Greater Houston: Its First Million People—And Why

Fly to Houston, fly past the long stretch of prairie flatness, then see it suddenly, this surge of a city scraping the sky looking like a splash of tomorrow.

Or come by boat, come up this dredged channel 50 miles from the sea, past piers unloading raw rubber from Malaya, whisky from Scotland, motor scooters from Italy, cuttlefish bones from North Africa—piers handling more tonnage than any other deep-sea port outside New York.

Or drive into Houston at night, drive along oversize highways flanked by factories as brilliantly lighted as night clubs—the billion-dollar industrial power that pushes forward the fastest-growing big city in the country.

Steel Skeletons: Then walk down Main Street, wherever you go. See the steel skeleton of some newborn building, see stores so plush they would seem striking even in Hollywood's Beverly Hills, see this city where dreams are poured into concrete, shaped into hard fact, then expanded like a rubber band.

Biggest dreamer of all is a tall, white-haired man with sharp, friendly eyes, 80-year-old Jesse Holman Jones (see cover), warmly known here as "Mr. Houston." Somebody once described Jones as "a town pump full of courage." This much is certain: Without Jones, Greater Houston this week could not celebrate the arrival of its millionth citizen; without Jones, the city skyline might look more like some soft small bumps.

Jones has an aerial map of Houston's downtown with his buildings numbered, 33 of them, and they're among the biggest. When the panic of 1907 swept the country, Jones borrowed money to build three ten-story buildings to put new heart in the town. When oil companies seemed unsure where to headquarter, Jones persuaded Texas Oil and Gulf to come to Houston, built buildings especially for them, and started Houston in becoming the country's oil capital. It was also Jesse Jones, first chairman of the Harbor Board, who pushed through a request for $3 million to dredge the channel and give the city a wide-open window to the world.

'Growing, Growing': "I always said that someday Houston would be the Chicago of the South," said Jones, "and it is. Railroads built this town, the port made it big, cotton and cattle kept it rich, oil boomed it, and now we're the chemical capital of the world. Growing, growing, growing, that's Houston."

Jesse Jones came here as a young orphan boy with nothing but pocket change, made his millions in lumber and real estate, went to Washington on the Reconstruction Finance Corp., later became its chairman and then Secretary of Commerce under President Roosevelt, now publishes the Houston Chronicle. "Putting up buildings is a slow way to make money," said Jones with a sly smile, "but I've been at it a long time. Now if I had put my full time in oil, why then I'd really be rich."

What Jones means is that while he's a multimillionaire, he's still not a rich millionaire. And that's not a joke.

This is the city where 72-year-old Hugh Roy Cullen donated around $175 million to assorted civic projects, and announced an unexpected $2.25 million gift to the University of Houston after they scored a surprise football victory.

Cullen explains his huge gifts by saying: "My wife and I are selfish. We want to see our money spent during our lifetime so we may derive great pleasure from it."

This is a city of big money—more money per man than any other city in the country. Where else would you find a housing development offering furnished one-family houses for $110,000?

That doesn't mean that Houston suburbs have car pools of Cadillacs. But it does mean this: It means that Houston is a city the depression forgot. That's because it's surrounded by the richest 200 miles of raw materials in the world, riches that have attracted huge industrial complexes. That means Houston workers not only work, but have a wider choice of jobs, jobs that pay more money.

And how did Houston get that way?

Dollar an Acre: Some enthusiastic citizen said Houston was the city that had to be. That's not true. Houston was just a muddy piece of land near the shallow sluggish Buffalo Bayou back in 1836 when Texas won its independence from Mexico, and its main claim to fame was its closeness to the historic San Jacinto battlefield. That was the promotion pitch for two New York real-estate men, John K. and Augustus C. Allen, who bought up the land for a dollar an acre. But even twenty years later, a Mississippi doctor wrote his wife: "Houston is a small city possessing little interest . . . the difficult navigation to and
from the place will ultimately leave it to die out..." (The doctor instead settled in the Texas town of Pittsburg which now has a population of about 8,142.)

It took the Southern Pacific Railroad to prove the doctor wrong. Southern Pacific has been Houston's biggest employer for the past 100 years and still is (current payroll: about 7,000). Not many years later the Houston Chamber of Commerce talked about their town "where 18 railroads meet the sea." The boast of a sea outlet was then just a dream, but a dream that never died.

Mud and Alligators: Flat-bottomed boats worried their way up the bayou a hundred years ago—overhanging branches ripping their topsails, shifting mud shoals, and alligators all slowing their trip. They came because boats always come where the cargo is, and cargo here was cotton. Even back in 1868, some 150,000 cotton bales moved out of Houston's port. By the time the new port opened in 1915, the total had reached some 4 million bales.

... I brought in the first big ship, the S.S. Dorothy, with a cargo of coal," said Capt. Walter L. Farnsworth, now retired, a sprightly small barrel of a man, who looks and acts at least twenty years younger than his 76.

