

SUGAR & RICE



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Map by Anton Sinkewich

THE BAY AREA

By Eric Leshinsky

Galveston
Bay

SEABROOK/
KEMAH

SAN LEON

TEXAS CITY

GALVESTON

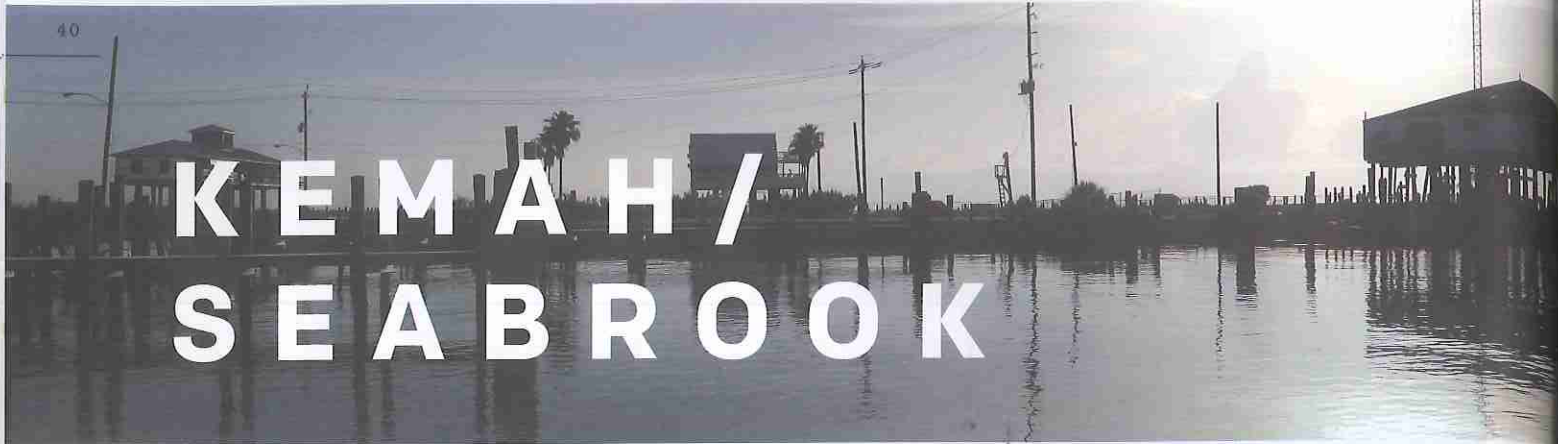
"The loss of local culture is, in part, a practical loss and an economic loss. For one thing, such a culture contains, and conveys to succeeding generations, the history of the use of the place and the knowledge of how the place may be lived in and used." —Wendell Berry, *The Work of Local Culture*

The stretch of I-45 South from Houston to Galveston is about as typical a Houston experience as anywhere in the city. You will drive past endless big-box stores, strip malls in various states of decay, and oddly-planned developments spaced intermittently between acres of flat, undeveloped, and mostly unremarkable land. Your view will be consumed by oversized signage, and you will cross, probably without even noticing, multiple bayous and drainage ditches.

The string of exits you pass—Bay Area Boulevard, FM 518, FM 517, to name a few—probably won't mean much unless you are traveling to or from a specific place. However, turn off on any of these exits, drive past the strip malls and big-box stores, and you will find unique places. Places that still exist in a direct working relationship to the geography of Galveston Bay. This is Houston's *Bay Area*.

Three towns flanking the western shore of the Bay, Kemah/Seabrook (technically two cities but they are twins), San Leon, and Texas City, frame the region and have served during my three years of commercial shrimping as both home ports and access points for better understanding through Shrimp Boat Projects, the connection between the regional identity of Houston and the area's native landscape. My partner in these projects, Zach Moser, and I have learned to shrimp on Galveston Bay and use the work as a lens into the region, because shrimping is one of the last ways of working directly dependent on the area's native landscape and because Galveston Bay has played such an important, but often forgotten, role in the history and culture of the Houston area.

This article is, in a sense, a guide to these three towns that I have come to know intimately over the past three years. Understanding these places is key to understanding the ethos of Houston as a place and the origin of our regional culture, a culture that is increasingly fading in the light of globalization, the media, and the homogenization of America.



KEMAH / SEABROOK

"The Blessing of the Fleet is an annual event that is practiced in fishing communities worldwide. As a genre, these blessings share several common traits: one or more priests perform the actual blessing; fishermen gather in their newly outfitted boats to receive the blessing; and family members unite in making whatever preparations are dictated by local tradition."

—Betsy Gordon, "Decorating for the Shrimp Fleet Blessing: Chauvin, Louisiana," *Louisiana Folklife Miscellany*, 1991

If you visit the Kemah waterfront on the first weekend in May, there is good chance you'll catch the annual Blessing of the Fleet. It's a traditional rite to mark the start of the Bay shrimp season. In Kemah, while the event still coincides with the start of the shrimp season, you'll now see power boats, sail boats, and even a few kayaks parading down the channel with the shrimp boats. Indeed, the evolution of this event from a tradition of consequence to pure spectacle mirrors the evolution of this place, from working waterfront to leisure waterfront, and from a varied assemblage of waterfront businesses owned by multiple individuals to a singular destination owned by a single corporation. Today, as the event takes place along a popular waterfront-themed development, the Kemah Boardwalk, there is also a good chance that the actual blessing delivered by the guest priest will be drowned out by a Top 40 band playing nearby.

