

The Pearland Fig Crop Industry

On the Pearland Historical Society website (www.pearland-historicalsociety.org) is a page about Pearland trivia. One of the bits of trivia mentioned there is that "the fruit which brought the most prosperity to Pearland was not the pear - -but the fig." Figs were a money crop for farmers in Pearland from the mid teens to the 40's. Even though figs were the big money crop, it is nice that the city's name is "Pearland" and not "Figland." During the mid teens, figs were definitely the big money crop. Early Pearlanders often debated which was the best time in Pearland's history — when gas and electricity came to Pearland or when the fig packing plant was in its "heyday."

In the Pearland Historical Society files is a story entitled "The Fig and I" written by Irene Mansfield. The story reflects a way of life in early Pearland which a few, very old time Pearlanders can still remember. Irene's story tells how figs first got started in this area, and traces the growth of the industry from the early 20th century to around 1970 when the last fig plant in this area closed its doors. The story goes that around the turn of the century, a peddler came through this area selling what he claimed to be magnolia trees. These so called magnolia trees quickly took root, but months later when the trees started flowering, instead of a sweet smelling magnolia, the small trees began bearing figs. These figs were not the ordinary small sugar figs. The fruit from the flourishing trees was much larger and filled with delicious juice. A new crop was born to the area.

Soon many of the landowners were clearing their fields and planting the suckers taken from the base of the existing trees. The cuttings easily rooted. Very appropriately, this new variety was named "Magnolia Fig." The Magnolia Fig proved to be aptly suited to this area. Sizeable orchards were planted around San Leon, Alcoa, Alvin, Friendswood, Pearland and other areas in Brazoria and Galveston County. Several thousand pounds of fruit were produced per acre of land. Prior to the depression in the 30's, fig growing and processing was a multi-million dollar industry with several thousand acres in this area producing the Magnolia Figs. Pearland had its processing plant as did Alvin, Friendswood, Dickinson, League City and San Leon. About 75 or 100 persons (mostly women) were employed at the Pearland plant. Most plants went bankrupt during the depression. In 1930, there were 28 fig processing plants between Beaumont and Victoria according to Roger May, who owned the J.R. May fig processing plant in Friendswood from the 60's to the early 70's shipping out some 150 thousand cases of figs per year. By the 1970's, the fig industry was just about dead due to the soaring land costs and the rising costs of production.

Frances and Bert Jamison still had a small fig orchard for use in their home cannery business in Pearland until the mid 90's when she was the only person in the United States still processing Magnolia Figs. Jamison's fig preserves and other fruit preserves were sold throughout Texas.

In all probability, if you asked a Pearland citizen today "what is the fruit which brought the most prosperity to Pearland," he or she would quickly reply, "pears, of course." Wrong. It was Magnolia Figs.

By John D. "Mickey" Mark, President, Pearland Historical Society

Pearland Fig Packing Plant -1919