This was his first trip down the channel since then and he was looking and remembering. "Over there was a cemetery," he said pointing to a knob of land now full of factories. "They must have moved it to straighten the channel. And see that sugar and molasses plant, that was all red clay. And when we got into

Medical Center: The most modern port they had to tie up our lines to trees, and took eight days to unload our cargo. It's all a little hard to believe now." It is hard to believe. Houston now handles 45.5 million tons of cargo a year worth $2 billion, and more ships pass through here than through the Panama Canal.

It's not just a channel—36 feet deep, up to 400 feet wide—it's an avenue of industry with 150 major plants, everything from steel to synthetic rubber, and the 35 chemical plants alone are worth a billion dollars. It's a magnet and a gateway, a concentration point for cotton going all over the world.

"Put cotton on a curve and you can see a slight per capita increase, you can see that it's still a million bales a year," said cotton expert Lamar Fleming. "We ship a half million bales to 30 foreign countries. Why the lint alone has a market value of $150 million alone. But remember that cotton opened this port."

But if cotton opened it, oil pressured its progress at high speed. This is the biggest oil port in the world.

The nineteen counties in the Houston area produce more than 410,000 barrels a day from over 9,050 wells. And the refinery capacity here is almost twice that. Humble Oil & Refining Co. alone has one eighth of the reserve oil of the United States.

Black-gold Business: Houston's big boom wasn't only oil, it was the big business that follows oil—refineries, pipeline companies, oil-field equipment. And it was the oil that made the millionaires.

"But oilmen aren't all millionaires," said multimillionaire R.E. "Bob" Smith, a big broad man with a head of thick gray hair and a warm smile. "Gosh darn, I could stand at any street corner and pick lots of them out and I'll bet some of them would be glad to take a job firing up a boiler." Smith once headed Houston's Good Neighbor Commission, now directs the city's Civil Defense and still passes out programs to the congregation each Sunday at the Methodist Church, greeting all his friends with: "You all right?"

Right now, Smith is pushing an idea of storing oil in some of our depleted fields for reserve.

The controlled oil wells no longer gush; the gas fields no longer burn.

Not too many years ago you could ride through a Texas oil field and read a newspaper at night from the bright light of burning gas. Gas then was the waste you couldn't give away.

Now gas is the sixth largest industry in the United States, edging close to oil and coal as a main fuel for power. Five major gas lines are headquartered in Houston, and pipelines pressure it all over the country.

Petrochemical Power: Gas isn't only power, it's a raw material for the petrochemical industry.

Petrochemical is a word that meant nothing to Houston fourteen years ago; today it means more than $2.5 billion. That's the petrochemical plant investment in the Gulf Coast area around Greater Houston—and that represents an estimated 85 per cent of the nation's total petrochemical plants, some 90 producers of basic chemicals turning out 200 different products. These chemical
products “pickle” steel, keep your toothpaste from drying out, produce penicillin, nylon, and the antiknock in your gasoline. Then there’s polyethylene, “the squeeze bottle” plastic, almost all of it concentrated here—by 1955 they expect to produce 600 million pounds of it a year.

Here’s why Houston is the country’s chemical capital:

It’s got everything these plants need: Salt, sea water, water transportation, sulphur, cheap fuel, and “shirt-sleeve” weather ten months a year.

Expanding History: “We had people hunting all over the country for plant sites and we just never found anything to equal this place,” said Dow Chemical’s boss here, Dr. A.P. “Dutch” Beutel, who has done everything for Dow from design engineer to pipe-shop superintendent. “And don’t forget one of the big things this area’s got—it’s got the fifteen top chemical companies in one place and that means we feed each other. And we’re all expanding. That’s our whole history here: Build a plant, then enlarge it, then enlarge it again. Here is a growth without limit.”

You believe this when you visit Dow—the first big chemical company here, and still the biggest. It’s a huge forest of brilliantly painted pipes and you have to look at it with your imagination.

How else can you actually believe that here they make metal out of ordinary sea water? You see pumps suck in water from the sea, mix it with the milk of lime made from oyster shells, drain it in huge outdoor tanks, then it’s boiled, purified, dried, split by electricity, and poured out as molten magnesium metal, lightest of all structural metals.

Most of these chemical companies are push-button places—Dow, Carbide and Carbon, Monsanto, du Pont—but they still hire some 40,000 people. Typical of Dow’s 3,600 employees is Jim Miller, a junior engineer in the Research and Development section.

“I tell you this is a young man’s country,” he said. “Great Scott, I’m in charge of a pilot plant, and do you know how old I am? I’m only 22. In fact the average age of the top brass here is only 48. I tell you I’m working with the future.”

But Houston’s future isn’t only chemicals—it’s things like cap pistols, products made from local raw materials.

Changing Spirit: “We make some 750,000 cartridge-loading cap pistols a year,” said 39-year-old Tally Nichols who started Nichols Industries, Inc., on a financial shoestring and a $10 lathe. “I use zinc and plastic in my pistol. I get the zinc here, but they ship the plastic in tank cars up north somewhere for finishing. Someday, and someday soon, that whole process will be done right here. You know why? Because here we don’t believe that just because it was all right for poppa then it’s all right for me. There’s a spirit of change here.”

