

## THE PHOENIX

I.

This is not a story about a city in Arizona nor is it about a bird that rose up out of the ashes of a city while it still burned in ancient times. It's about a small town and an old man in the early 1900's.

Who am I and why do I think I can write something about things that happened three quarters of a century ago? Well, I am one of a very few old timers left who can recall many incidents of my early days. I was born in Montgomery County somewhere near the middle of Lake Conroe between Montgomery and Willis. My grandn-a said it was on the trail that Sam Houston travelled between Washington on the Brazos and Huntsville. We moved to Willis and later to Conroe and I lived in Conroe when it didn't have a post office. If you read my story you will understand that the statements are true. Old people usually live in the past, recalling incidents of long ago. If they are not recorded they are lost forever.

Conroe was a small town. In the latter part of 1910 it was the county seat of Montgomery County and the junction of two railroads. A few saw mills were around and some farming was done. Otherwise there wasn't much to make it grow. The town had more kids then than grown ups and I was one of the kids, about 13 years old. We lived in what was known as the Old Guinn Home just across the I. G. N. railroad about a stone's throw from the middle of town, which covered about two blocks of wooden buildings. The Conroe Hotel and Mistrot Munn's Dry Goods Store were the only brick buildings in town. Two drug stores, three saloons, four grocery stores four dry goods stores, four hotels and rooming houses, three restaurants, and several other places -- furniture store, feed store, barbershops and pool hall. We had our volunteer fire department -- one hose cart, a two-wheeler pulled by hand, that

was all we needed. No serious fires had ever occurred in the town. But this was not to be

### Fire

On the night of February 21, 1911, things were drastically changed. About midnight the old whistle at the Santa Fe roundhouse began to moan. Charles Gray and my father worked the night shift and were notified that a big fire was burning at the Capitol Drug Store and Post Office. They pulled on the whistle cord until the boiler was out of steam. By then the entire town had been aroused. The volunteer fire department made a gallant run to where the blaze was. No one knew or ever will know the exact starting point. It was a very cold night. A blue norther had descended on the town. The drug store and post office had office rooms overhead, and any one of them could have had a fire going to keep warm. They could have left a fire in their stoves. Every one had a different opinion as to where the starting point was, but one thing for sure, Mrs. O'Leary's cow didn't kick over a lantern. When the firemen hooked up the hose and turned on the water, there wasn't enough pressure to reach the blaze, and after a few minutes the men abandoned the hose. Everyone knew there was no hope of saving the town. The north wind was blowing too hard. The fire had already begun to spread to other places, south, east and west it raged. Business men began to open their places and everyone started to pulling things out in the street, dragging anything they could over on the Courthouse lawn and along the I. G. N. railroad tracks. Many just pulled them out in the middle of the streets, only to see the fire get them later.

It would be hard to explain the route the fire travelled. By daylight everything had gone up in smoke except the Conroe Hotel. Munn's dry goods store and Wahrenburger's store. The hotel was a brick building and had a flat roof. Men got on top of the building with wet blankets. Every time a blazing spangle hit the roof they smothered it out. The other two places were on the north side of the fires and no sparks came that way. Along



A View of Downtown Conroe After the "Big Fire" on February 21, 1911  
Buildings Still Standing Include the Courthouse, the Old Bank Building and the Area Where Carter Drug is Now Located

Railroad Street from Miss Annie Wahrenburger's to the Santa Fe railroad tracks was levelled to the ground. All along the I.G.N. tracks were piles of belongings that had been salvaged from the fire.

Several families had lived in their places of business. Among them was Uncle Nick and Aunt Kate, who lived in back of the restaurant they ran. The day after the fire they came to our house. He had stored his belongings in our back yard. They look over the collection and had a long talk with my parents. He was going back in business as soon as he could. They made arrangements with my parents to stay with us until they could get things started again. Uncle Nick went away for a few days and came back with a wagon full of tents and poles. He erected two tents about where the old Lyric picture show was, facing the railroad tracks, one behind the other -- a plank floor and counter, stools, and a couple of tables, and the front tent was ready for business. The rear tent was kitchen and sleeping quarters. Aunt Kate arranged things and they moved in. In a short time they were serving meals.

