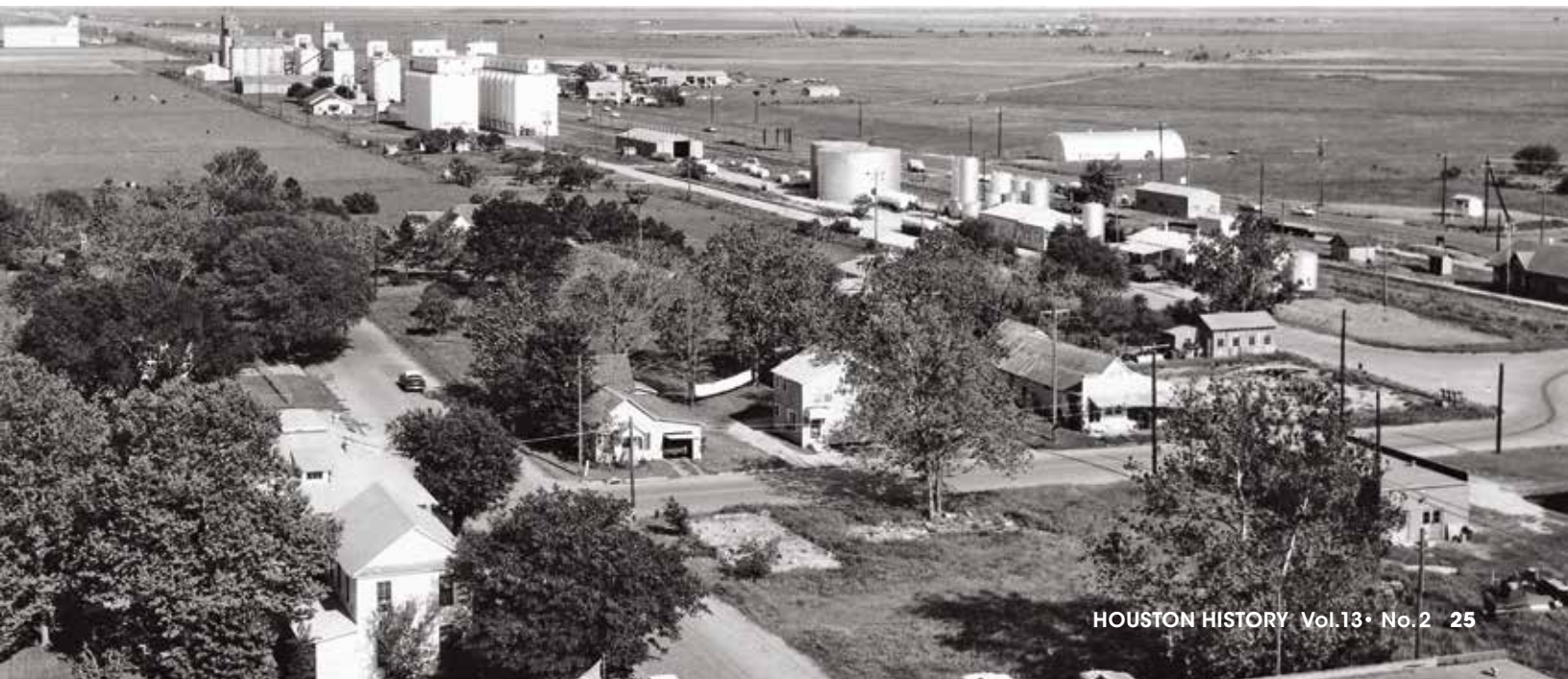
Many came by wagon to visit Katy and see the land put up for sale by Adam Stockdick, the first MKT railroad land agent in the community. After he left the railroad, he opened his own real estate business. Travelers and prospective settlers stayed in the Katy Hotel and Hotel Clardy, which opened their doors in 1897 in what is now downtown Katy. Although these hotels represented an iconic part of Katy’s history, they did not survive. In 1930 after having several owners, the Katy Hotel closed. The building later housed several businesses before it was moved in 1966 to make room for an expansion of the First Baptist Church and then converted into apartments. The 1900 Storm that devastated Galveston also ravaged inland areas, including all but two buildings in Katy. Houses and businesses had to be rebuilt, but some of the residents who lost everything decided to leave Katy. Those who stayed banded together to rebuild what they could.⁵