You feel that same sense of change couldn’t have cattle here, but last year I had 300 head and I fattened them on my own peanuts and corn. And they told me this wasn’t corn country, but last year I got 70 bushels an acre. Sure it takes more time, more investment, maybe more gamble to feed your corn to cattle and sell your corn on the hoof and walk your grain to market—but it’s only common sense because we’ve got our own market here, we’ve got a million people to feed.”

This million is but the beginning. Some citizens say that Houston is a city that hasn’t jelled yet—and they mean that its final form is still in flux.

Skyline Changer: “I came here twenty years ago,” said skyline changer Kenneth Franzheim, “and there were only 25 architects here then—now there are 250, and they’re all busy. I tell you this is a frontier.”

Perhaps the most famous of the Franzheim buildings is the $18 million Foley’s, the country’s first windowless department store (which also features a separate five-story garage for customers). Ultramodern Foley’s is Houston’s only complete department store besides Sears, Roebuck, and that’s because Houston, with its billion-dollar retail trade, is mostly a city of slick specialty shops—like Sakowitz’s.

Downtown Houston has been shifting south during the past years, filling in the empty spaces between the heart of the city and the $21 million Shamrock Hotel, about 5 miles from downtown center, built by wildcat oil millionaire Glenn H. McCarthy.

Close to the Shamrock is Houston’s new pride, a 163-acre Medical Center that has grown so fast and so rich that it already has a national importance. It’s unique in its diversity—four huge general hospitals plus two children’s hospitals, the Baylor University College of Medicine, the The University of Texas Medical School. You can’t help admiring this outgrowth. For you see it everywhere, in the scarf you wear, in the shirt you wear, in the shoes you wear, in the newspaper you read.

Here are some of the men who make Houston: Cattle (James D. Sartwelle Jr.), chemicals (Dr. A.P. Beutel), cotton (Lamar Fleming), and oil millionaires (Hugh Roy Cullen and R.E. “Bob” Smith)
Houston: The Shape of the Future

Hardly a hundred years ago, Houston was a piece of muddy nothing in the middle of nowhere; today Greater Houston's population has hit the magic million—a city reaching for tomorrow.

Houston markets a 200-mile area that produces more natural wealth than any other similar-size land in the world. More oil, more natural gas, more rice, more than 75 per cent of the world's sulphur, plus plenty of cotton, cane sugar, and cattle feed.

It is building up so new and so fast that some downtown real estate recently sold for $2,000 a front inch. It's by far the biggest booming city in the Southwest, the fourteenth largest in the country, the chemical capital of the world.

But of course Houston is much more than that; it's the shape and shadow of America's future.
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Medicine, the $10 million Anderson Hospital, one of the most modern cancer clinics in the country. Upcoming soon is the University of Texas Dental College built around the use of color TV.

**Volunteer TV**: Houston believes in all uses of TV—it has a complete TV setup in its air-conditioned jail, and it sponsored KUHT, the first educational TV station in the country, which operates with a lot of volunteer student help at the University of Houston.

"You can call Houston a cultural oasis of the Southwest," said 37-year-old KUHT director, John C. Schwarzwald. "We've got three live theaters, an excellent symphony orchestra, a first-class choral group, and two art museums. Of course you still can't call it a violin and candlelight town. Hubert Mewhinny of The Post said it was more of 'a whisky and trombone town'."

William P. Hobby, former governor of Texas, now publisher of the Houston Post (his wife Oveta Culp Hobby heads the Federal Health, Education, and Welfare Department), has another description of Houston: "This town was born with a big kick, and it's been kicking ever since."

Some of these kicking ceremonies take place this week when the hustling Chamber of Commerce goes all-out in a week-long celebration for its observance of "M" Day, July 3, the day Houston becomes the first metropolitan area in the South or Southwest to reach the magic million. It will be a week of parties, parades, projects, and all kinds of contests. And some time after midnight July 3, the first baby born will be honored as the 1,000,001st citizen.

**Million Magic**: That honored baby probably won't be the second child of Herbert and Ava Jean Mears, although they expect it anytime. But the Mears baby will be typical of something else. The magic of the new million is that they are from everywhere, pulled in by the promise of the city. Herbert Mears came here from New York some three years ago, married a lovely local girl, and settled down as a draftsman for Humble Oil & Refining Co. During summers he directs an art school at the Contemporary Art Museum, and his own fine, sensitive paintings have been widely exhibited and widely praised.

"I'll never forget the first night I came here," he said. "Somebody took me to a huge outdoor party and here were these dozens of strangers treating me not only as a gentleman, but as a friend. And it's the same at Humble where I work. It's such a big company, you'd think I'd be swallowed up, but I know hundreds of people by their names and hundreds more by their faces, and they're friendly faces. And that's what sold me on this city. It's a special warmth, a special spirit, and that's why I'm never leaving here. That's why Houston is my home."

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**Newsweek, July 5, 1954**