



# A STRONG FOUNDATION: DAYTON CHAMBER HALL OF FAMERS REVISIT ORGANIZATION'S EARLY DAYS

By Matt Beardmore



Nearly a quarter-century has passed since there was a strong push among members of the Dayton community to split from the Liberty-Dayton Chamber of Commerce and create their own chamber. Thanks to the efforts of many during that time, the Dayton Chamber of Commerce has a strong membership base today in a city with plenty of growth potential.

Located just a few miles apart, Dayton and Liberty have a long, combined history. Dayton was "originally part of the town of Liberty, which was established in 1831 during the time of Mexican rule" and it was referred to as West Liberty until its name was officially changed in 1885 "when it reported a population of 60."

It was at Dayton High School on March 25, 1977, when "the Liberty and Dayton Chambers merged their organizations at the first annual meeting and banquet of the Liberty-Dayton Chamber of Commerce."

However, in the late 1990s/2000, there were rumblings among some Dayton residents that they were not receiving equal treatment in terms of businesses coming to their town and the financial benefits that came along with that.

Larry Wilburn, who along with his wife, Denise, have owned Pappy's BBQ in Dayton since 2002, was the president of the Dayton Youth Sports Association during the late 1990s and remembers no businesses in town being able to offer sports team sponsorships at that time.

"Boyd Arnold, who was in real estate and was a well-respected home builder at the time, made a statement that rang very true," said Wilburn, a 2023 Dayton Chamber of Commerce Hall of Fame inductee along with his wife, Denise. "He said, 'you can't go anywhere in Dayton and even buy a pair of socks.' We had nothing over here except for a couple of fast-food joints and a thrift store, so Boyd Arnold's comment struck a chord with everyone here and it kind of got the ball rolling to form the Dayton Chamber."

Bob Edwards, a founding member of the Dayton Chamber of Commerce, also recalls there being those within the Dayton community who were opposed to the town creating its own chamber.

"There were a lot of people in Dayton who were all for Dayton creating its own chamber, but a few were not in favor," he said. "I was a member of the Liberty-Dayton chamber, so when I became a member of the new Dayton Chamber, I was no longer a member over there, so the Liberty-Dayton Chamber definitely lost some membership."

According to Alan Conner, a member of the Dayton Chamber who voted to merge that organization with the Liberty Chamber in 1977, "Dayton was beginning to grow very quickly and people in Dayton felt like Dayton was being overlooked."

Two people that cannot be overlooked when talking about the formation of the Dayton Chamber of Commerce are Gene Touchstone and Arnold, who Edwards said were "the ones that did the hard work and convinced people to pull this all together."

Touchstone and Arnold were the first two presidents of the Dayton Community Development Corporation (Conner, a 2023 Dayton Chamber of Commerce Hall of Fame inductee with his wife, Mary Ellen, was the third), which was formed in 1996 by the City of Dayton to assist business development. Touchstone, the longtime owner of Trinity Valley Tractors in Dayton, passed away in 2012 at age 89.

"Many say he was the person most to credit for (the) beginning of the Dayton Chamber of Commerce," according to Touchstone's obituary.

Named Citizen of the Year in 1989 by the Liberty-Dayton Chamber of Commerce, Arnold also served as vice president of the DCDC. He died in January 2017 at 88 years old, shortly after the Dayton Chamber of Commerce inducted him, Touchstone, Edwards, John Simmons, and John Otto into its 2017 Hall of Fame Class.

Simmons was named one of the Dayton Chamber's original directors in late 2000, along with Cliff Richey, Mike Fielder, Bill Sjolander, Betty Tankersley, and Mary Ellen Conner, who continues to serve as a chamber Ambassador.

Otto was also instrumental in the formation of the Dayton Chamber of Commerce, serving as the DCDC's treasurer. He later served six terms in the Texas House of



Representatives and was honored as the Citizen of the Year by the Liberty-Dayton Chamber of Commerce in 2012. Shortly before Otto passed away at the age of 71 in 2020, the "Dayton City Council renamed a portion of SH 146 as the John Otto Expressway in recognition to the citizens of Dayton."

A discussion about the forming of the Dayton Chamber of Commerce would not be complete without mentioning Lester Ray Wisegerber, who was named the organization's first president. Wisegerber, a Dayton resident for more than three-quarters of a century, has also served the city in a number of other roles, such as being a member of the Dayton City Council, Dayton ISD school board, and Dayton Volunteer Fire Department, being president of the Dayton Historical Society, and helping Conner, Edwards and several others create the Dayton ISD Sports Hall of Fame, which Wisegerber was inducted into in 2021.

"We thought we needed someone on the Chamber who was well-respected, and he knew everyone in town," Edwards said of Wisegerber.

In the months leading up to the Dayton Chamber of Commerce's first event – "Round-up 2000" on October 24, 2000 – the "chamber's organizing committee hired Rick Sparks as interim president of the chamber," the chamber completed the bylaws and articles of corporation, opened a bank account and post office box, and volunteers agreed to help run the chamber office at 115 Bryan Street.

During this time, the DCDC stressed with a local publication, the Liberty Vindicator, that Dayton did not want to "dissolve the Liberty/Dayton Area Chamber of Commerce but hope that two Chambers can work together in a positive way." The Liberty County Chamber of Commerce, though, closed in 2022 due to "financial woes caused, in part, by the COVID-19 pandemic." Just months before dissolving, the Liberty County Chamber of Commerce finally dropped "Dayton" from its name.

The Dayton Chamber of Commerce, meanwhile, has seen its membership grow to more than 200 since its inception. The city is also experiencing a tremendous amount of business growth, which was a big draw for Sean Stockard, who was named the chamber's new Executive Director on October 2, 2023.

While many of the older chamber members such as Conner, Edwards, and Wilburn who helped start and support the Dayton Chamber of Commerce in the early days are not as active in the organization as they once were – Wilburn said he and his wife have "kind of let some of the younger ones pick up and run with it" – they continue to support the chamber and its leadership.

"The old members have either died or retired," Edwards said. "The board now is made up of 45-50-year-old people, which is good. They have the time and energy to move the chamber forward."