

## CHAPTER VIII

### INSTITUTIONS AND INDUSTRIES

Throughout the history of Montgomery County there have been two main churches, the Baptist and the Methodist. The first Baptist Church in the county was organized in 1838 with the Elder Allen Samuel as its pastor. Elder Daniel Parker, the organizer of one of the first Baptist Churches in Texas, visited this church in 1840 and wrote in his church journal the following words:

. . . I proceeded to Montgomery County, where I found a church with about 20 members of the sound Regular Baptist faith and order who had constituted by the best authority in their reach some time in the year 1838 with Elder Allen Samuel their Pastor. . . . This Church is known by the name of Mount Pleasant Church of the Regular Baptist faith and order Your Humble Servant in Christian Love.<sup>1</sup>

The next report of Baptist activities and a church being organized was in 1844 reported by Reverend Z. N. Morrell. His report contained the following:

. . . Elder R. E. B. Baylor, then residing at La Grange, accompanied me to Colonel Richard Jarman's, some seventeen miles south-east, where we preached for several days and organized a church. . . . Greatly encouraged with the prospect, religiously, west of the Brazos, my mind was impressed strongly that my labors were in demand in the county of Montgomery, which then

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<sup>1</sup> "The Records of an Early Texas Baptist Church", The Quarterly of the Texas State Historical Association, Vol. XI (Austin: The Texas State Historical Association, 1907), p. 117.

extended from the Brazos to the Trinity River. . . .

I visited, as rapidly as I could, a number of the most important points in this region of country, the present locality of Anderson, Colonel Shannon's, Montgomery, Danville, and Huntsville, inquiring after Baptists, and considering the facilities and difficulties relative to a general organization. The country was being rapidly settled, and large congregations met us at every point.

Seven miles west of the town of Montgomery, another monthly appointment was steadily filled, and on the twenty-fifth day of November, 1844, the Post Oak Grove Church was organized, with six members. The presbytery consisted of Elders Wm. M. Tryon and Z. N. Morrell.

On the same day the organization was formed, sister Aaron Shannon, and my son A. H. Morrell related their experiences, and were baptized by brother Tryon.<sup>2</sup>

Another early Baptist Church was organized in the town of Montgomery, December 28, 1850. In this church the renowned R. E. B. Baylor, whose name later became affiliated with Baylor University, held many meetings. In 1855 one of the citizens of Montgomery wrote that:

. . . I took my pen in hand to say a few words about preaching etc. Well, Baptist Church was filled up. Judge Baylor made a very pretty and feeling discourse. A quo si funeral for the late Rev. M. Chilton. The text "Jesus wept" was appropriate. Baylor was not probably the ableist that Chilton had, but his sermon had more of the gospel, simplicity, and wisdom of heart about it. . . .<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Z. N. Morrell, Flowers and Fruits From the Wilderness; or; Thirty-Six Years in Texas and Two Winters in Honduras (New York: Sheldon and Company, 1872), pp. 197-208.

<sup>3</sup> Letter of Nat Hart Davis to Betty Davis, February 11, 1855, in Addison Collection.

Again in 1855 he wrote about a Baptist revival in which he stated:

. . . The Baptist are now trying to get up a revival meeting; commenced Friday night and yesterday and last night, again this morning and at night, and tomorrow at 9 A. M. they propose to meet. Men, women, children, and servants all keep it as a day of fasting and prayer, and then how much longer the meeting is to last I suppose depends in the excitement. I attended the two past nights and may go again tonight. . . .

In 1838 Methodist affairs in Texas were under the supervision of the Mississippi Conference. In 1838 it was arranged by this conference that centering at the town of Montgomery and including all the territory between the Trinity River and Brazos River the Reverend Isaac L. G. Strickland would be in charge. In 1838 Strickland, a circuit missionary, proceeded to Montgomery, where he made his headquarters and organized the first Methodist Church in the country. Services were at first held for this church in the home of a member.<sup>5</sup>

Since Montgomery was made the center of Methodist activities of such a large area -- from the Brazos to the Trinity -- and since it was the only sizeable town in that area, it was apparent that the Reverend Strickland would establish his residence at that place. In 1842 through the contributions of the local carpenters and cabinet

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<sup>4</sup> Letter of Nat Hart Davis to Betty Davis, July 15, 1855, in Addison Collection.

