

## THE SWEENEY STORY

Maxey Brooke 1967. Transcription from signed copy

Notes in **red** Basil Shannon basil\_shannon@yahoo.com

Imla Keep was a doctor, a widower with a small son, and one of Austin's Old Three Hundred. He came to Texas with the Groce family as some kind of business agent. He received title to a league and a labor on the San Bernard on July 24, 1824. He did not seem to be a very good business man or farmer. After a quarrel with Jared Groce over some damaged cargo of which he had charge, Keep took bankruptcy in March 1826 and returned to Louisiana. Sweeny now sits on the Imla Keep League.

In 1833, John Sweeny, Sr., came from Tennessee to Texas with five sons, two daughters and two-hundred fifty slaves. It is said he crossed the Sabine at night to avoid paying the fifty cents per head tax.


He had been here two years before to look over the situation and liked what he saw. He acquired the Imla Keep league and settled down just across from the present cemetery. In fact he started the cemetery since one daughter died just after he arrived.

Oddly enough, this was not known as the Sweeny Plantation. That name applied to the John Sweeny, Jr., Plantation in the Old Ocean area. It came to be known as the MaGrew Plantation. (Some say McGrew, but in John Sweeny's will the name is spelled MaGrew.

This is because he left the Sweeny site plantation to his daughter Sophia who married John Ma Grew, one of Sweeny's overseers. It was her second marriage.

She died intestate in 1898 (24 Dec 1890). William Sweeny (1855-1923) sold his Chance Prairie land, (to Mrs. Katherine Bannister's mother **Mussetta Sweeny Holland**). and bought the Sweeny town site from Sophia's heirs---Betty, (Mrs. Frank Rowe) and Ella, (Mrs. Irvin Wilson).

**note: Betty=Mary Elizabeth "Bettie" McGrew 1866-1948. Ella McGrew Wilson 1855-1931 mother of Ashley Fly Wilson..... **ASHLEY WILSON ROAD****

**Ashley Wilson**  Hi Basil, I admit it. My full name is Ashley Fly Wilson III. You only got one item wrong in your message. There is no John Fly Wilson. I visited Brazoria several years ago and drove along AFW road. It sure felt strange driving along that road with my name. Visited both cemeteries in Brazoria and Sweeney. Fascinating! !! Ashley

Just after the Civil War, the Smith brothers, John G. and Travis L., came to Brazoria County along with their uncle John W. Brooks. By the turn of the century they had established stores in Columbia, Brazoria, Chenango, Velasco, and Quintana; they had seven steamboats on the Brazos, gins, and other enterprises.

In October 1905, when the rails of the Brownsville Line reached a point seventeen miles east of Bay City, a side track was laid and given the name "Adamston". No one seems to know why or for whom it was named.

The 1899 floods and 1900 hurricane had hurt the Smith enterprises severely. In his efforts to recoup, Travis Smith's health began fail so he moved to Adamston in 1906 to farm.

But, once a merchant, always a merchant. He was soon taking orders for notions and tobacco from the surrounding ranchers, filling them from the Columbia store, and delivering them. By 1898 he built a store approximately where the Randolph Smith home now stands.

A country store was the focal point for farmers for miles around. So the next step was to establish a post office. This was done on August 17, 1909, with William Sweeny as postmaster. The name given the post office was not Adamston, but Sweeny. Again, nobody knows who was responsible for the name or for which Sweeny it was named.

About this time R. D. McDonald's Bernard River Land Development Company bought up a great deal of land in this area, cut it into small plots and sold it. The combination of rich soil and a rail outlet for produce was most attractive. The first new families to arrive were the John Partens, the Emmett Rimmers, and the Levi Hankins who came from Missouri in 1910.

Nobody is sure how Burton D. Hurd fit into the picture. He may have been McDonald's partner, his agent, or he may have been an independent operator. Anyway, he gets credit for laying out the City of Sweeny in March 1911 and for promoting it for several years.

That year, Main Street was cleared and Mr. Smith moved his store, whose second floor was now a hotel, to its present location. The building now houses the Library which started in 1966.

The next group to arrive included the Chenaults, the Ellises, the Arringtons, the Warters, the Ballards, the Woodrums, the Meadors, and the Lindseys .

