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Houston's Power Mix: Space, Energy, Old West Legacy

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Shuttle Photo: The first word ever spoken on the lunar surface was "Houston."



It happened on July 20, 1969, when astronauts Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin stepped foot on the moon and said, "One small step from man. One giant leap for mankind."

Armstrong and Aldrin were communicating with the Manned Space Flight Center, later renamed the Johnson Space Center in honor of the late President Lyndon B. Johnson, a native Texan who was also an advocate of space exploration by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA). The training facility for U.S. astronauts is located 23 miles south of Houston.

Because of the NASA center, the one-time capital of the Republic of Texas is called "the Space City." Before 2005, locals bemoaned the space between the Astros' spot in the National League standings and the top of the baseball world.

The team went 43 seasons before winning its first pennant, albeit as a wild-card champion. Prior to its 2005 Fall Classic contest with the Chicago White Sox, the Astros had qualified for the playoffs eight different times but always lost before reaching the World Series.

Changes of nickname didn't help: the original Houston Colt .45s, a 1962 National League expansion club with an affinity for defeat, became the Houston Colts, then took the name Astros after opening the world's first domed ballpark three years later.

Once called "the eighth wonder of the world," the cavernous Astrodome not only created new playing conditions but mandated the creation of synthetic turf after natural grass refused to grow there. Visitors liked the constant 72-degree temperature but said the air-conditioning currents blew out for Astro hitters and in for opponents.

The Ryan Express simply blew batters away. After becoming baseball's first Million Dollar Man in 1980, native Texan Nolan Ryan spent nine seasons as Houston's main man. Jeff Bagwell, who surfaced shortly after Ryan left, later became the first Astro to be National League Rookie of the Year and the first to win a Most Valuable Player award.

Hampered by the spacious dimensions of the Astrodome, Bagwell was the chief beneficiary when the team opened Enron Field for the 2000 season. Within four years, Minute Maid had replaced the scandal-plagued Enron as the title sponsor.

Veteran broadcaster Milo Hamilton also made some noise. The voice of the Astros since 1985, he not only started his 60th season at the mike this spring but penned his controversial memoirs in *Making Airwaves: 60 Years at Milo's Microphone*, released by Sports Publishing last month.

Milo's book mirrors the excitement of an ongoing downtown metamorphosis. Thanks to a \$4 billion building boom that began in 1995, Houston's handsome skyline seems to change by the hour.



Downtown Houston The only city with a pair of retractable roof ballparks (including football-friendly Reliant Stadium), Houston added another swanky sports venue with the October 2003 opening of the Toyota Center, home of professional basketball teams for men (the Houston Rockets) and women (the Houston Comets), as well as a hockey franchise (the Houston Aeros of the American Hockey League).

The NFL is represented by the Houston Texans, who arrived in 2002 to fill the vacuum created by the departure of the old Houston Oilers.

Big sports events, such as baseball's 2004 All-Star Game, invariably have spinoffs that turn a single game into a week-long festival.

The All-Star Gala that year, for example, was hosted by the ultramodern downtown aquarium, where activities included playing carnival games for baseball cards and riding a toy train through a tunnel surrounded by living sea creatures.

Though the Gala was a lavish private party reserved for VIPs, players, and media members, All-Star FanFest was open to the public. It was held in the George R. Brown Convention Center, fresh from a \$165 million expansion. With 1,180,000 square feet of exhibition, meeting, and registration space, it ranks among the nation's top 10 convention centers.

The need is obvious: Houston is growing so fast that it now ranks as the fourth-largest city in the United States, with nearly two million people in the city and more than twice that number in the metropolitan area. Houstonians work hard and play hard.

The Hobby Center joined the growing theater district in 2002, joining the six-year-old Bayou Place in providing entertainment of every conceivable description. The Main Event, blending music, dance, and lasers, and Main Street Square, where clubs and night spots surround gushing fountains, were added this year. Several times a week, four blocks of the pedestrian-friendly complex are closed to vehicular traffic.

Locals love museums, theater, and festivals.

There's a fire museum, a printing museum, a children's museum, a crafts museum, and even something called the National Museum of Funeral History, where people are dying to get in. But all of them combined don't draw as well as the Houston Livestock Show and Rodeo, which packs Reliant Stadium with sellout crowds in late February and early March.

For those who prefer culture to cowboys, the Houston Grand Opera is marking its 52nd anniversary this year and the Houston Ballet is observing its 37th. Both feature ongoing programs, along with the Alley Theater, one of the oldest resident professional theater groups in the U.S. The Houston Symphony's season offers a theme of fairy tales, while the Society for the Performing Arts imports a myriad of artists and companies from around the world.

Since warm weather lingers longer in south Texas, a flurry of ethnic festivals also provides options for visiting sports fans with free time. Turkish, Italian, Greek, Chicano, and Asian-American festivals are annual events, and there's even something called the Original Houston Hot Sauce Festival.

Like Tex-Mex food, other Texas originals are always popping up somewhere. One-of-a-kind artifacts from Texas history, including a Davy Crockett fiddle from 1819, are on display at the San Jacinto Museum of History. Sam Houston's signature red sash is there too, along with a Bowie knife dating from 1830 (when Mexico ruled).

History is important in Houston. Founded more than 160 years ago, it served three years as the seat of the Republic of Texas. After the capital moved to Austin, locals decided to develop a port for shipping livestock and crops. The port was founded in 1841, with the Houston Ship Channel opening in 1914 -- in time to help locals profit from the war in Europe. Houston now ranks as America's second largest port in total tonnage and the largest in foreign waterborne commerce.

The link to the Gulf of Mexico, 50 miles distant, proved as almost as vital as the discovery of oil in nearby Beaumont, east of town, 13 years earlier. Before the Depression, 40 oil