Despite the storm, people did not stop buying up the land, and soon many new residents settled in the area. George Weinmann came right after the storm. Once he unpacked his belongings, he went straightaway to buy lumber and then to his property to begin construction. At first, though, he found his land knee-deep in water, so he adapted and searched for a drier place to begin building his home.⁶

The railroad brought more settlers to inspect and purchase Stockdick’s land, attracted by the price, the mild climate (for health), and the fertile soil. As people poured into

The rice dryers along Highway 90 outside of Katy can be seen for ten miles and have been a local beacon since 1900. Shown circa 1962.

Photo courtesy of Carol Adams.



the township, the community thrived. The new demand allowed old businesses to grow and new businesses to set up shop. The first automobile appeared in Katy in 1906 and ten years later the first dealership. Also in 1906 Southwestern Bell Telephone Company installed two telephone lines, and two years later it began installing the town party lines, which were shared by several households. After the phone lines came electricity provided by Houston Lighting and Power Company in 1929. Before that kerosene lamps and stoves provided lighting and heating. As with other American communities, this luxury paved the way for new household appliances, freeing time to do other things. Several

local women seeking “to advance culture” formed the Katy Literary Club, which still meets today.

The thirties were a rough time for Katy. The Great Depression slowed the town’s growth but did not halt it. The bank closed in 1932, but no one starved. As Bran Legett explains, “If you didn’t have [land], the neighbors would let you farm, let you make a garden on his land.”⁷

After the Depression, life started to return to normal, and



Floyd Breedlove was the lone World War II casualty from Katy.

Photo courtesy of Katy Veterans Memorial Museum.

other work on the Katy prairie soon sent Katy’s population skyrocketing. Carol Adams reported that Stanolind (part of Standard Oil, Indiana) drilled in excess of 1,000 wells with remarkable results. To process these natural resources, Humble Oil built the Katy Gas Plant, which started operations on January 1, 1943, with Johnnie E. Clayton acting as superintendent. The Katy Gas Plant was invaluable to Humble Oil, as well as to the war effort. The war increased the demand for very rich liquid hydro-carbons, ingredients essential to the production of jet fuel. The Katy Gas Plant produced the lion’s share of these ingredients. An added advantage was that the plant stood less than thirty-five miles away from the Houston refineries. Within a year, the plant’s work doubled the town’s population from approximately 400 to 800 people.⁸

When Japan forced the United States into the war by



One of the city’s great icons, the Katy Caboose represents the beginning of Katy. Photo courtesy of author.

