

## THE BIRTH OF A NEW TOWN – PEARLAND & THE STATION DEPOT

Today most people think of trains that go through Pearland as little more than a nuisance. But there was a time when the railroad was an essential part of the community, and people anxiously looked forward to the arrival of the train. Since their introduction, railroads have always played a significant role in the development of communities located by their routes. Pearland is no exception. Born with the railroad, much of the town's life in the early years centered on the Santa Fe Railroad Depot. The depot was the center of business and social activities as trains brought in new people, necessary supplies, and news from the rest of the world.

The history of Pearland began in 1861 with a grant of land applied for by the Houston, Tap and Brazoria Railroad Company.

The Railroad Company, already in operation when the Civil War began, was chartered on September 1856, to run from Houston to Columbia in Brazoria County. Its physical condition at the end of the War was such that its owners abandoned it, and on February 3, 1869 it was sold under judgments in Harris and Galveston counties to W.J. Hutchins of Houston. By then the H.T. & B.R.R. had become unsafe to operate, and the only service available was a light car drawn by a mule, the driver of which kept the small fare collected for his services and the mule's feed. On July 21, 1871, Masterson & Wagley, acting for the owners of the International-Great Northern Railroad Company, bought the H.T. & B.R.R. at a public sale. Later, an arrangement between the International-Great Northern and the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railroad companies set the ground for Pearland's growth.

The Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railroad Company was chartered on May 28, 1873, as a result of the determination of Galveston merchants to build a railroad reaching to the interior of Texas – without passing through Houston. But by 1880 Houston had assumed such importance that the Santa Fe arranged access to the city by securing trackage rights over the International-Great Northern between Arcola and Houston. In 1882 the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe decided to build a railroad from Houston to Galveston through the present site of Pearland. It was then that Pearland became a siding switch on the railroad, and it was named "Mark Belt" for a local landowner whose house was used to receive and sort the mail heading to Galveston.

The first real growth of Pearland was caused by a land boom. In August 1, 1892, L.W. Murdoch, a

businessman from Brazoria County, conveyed a large parcel of land to Captain Withold von Zychlinski, a Polish nobleman residing in Harris County. Zychlinski set aside 520 acres along both sides of the railroad as a town site and then appointed J.R. Jeter as the agent in charge of selling the lots and colonizing the surrounding lands. To promote the town to prospective settlers, many fruit trees were planted. On May 17, 1894, Zychlinski filed a plat of the town site at the county seat in Angleton; however, for unknown reasons, the plat was not recorded until September 26, 1894. The name given to the town site was "Pear-land." The plat contained forty blocks with the usual

dedication of streets and alleys and acknowledged the land belonging to the Gulf, Colorado and Santa Fe Railroad that ran through the town site. Jeter was to have five years from September 1, 1892, to sell and colonize the land. Also, he was to collect one-half of everything over twenty dollars per acre he received for the land. When the purchase money notes were not met, the tract figured in various assignments and judgments and was finally contracted to the Southern Homestead Company with S.M. Christensen, President. The company helped develop the area by directing a large advertising campaign to attract buyers from the snowbound Midwestern states to come to Texas and grow pears. The railroad was very important in bringing in new settlers, and in 1894 the Southern Homestead Company built the town's first building, a railroad station, with most of the labor donated by early settlers.

Later the Santa Fe Railroad Company took over the building and moved it east of the railroad tracks. That is when Pearland entered the embryonic stage during which it would go through many experiences before emerging from the small village state to become a growing city.

Pearland's development was closely linked to the railroad. The railroad brought new settlers from all over the country to town, and it was the way the settlers shipped their harvest to the northern markets. Since there were no good roads into Houston in the early days, Pearlanders rode to the Santa Fe train nicknamed the "Bobby Train" and had their groceries shipped by rail. The "Bobby Train" was a combination freight and passenger train with the passenger cars in front of the caboose. The cars were segregated, and there were also smoking compartments. People who wanted to go to Houston boarded the train at the local depot.



