

Blade, Jason, Kimberly, Staci, Teresa, and Bob Pierce enjoy the small-town feel of the Hill



Life on the Hill

Preserving Sugar Land's Oldest Community

Written by Lesley Clinton Photography by Marisa Hugonnett

Visitors to Sugar Land often perk up when they drive down Main St. past the houses on the Hill. They sense something different, something special, about this neighborhood. Joggers delight in the cheerful yard decor and peaceful-looking rocking chairs on inviting porches. "The Hill still has the small town atmosphere where people wave hi to each other and know and watch out for our neighbors," says Bob Pierce, a longtime resident along with his wife, Teresa. It's not just the welcoming atmosphere, but also the warm people and rich history that make the heart of the city's historic district a real Sugar Land gem.

A Sweet Start

This little patch of land is where it all started for Sugar Land. Local historian Bruce Kelly explains that before 1908 the area was primarily swampy, mosquito-infested plantation farmland known as the "hell hole on the Brazos." Then W.T. Eldridge and I.H. Kempner, owners of Imperial Sugar Co., bought property surrounding the refinery and started adding company-owned houses for their employees.

From the beginning, Sugar Land was special. Kempner and Eldridge were supporters of welfare capitalism and attracted families to the area by creating an idyllic community with good schools, hospitals, a park, and churches. And that is the kind of town that grew on the Hill.

Kelly describes the town in the early 20th century. The original main drag ran along Kempner St. There was a paper mill, an acid plant, a meat packing plant, and truck farms. Sealy Mattress Co. built its first factory there in 1911. A hotel stood on First St. In the 1920s, Lakeview Dr. boasted a hospital and a boarding house for teachers. In the 1940s, locals could skate at a rink on Wood St., and school students would swim in Cleveland Lake during their lunch break. M.R. Wood designed the school to be the social center of the small pedestrian town. The auditorium hosted silent movies, traveling shows, and dances on the tiled rooftop terrace.

The Community Today

There may be no more rooftop dances, but the Hill is definitely alive and kicking in the present, in great part thanks to community advocate Kristin Lytle. She works to retain the neighborhood's small-town charm, the historic beauty of the architecture, and the solidarity of its families.

As the founder of the group Friends of Old Sugar Land, Lytle has spearheaded successful community endeavors through the years, including repairing elderly residents' homes and raising \$23,000 for a 5-year-old Hill resident suffering from brain cancer. Lytle also led the group in publishing a book of elderly neighbors' recipes. For several years the community has spent frosty December nights caroling for the senior residents.

Neighborhood Natives

Among Lytle's friends and neighbors is Johnny Rychlik, who has lived there for 49 years. Rychlik's mother lived on First St. and ran the old boarding house. Rychlik's daughter, Terry House, grew up and raised her family there. For several years, three generations of the family lived on the Hill. "Everyone [here] looks out for each other," House says. "The people are friendly and concerned about what happens to our neighborhood."

Rychlik and House note that in recent years traffic has increased, old houses have been remodeled, and the refinery has shut down. "We miss the whistle that blew daily," says House. The family enjoys being on the water and seeing the occasional alligator swim by. They would like to see families continue to move in and enjoy the neighborhood as they have.

A Return to Local Roots

The Pierces are one such family. Bob and Teresa's son, Jason, is returning to his roots. He and his wife, Staci, recently bought and remodeled a home on the Hill near Jason's parents. "We look forward to watching our soon-to-be-born baby make his or her own happy memories here," Jason says. The Pierces like how cozy and at-ease the neighborhood is.

On pretty days, they enjoy walking under the lovely, large trees and taking in the distinctive architecture of each house. "Because I build homes, I am up-to-date with newer materials and technology," says Pierce. "We like incorporating them into our home while keeping the historical integrity." They enjoy working on their house as a family, knowing that the previous owners did the same. "We love this neighborhood and will do our part to maintain the value of this rare area for many years to come."

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LESLEY CLINTON grew up near the Hill. It is one of her favorite spots in Sugar Land.

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- > Find out the latest info on the redevelopment of the Imperial Sugar property. Visit sugarlandtx.gov.

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