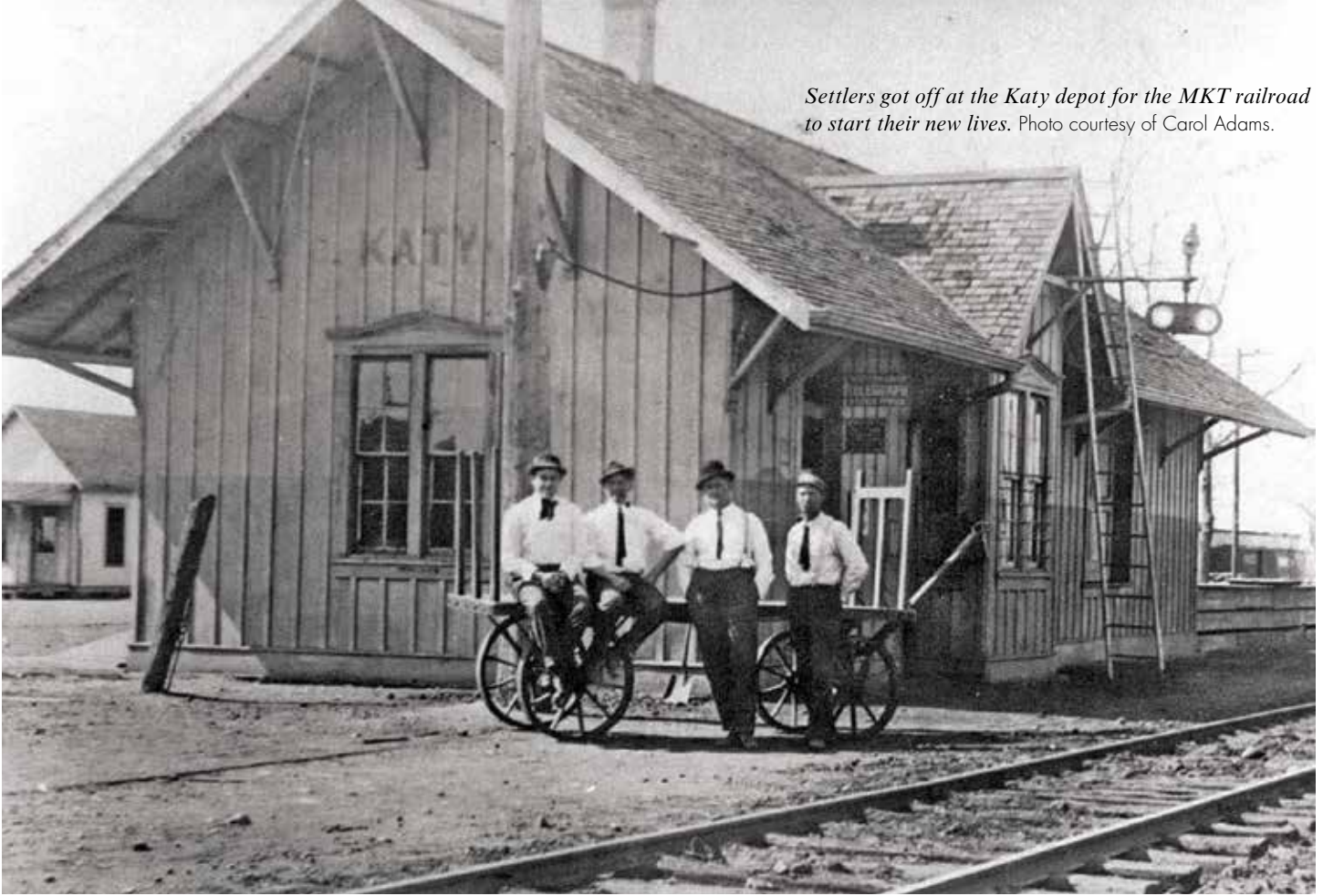
bombing Pearl Harbor in 1941, Katy signed up for service. The community did many things to support the war effort, including holding scrap metal drives, buying war bonds, and enlisting in the military. All of those who enlisted came back save one, Floyd Breedlove. Because he gave all, veterans named their post in his honor. Later converted into the VFW Hall, it became a center for social life.⁹

Following the war, Katy grew even more. One of the new families was the Mikeskas. Roy Mikeska was seventy-nine years old at the time of this writing, but he was only a boy of nine when his father showed up to work at the Katy Gas Plant in 1945. Roy remembered the dirt roads and the small one-room schoolhouse. He recalled swimming in the rice wells and the mild segregation that existed between the Katy citizens and the Humble Oil workers who were fresh to town. Most of those tensions died down over time in large part due to how valuable the plant and its workers were to the city and its economy. The plant infused the market with revenue that came to farmers who sold their land to Humble Oil as well as the workers who spent their earnings in local stores. The oil company also donated large sums to the Katy Independent School District. In appreciation, the district saved a position on the board for the president of the plant.¹⁰

Roy recalled that the Humble Oil neighborhood had seven streets and forty houses in the early days, and the buses picked up all of the children for school in the morning. During his high school years, Roy went with his buddies into Houston to go dancing. At the end of the evening, they came home “with nothin’ but armadillos and skunks crossing the road” and “turtles crossing over from one rice field to the other rice field.” Often they stopped and swam in one of the nearby rice wells before heading home around 2:00 to 3:00 a.m.¹¹

Roy reflected on the lifestyle in those years, indicating that church was a large part of living in Katy, which was

Settlers got off at the Katy depot for the MKT railroad to start their new lives. Photo courtesy of Carol Adams.



nicknamed the “City of Churches” for both the large number of churches and the importance of church life to its residents. The Mikeskas belonged to the First Baptist Church, and Roy’s mother insisted they attend every Wednesday night. The community held no school events on Wednesdays so families could go to church, which served as a social hub where “everybody knew everybody.” Roy graduated from Katy High School in 1956. With a longing in his eyes he said, “I’d like to do it all over again, start again.”¹²