<sup>5</sup> W. N. Martin, "A History of Montgomery," (unpublished Master's thesis, Sam Houston State Teachers College, Huntsville, Texas, 1950), p. 66.

makers, and through subscriptions of the local citizens, the first parsonage in Texas was erected. <sup>6</sup>

This parsonage was replaced by a more modern building in the 1880's, which is still in use; however, it is on a different site from that on which the original building was erected. A monument marks the spot where the first building stood.

In 1850 the Methodists erected a new church on the site of the first church. The church bells, then an innovation in new Texas towns, were given by Peter and Richard Willis, pioneer merchants of Montgomery. At the dedication of this church held on July 27, 1851, it was christened Alexander Chapel. The following describes the dedication ceremony:

In the flourishing village of Montgomery, Methodism seems to be permanently established. At an early period in the exploration of Texas by the missionaries of the Methodist Church, this place was visited, but of the success of their labors here for several years, we are not prepared to speak definitely. But in our visit to this town on last Sabbath we found a church of some thirty odd members, most of whom are truly devoted Christians and te-to-talists. They have evinced their Christian enterprise in sustaining a stationed preacher, and in the erection of a neat and commodious chapel, which was dedicated to the worship of Almighty God on last Sabbath.

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 It was our pleasure to conduct the dedicatory service of the new chapel, which is to be called Alexander Chapel, in compliment of Rev. R. Alexander, the Presiding Elder, of Ruterville District, who has preached there

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<sup>6</sup> Loc. cit.

frequently for His work's sake.

In the delightful services we were assisted by Rev. Bros. Rottenstein and Alexander -- the former offered the first prayer and the latter administered the holy sacrament of the Lord's Supper at the close of the sermon.

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 Rev. Bros. Ogletree, Johnson, and John were present to assist in the subsequent exercises of the meeting. Our first impressions of Montgomery were quite favorable. We learned that a Baptist Church has been organized in this town, and that a handsome subscription for a church edifice has been obtained and that the edifice will be erected forthwith.<sup>7</sup>

Schools played an important part in the early history of the county. In 1837 Doctor E. J. Arnold and C. E. Clepper bought a lot and gave it to the town to be used jointly by the Masonic Lodge and public school. It was not until 1848, however, that a charter was granted and a building constructed for a school. In 1848 the state legislature passed the following act for incorporating an academy at Montgomery:

Be it enacted by the Legislature of the State of Texas, That the institution for the educating of youth, now located at the town of Montgomery, in the county of Montgomery, shall be, and the same is hereby established at said town, by the name of the "Montgomery Academy of Montgomery County."

Be it further enacted, That C. B. Stewart, Jacob Shannon, R. F. Oliver, W. M. Rankin, Benjamin Rigly, J. H. Price, R. B. Martin, M. O. Dimon, J. Wamack, and

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<sup>7</sup> C. Richardson, "Dedication of Alexander Chapel, Montgomery, Texas, "The Texas Methodist Historical Quarterly, Vol. I (Georgetown, Texas: Texas Methodist Historical Association, 1909-1910), p. 236,

E. J. Arnold, the President and Trustee of said Academy be, and they are hereby constituted and incorporated a body politic in deed and in Law, by the name and style of the President and Trustees of the Montgomery Academy of Montgomery County, and by the name they and their successors may, and shall have succession and exercise the privileges herein granted them, be capable of suing and being sued, of pleading and being impleaded, of holding property real and personal, and mixed, and of granting, selling, and conveying the same at pleasure, of having a common seal to be changed at their pleasure, of establishing a Female Department, and such other dependent institutions as they shall deem necessary, and of doing and performing whatever else they may deem proper and necessary for the advancement of said institution, in as ample a manner as persons of bodies politic or corporate can or may by law.

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 Be it further enacted, That said institution shall be open to all denominations of religion, and that this act takes effect from and after its passage.