But one can hardly blame Kemah for trademarking the slogan "The Gateway to the Bay" or promoting itself as a tourist destination. With the decline of Bay shrimp fisheries, the city of Kemah needed income. Tourism, which is hardly new to Galveston Bay or Kemah, made sense. Kemah is convenient to Houston and has beautiful overlooks of the Bay.

This transition places Kemah, and its sister city across the channel, Seabrook, squarely in a much larger and complex global story. Shrimp is by far the most popular seafood consumed in the United States. We eat an average of 4.2 pounds of shrimp per person per year, or 1.32 billion total pounds of shrimp. Yet 90% of the shrimp eaten in the U.S. is imported—all while many productive U.S. shrimp fisheries, like those on Galveston Bay, are struggling.

The irony can't be denied. Substandard labor and environmental practices in places like China, Thailand, and India, as well as a complex array of subsidies and regulations, mean that shrimp farmed and shipped from 10,000 miles away can be sold at a fraction of the cost of shrimp caught within 30 miles.

Today, you'd be hard-pressed to find a restaurant along the Kemah Boardwalk that serves much harvested from the Bay. In fact, you'd also be hard-pressed to find much in Kemah that reflects its relationship to its past or its past relationship to the

Bay: Kemah's once illicit nightlife, the bars, brothels, and secret gambling dens that thrived in the 1930s to 1940s, and the once thriving shrimping industry.

But leave the Boardwalk and the roads that lead there, cross under the causeway high overhead, head toward what may be the only unpaved lot in the area and follow the smell of decomposing shrimp and an army of stray cats, and you will find what remains of the Kemah/Seabrook shrimp boat fleet—about 12 boats (though this number fluctuates as the shrimp move). This is the last place to buy fresh shrimp right off the boat in Kemah or Seabrook and one of the few places on Galveston Bay where you still can.

Despite the fact that you can find shrimp year-round in any Kroger, Randall's, or Whole Foods Market, shrimping is seasonal. There are several species of shrimp found in the Galveston Bay, but only two are commercially harvested: brown shrimp (*Farfantepenaeus aztecus*) and white shrimp (*Litopenaeus setiferus*). Each of these shrimp have similar life cycles—basically adults spawn in the Gulf; larval and post-larval shrimp drift into the Bay on tides, currents, and wind-driven waters; mature in shallow sub-bays and marshes; juveniles then make their way back into deeper waters, grow and reenter the Gulf; and the cycle begins again.

However, the seasonality of shrimp is not like clockwork. They will arrive too early or too late, leaving Bay shrimpers scrambling. For those living on the Bay, and especially for those making a living from it, surviving and adjusting to these and other vagaries of nature is a way of life.

Walk along the Kemah Boardwalk, suspend your tourist gaze, survey the opposite side of the channel, and you will see a mostly vacant peninsula of dilapidated piers, the skeletons of buildings wrecked by Hurricane Ike, and a stretch of identical-looking seafood markets, all rebuilt after the hurricane and raised up on 20-foot-tall concrete foundations to weather the next storm surge.

This is Seabrook and all that remains of what was once a prominent working waterfront where shrimp boats were tied up three-deep along the bulkhead, and seafood markets at dock-level (where they should be) featured upstairs restaurants serving the day's catch and sweeping waterfront views.

Now, the closest you can come to that experience is a restaurant called Outriggers. Before I called Kemah a home port, I would bring people from Houston to eat there. It wasn't really the food we came for, though it isn't bad, but the view. Sitting on the outside patio, you will catch a rare view of Kemah and Seabrook that is both close-up and wide-angle. You won't necessarily see what originally put these towns on the map, but you will see what makes them places of interest and consequence today.

SAN LEON



I used to come to San Leon with friends as a respite from Houston. I came to eat shrimp and oysters at Gilhooley's and the Topwater Grill, enjoy a cold beer at the Sunset Lounge, and relax along the shores of the Bay in a place that embodies an off-the-map quality and an end-of-the-road sensibility. An unlikely paradise, perhaps, but one that is increasingly rare near a metropolitan area anywhere.

San Leon—an unincorporated municipality that elects its unofficial mayor at a local bar—sits on a 5,000-acre peninsula that juts into the Bay. Only a couple of roads, FM 517 and Bayshore Drive, lead in and out of town. At least two previous attempts to establish settlements on this peninsula were destroyed by hurricanes. It is a place shaped by geography and weather. But the character of the place is likely derived as much from its unique geography as from its unusual history (though some of that unusual history is likely due to its unique geography).

