

REVELATIONS FROM THE OBSCURE: HOG ISLAND REVISITED

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Approximately thirty miles southeast of Houston lies the city of Baytown, population 60,000. Baytown has earned its place in Texas' history from the earliest days of the fight for independence to its present status in the oil industry. Just south of Baytown, separating Tabbs Bay from the Houston Ship Channel, a tiny island rests, unobtrusive, unimpressive, and unmemorable – or so it seems. Under closer scrutiny, Hog Island emerges as a reflection of Baytown's evolution from an agricultural community to an industrial town, to a city affluent enough to consider a community project that would exemplify civic pride.

Hog Island got its name during Baytown's agricultural period from the swine which Dr. Ashbel Smith kept on the island after he purchased it in 1859; originally the island appeared on maps as Ashbel Smith Island and kept that name until after his death in the late 1800s (Harris 1). A local myth arose over the island's name, creating the misconception that Texas' former governor, James (Jim) Hogg, who served from 1890-1892, originated the name of the island (Ponder; Nethery). The myth gained wide enough acceptance that by 1939 it was misspelled on a county map. Current maps list both spellings. History, however, established pigs and not a governor as the true originator of the name.

In addition to its agricultural use, Hog Island served as a steamboat landing on the Houston-Galveston route for those traveling to the Tabbs Bay mainland and as a shipping point for mainland families in the late 1800s (Nethery; Rogers 3). The influx of new people coupled with the discovery of oil at Spindletop, Texas, brought change in the offing for Baytown and, as a result, the island. As Baytown became caught up in an industrial movement, the island became a pawn in the oil game.

Hog Island's first real notoriety came in 1905 when John Gaillard purchased it from the heirs of Ashbel Smith (Harris 1). Prior to his purchase, Gaillard leased the island to graze his livestock. His Father had often fished off the island, convinced that the bubbles rising to the surface resulted from the mud sucking buffalo fish he believed swam below. A La Porte man, Royal Matthews, persuaded the younger Gaillard to investigate another possibility for the origin of the bubbles, oil. Matthews conducted an experiment with a lit match applied to a risen bubble. The small explosion that resulted confirmed the suspicion. Natural gas, contained in the bubbles, often signals oil reserves below (Deavers). "Gaillard's Bubbles" still float to the surface (Nethery).

Another discrepancy that arises in the historical record of the island refers to the amount Gaillard paid for the 223 acre tract. Amounts recorded range from \$900 to as high as \$8000 (Nethery; Henson 79). In fact, Gaillard paid \$2000 for the island, \$1000 on July 29, 1905, followed by two subsequent payments of \$500 made at six month intervals (Harris 1). Whether or not the two payments actually followed remains unclear.

Ironically, Gaillard, who bought the property as a place to graze his cattle, leased the island to Goose Creek Oil Company less than three months after the purchase (Deavers). Gaillard had already leased the island in 1867 for the purpose of

grazing livestock. A question arises as to Gaillard's motivation. Did Gaillard buy Hog Island for grazing purposes or for the profit inherent in the discovery of oil?

A 2000-foot well drilled on the island yielded 1500 barrels of oil. Other wildcat test wells on the island were abandoned when lack of funds for proper drilling equipment forced Producers Oil Company, the drilling company that bought Goose Creek Oil Company, out of business. Producers Oil Company sold out to Humble Oil Company who, in turn, subleased to Gulf Coast and Crown Oil Companies (Deavers). When the Goose Creek oil field erupted, Hog Island became a valuable property. Several wells in Tabbs Bay, adjacent to the island, offered great yields (Deavers). Consequently, John Gaillard, sold the island to Humble Oil and Refining Company in 1918, at the height of the Goose Creek oil field boom for \$300,000, one of the highest prices paid for land in the section (Deavers). Hence, Hog island left its agricultural past behind, and industry manipulated the island's fate from that point on.

The first barge load of Goose Creek oil departed from a landing on Hog Island (Rogers 3). Ross S. Sterling Pipeline Company also routed crude from the Goose Creek oil fields to the Houston Ship Channel via Hog Island. Two 7000-foot lines of four inch pipe crossed the bay to Hog Island and into cypress storage tanks with a 20,000 barrel capacity. Oceangoing tankers docked at the wharf on the island and received the oil out of a 500-foot six inch line from the tanks (Rundell 120). The island earned noteworthiness in Baytown's story as the city grew into an important energy producing center.

Hog island also reveals a personal side to its oil days. Mrs. Hettie Perry ran a boardinghouse on the island from 1917 to 1920 (Webber). Mrs. Perry, a colorful character who commanded respect, offered bed and board for \$1 a day to roughnecks who worked in the Goose Creek oil fields. According to Margaret Davis, who resided under the protection of Mrs. Perry at the time, tramps looking for food always left the boarding house with a full stomach. The tramps never stole from Mrs. Perry, paying for their repast by doing odd jobs around the boarding house only after their meal (Webber). Mrs. Davis also recalls that people crossed to the island in a hand operated ferry with a forty-person capacity and made the trip in approximately fifteen minutes (Webber).

