

Katy Residents

Throughout the 1940s and 1950s, the Humble Oil camp in Katy was the largest of its kind in the world. Humble Oil also served as one of the main suppliers of aviation fuel to the U.S. war effort during World War II. Tax revenue from the plant generated much of the money needed to fund Katy ISD. Although at that time Katy ISD consisted solely of what is today the Katy High School ninth-grade center, Humble Oil Company and the residents of the camp played a key role in creating the great district that serves the community today.



The Humble Oil Camp's mess hall bustles with diners

Remember

What Life Was Like

A Look Back at the Humble Oil Camp

Written by Ashley Withers

The workers and residents of the Humble Oil plant were some of the first to settle in the Katy area. Few members of the community, however, even know the plant existed or that it is the main reason for Katy's award-winning school district. The camp represents a lot more than just revenue and a workplace of the past, though. For those who remember the Humble Oil camp, it was a home, a family.

A Katy Trip down Memory Lane

Located in northwest Katy off of Morton Rd., the plant still stands today as a marker of Katy's proud past. "They haven't dismantled the plant," says Wilbur Bingle, gazing at an aerial photo of his old workplace and home. "It's still sitting out there like a ghost town." "And the memories are up here," his wife, Betty interjects, pointing at her head. "They aren't out there where you can see them."

A Neighborhood that Felt Like Home

In 1954, during the camp's peak, it had 71 camp-owned houses, 76 employee-owned houses, three bunkhouses for the single men and women, one mess hall, and one recreation hall servicing a total of 517 people. Gasoline rationing during World War II kept employees and their families at the plant most of the time. The company soon discovered it needed to provide many of the amenities found in a city for the residents of its self-contained camp. It had a nurse on staff, a mess hall for employees, a small convenience store, and a "party line" telephone system on each street to allow for a better flow of communication.

The plant also created a social scene for residents of the camp. "The plant would have all kinds of parties at the rec hall and we played tennis. It was just a lot of fun," says Marjorie Gordon, who was one of the first residents of the Katy camp. Her son, Dennis Gordon, who lived in the camp until he was 15, remembers the friendly and fun community. "They would have barbecues out there and dances for the teenagers," he says. "It was a great time for the wives; it was a great time for the husbands. It was great for building relationships out there. The opportunities it afforded for the kids were great. We were one community."



Charles Cooper, Davalyn Thompson, Larry Mikeska, Marilyn Harris, Dennis Gordon, and Greg Murray all grew up at the Humble Oil Camp

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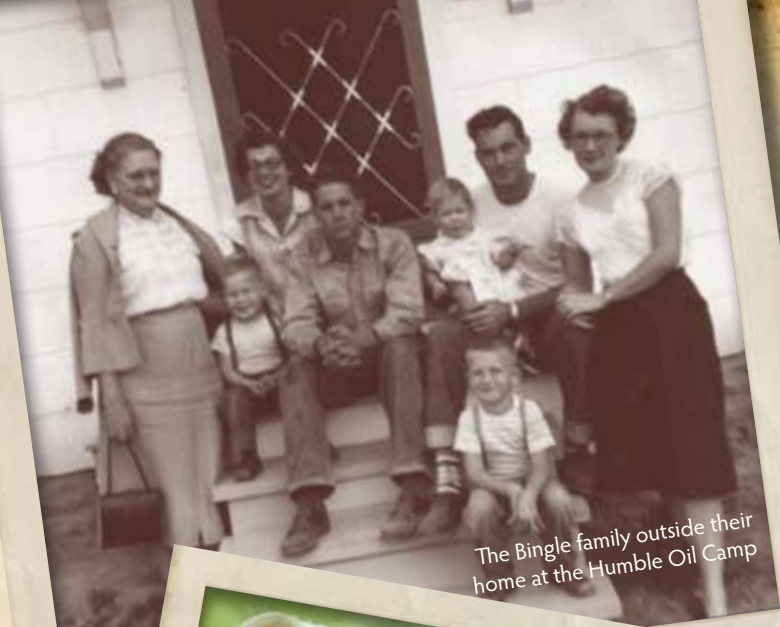
Growing up, Camp Style

Kids who grew up on the camp have only the fondest memories of that time. They turned the whole camp into their playground and even made the school bus ride an adventure. “The school bus would come out and it would pick us up,” says Greg Murray, who grew up in the plant and now serves as president of Enterprise Bank in Katy. “We loved to get in the very back of the bus, because Morton Rd. was not very smooth. Those old buses, you would hit certain dips and you would fly clear to the top of the bus... It was a little rollercoaster ride to ride the school bus.”

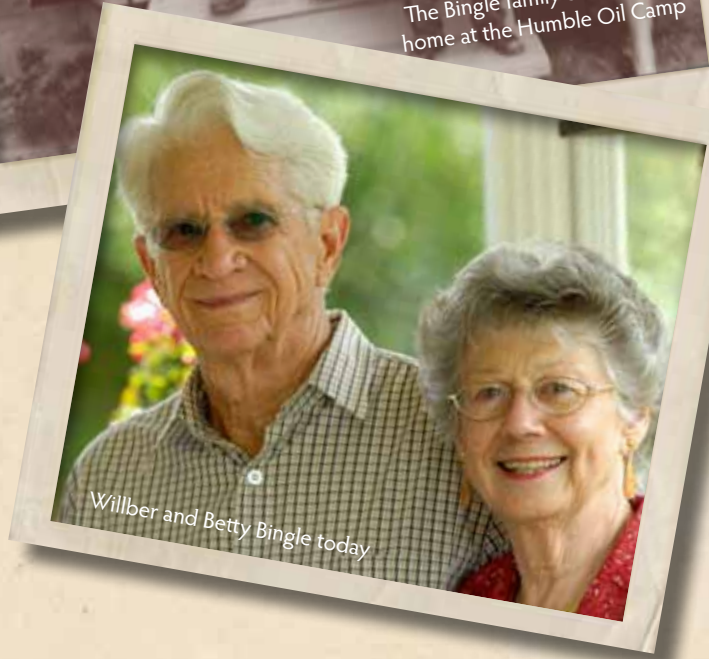
Charles Cooper lived on the camp from 1950 to 1959 and shares the same fond memories. “We did a lot of goofy things – hunt for frogs, fish under the culverts,” he laughs. “But it was just a great place to grow up. If you live in a town, things are usually pretty spread out. But out there, everyone was right there in one area and you could just go down the street, find somebody outside, and play.”



The Humble Oil Camp served as one of the main suppliers of aviation fuel to the U.S. during World War II



The Bingle family outside their home at the Humble Oil Camp



Willber and Betty Bingle today

A Close-Knit Community

The ties of growing up on the camp make the friendships among residents different from others. The Humble Oil plant in Katy holds a reunion every year and most of the camp residents who are able to, come out and catch up with old friends and neighbors. "It is hard to describe how great it was," says Cooper. "As close as all of those houses were, is how close we all were. It was like a family out there."

When the camp closed down in 1960, most of the residents moved into Katy. Some residents bought their camp houses and had them moved into town. You can still see some of these houses today in the neighborhoods around Peckham Park. "We were just one big, happy family," says Wilbur Bingle, who lived and worked on the plant for seven years. "We hated to leave."

The camp site may stand as a mere skeleton today, but remnants of camp life can still be found throughout Katy and fond memories live on in the hearts of all who lived there. **KM**

ASHLEY WITHERS is a junior at Southern Methodist University currently studying journalism and sociology.

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