



90 Years: As Conroe Has Grown, so Has the Chamber

By Matt Beardmore



Ninety years ago, the dirt streets in Conroe, Texas, were just being paved as it was enjoying an economic boom during the Great Depression.

That growth has continued as Conroe has become a thriving city and county seat in Montgomery County that serves more than the 100,000-plus people who call it home.

Named after Isaac Conroe, a former Illinois Civil War captain who founded the city and helped it flourish as a lumber town in the 1880s, Conroe "blossomed into a major shipping center for livestock, lumber and crops with lumber mills, brickyards, a

cotton gin, as well as hotels, general stores and a rapidly growing population before the turn of the century," according to the City of Conroe website.

But, as the Great Depression took hold, George W. Strake hit oil on Dec. 13, 1931, on the 8,500 acres he leased just southeast of Conroe. It changed the city's fortunes long into the future, making it a destination for those looking for a better life and, indirectly, serving as the impetus for the creation of the Chamber.

"While the rest of the country was still languishing in the Great Depression, Conroe had an economic boom," said Larry Foerster,

Conroe on Monday, May 21. Despite the fact that "many who were expected to attend were absent for this meeting," over 30 business leaders attend to perfect the plans of incorporation.

chair of the Montgomery County Historical Commission and a Conroe resident since 1978. "There were thousands of men from around the country that moved into Conroe just to find work in the oil fields."

Due to this oil boom, Conroe at one point reportedly had more millionaires per capita than anywhere else in the United States. Among those wealthy Conroe residents who made it big thanks to the oil boom was Mayor Harry Crighton, who "sold his drugstore to pursue the oil business." Crighton was a strong proponent of the creation of a Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce, now known as the Conroe/Lake Conroe Chamber of Commerce.

Two days after the Chamber was officially organized on May 30, 1934, a Conroe Courier article about the new organization delivered this message: "If we are to have new industries, more paved streets, better living conditions for our farmers we must concentrate our efforts. The Chamber of Commerce is the best known medium by which our efforts may be concentrated. Boost the Chamber of Commerce."

The development of the Chamber followed a failed attempt to form one in the 1920s. There were two main reasons it was unsuccessful, according to Foerster. "Number 1, we had World War I and with a lot of men off to war, much of the business focus during that time period was winning the war," he said. "Also during that time we had Prohibition and a lot of saloons and other small businesses shut down. It wasn't a good time for business."

Timber and agriculture were Conroe's biggest businesses in the 1920s. At the time, Conroe, even within the city limits, was a very rural area. The city started to transform in the 30s.

During that decade, Harry Crighton promoted the development of new paved roads – one of which (the current-day Crighton Road) connected Highway 75 to the oilfields in order for trucks to avoid driving through downtown Conroe.

Crighton shared his wealth and passion to make Conroe a better place as he "hired architect Blum E. Hester to build a movie palace similar to the great Majestic Theatre in Houston using native stone like that of the capitol in Austin." Crighton Theatre opened

R.D. Simonton was unanimously nominated to serve as the first Chairman of the Board. According to the Courier, May 25, 1934, Simonton's roles included: make a budget, "secure the number of prospective members, and work out a plan whereby the organization may be completed without undue delay."

in 1935 and "became the crown jewel of downtown," Foerster said.

The theatre – today located around the corner from the Owen Theatre, which was built in 1946 as the Weisinger Pontiac/GMC Dealership – closed in the mid-60s but was completely restored in 1978 through the efforts of community leaders.

"This new community pride came from the people who, even if they weren't millionaires, were at least prospering in their businesses," said Foerster, a former Chamber board chairman. "They said, 'we need to do more – we need to put Conroe on the map.'"

Conroe, the county seat of Montgomery County and the birthplace of the Lone Star Flag, now holds a prominent place on the Texas map. The city's population, according to the U.S. Census, was 101,405 in July 2022. From July 2015 to July 2016, the population of Conroe increased by nearly 6,000 – or 7.8% – to 82,286, making it the fastest growing city in the nation during that time among those with at least 50,000 residents.

Foerster said that Conroe's reach goes much further than the 100,000-plus residents who call it home. The area's major hospitals, strong business community (the Chamber

is a 5-Star accredited chamber) and thriving downtown area are big draws for those who reside outside the Conroe city limits. Conroe is also home to the 22,000-acre Lake Conroe, W.G. Jones State Forest and Sam Houston National Park.

"People can go boat or enjoy the restaurants and the outdoor entertainment (at Lake Conroe)," Foerster added. "Then with the growth of downtown Conroe, there are more bars and theaters and shopping venues that are attractive to people, including young professionals."

"The quality of life makes Conroe a great place to visit and to live," he added. "People have moved here



The Chamber initially met in the old Burch Hotel as it formed in 1934.



Larry Foerster

Timeline - 1934 to Today

1934 – The official formation of the Montgomery County Chamber of Commerce takes place in the summer of 1934 with newly-elected mayor of Conroe, H.M. Crighton, calling for its formation. A meeting was held in the Burch Hotel in downtown

Only a week or so later, on June 1, 1934, the headline in the Courier reads "Organization of C. of C. is Completed." With more and more support of the business people in the area, the Chamber was established. Simonton names a committee to select the first Board of Directors for the coming year, and



because of job opportunities. The schools are perceived to be better, as are the quality of the medical services. People also want more space and to escape the congestion in Houston."

The construction of I-45 was instrumental in the growth of Conroe, although there are concerns that the existing transportation infrastructure cannot meet the area's growth and expansion. Part of the area's growth has been impacted by the development of The Woodlands community, which celebrates 50 years in 2024. "The growth of The Woodlands stimulated more interest in Conroe," Foerster said. "More businesses and professional people wanted to come – with that business growth came business and professional people interested in the Chamber of Commerce."

Over the past 90 years, the Chamber has grown from three charter members – The Conroe Courier, Gulf States Utilities Company, and The Conroe-Lufkin Telephone Exchange – to more than 1,000 today. Throughout its history, the Chamber has lent its support and helped incubate countless community organizations, initiatives, and events, such as the 1949 Montgomery County Historicade celebration that honored the area's pioneers, Montgomery County Fair Association, the creation of Lake Conroe, the Conroe-North Houston Regional Airport, and Leadership Montgomery County.

The Chamber's dedication to "improving the economic quality of life in Montgomery County" is unquestioned. The organization has played a significant role in creating the business-friendly atmosphere that the Conroe Economic Development Council says, "attracts a wide variety of industries ranging from tourism and dining to distribution, manufacturing, and professional services."

Conroe is clearly a much different place than when Foerster arrived in 1978 when he was hired as an Assistant District Attorney at the downtown courthouse. "I wouldn't call it a backwater town when I arrived – there were over 10,000 people here – but it was a small town with only one or two decent restaurants. If you went to the grocery store or post office, chances were good you'd know a number of people in line," Foerster said.

Foerster said he never expected Conroe to grow as much as it did, but after living here for more than four decades and raising a family with his wife Martha, he has no plans on leaving.

"Our roots are deep in this community," he said. "We look forward to many good years here in Conroe where the quality of life is as good as you'll find anywhere."

that same month the committee selects the first Chamber of Commerce Secretary (i.e., president) – S.M. Patterson, who came from Austin to serve in that role.

The original leaders of the Chamber waste no time in getting things done for the community. The first meeting for the Board

of Directors is Friday, June 27, 1934. During their first meeting, the Board started three separate committees: Good Roads, Agricultural, and Civic Improvement. Securing the completion of Highway 105 is one of the first major areas of focus for the Chamber.