Prior to 1933, people reached the island only by boat (Nethery). A two day barbecue that began on July 29, 1933, celebrated the opening of Morgan's Point ferry that ran from La Porte to Hog Island and the causeway that spanned the water from Baytown to the island (Evans). A .9 mile concrete highway ran from the causeway to the ferry landing on the south end of the island. Hog island became the first link that connected Baytown to La Porte (Nethery). Thus, Hog Island grew in importance to an increasingly affluent city as a thoroughfare and a recreation spot. In 1937, The Texas Highway Department took over maintenance of both the ferry and the causeway (Rogers 4). Until the opening of the causeway and ferry, Hog Island served the interests of only a few, its value primarily monetary in nature. The organization of the East Harris County Federation of Garden Clubs in Baytown signaled Baytown's development into a city of wealth, concerned with the face it presented to the outside world. Such concern brought Hog Island to the pinnacle of its notoriety, and the tiny island emerged as a source of civic pride.

Soon after it organized in the spring of 1939, the Federation sought a project that would build interest among members. Under the leadership of the temporary chairman, Mrs. W. A. Jones of Highlands, the clubs undertook a project for the beautification of the highway approaches to the Tri Cities and La Porte, the San

Jacinto Memorial and, later, the Morgan's Point ferry site on Hog Island (Rogers 4). Dorothy Thompson, a member known for having a way with words, said, "Whatever develops resources inside ourselves, whether from eighteenth century poetry or twentieth century cookery, adds to human courage, and anything that increases consideration for human life helps toward the prevention of wars, and anything that makes life more beautiful makes it more tolerable (Rogers 9). Mrs. Thompson's statement suggests an underlying uneasiness that permeated throughout the country in the prewar years and suggests that perhaps civic pride did not exist as the sole motivation for the beautification project. Despite the war abroad, the club women set about creating something of beauty out of a wasteland island.

Focusing their effort on converting the unsightly face of the island into a recreational haven, the Federation took into consideration elements that would aid in achieving their goal. The island's esthetic and environmental value could enhance the experience of its patrons if the park became an arboretum for the preservation of native trees and shrubs as well as a bird sanctuary for fresh and salt water migratory birds (Rogers 1-2). Mrs. Mildred Kater, Mrs. Ella Holland, and Mrs. Georgia Hederhorst accepted appointments as trustees for the Federation (Rogers 5). As assignees for East Harris County Federation Garden Clubs, the trustees entered into an agreement with Harris County Houston Ship Channel Navigation District, the current owners of the island, for the lease of Hog Island on October 1, 1940 (Hog). The Hog Island Project became the first of its kind in the state developed solely at the suggestion of a group of public-spirited residents who organized and went to the State Highway Department for help (Rogers 8).

The Hog Island Project combined the efforts of many groups in conservation and beautification of the Galveston Bay corner of Texas. Two months before the lease signing took place, The Tri Cities Safety Council hosted a meeting in the Baytown Community Building for organizations interested in helping with the project. A panel discussion followed the presentation given by the Highway Department concerning the development of the island (Tri Cities).

The women of the Federation, as a result, found help from the Harris County Commissioner's Court, Tri Cities Junior Chambers of Commerce, senior trade groups of the area, schools of the district, bird clubs, and Humble Oil and Refining Company. Hog Island's Park project became a sort of adhesive, pulling the separate interests in the community into a unit with a single focus in mind. C. Rogers of the Federation writes, "The project has become a gigantic community endeavor, not limited to the interest of any particular group, uniting the efforts of organizations interested in conservation and beautification, a rare type of constructive effort in a world upset with destruction" (5).

The Federation's pride in the historic Galveston Bay area hints at the general mood of the country during the war. It seems that anything under the threat of loss becomes more precious. Did the ladies, by endeavoring to preserve the past, perhaps seek to retain the status quo? The island, as a park, also would serve a certain kind of moral need in the community by offering a wholesome family atmosphere.

In keeping with the idea of wholesomeness, Federation trustees extended their concern to include the agreement that intoxicating liquors or alcoholic beverages of any kind not exist on the island, whether sold or consumed. In addition, no signs would mar the esthetics of the park (Rogers 8). Any buildings constructed required prior approval, in writing, by a representative of the Federation, Department of Highways, and the Navigation District, as to location, architectural design and

finish (Hog). Finally, no more than two subleases for concessions would exist on the island, with the monies accrued going into a fund for maintenance and operation of the park and beach. All buildings would exist for the public's use (Hog). Plans to invite boy scouts, girl scouts, and school children to share in the development and care of the project provided an added dimension to the scope of the park. Mrs. Kater pointed to statistics that proved a project like Hog Island would benefit the children by teaching them about plants and animals and thus reduce delinquency and behavioral problems while also providing scientific knowledge. Of equal importance, the park would have commercial value as a tourist attraction (Kater, Texas Ranks).