Approved, March 11, 1848.<sup>8</sup>

The building was a two story house fifty by a hundred feet and the lower story was used for the academy, while the upper story housed the Masonic Lodge. The frame work of the building was of hewn white oak logs weather-boarded outside and later ceiled inside. A partition was removed and the school became coeducational. A fireplace at either end of the building furnished the heat. The window panes were painted red and blue, thus making the light very poor except when the windows were raised. As the panes became broken they were re-

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<sup>8</sup> H. P. N. Gammel, The Laws of Texas 1822-1897 (Austin: The Gammel Book Company, 1898), Vol. III, p. 379.

placed by clear ones and soon enough light crept through.<sup>9</sup>

A blackboard on a stand ran the length of one long wall. This was made of boards painted black with a chalk trough where the pupils carefully put the lumps of chalk with which they wrote. The pupils who could afford it brought a chair and either a desk or table from home. The desks usually had hinged tops which could be opened or locked. The less fortunate children sat on long benches facing the teacher and when writing time came they had to march up to a special writing desk. This desk was a long table down the middle of the school room with the top divided into two tilted surfaces where the pupils seated themselves facing each other.<sup>10</sup>

The first teachers of the Montgomery Academy were J. J. Patton and a lady who taught there before, during, and a short time after the Civil War. These two were followed by E. C. Chambers and a Miss Ames, who taught until the first free school was started in 1872.<sup>11</sup>

Besides the Montgomery Academy there was another school that lasted for a number of years. It was built and taught by

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<sup>9</sup> Dora Davis, "The Development of the School in Montgomery, Texas," (unpublished paper, 1933), p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>11</sup> Loc. cit.

Charles L. S. Jones and was known as the Jones Academy. It had both boarding and nonboarding pupils and taught all subjects. Jones was assisted by his son and daughter who built this up to be a very popular school. When the Civil War came on Jones' son with most of the older boys of the village left for the war and the father was compelled to close the school. After the war was over the building was rented out to two returned soldiers to open a school. These two men were T. J. Peel and Alexander Boyd, both being graduates of Austin College, then located at Huntsville, Texas.<sup>12</sup>

The first public school was built in 1895 on the same spot where the other schools had been located. The house was planned for a school and lodge and when built it adequately housed the Masonic Lodge in its upper story. The downstairs consisted of two rooms, each twenty-four feet square, a twelve foot wide hallway, and two doors at each end.<sup>13</sup>

The pupils for this school were separated into groups of primary and grammar grades, the few who pursued the more advanced studies sat in the room with the grammar school students. The curriculum varied, but more attention was devoted

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 6.

to mathematics and grammar. Latin was usually given two years to the most advanced pupils. English was taught though grammar and spelling were stressed throughout the school. The dictionary was the favorite textbook and classes were combined so that the entire school above the primary spelled from the dictionary. After 1875 the "Blue Back Speller" was a favorite. <sup>14</sup>

Some of the teachers of the early schools of Montgomery became prominent men. Doctor John T. Moore, who later became a prominent doctor in the Medical Arts Building in Houston, was one time principal teacher at Montgomery. Doctor W. B. Bizzell, later president of Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College held this humble office. Doctor C. P. B. Martin, charter professor of Texas Agricultural and Mechanical College who taught agricultural chemistry there was a teacher at Montgomery. Doctor Frank Calcott, professor of the Department of Spanish at Columbia University, was at one time Superintendent of the school at Montgomery. <sup>15</sup>

Some of the school trustees who served nearly a quarter of a century as members of the board of trustees were: Doctor Charles B. Stewart, succeeded by his son Edward Stewart,

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 9

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

Doctor F. A. Young, Jim Riley, succeeded by his son John Riley, Jim Sanders, succeeded by his sons Willie and Robert Sanders. Lester Peel was president of the board for fourteen years and W. B. Gay was an active member for more than fifteen years.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1920's the Montgomery schools were consolidated into an independent school district through the influence of Mildred Price, then a member of the school board, by interesting her brother, Representative Robert A. Powell, in securing the passing of a special act of the State Legislature to create the Independent School District of Montgomery.<sup>17</sup>