Now there were enough people in the vicinity of the Sweeny Post Office to take the first step toward becoming a community; they started a school. Miss May Rice, a graduate of the University of Ohio, was the first school teacher. She held classes in 1911 in a one-room frame building with homemade seats and desks. Her class consisted of nine grade school pupils and two high school students. She was paid \$60 per month.

The school was closed before the year was up because she could not cope with a group of young hoodlums who harassed her.

The following year, a Dr. Wallace from Tennessee was brought in as the first school superintendent. Another small frame building was added and through the efforts of Mrs. Marie Ellis and Mrs. George Nugent the Sweeny Independent School System was formed.

Also, in 1912 construction of a new two-story brick school was begun. The first class graduated in 1915. At that time there were only ten years of school at Sweeny. A graduate, who wanted to go to college, could take the eleventh year at some other place such as West Columbia, or could take a special examination. Mrs. Ethel Parten Winstott was in the first graduating class of six.

This building burned in 1925, All school records were destroyed. Classes were held in the Baptist Church, The Church of Christ, and in private homes. That year, there were three graduates: Troy Meddars (Meador?), Bobo Arrington, and Oscar Duncan.

Work was started almost immediately on a new building. This is the building now known as the Berta Berkley Building, (it got this name in 1951). Some classes were held there in 1926, but it officially opened in 1927 with Mrs. Verna Arrington as principal. There were four teachers for ten classes with a total of 236 pupils.

In 1935, the building now known as the Junior High Building was begun and the Sweeny School was reduced to nine years. Pupils now had to go to West Columbia to graduate. Sweeny began having eleven years of school in 1939 and 12 years in 1941.

The present high school was begun in 1957 and is still building.

No one seems to know when Carver started. It began as a one-room frame building. From time to time, other frame buildings were attached. Soon after E. T. Gee, the last principal before the schools combined, came the present Carver building was begun (about 1951).

There has been some controversy as to which was the first church in Sweeny. A Houston minister came to town in 1912 to hold a revival. Soon after that, a Union Sunday School was organized and people of several denominations worshiped together in the school house.

About a year later, a group of these people decided to build their own church. The frame building that was the First Baptist Church and the first church building in town was erected. They borrowed the money to build the church. To repay the loan, a ten-acre tract (where the high school now stands) was leased and a cotton crop was planted. Only one good crop was needed.

Also, in 1912 members of the Church of Christ first met in the home of Lewis Sanford at Fifth and Main. Later, arrangements were made to meet on Sunday afternoons at the school house. In 1921, they built their first church building.

IN 1924 ten people organized the Methodist Church, and in 1927 they built their first building. During the depression, the membership dwindled to the point that the church was no longer a Conference member. It was reorganized in 1928.

The Roman Catholics met for many years in West Columbia. In 1954 a church was built in Sweeny. The Assembly of God Church was organized in 1957 and the Lutheran Church was organized in 1959.

In 1961 the Nazarene Church was organized and in 1964 they built their church. Sweeny Presbyterians worshiped in Old Ocean for many years and in 1964 they built their church.

The Missionary Baptist Association has been meeting at the Legion Hall since 1965.

I have no information on the beginning of the Pentecostal or the first Baptist Church on Ash Street.

Peter Crane joined the New Zion Methodist Church in 1924 when L. E. Brown was pastor. He was told then that the church was 60 years old and once set just across from the present cemetery. This makes the New Zion Church older than Sweeny.

Much of the history of a town can be told in the history of its service clubs. The Civic Club is not only the oldest service club in Sweeny, it is one of the oldest in the county.

It was founded in 1912 "to promote civic and social improvements through organized efforts, and to promote the interests and improvements of the town of Sweeny". Its first president was Mrs. Marie D. Ellis, and its original name was the Dorcas Needlework Club.

Their very first city improvement project resulted in the name change. This project was an old fashioned clean-up campaign. After a dry summer weeds had grown high all over town and there were piles of trash everywhere. The ladies enlisted the help of their husbands and anybody else who would donate a day's work. The women then got together to cook a big meal for the workers. The project snowballed until almost everybody in town was involved.

There was enough food left over to serve supper that night, and somebody decided a celebration was in order. Two fiddlers were obtained and a big street dance was held that night.