Roy eventually married, and the couple had a son, Michael, who followed in his father’s footsteps by “running all over Katy” and graduating from Katy High School. He married Kim, and they had two children, Michael and Amanda, who followed their father by graduating from KHS in 2007 and 2008 respectively. The Mikeska legacy is like that of many of the founding families who grew up in “Old Katy” or “Katy proper.” However, the Katy area is not restricted to the area within the city limits, with the overwhelming majority of the population living outside the city’s borders but inside the boundaries of Katy ISD.¹³



Roy Mikeska’s Katy High School year book picture from class of 1956.

Photo courtesy of Mike Mikeska.

Others came to the region in a different time, including my grandfather, Carl Hursman. He came here from Billings, Montana, in the summer of 1975 with his wife Karen, and their two daughters, Kareen and Joy, to follow a job with Conoco

(now ConocoPhillips). Carl looked all around Houston for housing, but no other location compared to Katy in the amount of land offered at affordable prices. They moved into a new home in West Memorial off of South Mason Road, almost twenty-seven miles and an hour commute to downtown Houston where Carl worked. The subdivision was so new that they had to drive over nine miles to the closest grocery stores located off of the Dairy Ashford exit from Interstate 10.¹⁴

When the Hursmans arrived, nothing stood west of their house. Carl recalled, “For the next couple of years there were four and five houses a day” being built. He said they “sprung up like popcorn.” The community grew along with the Hursman family. New houses appeared all around them on Mason Road. Katy ISD built schools at breakneck speed. Karen Hursman said it seemed like a new elementary school materialized every other year and a new junior high every three or four years. Eventually the Hursmans looked for new housing options for their growing family. They bought land in 1979 and had their new house built in 1980. Carl had changed jobs in 1978 from ConocoPhillips to Pennzoil, but with the Oil Bust he lost his job in 1984. He received one year’s salary as severance, but finding a job in oil at that point was “impossible.” During the two years he was out of work, he and his wife did everything that they could to make ends meet, looking for jobs, accepting church welfare, cutting coupons, cooking at home, and doing whatever else it took to make it. Their story was not so unlike many people living in Houston or Katy at the time.¹⁵

Katy and Houston built their economies on the strength of oil. When the prices of crude dropped, so did the wellbe-

ing of nearly all in Houston. With the Oil Bust, one in seven Houston jobs were lost. The *Houston Chronicle* described the era as “a time of bankruptcies and foreclosures, For Sale signs and empty office towers, loan defaults and failed banks. Phones were cut off and trucks repossessed. The city reduced garbage pickup. Church charities fed 300,000 families in 1986, twice as many as the previous year. Eighty-four children checked in at the Star of Hope shelter downtown on Christmas Eve.”¹⁶

Houston recovered by diversifying its economy. The Dallas Federal Reserve Bank makes this clear stating, “Strong growth in Houston in the 1990s required more than oil; it needed both a growing U.S. economy and strong oil markets.” Katy recovered from those years as did my grandfather who found a job with Texas Commerce Bank. After moving just north of Katy proper, the family put down their roots, raised the two children, and three more who followed. All graduated from Katy High School. The experiences of one of those children, my mother Kareen, show the evolution of Katy. This period in the late 1970s and 1980s was transitional for the nation and also for the town.¹⁷

Kareen remembered her parents telling her, “We’re going to move somewhere so hot, you won’t be able to go barefoot on the sidewalk,” unlike their home in Montana. She attended West Memorial Elementary where their mother met other moms in an effort to make the transition easier on the children. As with earlier generations of Katy residents, church played a central role in their spiritual and social life. The church met in a small house in Old Katy and had weekly activities for the children and young adults. Kareen’s family was active in more than just church, however. Both parents served on the PTA, and Carl served as an election judge for Harris County and as a county judge for Katy ISD.¹⁸

Kareen remembered many parties, dinners, potlucks, picnics, dances, pancake breakfasts on the Fourth of

