

THE ELENA FARMS FRUIT & COTTON COMPANY: A MICROCOSM OF DEPRESSION-ERA ECONOMICS ON THE UPPER TEXAS COAST

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The Southern Publishing Company's Tri-Cities telephone directory for 1929-1930 contains a listing for the Tyrrell & Garth Fig Preserving Plant in Highlands, Texas, a cannery which operated at full capacity only thirteen years.¹ At publication of the updated directory in 1946, the cannery had already been closed four years; but despite the plant's short duration, its activities played an integral role in the economy of the area during the Great Depression.² The relationship between the cannery, the community, and surrounding agricultural and industrial interests illustrates the delicate balance which unites the fortunes of a geographic area. Highlands, located on the lower San Jacinto River in Harris County, is twenty-eight miles east of Houston, immediately northwest of Baytown, and just northeast of the great industrial and shipping amalgamation known as the Houston Ship Channel. The community, originally called Elena, changed its name to Highlands in 1926.³

The history of the community and of the Elena Farms Fruit & Cotton Company began in 1902 when the San Jacinto Rice Company purchased approximately 17,000 acres of land along the banks of the San Jacinto River.⁴ Captain William C. Tyrrell of Beaumont – real estate speculator, oil baron, and philanthropist – held the San Jacinto Rice Company, and its acreage encompassed most of the area which is now Highlands, Baytown, and Channelview.⁵ In 1911 Captain Tyrrell's son Harry and his grandsons, J. W. and Thomas Garth, formed the Tyrrell & Garth Investment Company and assumed control of the San Jacinto Rice Company.⁶ The concentration on rice production continued for several years.

But there were problems. A combination of a severe decline in the rice market after World War I and a storm which backed salt water from Galveston Bay into the San Jacinto River and thus into the rice canals forced Tyrrell & Garth to abandon the rice business. The company began selling some of the storm-ruined acreage, a portion of which, purchased by Humble Oil & Refining Company, later became the site of the Humble Baytown refinery. On part of the land not ruined by salt water, Tyrrell & Garth planted cotton, clover, and corn and other vegetables and formed the Elena Farms Fruit & Cotton Company to manage this enterprise.⁷ Harry Tyrrell and the Garth brothers were experienced in the agricultural business; in addition to Elena Farms, their holdings included fruit and vegetable farms in the Rio Grande Valley and canneries in Mission and in San Leon.⁸

Development of the Highlands acreage continued in 1923, when Tyrrell & Garth planted magnolia fig orchards. The crop thrived in the local climate, considered ideal for the fruit with its mild nights and hot, sunny days. The company also plotted a townsite, complete with streets, near the banks of the San Jacinto River. In the early part of the century, about 300 people inhabited the area around Highlands, most of them employees of the San Jacinto Rice Company. With the opening of the Humble refinery in 1919, population rose in the Tri-City area, and Tyrrell & Garth hoped to lure additional residents to their new community with the attraction

of agricultural employment. To promote the settlement in 1925, Tyrrell & Garth brought two trainloads of homeseekers to Crosby and bused them to Highlands where they received a free barbeque dinner.⁹ They stayed. In 1928, aided by the opening of the North Shore Railroad which ran from Houston to Highlands, the population of the town increased to 1,200.¹⁰

In a spirit of optimism generated by growth and development of the entire area, construction of the Elena Farms 23-acre cannery complex, known locally as "the fig farm," began in 1928. Facilities included a cotton gin, a grist mill, and a water system which supplied the town of Highlands until it formed its own utility district several years later.¹¹ Tyrrell & Garth installed the most modern equipment throughout the facility, and fire-proof buildings housed both the cannery and the cotton gin. The complex brought attention and recognition to Southeast Texas, and the many visitors who inspected the facility considered it a remarkable accomplishment.¹² A spur of the North Shore Railroad ran into the plant and provided transportation for produce shipped from Tyrrell & Garth farms in the Valley for processing at the Highlands cannery.¹³ The spur also insured ease in conveying the finished products to markets throughout Texas and Louisiana. The complex cost approximately \$200,000 to construct.

Before completion of the cannery, Tyrrell & Garth began to relocate families from Louisiana to work at the farm. Most had been railroad workers. For those who could not afford to purchase a home, the company provided housing in a row building that contained nineteen apartments. Later, frame houses built in close proximity to the plant accommodated supervisory personnel and their families.¹⁴ Mr. L. J. La Blanc, three years old when his family moved from Louisiana into one of the row apartments in 1928, offers some insight into the life of an agricultural worker in the late 1920's.