The Conroe schools began in 1886 when a one room rough lumbered house was constructed at Isaac Conroe's Mill. It had hand-made benches for desks and its first teacher was Miss Ione Burns (later Mrs. J. A. Knight). This school only lasted five months of the year. The next school house was also a one room affair and was located in the southeast part of Conroe where Jim Traylor lived. In 1894 another room was added and also another teacher. At the time of this school's organization Conroe was under the community system of public schools. Under this system the public schools were organized by the County Judge who actes as

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<sup>16</sup>Loc. cit.

<sup>17</sup>Loc. cit.

ex officio school superintendent. He appointed three trustees in each neighborhood, who organized a school, gave it a name and number, then furnished the County Judge a list of all the children of scholastic age that would attend school. Tax money would then be appropriated accordingly.<sup>18</sup>

In 1899 a new building was built, having four painted rooms. This building was situated on the block of ground south of the present site of the William B. Travis Junior High School Building. At the time of its organization there were only ten grades in the plan, and the three last were designated the high school. Honorable D. A. Frank, now a prominent attorney of Dallas, Texas, was the first Superintendent of schools. The first high school graduating class of the school was composed of one young man and three young ladies who received diplomas of graduation at the close of the scholastic year 1901-1902.<sup>19</sup>

The class of the year 1906-1907 was composed of four young men and eleven young women. The plan still carried only ten grades and Hulon N. Anderson had been the superintendent since 1905, as well as the teacher of all high school subjects except Latin, which was taught by J. T. Terry. In 1909-1910, the class in the

<sup>18</sup> Hulon N. Anderson, "History of the Conroe High School," (unpublished paper, no date), p. 1.

<sup>19</sup> Loc. cit.

tenth grade graduated twelve people and during this year under the superintendency of W. C. Hanner, arrangements were perfected for the addition of the eleventh grade.<sup>20</sup>

In the mid-term of the scholastic year 1911-1912 the entire school was moved into the first brick building built in Conroe. Later this building was named the J. O. H. Bennette Building in honor of J. O. H. Bennette who served the district as president of the Board of Trustees for seventeen years. During his long tenure he contributed thousands of dollars of his own money to help equip and finance the school system of Conroe.<sup>21</sup>

In January 1927, the high school was given a separate building -- the central unit of the present David Crockett High School Building -- and the elementary school was housed in the J. O. H. Bennette School Building. The teachers and pupils of the high school group moved most of the furniture and furnishings, including the library books, by carrying them by hand from the old building to the new school.<sup>22</sup>

In 1927 some new additions were made at the Bennette Building -- among which was a wooden building to house a Free

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 2.

<sup>21</sup> Loc. cit.

Kindergarten; this had been moved from the old school site to the lots now occupied by the new Education Building of the First Baptist Church, and the six room Jessie W. Harris Home Economic Cottage, planned and built under the teacher and by the boys of the Industrial Arts classes, occupied the former site of the Kindergarten or "Addison-Kiddy-Koop," named in honor of H. C. Addison, a long time member of the Board of Trustees. He had contributed freely of his means in construction of the Kiddy-Koop and in providing shop equipment and mechanical drawing supplies for the Industrial Arts classes in the basement of the Bennette Building.<sup>23</sup>

The scholastic population grew slowly until the oil boom came to the district in 1932. The following year the scholastic population was doubled and the school's enrollment increased proportionally. Temporary "shacks" were built and it was on October 11, 1935, that K. G. Schafer, President of the Board of Trustees, turned the first shovel of dirt in a ground breaking ceremony which was the beginning of the additions and new buildings and construction of the athletic field, a plant which now comprises the quarters of the David Crockett High School. Since 1935 the entire system has been advancing and improving in building, equipment, organization, administration,

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<sup>23</sup> Loc. cit.

curriculum enrichment, qualifications of teachers and administrators.<sup>24</sup>

Montgomery County has had several newspapers. The first one was called the Montgomery Patriot and was published by John Marshall Wade in 1845. The first regular copy appeared April 26, 1845. In one of the first copies of this paper the following advertisement appeared:

PROSPECTUS of the MONTGOMERY PATRIOT,

"Let all the ends thous aim'st at, be thy Country's thy God's, and Truth's"

The undersigned proposes publishing in the Town of Montgomery, a NEWSPAPER of the above title, as soon as a sufficient number of subscribers can be obtained to justify the proprietor in the undertaking:--and, in order that a perfect understanding may exist between the public and the Editor, we deem it expedient to issue the present number, as a specimen of what may be expected from us.