July, and the Rice Harvest Festival, originally called the “Sellabration.” Promoted by the Tri-County Optimists in the late 1970s, the event grew larger each year and was eventually renamed to honor farmers and the agricultural legacy of Katy. In 1895 land agents recruited settlers to the area from the Midwest with promises of fertile soil. Katy’s soil nourished the crops that grew in the area, including apples, peaches, cotton, lumber, peanuts, rice, peas, potatoes, sweet potatoes, and others. In the beginning no single crop dominated, and settlers tried many different crops to see what would grow best on the land. They needed to experiment because most of them were accustomed to farming in an entirely different climate.¹⁹

Wilhelm Eule was the first farmer to plant rice in Katy. In 1901 Eule and A. J. Peek dug the first rice well, without any machinery. Farmers used well water to flood rice fields to nourish crops, and drown out pests and weeds. Still, they faced many risks. Many farmers maintained fields with uneven ground that required more water to flood than flat fields. Geese, other birds, and livestock invaded farms and their crops. Farmers also struggled to find the time and place to dry their rice. Later, though, agricultural technology advanced, saving time and increasing profits for farmers.²⁰

The technological advancements that offset these losses included deepening of rice wells and the evolution of tractors, combines, and rice driers. The concrete rice driers were so useful that they became one of Katy’s most iconic symbols. Rice became Katy’s dominant crop because of the money it brought in. Rice production increased year after year and peaked with 60,000 acres of land planted in rice. Later, homes took the place of rice paddies, and the last crop dried in the Katy driers was harvested in 2011.²¹

Football is another important Katy and Katy High School tradition. These games bring together students and



Humble Oil's Katy gas plant with employee housing on left.

Photo courtesy of Carol Adams.

alumni who graduated long ago. The sense of honor continues across generations, as well as championship titles, with the Katy Tigers earning their eighth state title on December 19, 2015. Families with their children, current students, grandparents, and old time Katyites all attend the games. One t-shirt encapsulates the atmosphere, reading, “You and 10,000 of your closest friends.” This kind of attitude is all around Katy and has caught on in the six other high schools in the area.

Katy’s population continues to grow, and “9% of Katy’s land is currently under construction.” This growth requires funding for infrastructure. For example, the *Houston Chronicle* reported that the Katy district added 2,495 students from fall 2014 to fall 2015. In response 28,509 voters “approved a \$748 million bond that will help Katy’s school district keep up with rapid growth, paying for new schools and a hotly debated football stadium.” This bond was the largest one passed in the Houston area up to that time.²²

Businesses interests and investments in the area have also grown along with the housing market. Many businesses flocked to Katy to capitalize on the West Houston wonder. Katy ISD, BP North America, WoodGroup Subsidiaries, Shell Exploration and Production, and ConocoPhillips employ the largest numbers of Katy residents.²³

The Katy Mills mall is next on the list of largest employers of Katyites. In the late nineties people speculated that a mall would be built at the Grand Parkway and I-10, and these rumors proved true on January 12, 1997, when The Mills Corporation announced its plans to build a

\$250,000,000 megamall. After long legal battles and large settlements with two other development companies, the mall opened on October 28, 1999, drawing a crowd of over 122,000 for its grand opening. Today it still draws crowds as well as investors and businesses to the Katy area.²⁴

As an example of that development, Kingham Dalton, Wilson Ltd. (KDW), an affiliate of Welcome Wilson’s GSL Welcome Group began developing the Texas Typhoon Waterpark on land bordering the mall in August 2015. Wilson believes being next to the mall is “going to make [the water park] extremely successful.” Investors designed the park, which is scheduled to open in May of 2016, to draw both local residents and people from around the region and is already selling season passes.²⁵

For more than one hundred years Katy has grown continuously, with minimal setbacks. The first settlers came with their families to work, worship, and thrive. Although today’s modern life is different from that of the first settlers, the Katy area still draws many families each year. According to the Katy Economic Development Council, that number has reached over 309,556 people as of 2015.²⁶ For tens of thousands of families, one thing remains constant: Katy is home. As the Katy area flourishes, one can only hope that the area remains as hospitable as it was to those who first set up log cabins on Cane Island.

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The Katy Tigers charge through their banner right before the 2015 UIL State Championship game.

Photo courtesy of Franklin Smith.