

PHOTO BY MARILYN BURROW

Joe Hester's Recollections

BY MARILYN BURROW

Joe Hester's family arrived in the Bay Area by rail in 1914 bringing with them a wagon, a span of good mules and all their farming equipment on a flat car. Hester, born in 1919, has vivid memories of growing up in the small fishing village of Seabrook.

In the early sixties a new era arrived bringing with it astronauts, scientists and a new world of technology. Progress in the Bay Area has been well documented since that time, but have you ever wondered what it was like before we became "Space City?" With friends and neighbors from all over the world, we seldom encounter a lifelong resident of the Bay Area, one who has witnessed these changes taking place.

Hester still lives on Toddville Road in Seabrook where his family first settled. Across the street from his home is the nursery which his father started in 1925 and which he still owns and operates. Back in the '30s the nursery stretched almost down to Old Seabrook. He now has eight and a half acres although he refers to a good bit of it as "rec land, very pretty and fun to visit."

Hester is tall and straight in spite of his bout with polio as a young man. His full head of white hair is usually covered by his trademark straw hat, tilted first one way, then another. The ever-present red suspenders add another touch of color to a very colorful personality.

Names and dates come to mind easily as Hester recalls the early days. His father bought 125 feet of bayfront property for \$325 and, having no knowledge of hurricanes at the time, built a small house on blocks. Just one year later the storm of 1915 hit and took the house with it. It blew back into the creek and floated over onto Toddville Road.

The storm destroyed a big lumber barge in the bay, and after the storm a lot of brand new lumber drifted onto shore. Hester's father used it to build the family home. Although it is still standing today, a fire in 1942 severely damaged it and the top part had to be rebuilt.

His parents, both schoolteachers, taught for several years in a two-story schoolhouse in Seabrook and each served as its principal at one time. After a while his father quit teaching to do contract work up and down the bayshore with his wagon and team of mules. An "inquiring sort of fellow" who was interested in everything, he became interested in plants, grew a few and liked it, and in 1925 procured a nursery license. Hester was six at the time. As a teenager, he managed the propagation while his family did the field work.

An old railroad bed runs through the property. There is not much left now of the spur from the Southern Pacific Railroad that left the main line in Seabrook, came around through the nursery up to Sylvan Beach and rejoined the main line in La Porte.

Hester remembers Sylvan Beach as being a very popular spot in those days featuring famous people like Dorothy Lamour and Herbie Kay. "It was a playground for Houston with massive boardwalks along the shore, a big pavillion and big name dance bands. A long pier stretched out over the water where you could go swimming or 'spoon' a little." There was a special motor car that ran to Sylvan Beach.

W. B. Scott, president of Southern Pacific, lived along Toddville Road. He had a railroad siding built right up to his home and if he needed gravel or supplies, he'd have the train run him a car or two up to the house. His old home is now Camp Casa Mare, the Girl Scout camp.

According to Hester, Seabrook was al-

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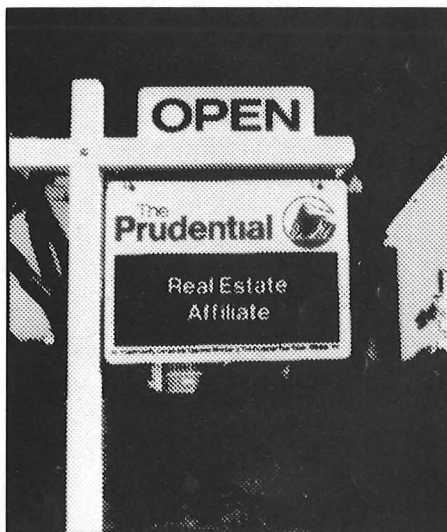
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ways a progressive little town because there were prominent, wealthy people from Houston—summer people who liked the coastal area—living along Toddville Road almost from the beginning. They lived alongside the schoolteachers, farmers, ranchers and fishermen.

Hester remembers at least two bridges connecting Seabrook to Kemah before the new bridge opened in 1986 and, prior to that, a hand-drawn ferry a little to the east of the present bridge. After driving onto it, you would get out and help pull it across with a rope. Later a steel cable and motor replaced the hand-drawn rope.

The old drawbridge was actually raised by counter-weights. With a great deal of amusement, Hester related an incident that occurred when the bridge was raised one day and they couldn't crank it back down so cars could go across. "Oliver, the guy that had the filling station over on the Kemah side, brought his big wrecker down and tied a cable up to the bridge to pull it down so everyone could go across. He pulled the bridge down and it kicked back and picked him and the truck both up—left him dangling and looking down at the water in the wrecker."

"They managed to get him out by floating out a barge. He fed out his own cable and lowered himself to the barge." Hester said, "That was exciting," although he remembers it as being a frightening experience at the time, especially to Oliver.

While Hester grew up along the bayshore, he refers to Doris, his wife of 43 years, as a village girl. "She lived way down there in Seabrook two miles away." The city was quite definitely separated from the country.

On a tour of Old Seabrook in the area of Second St., Doris's memories transformed the local antique and gift shops into the homes of her childhood. Many of the buildings in the area haven't changed much since that time when water had to be carried from an artesian well at the end of Fourth St. The well can no longer be found.

One of the oldest homes in Seabrook, on the opposite end of Fourth St., was the home of George Ballentine. Seabrook was a town of about 300 people and five of the families were Ballentines. J. A. Ballentine, whose grandfather helped build the old ferry, still lives in town.

The few businesses on Second St. included two grocery stores, Bennett's (owned by Doris's father) and Keys'. Chapman's Store was in the building now known as Marilyn's Antiques and Doris

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recalls it was the "Neiman Marcus of Seabrook." In addition, there was the post office, library and two or three "honky tonks." "I wasn't allowed to go in those," she quickly added. Doris' father was also the preacher.

The old library was the melting pot of the little town. It doubled as a community center where people gathered for movies, dances and plays. Doris remembers her father playing the fiddle there for some of the town dances. "Activity revolved around the library before and during the Depression."

A few people on the edge of Seabrook lived along NASA Road 1 around the lake. "Other than that," said Hester, "it was just open country--pretty woods and trees—lots of animals."

The Johnson Space Center is on part of what was once the West Game Preserve. The ranch manager lived there and, later on, Jim West built a beautiful mansion on the edge of the lake. It was completed in 1930 and today it houses the Lunar and Planetary Institute.

NASA 1 was a two lane road that curved along the edge of the lake with several sharp turns in it. "I kept a towchain in my truck because usually you could go along there and find someone who went around one of those right-angle turns too quickly and slid in a ditch."

In what is now the Nassau Bay area there was nothing but the ranch and open pastures. It was not unusual to see a herd of deer grazing alongside the cattle. "I remember driving along there one day and way down the pasture was a bulldozer or two," said Hester. "It was a strange sight at the time."

The Johnson Space Center brought "fresh air" with it. "It's been fun over the years. It just became such a part of our life." He remembers the early astronauts became familiar faces. "They enjoyed our little town because they had been famous places and they could come here and it was quieter."

Hester sold the old family home in 1959 and built his present home just back of it. Two years later, Hurricane Carla filled it with two and a half feet of water, reminiscent of an earlier time.

Driving along Toddville Road you will pass Hester Street and cross Hester's Gully. "We didn't have any sons," said Doris, "so that's how people are going to remember us."

Marilyn Burrow is a free-lance writer and photographer who is a native Texan. She has lived in the Bay Area for the last six years.