Tyrrell & Garth didn't hire just one man; they hired the whole family. When you got old enough to work, you worked . . . When my daddy first came down, he wasn't making but \$20 a month, and had five children. I can remember when he got a raise and was making \$23; we really thought that was a lot . . .

When I was just a little fella, my mother would pick cotton in the summertime and drag me and my sister around on the cotton sack. The whole family had to be working somewhere, even the kids when they wasn't in school. They had the fig plantation, cotton fields, corn; and people worked all of those.

When you were about seven, you were old enough to start chopping cotton and hoeing . . . you'd pick a big gallon bucket of figs, and that was worth three cents. . . . I worked at the cotton gin when I was nine years old at ten or twelve cents an hour.

Significantly, the cannery began full operations in the same year that the Great Depression engulfed the nation. This crisis certainly helped the company succeed when so many other agricultural enterprises throughout the country failed. Labor became cheap and available in a region where people were moving away from traditional agricultural endeavors and depending increasingly on employment in the Ship Channel refineries, chemical plants, and other industries. A second attraction drawing labor to the area was the Humble Oil refinery, important to the economic fortunes of any small town in the Baytown vicinity. Mr. La Blanc summarized the situ-

ation most succinctly when he said, "If you live in Highlands and you didn't work for the cannery or the [Humble] refinery, you didn't get credit."

However, as the effects of the Depression filtered into the Texas Gulf Coast region, the decreased demand for petroleum products reemphasized the importance of agriculture to the community. By the end of 1930, the Humble Baytown refinery had reduced its workforce by one-third; and by the end of 1933, less than half of the 1929 workforce remained. Decline in demand for refinery products reduced process work and forced abandonment of large construction and research projects at the Humble facility. Nearly all the dismissed employees were local labor and construction workers. In three years, over 3,000 unskilled men and women lost their jobs with Humble.¹⁵ Although some economists deem the effects of the Great Depression less severe in the Texas Gulf Coast region than in other areas of the country, and although the depression did arrive later and end sooner along the Texas Gulf Coast,¹⁶ to the people who lived there, the results were equally frightening. Mr. LaBlanc describes a plight common to many families in the region:

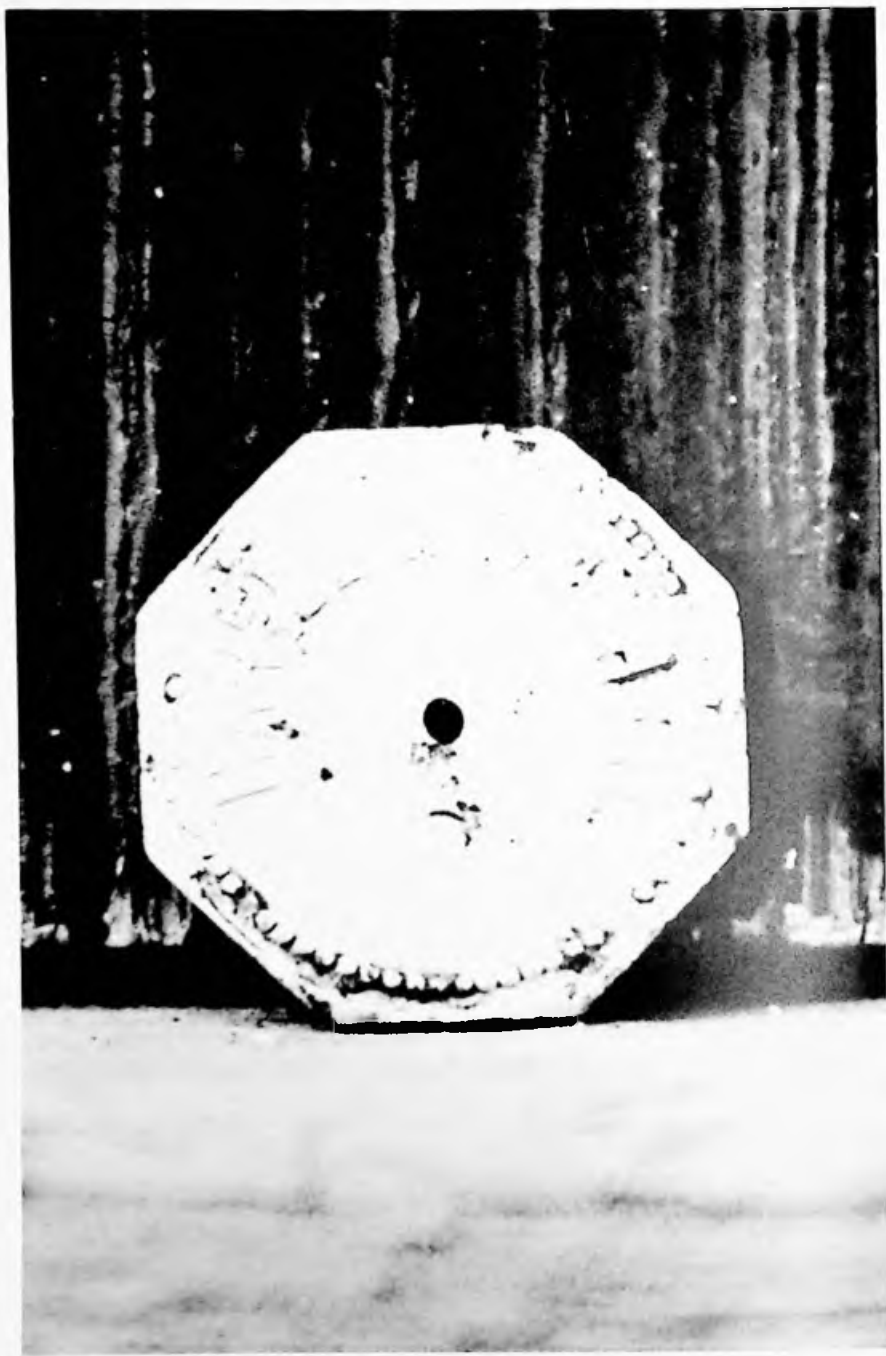
In the wintertime, they [Elena Farms] planted turnips in the fig orchards to fertilize the figs. We'd eat figs in the fig season and turnips in the winter. We'd eat anything we could get a hold of back then.

