

the suburb of tomorrow

Frank Sharp and the legacy of Oak Forest

by Randal L. Hall

In the mid-1920s, at the age of 19, Frank W. Sharp left the family farm in Crockett, Texas, for big-city Houston. By day he worked as a carpenter's helper and attended business college at night. His co-workers and fellow students must have detected a glint in his eye, some early sign of his ambition even then. Sharp would ultimately reshape the city several times over and ride the housing boom so high that when he fell he would take the governor of Texas down with him.

Sharp got started with a \$150 loan building homes during Houston's oil-driven growth in the 1930s. During World War II, Sharp built housing in Jacinto City and Texas City. As the war drew to a close, Sharp foresaw Houston's extension to the northwest beyond Garden Oaks, which was begun by E. L. Crain just outside the city limits in 1937, and bought 1,132 well-located acres of adjacent land.

Oak Forest came into being in 1946 and Sharp laid out 4,780 lots by mid-1947. He drew on his wartime experience building large numbers of units, and on the ideas and people behind Garden Oaks. He hired the architectural firm Wilson, Morris, and Crain (later famous for creating the Astrodome) to design all the houses. As with Crain's work in Garden Oaks, the building of Oak Forest was "speeded by the precutting of framing members and the preassembly of wall framing sections, cabinets, windows and doors."¹ The design of kitchens, bathrooms, windows, doors, and trim were also standardized, but the variations in plans

allowed the company to have the advertising slogan, "No two houses are alike."

Sharp initially planned to carry out every aspect of developing Oak Forest. He owned Frank W. Sharp Enterprises, an umbrella company that ran four smaller entities: a firm doing concrete and street work; the Douglas Fir Lumber Company, whose two mills in the Northwest kept Sharp immune from widespread shortages of lumber; the Oak Forest Corporation to handle development and merchandising; and the Frank W. Sharp Construction Company to handle the building. A closely connected company did the millwork. His production schedule called for peak output of an extraordinary twenty houses each day. A three-bedroom home with 852 square feet sold for \$9,050, while a two-bedroom model with 737 square feet sold for \$8,000.

In July 1948, Oak Forest got a dose of national publicity when *Better Homes and Gardens* featured several of its homes. At that point nearly a thousand had been completed. The magazine reported that the projected investment of \$32 million with a planned population of 25,000 people meant that Oak Forest was "one of the largest privately financed, single-family home developments in United States or world history." It lauded the attributes of the houses: "attractive outside and inside color

schemes, big windows, lots of closets, planned kitchens, screened porches, and individuality for each house." The distinctiveness of each building held particular significance at a time when suburban developments often took fire for their lack of individuality. According to the article, "Of the first 400 houses built in Oak Forest, only two were alike in planning and only two were white in color."

In September 1948, Sharp shifted gears. Rising material prices and the cost of overhead had cut his profits. Small builders often beat his total production costs. He reinvented his role, allowing other builders (such as Charles R. Brace, who previously had a large role in developing Garden Oaks) to take over construction in Oak Forest while Sharp provided lumber at a good price, accounting support, and so on. Skilled laborers were paid at a piece rate. It was "an extraordinary free-enterprise system of piecemeal and subcontracting," according to *Architectural Forum*.²

As the community grew, Sharp saw new avenues for profit. In 1953, he proposed to start the Peoples State Bank in Oak Forest and commissioned two economists to analyze the area's potential. Their report projected that 1,301 new houses would be built "in the immediate Oak Forest area" during 1953. One new shopping center with 12,000 square feet on Ella Boulevard on the border between Oak Forest and Garden Oaks was to open on May 1, 1953. It would house "two doctors, one dentist, one lawyer, one jewelry store, one liquor store, one ladies-ready-to-wear store, one general merchandise store and one bakery."³ In addition, Sharp had two larger centers under construction.