Although we do not arrogate to ourselves those high, classical, or literary attainments claimed by many of the editorial corps, yet we feel a confidence that our humble endeavors will contribute to the support of the institutions of our country generally, and the interests of our country particularly, and that at all times we will be governed by a respect for the maintainance of right, justice, freedom and humanity.

Feeling almost certain of sufficient patronage from our fellow-citizens, we venture to promise that our first regular number will be published on Saturday, the 26th day of April next, and appear regularly thereafter, on every Wednesday morning.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 3.

TERMS: For each volume of fifty-two number if paid in advance -- Four dollars. If paid within three months -- Four dollars and a half. At the end of the year -- Five dollars.

J. M. Wade, Proprietor  
Montgomery. March 29, 1845.<sup>25</sup>

Soon after organizing the paper Wade moved to Huntsville, where he published the paper for a year and then sold out.

Some of the other newspapers are as follows: Montgomery Register, published in 1870 in Montgomery; Montgomery Press, published in 1871 in Montgomery; Willis Observer, published in 1889 in Willis; Conroe Enterprise, published in 1893 in Conroe; Willis Progress published in 1908 in Willis. Montgomery County has two live papers at the present time. They are weekly newspapers and are called the Montgomery County News and the Conroe Courier. The Conroe Courier was first published in 1892.

The industrial development of Montgomery County was very slow in the first ten years of its history. The first settlers who came began to develop their lands by clearing away the forest and putting fields into the cultivation of cotton and corn. Due to primitive conditions, a period of slow development resulted through the late 1830's.

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<sup>25</sup> Montgomery Patriot, July 2, 1845, in Sam Houston Memorial Museum.

Conditions improved after independence was won. Montgomery received a generous share of the tide of settlers who poured into Texas in the late 1880's and early 1850's. These settlers were mostly well-to-do planters, and some of them were large slave owners. About that time the first settlers began to reap the reward of their early labor. Their potential wealth in cattle, lands, and timber could not be turned into money as the new settlers came.

Montgomery was the only town in the county of any importance. It soon became one of the most important trading centers in Texas. Long teams of oxen, drawing loads of cotton, lumber, and other products, plodded their way slowly to Houston, the nearest market, sixty miles away. These freight wagons brought back all kinds of merchandise which were shipped from New York, New Orleans, and other distant points by way of Galveston.<sup>26</sup>

With the increase of wealth, the crude life of the pioneers was replaced by one of a more comfortable existence. Professional men and their families -- late comers from the old states -- lawyers, teachers, and doctors brought into the county the culture of the Old South. A few Northerners, full of the energy and initiative that characterized them, came also.

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<sup>26</sup> Martin, op. cit., p. 39.

Some of the early industries which had been necessary to the pioneer of Montgomery County gave away to modern factories and later to mass production. In the first days there were grist mills and cotton gins which began to be installed as farming became the chief money crop. It was to these gins and mills that the people carried their cotton and corn to be ginned or ground.

One of the first gin and grist mill that was operated in Montgomery was owned by Dr. J. H. Price. It was built in the early 1840's and was situated about nine miles northwest of the town of Montgomery.<sup>27</sup>

Another gin was an old horse-power gin operated by George Dean. It was situated across Lake Creek on Ford's Lake. The exact date of the establishment of this gin is not known, but it operated for several years prior to 1845. It was abandoned later when steam gins came into the county.

Another cotton gin and grist mill in the county was owned and operated by John Robertson. This gin and mill was a steam type and was located at New Caney around 1866; and another gin in this area was established by William Campbell Copeland in the 1850's.