I would go over to their place after school to see how they were getting along. One afternoon I found Uncle Nick back of the tents painting something on a piece of canvas tacked on a frame about 12 feet long. The words were "The Phoenix". At the end he had a picture of a bird with wings spread, rising up out of red flames. I didn't know what to make of it, and he explained the story of the bird that rose up out of the ashes of an ancient city while it still burned. This was to be the name of his restaurant and he was to put the sign in front as soon as the paint dried. In a short while he put the sign up. As the passenger trains went by each day people would put their heads out the windows and shout encouraging words to the old man. This was the first place to go back in business after the fire.

Kate Carnochan - Jan 29, 184 #3  
Nick Carnochan - July 24, 184  
Apr. 27, 1929 #3

but saw that wouldn't be enough. Besides it let too many flies in, so he decided to rig up fans to help things along. The fans were of the Rube Goldberg style. Three palmetto fans, the kind we used with our hands, were nailed on 1" by 2" boards and were so arranged that they would swing up and down the counter. A rope was attached so that a person could sit at the end of the counter and pull up and down on the rope and the fans would swing over the counter. It didn't create too much breeze but was a boost to the tanglefoot flypapers that he scattered around.

Someone to operate the fans was the next problem. He got a boy by the name of Steve to sit at one end of the counter. When a customer came in Steve started the fans in motion. He usually made about a dozen pulls. By then he would be fast asleep. This wouldn't do so Uncle Nick fired him. There wasn't anyone to operate the fans. He said I would do so I got my first job. I lasted about a month.

## II. Lumber.

Some time around 1913 strangers came to town. They were planning to build a sawmill close to town. Well, that wasn't anything new. We had sawmills all around, but this wasn't to be a small mill. Would be one of the biggest in the world. Hundreds would be required to make it go.

So the Delta Land and Timber Company began their plans. A surveying crew was formed from boys around town. Paul Evans, Lawrence Crooke, Caswell Longmire, Henry Schaffie, Johnnie Dunhan and I were part of the crew. Bert Hawkins was behind the tripod. We started a line from where the mill was to be, then back through the river bottom until we hit the timber land it was about 20 miles, that was to be a standard railroad track. It took about a month to do the job, camping in the woods and working was fun,

When we finished the line and came back to town, work had already begun on the

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Soon there were heard the sounds of hammers and saws all over town. People had been inspired by the old man's spunk and were erecting temporary places of business. An ordinance was passed that required all permanent places to be fireproof. This was a welcome word to the jackleg carpenters who had abandoned the hillbilly stand on the Courthouse lawn. They all had found something to do. The temporary buildings would require less work. Where they usually used a dozen or more nails they found that three or four would do. Besides, they would get the job of tearing them down. Before the end of the year, contractors, brick masons and plasterers were in town building new stores of brick. While the construction was well under way, a fire burned the interior of the Munn's Dry Goods store. They wasted no time in building back. Wahrenberger's frame building was torn down and a brick was put up. The town was again on its way.

Back at the Phoenix things were going strong. Uncle Nick had been a bugler in the Civil War. When Aunt Kate got the meals ready, he would don his old gray Army blouse and soldier's cap and get out in front of the Phoenix with the old bent-up bugle and sound off the mess call. Then at night he would blow Taps. He said that was to let people know it was time to blow out the lamps and go to bed. After these many years I don't think that was the message at all, but he was telling them to have faith in their town and to build back.

He went into the bread business. Bread was shipped in fresh every morning from Houston. When the bread arrived he would wrap each loaf in old newspapers and have it ready for the customers. There were no complaints about the wrapping but everyone seemed to want an inside loaf that didn't have too much crust. This bothered the old man so he got paper sacks so they could see what they were getting. Signs were all around the tents telling what they had to sell and the prices.

It was beginning to get warm. He rolled up the sides of the tent to let the breeze in

right-of-way and some of the track was laid. We surveyed the mill site and pond a few streets from where the mill town would be. Then our work was over.

The mill was built and logs were filling the pond one morning at 6:30 a.m. The whistle blew, which it would for 20 years or more.

Many new people moved to town, good citizens too. A gin and ice making plant, bakery and many new stores were added to the town. Prosperity was on its way.