Elena Farms provided supplemental income – sometimes sole income – for displaced members of the community. When the cannery first began operations, Mexican laborers brought in by truck performed most of the harvesting.¹⁷ By 1931 the company abandoned this practice and employed local labor.¹⁸ Fig season lasted from June through November 15; during this period, the company added extra employees to the regular payroll, which normally ranged from 80 to 150 people.¹⁹ At the peak of the packing and cotton harvesting seasons, the company hired temporary hands in an unusual manner. Mr. La Blanc tells us:

They used to blow a whistle when they needed help . . . it was a steam whistle . . . from Highlands, Crosby, Goose Creek, all over. You could hear that whistle all the way to Baytown. You didn't have to have any experience or anything. They would hire anybody who would come up, but the old hand who had worked there before had precedence over a new man . . . if they [the cannery] got more than they needed.

The workers earned tokens which varied in value depending on the crop. For each unit of produce the worker turned in at the weigh station he received a token, and at the end of the day he received cash for the value of the tokens collected.²⁰

Two major factors contributed to the success of Elena Farms during this period. First, the economic complexion of the area changed. Many small businessmen whose enterprises failed because of the depression returned to farming for income, thereby increasing the agricultural base; and, with Humble's misfortunes, a large, local labor force became available for low wages. Second, Tyrrell & Garth seized every opportunity to run the canning plant and cotton gin at full capacity year-round. The expanded agricultural base created an additional source of local produce and, coupled with produce shipped from their fields in the Rio Grande Valley after the Upper Coast harvest season, enabled the company to maximize use of the favorable labor situation at the Highlands facility.²¹ Thus, production peaked in the Mid-1930's when Elena Farms packed over three million pounds of produce annually and processed more than 500 bales of cotton per year.²² By 1937, encouraged largely by the increased agricultural activity in the area, the population of Highlands increased to over 2,000.²³



Token used to pay workers at Elena Farms.

Another factor which prolonged the vitality of agriculture in the area involved the United States government's decision to build a federally-funded cooperative agricultural project in eastern Harris County – the Sam Houston Farm Project. Under Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal in 1935, the Farm Security Administration purchased 5,000 acres from the Tyrrell & Garth Company in the area now called McNair, immediately east of Highlands.²⁴ Its proximity to an already successful agricultural community and the low cost of the Tyrrell & Garth acreage made the site attractive for the federal government's farm project. The Farm Security Administration intended to transform tenant farmers into independent, self-sufficient businessmen through the use of scientific agricultural techniques.²⁵ According to Mr. M. L. Rees, project engineer, "We want these farmers to serve as models to prove to the producers of the Southwest that farming can be made profitable by the use of a little common sense coupled with scientific methods."²⁶ Although tenant farmers in eighteen Gulf Coast counties became eligible for low-cost government loans if they could not obtain credit elsewhere,²⁷ most of the project residents were from Houston and Harris County.²⁸