An early industry in Montgomery County that did not survive the Civil War was a tannery establishment by Antony Martin in

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 43

1843. This tannery was operated until the middle of the Civil War, when materials became scarce and Martin was forced to close.

Another short-lived industry was a small pottery located on a farm south of the town of Montgomery. It was established in the late 1840's. The remains of the old kiln and a few broken pieces of pottery still mark the location.<sup>28</sup>

One of the first sawmills in Montgomery County was run by George Dean. It was located on Ford's Lake about seven miles south of Montgomery. The steam boiler was brought from Galveston, Texas, in the 1860's. It is said that this boiler came out of a steamboat, the famous Harriett Lane, that was sunk by the Confederates in the Civil War. The boat was raised and the boiler removed and brought to Montgomery on ox carts. This first mill was a crude affair. It is said that the saw had only two teeth. There is no definite information concerning the closing of this mill. It is known that it was run for several years at its original site and was later removed to another part of the county.<sup>29</sup>

Because of the abundance of excellent timber, there were numerous other mills which operated in the county through the years. In the last quarter century of the history of Montgomery

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 40.

<sup>29</sup> Loc. cit.

County there have been numerous small mills which would move from one forest to another, some successful, but most failures. Some of the successful ones were the Grogan Lumber Company, located at Magnolia; Foster Lumber Company, located at Fostoria; Hunt Lumber Company, located at Willis; Delta Land and Timber Company, which was located at Conroe. Other mills of considerable size are located at Porters, New Caney, Willis, and Conroe.

Giving place only to the oil industry in this county in rank of importance is the timber and lumber business. For many years the principal source of revenue came from the forests that until a very few years ago covered this area. Millions of feet of lumber and hundreds of carloads of cross-ties were shipped from this county annually. The people were educated in lumber; they talked and lived lumber. Even the smaller lads could look at a pine tree and give one a fair estimate of the amount of lumber it would produce.

No doubt the lumber industry has been and will continue to be one of the chief industries of the county. There is a large National Forest Reserve situated in the northcentral part of the county. The timber is carefully selected and sold to mills that pay the highest price. In later years the pulp-wood industry has developed along with the lumber industry. The small mills buy the rights to

cut off the trees suitable for lumber, and the pulp-wood<sup>30</sup> men purchase the rest of the same lease for pulp-wood.

The oldest industry of Montgomery County is farming. The soil was rather fertile in the beginning and the rainfall and temperature favorable for agriculture. As the early settlers cleared away the forests and began to farm, they found that almost any food crop grew well. Small fields of cotton were planted in the early 1840's. Just as the first gins began to appear, more farmers planted cotton for their money crop. Corn, potatoes, cane, and vegetable crops were planted for home use and local trade.

During the late 1840's a steady stream of settlers came into the county with their families and slaves. It was in the 1850's that cotton really became a source of income. Cotton was hauled to Houston and Galveston on wagons and ox-carts and sold or traded for other commodities. After the Civil War started, an increased demand for cotton raised the price until most farmers were planting almost all that they could possibly harvest. Almost every plantation eventually built its own cotton gin.<sup>31</sup>

After the Civil War and during the Reconstruction Period conditions in Montgomery County became very hard for the farmers.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 48.

<sup>31</sup> Loc. cit.

The price of cotton was so low that it was almost worthless. The freeing of the slaves caused many of the large farmers to dispose of their farms. After the Negroes were emancipated, the labor situation became such that the farmers could not continue to plant a large acreage of cotton. They had to plant just about what the family could grow and harvest. The feeling between the freed slaves and their former masters was not always friendly. Many of the former slaves left the farm and sought relief from the different government agencies that were organized to aid them.