The next day a minister's wife called on the club president, outraged that an organization with a biblical name would have the audacity to sponsor a dance. Mrs. Ellis said she thought the matter could be corrected. So at the next meeting, the name was changed to the Civic Club.

The club has a long list of distinguished projects to its credit including being responsible for having the Sweeny School classified as an independent school district and the acquisition and perpetual care of the Sweeny Cemetery.

Chronologically, the next organization was the Home Demonstration Club. The History of this group is the history of the Little House. You've seen it; a white frame house between the bank and the Methodist Church. It may not look like much, but no building in Sweeny has contributed more to the life of the town.

Back in the twenties, Sweeny was just another little farming community. Lots of produce was raised. During the season as many as fifteen boxcars per day were loaded from Andy Warter's shipping shed.

Came the depression and Sweeny, like so many other farming communities, suffered. No one would buy produce and the price of a bale of cotton would hardly pay for the seed. The men used to sit around Smith's Grocery and discuss the matter, but the women of the community decided to do something about it. The big problem, as they saw it, was food for the winter. So they formed the Home Demonstration Club in 1931.

They tapped the County Commissioner's Court for \$100. They scrounged building material; the foundation stones came from the old courthouse at Brazoria, and they conned the men into building a little one-room house on the corner of the school ground; that would be at Elm & Sixth Streets.

The Freeport Sulfur Company contributed a canner. Johnny Brown scrounged an old railroad stove. They bought a sealer and were in business. Women came from miles around to can beans and tomatoes and corn and beef and pork and--what have you. They had no cast to pay for the use of the equipment, so they would leave part of their canning. The Home Demonstration Club used this to furnish hot lunches for the school children. **In those days, people helped themselves and each other, instead of hollering for the government to take care of them.**

Things began to look up in 1935, when the Old Ocean Field came in. People began to move into Sweeny and the strain on the school system began. Since the Canning Club, as it was called, was on school property, the trustees decided to appropriate it for a class room. Once again, the women went into action. They bought two lots on Elm Street and moved the building before the trustees knew what happened.

In 1936, Herman Vezey organized a Boy Scout Troop which met there for a while. But by 1941, prosperity had done away with the original purpose. During the war years, the Red Cross used the little house to roll bandages. Just after the war, the Methodist Church bought the lots the Little House now sits on, made a swap, and moved it to its present location.

For years, the Methodist Church used it for a Sunday School room. And in 1947, the Girl Scouts have used it as a meeting place, hence the name "Little House".

In 1938, The P. T. A. sponsored a Boy Scout Troop 61, one of the oldest continuous troops in the county. Mr. Gammage, the school principal, was Scout Master. In 1942, the American Legion assumed sponsorship; 1944, the V. F. W. , and in 1946 the Lions Club took over.

Both the American Legion and the V. F. W. were founded in 1942. The V. F. W. Post was named after Hood Dunnam, the first Sweeny boy killed in World War II.

Other dates:

1943: Masonic Lodge; Ben Horn, W. M.

1945: Lions Club; Pete Weaver, President

1947: Girl Scouts

1953: Junior Chamber of Commerce; Bob Martin, President.

1963: Optimist Club; Charles Spano, President.

1964: Chamber of Commerce

1965: Pink Ladies

There must be reasons for a town's birth, growth, and in some cases, its death. Sweeny was born as a result of a rail siding, a general store, a land and a post office. It grew, and continues to grow, because it offers something to its people and the surrounding community. I have mentioned schools, churches, and civic clubs.

Of course, there was the gin. Considerable cotton was grown. The roads in Brazoria County were simply dirt trails. The cotton had to be moved out by rail. Before the depression hit, there were two gins.

To the south of Sweeny were the truck farms. In the twenties they were what the valley is now. And the produce had to be moved out by rail. After World War I, Andy Warters and his father built produce sheds along the siding. Up to fifteen cars a day moved out. It is also said there was a good market in Houston for frogs caught in the Old Ocean Swamp. And in 1915, Sweeny had a brief flurry of peanut growing, but it never came to anything.

The first public utility to reach Sweeny was electricity in 1926 by the Texas Electric Service. This company was dissolved in 1935, and its facilities were taken over by the Community Public Service.

The Garrisons started the telephone service in about 1930. They had 155 phones in service when O. K. Hitchcock bought the business in 1938 and formed the Sweeny-Old Ocean Telephone Company.

