

New Refinery Continues Sugar Town's Legacy

[isc](#) | Feb 01, 2010

When David Reynaud steps outside his office at the *News Examiner* in Lutchter, Louisiana, to catch a breath of fresh air, he can hear the sound of massive steel pilings being driven into the ground.

That sound is coming from the new sugar refinery being constructed in the neighboring town of Gramercy.

"People in town are starting to talk as they see signs of construction," said Reynaud, who is editor for the *News Examiner*. "They're starting to get interested now that they actually see some work getting done."

The new refinery being built will be owned and operated by Louisiana Sugar Refining, LLC, a joint venture among Sugar Growers and Refiners, Inc., Cargill and Imperial Sugar Company. Imperial expects it will strengthen the sugar cane industry in southern Louisiana and bring an economic boost to the region.



David Reynaud, editor of the St. James Parish News Examiner.

Sugar refining is not new to these two towns separated by a single street and situated along the banks of the Mississippi River just 45 miles northwest of New Orleans. Many of the combined 6,000 townspeople grew up with the old Colonial refinery, as they still call it, which was founded in the 1890s along with the surrounding town of Gramercy.

The old refinery has been run by several companies since – including Colonial Sugars starting in 1902 – and is now owned and operated by Imperial Sugar.

Reynaud, who also edits the *The Enterprise* in Vacherie across the river, was born and raised in Gramercy. He said many of his friends' fathers have worked at the Gramercy refinery.

"It's been an important facility in the upbringing of people around here. My Godfather's father was a Colonial plant manager. A lot of my high school friends used to work there in the summer to make a little extra money."

While Reynaud, 32, is admittedly a relative newcomer to much of the area's history, he believes the new refinery is a plus for Gramercy and Lutchter.

“Any time you can start new construction and bring in some new jobs, that’s always good. It makes people feel a little more secure when things are improving.”

Lutcher and Gramercy are located within St. James Parish, total population of 21,000 and home of many sugar cane farming families.

Dale Hymel, president of St. James Parish since 1992, has family that continues to farm sugar cane today.

“All the sugar cane that you can see from the Gramercy refinery is still grown and harvested on the property my family owns.”

Currently, that’s about 2,000 acres, 800 of which the family purchased from one of the past owners of the existing refinery.

Hymel said his grandfather started the family’s sugar cane business. “I drove him through the sugar cane fields so he could inspect the crops. I started driving tractors on my own when I was ten years old.”

After working in the cold weather and rain during the harvest season, Hymel made the decision to go to college.

He thinks the new refinery is a “win-win situation for farmers and consumers” and will continue to provide a solid source of employment for parish residents.



Dale Hymel, president of St. James Parish since 1992, has family that continues to farm sugar cane today.

Gramercy’s mayor, Herman Bourgeois, hopes the new refinery brings additional jobs to the community.



Gramercy’s mayor, Herman Bourgeois, hopes the new refinery brings additional jobs to the community.

“We’re always looking for progress. We’re always looking to keep our people employed. And we welcome a good neighbor, just like Colonial has been for many years for the town of Gramercy.”

Part of that progress will come in the refinery’s state-of-the-art equipment and automated processes, which the

Mayor believes will be safer for members of the community who work there.

“We support cane farming here in St. James Parish. It’s one of our major industries. The old refinery has employed a lot of local people in communities from the river parishes. And we’re just tickled to death to have an expansion and a good, permanent employer in Gramercy.”

Lloyd Kliebert started working at the old refinery 41 years ago. He is currently a maintenance coordinator at the plant for Imperial Sugar Company and president of Local 1167-P UFCW. The plant currently has about 275 Imperial employees and 190 contractors.



Lloyd Kliebert, maintenance coordinator for Imperial Sugar Company

“I still have a lot of questions,” Kliebert said. “My hopes are that the new refinery will be something good for the community, something good for the town and the workers who put their lives into this refinery. And if not for themselves, then for their families. It’s something that’s been handed down from grandfather to father to son.”

Case in point, Kliebert’s father started work at the refinery in the 1940s, and now he has two of his own sons there.

Kliebert, who will be 62 in May, also was born and raised in Gramercy. “I’ve been living here all my life. I live two streets away from the refinery. My mom lives one street closer. In fact, she can sit on her porch and watch the new refinery being built every day.”

The new million-ton-per-year sugar refinery is expected to bring more than 500 construction jobs as well as new plant jobs to the Gramercy area.

Groundbreaking is set for Wednesday, February 3. Representatives from Sugar Growers and Refiners, Cargill and Imperial Sugar will be joined by local, state and congressional officials.