After the Reconstruction period farming continued somewhat as it did before the Civil War. In addition to the cultivation of cotton, many families in the central part of the county resorted to the cultivation of tobacco. The center of this industry was located at Willis, and it is said that Willis boasted of having seven cigar factories in 1895. A large number of big tobacco buyers from the various eastern states would come to Willis each season to buy their tobacco, claiming the Willis tobacco had a flavor that could not be found elsewhere. The United States Congress lifted the tariff on Cuban tobacco, which had a very devastating effect on the Willis tobacco industry. Due to the fact, that Cubans, with cheaper labor, could raise tobacco more

cheaply than the farmers around Willis, the industry soon vanished.<sup>32</sup>

In the last half century, farming has given way to the lumbering of second growth timber and to ranching. Today there are very few large farms in the county. The chief crops are corn, watermelons, and garden truck. The soil has been exhausted by poor farming methods. It is only through heavy fertilization of the soil that any crop can be grown with much satisfaction.

In the beginning, ranching in this region was very unsatisfactory. The land was covered with heavy forest and underbrush. There were very few prairies, and the early settlers found that cattle could be grown only where the forests had been cleared. Very few cattle were raised until after World War I. The people have now found that the land is better adapted to ranching than farming. It has been proven that the wornout soil in the vicinity can be terraced, fertilized, and prosperously mowed so that almost any kind of grass good for cattle can be grown. Where proper pasture practices are being used, there is probably no place in the state more suited for ranching.<sup>33</sup>

For more than thirty years before the discovery of oil in the county there had been talk that it was there. As far back as

<sup>32</sup> Conroe Courier, June 30, 1933.

<sup>33</sup> Martin, op. cit., p. 50.

1900 shallow tests were made in the county and evidence of a major field developed, but for one reason or another the tests were abandoned before striking the productive oil sands that underlie vast areas in Montgomery County. Thousands of dollars were spent by wildcatters in a vain effort to pierce the rich pools, but either the wells were abandoned before reaching the pay sand or they missed the pools entirely. <sup>34</sup>

The drilling of a deep water well for the Santa Fe Railroad more than a decade ago occasioned a slight flurry in oil circles. A small showing of oil was made by the well, or at least that was the report that was circulated. Evidently little or no credence was given the prospects of finding oil in paying quantities as the excitement soon subsided and the matter was dropped almost entirely with the exception of an occasional reference by some of the old timers to the subject.

Some shallow tests were made in the now productive area but drill bits never penetrated to a sufficient depth to disturb the ageless tranquility of the lakes of "black gold" under the dunes south and east of Conroe. Stirring tales were told of fortune seeking gentlemen who staked their last dollar on a hope of finding the

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<sup>34</sup>Conroe Courier, April 8, 1932.

precious fluid. Divining rods, seismographs and all the paraphernalia used in the locating of hidden treasure were brought into use.<sup>35</sup>

It remained for George Strake, a young oil operator from Saint Louis, Missouri, to make the find that changed the history of this county. Strake came to Conroe in the spring of 1931. Nobody paid much attention to him, as there had been dozens of promoters in the field before and at that time several wild cat tests were in operation. Wild rumors and conflicting reports were in the air and all had amounted to naught in so far as striking oil was concerned. The Kelley-Baker well west of town was going down at that time and it was being watched with considerable speculation by local people and a few oil men; hopes were high but the well was abandoned.<sup>36</sup>

Strake got very little consideration from local people but he stuck to his theory that oil was to be found if drilled for at the right place; so he rambled through the woods and sand dunes south of Conroe for months. He accumulated a block of leases with an area of eight thousand acres and selected the spot to spud in his well. He staked everything on his judgment that he had

35 Loc. cit.

36 Loc. cit.

selected the right spot and with the courage of youth and the determination of a veteran he set about the business of proving his convictions. He was unable to interest others in financing his wildcat, borrowed money on his life insurance to the limit, burned wood under his boilers because it was cheaper than fuel oil, and after many weary days of drilling, Strake, On December 11, 1931, got the first indication of oil. On December 13, he brought the well in, the first in Montgomery County.<sup>37</sup> Today the county has several thousand natural producing wells. The Conroe area at one time was considered the third largest oil field in the United States.

Other industries of importance in Montgomery County are the several gasoline refineries, a carbon black plant, and two creosoting plants.

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<sup>37</sup> Loc. cit.