Gator Miller, former mayor of San Leon and publisher of the *Sea Breeze News*, has said that San Leon was developed through a real estate promotion concocted by the *Galveston Daily News*. Subscribers to the newspaper were given lots on the peninsula. When subscriptions were cancelled, so were the lots. Now, very few lots in San Leon have a clear title, and consequently chain stores and franchised establishments have a difficult time setting up shop. So affordable waterfront real estate is still the norm and the town boasts one of the few remaining supply stores catering to shrimpers, San Leon Marine Supply, which operates at a prominent bend on FM 517.

April Fool Point, at the southern tip of San Leon, is a place that is strongly identified with what's left of the Bay's seafood industries. You'll see a cluster of traditional oyster boats (colloquially known as *luggers*) and possibly a few shrimp boats docked near a popular local seafood joint called the Topwater Grill and Misho's Oyster Company, perhaps the largest processor of local oysters on the bay. If you don't mind schucking, you can still buy a 110 pound "boat sack" of oysters from Misho's for around \$40 in season. Though more than anything, it is here on this thin strip of land between Dickinson and Galveston Bays, that you are exposed to the ebbs and flows of the Bay's weather—enjoyable sunny days as well as harsh winds and heavy rains—forces that can destroy your way of life. You realize how vulnerable life along the Bay is and how geography and weather shape it.

Over time, I came to realize that the eclectic mix of houses I saw in San Leon—RVs converted into permanent dwellings with custom decking, houses that have been raised up 16 feet since Hurricane Ike, boats parked next to boat-sized houses, houses built around existing palm trees, houses growing almost organically as their owners continually expand them in bits and pieces—was a direct response to the weather and geography of San Leon and the Bay. Houses, boats, and docks were raised, rebuilt, and scavenged after each major weather event.

A visit to San Leon gives you a chance to experience life on the Bay without major chain stores and as a direct response to the pressures and vagaries of the Bay's environment. I also wouldn't miss lunch at Gilhooley's with a dozen Oysters Gilhooley on the side.

TEXAS CITY



In 2011, at the historic Davison House in Texas City, I found an undated postcard. The image shows a shrimp boat tied up to a rocky jetty with a refinery looming in the background. The caption on the reverse reads, “Good Neighbors’—abundant water-oriented recreation along the Texas City shoreline serenely compliments Heavy Industry.” When I bought the postcard it seemed like an unusual scene to commemorate. Yet after spending a couple months shrimping from Texas City, I have come to realize that this layering of uses and understanding is emblematic of the region.

Texas City was founded in 1893 by three duck-hunting brothers from Duluth, Minnesota. Its early development coincided with both the birth of the Galveston Bay oil industry and the birth of modern shipping. By the 1920s, Texas City had become a major nexus of oil refineries, chemical plants, rail lines, and docks. Almost 100 years later, this is still the case. The industrial landscape, whether we like it or not, has become part of the essence of Texas City.

Yet the tidy streets, ample civic parks, a struggling but historic main street, and the Norman Rockwell-esque bronze statues of everyday people doing everyday things found in civic spaces across the city give you the impression that Texas City also wants to be a normal sort of place. A small town. An all-American town. However, as the site of the worst industrial accident in U.S. history—a massive series of dockside explosions sparked by ammonium nitrate that killed over 500 and injured over 5,000—and home to three major petro-chemical refineries, the story will always be more complex.

But for many, the Texas City experience is synonymous with the Texas City Dike. Sometimes called “the world’s longest manmade fishing pier,” the dike is a 5.3-mile-long spit, often barely wider than the road, that juts into Galveston Bay. Built in 1935 by the Corps of Engineers to prevent silt from building up in the Texas City Channel and lower bay, it has become a popular

destination for recreational fishing. Its unique geography gives fishers access, by car, to waters normally only reachable by boat. Most weekends the dike is crowded with fishers, swimmers, and boaters.

The recreational activity that animates the dike on a typical day, like that image of the shrimp boat on the postcard, belie another view of this place no longer visible. For much of the dike’s history, a view of it would have included not just the people who came to fish but also the numerous bait shops, seafood markets, and restaurants that thrived on the dike.

In 2008, most of the dike’s iconic bait shops, restaurants, fish markets, and shrimp docks were destroyed by Hurricane Ike. The already declining Bay shrimping business suffered yet another blow. Today along the dike, you might see just a few shrimp boats tied up to the one dock left for commercial vessels. In the water around this dock are the crumbled concrete foundations of Curl’s Fish House. The remnants of Anita’s Bait & Tackle are likely in the waters on the other side of the dike. As with the Seabrook waterfront, it was the storm surge from Hurricane Ike that demolished every structure on the dike, wiping away not just a popular view of the place but entire livelihoods. Today, only the stories remain.

As much as the Bay Area has maintained an identity dependent on Galveston Bay, it still struggles to adapt to the forces of weather, the pressures upstream population growth place on the Bay watershed, global competition, expanding industry, and subsiding wetlands. Houston also struggles with these same issues but is more equipped to mitigate their effects on the landscape. In the Bay Area, these realities are all too evident. Yet, because of this, the Bay Area is worth exploring. It may feel like a refreshing departure from Houston. It may feel salty and more relaxed. The landscapes of the area may seem new and foreign, at times disconcerting to your typical Houston experience. But you will always be closer to the city than it seems.