In early 1938, the Farm Security Administration opened the first twenty cooperative units of the Sam Houston Farm Project.²⁹ Each unit contained a small frame house and averaged about seventy acres of the black, fertile gumbo which comprises the soil of the Upper Texas Coast. Under the guidance of Farm Security Administration experts,³⁰ the project farmers grew cotton, sugar cane, and truck crops. Sixty-five government-sponsored farm units operated in 1938,³¹ and by 1941 the Sam Houston Farm Project contained more than 450 residents on 86 farm units.³² Elena Farms purchased cotton and tomatoes from the project farmers, and these purchases enabled the company to continue operations despite a failure of the fig crop in the late 1930's.

Yet even as the Sam Houston Farm Project opened, the agricultural boom in the Highlands area had already begun to decline. When the United States formally entered World War II in 1941, the demand of the war effort for explosives, synthetic rubber, aviation fuel, and other petroleum products revitalized the petrochemical industry along the Texas Gulf Coast. Wartime quotas imposed by the federal government on glass, metal, and sugar – items essential to preserve fruits and vegetables – created a hardship for the cannery.³³ In 1939, the nematode, a parasite which attacks plant roots, began to destroy the fig trees in the Elena Farms orchards, and the changing labor situation made reinvestment in agriculture unprofitable. According to Mr. La Balne: "Humble was expanding and hiring a lot of the people around here. They were making more money there, and many from the cannery went to work for Humble." The high wages offered by Humble to staff its massive war effort enticed nearly every able man who had not entered the armed forces. Thus, shifting fortunes once again dictated economic and social changes.

In light of the deteriorating world political situation, Humble anticipated war-time demand and in 1939 hired and trained hundreds of new employees.³⁴ In 1941, the refinery started construction of a toluene plant, completed two years later, which supplied the raw materials for a large percentage of the explosives used in the United States war effort.³⁵ To replace traditional sources of natural rubber from Southeast Asia, the Defense Plant Corporation contracted with Humble in 1942, to build one of the first synthetic rubber plants in the United States.³⁶ After the invention of the catalytic cracking process, which converts heating oil into high-octane aviation fuel,³⁷ the Baytown refinery produced more of this product than any other refinery in the world and provided other domestic refineries with its surplus compo-

nents of aviation gasoline.³⁸ As a result of such drastic changes in the local economy, compounded by crop failure and wartime rationing, Elena Farms Fruit & Cotton Company filed for bankruptcy in 1942.³⁹ Although American Can Company assumed ownership of the complex, the plant sat idle for several years.⁴⁰ In addition, the Sam Houston Farm Project closed in 1943, after the Federal Works Administration purchased 1,100 acres of the land and on it built a storage reservoir to provide water for the aviation fuel and rubber plants at the Humble refinery.⁴¹ The Farm Security Administration sold most of the remaining acreage at the farm project as individual homesites.⁴² With the demise of agriculture, the petrochemical industry assumed its place as the primary source of income along the Upper Texas Coast.

In the 1980s, some of the 7,000 residents in the Highlands area still raise rice, soybeans, and cattle in moderate quantities; but the once-great orchards, cotton fields, and truck farms now contain housing projects and shopping malls. People work in the refineries, the chemical plants, the heavy industry – or in businesses and services that support them. Agriculture has become mostly a part-time endeavor, pursued in the spare hours or as a diversion during retirement. Ironically, the old Elena Farms complex, recently refurbished, today packages antifreeze, motor oil, and other petroleum-based products.⁴³ The complex stands as a symbol of the fortunes of the Upper Texas Coast in the twentieth century, an example of the transition from a diverse agricultural center to a petroleum-dependent economy.

NOTES

¹Three small towns – Goose Creek, Pelly, and Baytown – were known as the Tri-Cities. The towns incorporated into the city of Baytown in 1948.

²*Tri-Cities and LaPorte Modern City Directory 1946*. (Springfield, Missouri: Page-Interstate Company, 1946), no page.

³Sherri Carver, "Highlands History: Community Site of Farm," *Baytown Sun*, 29 January 1984, Section B, p. 3.

⁴Carver, page 3.