1930 was a bad year to start anything anywhere. Isolated country towns like Sweeny were particularly vulnerable. Texas is dotted with the remains of such communities that succumbed to the depression.

The thing that saved Sweeny was oil. In 1934 the discovery well in Old Ocean came in. People began moving instead of moving out. More utilities became available. Andy Warters began a private water works in 1935 and United Gas began their gas transmission system. In 1938 the Harrison-Abercrombie gasoline plant was built, and Sweeny had a payroll. The first census figures are for 1930. The Texas Almanac says 300. The Handbook of Texas says 500.

World War II gave a shot in the arm for the Sweeny economy. The carbon black plant was built in 1942 with Ed Johnson as superintendant, it shut down in 1961), and Plancor 880 was built the following year.

In 1945, the City of Sweeny was incorporated with J. R. Smith as mayor. The city bought Andy Warters waterworks for some \$20,000 and built the old sewage treatment plant.

There were a couple of bad years when the Plancor shut down. But Phillips Petroleum Company re-opened it 1947 and it has been growing since.

Sweeny's population in 1950 was 1,393 and in 1960 was 3,087.

Other highlights of the incorporated city are:

1947: Volunteer Fire Department founded.

1956: Present water well drilled.

1959: Water softener installed.

1962: City bought gas system from United Gas.

1965: Hospital built. New sewage disposal plant built.

The first death in the community of Sweeny occurred in 1912. I do not know the little girl's name, but it can be easily checked in the cemetery records.

The local land owners had family burial plots on their own lands. It had never occurred to anyone that no provisions had been made for people without land.

Mr. Charles F. Ellis, (Pat's father), built the casket and Mrs. Ellis went to see the Sweeny family. They donated a third of an acre adjoining their family burial plot.

Knowing this was only a stop-gap measure, she relates:



"Our organization (the Civic Club) discussed the situation at our next meeting, and as a result were able to secure a three-acre tract from R. D. McDonald. That is today's public cemetery.

We worked long and hard to get it surveyed and paid for, but we felt it fulfilled a great need in the community."

When the road to Old Ocean was changed in the late 1950's, it cut through the cemetery property. The Civic Club was paid for the right-of-way and promptly re-invested the money in more cemetery property.

But because they had never registered as a non-profit organization, the government demanded about \$600 as tax. The ladies had already spent all the money, so it was necessary to do something. I don't know from where it all came, but Boy Scout Troop 561 had a candy sale and raised almost \$200. This was in 1964.

If you find any mistakes or omissions, please let me know. If more material becomes available, I will re-write this story. Let me thank the following people for their help:

Mr. W. O. Arnold

Mr. & Mrs. Bobo Arrington

Mrs. Katherine Bannister

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Mr. Nick Carter

Mr. Peter Crain

Mr. Pat Ellis

Mr. Bob Evans

Mr. E. T. Gee

Mrs. Juna Graff

Mr Bud Heickman

Mr. o. LK. hitchcock

Mr. Ed Johnson

Mrs. Mattie Lee Jordan

Mr. 7 Mrs. Clyde McKinney, Sr

Mr. P. O. Patrick

Mr. Wright Patterson

Mr. Elmer Slay

Mr. Barkley Smith.

Mr. J. R. Smith

Mr. Bob Santner

Mr. Charles Spano

Mr. V. C. Troutman

Mr. Josh Ward

Maxey Brooke

913 Old Ocean Ave

Sweeny, Texas



**James Brooke** What an incredible outpouring of interest. Maxey would be really proud. He wrote this little booklet as a promo for the city library. He was a founding board member. I can never remember a time when he wasn't writing stuff. He had short stories published in the early 50's in Ellery Queen's mysteries and Astounding Science Fiction.....both pulp paperbacks. In the mid-fifties, he wrote "The Industrial Cooling Tower", a technical engineering text book that is still a standard in the industry. During this time he also set design standards and equations for parabolic cooling towers that are commonly seen at nuclear power plants. In later years his writing became a bit lighter and he was a regular contributor to the Houston Post. He also reviewed books for the Post. His later publications include "Fun For the Money", a book of coin tricks, "Match This", a book of match tricks, and "150 Puzzles in Crypt-Arithmetic".....you figure that one out. Thanks for the interest!