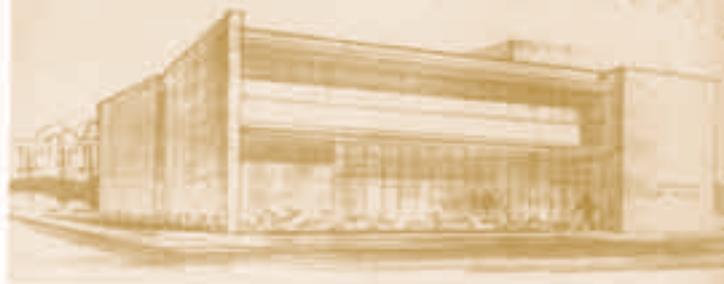
In 1955, Oak Forest neared completion. At age forty-eight, Sharp began development of Sharpstown, a projected ten-square-mile community on Houston's west side that would earn him national fame. At its dedication, Norman Mason, the Federal Housing Admin-



Frank Sharp



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PROPOSED BANK WILL SERVE NORTHWEST HOUSTON

Now under construction, the modern Oak Forest State Bank is expected to open early in February. Designed of brick and glass by Wilson, Mirren and Craig, the \$15,000 building will have two floors. The bank will occupy the first floor and the second will be rented as office space.

Promotional rendering of what would be the Oak Forest State Bank.

building—on Texas scale—the Suburb of Tomorrow. It's billed, natch, as the biggest real-estate subdivision in the world: 25,000 homes, 100,000 people." In the exciting new world, Oak Forest was left in the dust as simply Sharp's "first biggest-in-the-world development." Sharpstown did not quite reach the size initially estimated, totaling about 15,000 homes on 4,000 acres, but it rightly was Sharp's crowning real estate achievement.

Sharp expanded his business enterprise into banking and insurance, but in early 1971 his reputation crashed in a massive financial and political scandal. Sharp schemed to manipulate the stock price of an insurance company he controlled, with the hope of gaining passage of a favorable bank bill in the Texas legislature. He made unsecured bank loans to various political figures, including Governor Preston Smith, and they used the money to buy stock in Sharp's insurance company. Through friendships with the Jesuit Fathers of Houston, Sharp persuaded the group to borrow money from the bank and then loan it to his realty company. He later convinced the fathers to buy, at artificially high prices, the insurance company stock owned by the politicians. But the Securities and Exchange

administration's commissioner, called the subdivision "a new experiment in our way of life."

The scale of Sharp's ambition for Sharpstown was the biggest change from Oak Forest. *Popular Science* breathlessly reported, "On the gusty plains at the edge of Houston, Texans are

Commission did its job and uncovered Sharp's maneuvers. The Sharpstown State Bank collapsed. Nationally Sharp became just another example of that "well-established stock figure in the folklore of American villainy:" the "Texas flimflam man."⁴ In 1971, he pleaded guilty to securities and banking violations. Though he received only a \$5,000 fine and three years of probation, his reputation and influence never revived.

While the property values and demographics of the Sharpstown area changed dramatically when many whites fled to more-distant suburbs, Oak Forest remained more stable. Given that the banking scandal has all but faded from memory, Oak Forest may well be Frank Sharp's enduring legacy. But in typical Houston fashion, the location and attractiveness of the neighborhood's plan appear to be the undoing of its original character. Older ranches and cottages are being scrapped and replaced, though the current economic downturn may slow the bulldozers down. Some builders respect the restrained size of the original construction, but many have plopped down mega-houses. On the other hand, the new homes—though jarring—could be said to match the brash expansiveness of the one-time farm-boy who built the neighborhood. 🏠

1. "Texas Subdivision Has 4780 Different Houses," *Architectural Forum* 87 (July 1947): 86–87.
2. "A New Method of Merchant Building," *Architectural Forum* 91 (September 1949): 75–77.
3. John P. Owen and Alan D. Carey, *A Survey of the Oak Forest Area to Determine the Economic Validity of the Charter Application of the Proposed Peoples State Bank* ([Houston], no publisher, March 1953), 27–29.
4. A. James Reichley, "The Texas Banker Who Bought Politicians," *Fortune*, December 1971, p. 95.