⁵Captain Tyrrell invested large sums of money in real estate by underwriting the efforts of individuals seeking to begin agricultural enterprises. Based on knowledge of adjacent acreage owned by Tyrrell in the area and the fact that his son's investment company later assumed ownership of some of this acreage, we believe he had an interest in the San Jacinto Rice Company.

⁶Betsy Webber, "First Human Tracings in Highlands Were Indians," *Highlands Star*, 25 June 1981, no page.

⁷Webber, no page.

⁸Telephone interview with Karen Collins, 15 November 1985. Ms. Collins was born in Highlands and currently resides there. Her father Claude Cauthen, the last surviving charter member of the First Baptist Church of Highlands, moved to Highlands in 1920.

⁹"Highlands in East Harris County Has Had Splendid Growth in Last 12 Years," *Houston Chronicle-Herald*, 21 February 1937, no page.

¹⁰"Highlands in East Harris County Has Had Splendid Growth in Last 12 Years," no page.

¹¹Personal interview with A. J. Smith, Jr., 9 September 1985. Mr. Smith purchased the defunct Elena Farms cannery complex from American Can Company in 1947. After refurbishing and expanding the cannery, he owned and operated it until 1976. Mr. Smith currently resides in Baytown.

¹²Annie Doss, newspaper clipping from personal diary, c. 1928, no page. Ms. Doss' diary is a collection of personal entries and memorabilia, as well as newspaper clippings, many of which are unidentified and/or undated. From their location in the diary, it is possible to determine approximate dates. Ms. Doss moved to Highlands in 1926 and kept a diary from 1926 until her death in 1969. The Doss family donated her personal papers to the Stratford Branch Library in Highlands.

¹³Personal interview with L. J. La Blanc, 21 October 1985. Mr. La Blanc moved to Highlands in 1928 when Tyrrell & Garth relocated his family from Louisiana. Mr. La Blanc currently resides in Highlands.

¹⁴Personal interview with A. J. Smith, Jr., 9 September 1985.

¹⁵Henrietta M. Larson and Kenneth Wiggins Porter, *History of Humble Oil & Refining Company* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1959), pp. 358-359.

¹⁶Robert C. Cotner and others, *Texas Cities in the Great Depression*, Miscellaneous Papers Number Three (Austin: The Texas Memorial Museum, 1973), p. 153.

¹⁷Doss, unidentified newspaper clipping, c. 1929.

¹⁸Personal interview with L. J. La Blanc, 21 October 1985.

¹⁹The actual records of Elena Farms Cannery are lost. These statistics reflect best estimates compiled from written and verbal accounts.

²⁰Personal interview with L. J. La Blanc, 21 October 1985.

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²³"Highlands in East Harris County Has Had Splendid Growth in Last 12 Years," no page.

²⁴Personal interview with Alton Netherlin, 12 September 1985. Mr. Netherlin is the editor of the *Highlands Star*.

²⁵"5,000-Acre Project Seeks to Prove Tenant Farmer Can Live Well," *Houston Post*, 9 January 1938, no page.

²⁶"5,000-Acre Project Seeks to Prove Tenant Farmer Can Live Well," no page.

²⁷"Sam Houston Farms," *Houston Chronicle*, 5 July 1940, no page.

²⁸"Prospective Buyers Now Moving on South Texas Farm Project," *Houston Chronicle-Herald*, 3 February 1938, no page.

²⁹"First Family Moves in at Sam Houston Farm," *Houston Post*, 6 February 1938, no page.

³⁰"5,000-Acre Project Seeks to Prove Tenant Farmer Can Live Well," no page.

³¹"Highlands Farm \$73,000 Project is Scheduled," *Houston Post*, 7 August 1938, no page.

³²"Sam Houston Farms," no page.

³³Personal interview with A. J. Smith, Jr., 9 September 1985.

³⁴Larson and Porter, p. 600.

³⁵Larson and Porter, p. 597.

³⁶Larson and Porter, p. 598.

³⁷Personal interview with Robert C. Luckner, PhD ChE, 20 November 1985. Dr. Luckner, a manager at the Exxon Company, U.S.A. Baytown refinery, is considered an expert in the chemical engineering field.

³⁸Larson and Porter, p. 589.

³⁹Personal interview with L. J. La Blanc, 21 October 1985.

⁴⁰Personal interview with A. J. Smith, Jr., 9 September 1985.

⁴¹*History of Highlands, Texas*, no author, c. 1981, p. 3.

⁴²*History of Highlands, Texas*, p. 3.

⁴³"Land of Plenty: Farms, Canneries Provided Living," *Baytown Sun*, 12 February 1984, Section B, p. 5.

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