On August 16, 1915, a storm hit the town. It was God's way of testing to see if the town had been built back strong. A few signs and awnings were blown down and some roofs leaked. They were repaired in no time. Things were going fine until 1917, when World War I came along. The boys of the town went into service in droves. Most of the homes had flags in their windows, displaying one star or more. For two years the town was quiet. When the war was over the men came back, back to the old town no more to roam. They had seen all they wanted to see. Their town was the most beautiful spot in the world. After the war people were contented to sit around and listen to what the fighters had to tell for a few years. Everything was rosy until the depression came along. The mill might shut down. Looked like the town would soon be dead.

### III. Oil.

One day a fellow by the name of George began to poking holes in the ground. He tried everywhere but wasn't having any luck finding what he was looking for. Old George was a stubborn cuss. He said, "I'll find it or bust." Several miles southeast of town he poked a hole deeper than the rest. Suddenly something black began to shoot out of the hole away up in the sky. George Strake had found what he was looking for -- oil.

The drillers began to shout. In town people went wild. The lease hounds and land developers nearly tore the court house down. Drillers and roughnecks were everywhere.

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The "Boom" was on. Conroe would never be the same. The Strake fletu began. 1932 was the year.

In less than two years people of the town had gone from rags to riches. Men who had gone around in brogan shoes, patched overalls, and 15-cent straws were now wearing shiny leather boots, cord whipped pants, fancy belts and shirts, hats of the J. B. Stetson class, that cost more than they could save in a year before. One day while visiting the town a boy asked me to get in his truck. He wanted to show me his "shack". We went about a mile from town to a fine looking home. A Cadillac was out front on the lawn. He said that was out there just for show. When he wanted to get up and go the truck would do. We went into the kitchen through the back door. The place was nearly as big as my house. Three refrigerators lined the walls. We went into the garage. Another refrigerator was up against the wall, nearly as big as the other three. He opened the door and I could see beer of every brand imaginable. This was for his friends who came by every day. I looked out the back and didn't doubt his word. Empty cans were everywhere. On the way back to town I felt rather blue. The people I knew long ago weren't the same any more. Prosperity was everywhere. They wouldn't build a new town. That would have been a disgrace. Just change the old town's face. The court house and jail were torn down. New ones were put up in their place. A new post office, banks, hotels, restaurants and stores. New schools, the old J. O. H. Bennett school was too close to town. Children didn't have to walk to school any more. Cars could bring them to the doors. New homes were scattered far and near.

In 1942, a new war began, World War II. The youth went away as they did before. Their absence was only slightly felt this time. The town wasn't a small village any more. Four years later the struggle came to an end. The men came home again, not youths any more, but full grown men. Their hopes were never to leave again.

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#### IV. Water.

In the late 1950's Houston and Conroe were growing so fast that fresh water was getting low. Something had to be done soon. Why not build a lake? The old San Jacinto River had millions of gallons going to waste. A dam across the river they would make and soon there would be a lake. The bulldozers and cranes were put to work. The palmettos in the bottom land, the magnolias and other trees along the river banks were pulled up, roots and all. The soil was hauled out by the ton. Soon the lake was made. Lake Conroe it would be called. You could hardly see across the shores. Our old favorite fishing holes were gone, but new ones took their place. Boats of all sizes and shapes skipped over the surface of the lake. Small cottages and large estates dotted the shores. Land that once sold for a dollar an acre was selling for thousands for a lot. People from the big town were scrambling to get a piece of the ground. They wanted to retire with grace. This was the place. New homes were going up. Old Highway 45 is so crowded each day that travelling between Houston and Conroe has slowed to a snail's pace.

Fire, lumber, oil, and water. In that order these are the things that have made this town as it is today,

To close my story, I have this to say.

John, Sam, Pete and Jack, the <sup>A</sup>Medley boys, J. L., Everett, his sons, the McKibbins, Walcom, Joe, Will, George, Henry, and many more, you are not here to see what has happened to your town, but your ghosts still hover around, as they flit to and fro overhead, one will look down, and in a squeaky voice, call out, "We didn't dream our town would ever be what it is today, but we lit the sparks and furnished the wood to start it on its way." Then Uncle Nick will give a toot or two on his new bugle and say, "What you say is true, but the old Phoenix and my bugle encouraged you all the way."