Hog Island, already viewed by Channel boaters as a convenient boat launching spot and by Tri Citians as a local "swimming hole," overflowed with congestion on holidays and weekends (Rogers 2). Tri Cities Area Safety Council coordinated the efforts of other agencies to supervise the construction of a staffed lifeguard station to serve the needs of an enlarged beach area projected by park plans. The Highway Department located and planned to erect 2000 feet of cable along the channel side of the island to protect bathers from the drop-off where the sandy beach met the deep water of the channel without interfering with channel traffic (Rogers 7). A planned playground and picnic area, along with parking facilities to lessen congestion, filled the demand for a facility of that type in eastern Harris County (Rogers 1). The Bayshore Bird Lovers Club, organized to work toward establishment of a bird sanctuary on Hog Island, and the Texas Game, Fish and Oyster Commission, who surveyed and laid plans for a warden station on the pathway to the sanctuary, spearheaded the animal conservation efforts (Rogers 6).

Many other community groups also aided the project. Federation trustees obtained ways and means to meet the estimated \$500 to \$600 need of shrubbery, top soil, and planned landscaping (Rogers 6). Fidelity Chemical Company of Houston donated fertilizers for use on the land. Robert E. Lee High School supervised the planting of cuttings and seeds that would develop part of the project. Some of the species targeted for development were parkinsonias, oleanders, salt cedars, cape jasmines, mimosa, crepe myrtals, and Washington palms. Highway Department workers made plans to plant native flowers, trees, and shrubs to complete the landscaping of the area (Rogers 7-8).

Men and machines worked diligently to erase a wasteland eyesore and replace it with a park and bird sanctuary. The State Highway Department leveled high spots and built up low places in the park area. Progress made in clearing the shacks situated along the channel shore, adjacent to the highway surpassed the expected time frame (Rogers 9). Most of the inhabitants of the shacks, fishermen, honky tonk operators, and people who enjoyed living by the water, either rented or paid nothing for their house sites and cooperated with Federation leaders' desire to remove the buildings from the island. Many found work elsewhere; some simply drifted away (Rogers 7).

Hog Island, the first roadside park bordered on one side by a ship channel, clearing and grading complete, became established as a public beach and bird sanctuary by 1942 (Rogers 7). However, the illustrious plans for concessions, a lifeguard station, and an on-site game warden never came to pass. The reason remains a mystery. Speculation given offers two possible answers. The first theory states that the East Harris County Federation Garden Clubs disbanded with the onslaught of World War II patriotism. The balance in the treasury supposedly went to the Red Cross to assist in the war effort (Fuller). No written record exists that

proves the claim either true or false. Contrary to written sources, a former Federation trustee asserts that the Federation's main goal came out of a singular desire to rid Hog Island of the riffraff that inhabited its perimeters, a goal which did indeed reach fruition (Hederhorst). This statement suggests that perhaps the Hog Island Park Project emerged in prejudice born out of ethnocentrism, and simply burgeoned from the effort of self-serving organizations into a civic endeavor. If indeed this were the case, then the logical assumption is that interests in the project on the part of some individuals was less than altruistic. And, perhaps the slightly blemished selflessness would effect a greater number when combined with a nationwide effort against a force much more dastardly than the undesirables on Hog Island, Nazism. Unfortunately, gaps in historical record prevent more than speculation at this juncture.

Hog Island, from that point, lost its image as a source of civic pride, but, ironically, gained a romantic reputation that still survives in the memories of many Baytonians. In the forties and fifties, the island held distinction as a teenage lovers' parking spot (Orten; Ponder). And, though the fear of contaminated water in the channel during the polio epidemic virtually shut down the island for a time, people often crabbed along the island. Many also swam in the dirty water for lack of an alternate spot in close proximity to Baytown (Orten; Ponder). Horror stories, perhaps exaggerated, of victims of the quicksand along the causeway abounded (Orten). Nevertheless, a real danger did exist at the island for swimmers. Passing ships drew the water away from the shore. In their wake, the water rushed in swiftly over the beach and out again. Unsuspecting swimmers risked drowning in the fierce undertow (Ponder), and reports record several drownings off the island (Maher). Still, those with stout hearts and strong swimming arms braved the unstable currents.

The final *coup de grace* to Hog Island would also catapult the island into obscurity. Hurricane Carla's force, in 1961, destroyed the causeway and thus the island's only link to the mainland after the opening, in 1953, of the Baytown/La Porte tunnel closed the Morgan's Point Ferry.

Presently, a lonely island, a victim of subsidence, Hog Island has reverted to its original marshy state. For the powerful men it served, for the companies who profitted from it, for the civic interests it advanced, Hog Island, most cherished in the hearts of those who only sought to enjoy it, remains an enigma.

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Hogg Island - Morgan's Point Ferry
CONNECTING TRI CITIES WITH LA PORTE



Hog Island - Morgan's Point Ferry in the 1940s - From an old postcard.



Construction of the causeway connecting Hog Island with the mainland in the 1930s. The causeway was destroyed by Hurricane Carla in 1961, and was never rebuilt.

Photos courtesy Baytown Historical Museum