



#12: Ross Sterling, Humble and the Humble Oil Company

Ross Sterling is a name prominent throughout Humble lore. He was a successful businessman, Texas Governor, and Ross Sterling Middle School in Humble ISD is named after him. But, what is the real connection to Humble?

Sterling was a self-made businessman. He owned feed stores in the oil boom towns of Sour Lake, Saratoga, and Batson. In 1904, as Humble was developing into an oil boom town, he purchased a corner lot adjacent to the railroad for the location of the R. S. Sterling & Co. Grain and Hay store. Having made such a good reputation for himself in the other oil towns, Sterling's feed store did quite well in Humble.

In 1907, he bought four private banks in the four towns where he had feed stores (Humble, Sour Lake, Saratoga and Batson). Those banks were faltering due to the Panic of 1907, and he was able to buy them for \$1,000 each. He immediately closed the Batson bank, and re-chartered the others as State banks. The Humble State Bank fared well in the following years, and served as Sterling's base of operations. He built a brick building for the Humble State Bank in 1908, which was the first business built of brick in all of Humble. It was located next to the present-day Humble City Café. Sterling built the second floor of the bank to accommodate the local Masonic Lodge. A fire on February 14, 1912 destroyed two-and-a-blocks of downtown Humble, including the Humble State Bank building. When he rebuilt the bank in 1912, he moved it to the corner at the end of the block (across from the present-day Humble Museum). That building still stands today.

In 1910, he purchased two oil wells, and slowly started buying more. In 1911, he went into business with other people who owned just a few oil wells and started the Humble Oil Company. They named the company after the town. The offices of the oil company were located in the Humble State Bank, where they also held the directors' meetings. As the oil company took off, Sterling sold his feed stores and his banks. In 1916, Humble Oil merged with several oil producers and re-organized as the Humble Oil & Refining Co. In 1919, it became affiliated with Standard Oil of New Jersey. Standard Oil took full control of the company in 1959, and marketed the Humble, Esso and Enco brands across the world. The company became Exxon in 1972, and then Mobile-Exxon in 1999.

By 1925, Sterling retired from Humble Oil and sold all of his remaining shares. That year, he also purchased the Houston Dispatch newspaper, and then purchased the Houston Post in 1926. He forayed into politics, and served as a member of the Houston Port Commission and as Chairman of the Texas Highway Commission. On January 20, 1931, Sterling was inaugurated as the 31st Governor of Texas, serving a single two-year term. He died in 1949, and is buried in Glenwood Cemetery in Houston.

While never a resident Humble, Sterling did do a lot of business in Humble, and he helped put Humble's name on the map thanks to his oil company. With Humble's past so intricately linked to oil, Sterling's name will be associated with Humble for a very long time.