A ride on the train was not the only reason residents went to the depot. For years the depot was the main gathering point in Pearland, drawing dozens of curious citizens every time a train stopped in town. The depot was a meeting place for Pearlanders where they exchanged good and bad news and where shipments from the big city of Houston were picked up. An early hotel owner made the trip for more practical reasons, however. Mr. E.G. Miller went to the depot every evening with a lantern to greet and guide prospective hotel guests to his establishment.

In 1900, after the destruction caused by the hurricane, the Santa Fe Railroad Company provided free transportation to anyone who wanted to leave town. Again the depot was the center of the town's activity as many residents left in search of better opportunities in life.

Pearland's second boom started in 1910 when the Allison-Richey Company began an advertising campaign selling the land, this time as a garden where oranges could be grown on a commercial scale. The firm used the railroads as part of its tactics to promote land for sale in Pearland: it organized excursion trains that brought prospective land buyers from various parts of the country. Some prospects liked what they saw and decided to settle in Pearland. Many longtime Pearland residents are descendants of those families that originally arrived by train, such as the Livesays, O'Days, Yosts and Haskinses.

One indicator of the influence of the railroad on the area's growth was the inclusion of the railroads on the map used by the company to tout the glories of the area. The Allison-Richey Company had a thriving business selling tracks of land. Pearland was dotted with orange groves and vegetables when a freeze struck the area and all oranges were frozen. Many settlers left the town then, and it wasn't until 1912 that the city had another boom, this time for the growing of figs on a commercial scale. The fig plant was first operated by the Jones Brothers in 1914. At the local plant the figs were canned in five gallon cans without sugar. After passing through various hands, the fig plant was operated by the Southland Products Company of Houston. Large quantities of figs were preserved, shipped and stored. Figs from Pearland's orchards were delivered to Southland Products by train. Because of overproduction the fig-packing business declined to such an extent that most of the orchards were allowed to die. During that period, shell roads were built to Houston, Friendswood, and Alvin. Those roads were followed by the city's modern, paved roads and are now some of the busiest highways in the area.

The early 1900's was the time of greatest prosperity for the Santa Fe Railroad Company and its Pearland Depot. But as time went by, automobiles and other means of transportation became more popular, and the passenger service on the railroad ceased to exist. By 1972 there were no passenger trains stopping in Pearland, and the station was primarily a freight depot. The railroad company decided to close the depot, and in March 1972 the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe offered to give the depot building to the city, with the stipulation that the city move it off the railroad's property. In October of 1972 an agreement was reached transferring the building to the city for \$1, and enough money was raised through community-wide donations to have it moved to the west side of the

tracks onto city-owned property. Plans were to renovate the building and use it as a community center. On August 23, 1974, the Garden Club relinquished their lease for the depot, and the Pearland Improvement and Beautification Board took charge of the building. Several plans for the building's use were suggested, but none were carried out.

In March of 1980 the city sold the property where the depot was located to the First Baptist Church and made plans to move the depot to its present location at 3501 Liberty Drive, where it became the home of the Pearland Area Chamber of Commerce and the Pearland Convention & Visitors Bureau.

Pearland's depot is of frame construction in the style of Frame Depot No. 4 of the Santa Fe Railroad System. The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe describe the building as "depot building D-2 (19' x 98')." Floor plans show the depot had two waiting rooms—One for women and one for men--each with a fireplace. The ticket agent's office was between these rooms with a ticket window facing into each room and a bay window overlooking the tracks. Much care went into restoring the building to make it suitable for the Chamber's use while maintaining its historical authenticity. Following drawings and building specifications obtained from the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad Company, the old Depot was restored as close to its original condition as possible.

Today the depot stands battered but proud, with a railroad crossing sign next to the driveway beside the building and an old caboose by its side, next door to the modern city hall. After serving for more than twenty years as the offices of the Pearland Chamber of Commerce, the building was damaged by Hurricane Ike in 2008, forcing the Chamber of Commerce to relocate. The Pearland Historical Society stands ready to take over the building to house a museum once repairs are made and city council gives the go ahead.