

# Sweeny-Old Ocean

source BCHM.org

When John Sweeny brought his family to Texas in 1837, he bought the north one-third of the Polly and Chance League and established a plantation. His operation was self-contained, including a cotton gin built about where the Phillips Clubhouse is now located. On down the road, approximately half-way between East Columbia and Matagorda, was a commissary that also served as the local mail depot, watch was called Chance's Prairie.

When the mail boat docked at East Columbia, a rider would take tale mail down the McGrew Bend road to Chance's Prairie. After spending the night at the Sweeny Plantation, he would go on to Matagorda the next day, meet the mail boat there, and then reverse the process. There seems to be no record of when the last mail delivery was made to Chance's Prairie, but it was never taken off the official list of post offices.

After the War Between the States, the Sweenys sold a portion of their land to George Armstrong, who sold it to a Mr. Patterson, who in later years would sell it to J.S. Abercrombie, developer of the Old Ocean oil field.

In the meantime, events were occurring which would result in development of the town of Sweeny. In October 1905, when the rails of the St. Louis, Brownsville and Mexico Railroad reached a point 17 miles east of Bay City, a construction side track was laid and given the name Adamston. No one seems to know why or for whom it was named. This might be considered the first "birth date" of the town of Sweeny.

The second birth date might be Aug. 17, 1909, when a post office was established at the site of a store and a gin built earlier by Travis L. Smith. He and his brother, John G. had built quite an economic empire in Brazoria County, but the 1899 floods and the 1900 hurricane had severely damaged the Smith enterprises, and Travis' health in particular. Travis moved to a farm which he had bought at Adamston, and built first the gin, then later the store. A Republican administration was in Washington when approval was given to locating a post office there. William Sweeny of Black's Ferry, one of the few Republicans in the area, was appointed postmaster. Oddly enough, the new post office was named Sweeny, not Adamston. Again, nobody knows who was responsible for the name -- or for which Sweeny it was chosen.

About this time, R. D. McDonald's Bernard River Land and Development Company bought up a great deal of land in the area and began selling small farm plots

for \$5 per acre. Burton D. Hurd laid out the city of Sweeny in March of 1911 (Sweeny's third birth date). Nobody knows just how Hurd fits into the picture. He may have been McDonald's partner, his agent, or an independent operator. At any rate, the streets were cleared, some 30 families moved in, and a school and two churches were established. A grist mill was built and a bank was organized in 1913; a depot was constructed in 1919; there was a second cotton gin, a brick works, and three grocery stores. In 1935, Sweeny had 14 business establishments; in 1947 there were 34; today the city boasts 80.

Truck farms were located to the south of Sweeny in the 1920 and cotton and fruit farming flourished. Sweeny was the shipping center for this thriving farming enterprise, which provided much the same type of produce and the same farming intensity for which the Rio Grande Valley is now famed.

The depression was especially hard on small, isolated agricultural communities like Sweeny -- so isolated that if you are there, it is for business reasons or you are lost. But Sweeny was saved on Nov. 8, 1934, when Harrison & Abercrombie and the Atlatl Royalty Company brought in their No. 1 BRDC well, which made 500 barrels per day. The oil field developed there was called "Old Ocean" because of the huge Old Ocean swamp that bordered it.

In 1938, Harrison & Abercrombie built a gasoline plant, and Sweeny had a payroll.

The gasoline plant needed a local post office. Gene Chambers, an Abercrombie lawyer, found the Chance's Prairie post office had never been officially shut down. He petitioned the government to reopen it and to name it Old Ocean after the oil field. The post office was opened in 1944, with Mrs. Katherine Bannister, a direct descendant of John Sweeny, as postmistress. She continued in that position until 1968. The post office has been moved twice -- in 1949 and 1970.

Even before oil was discovered in 1934 and the plant was built in 1938, Old Ocean served as something of a community center. The first store there was built by a Mr. Blake in 1929, and was later sold to W.W. Mercer. The highway was paved about 1926, and was one of the first sections of paved road in Brazoria County.

World War II gave the Sweeny-Old Ocean economy another shot in the arm. A carbon black plant was built on one side of Sweeny, and Plancor 880 -- dedicated to making aviation gasoline -- on the other side. The war's end, with the resulting shutdown of the gasoline plant, was a setback for the economy, Plancor, but in early

1947, Phillips Petroleum Company bought and the company's expansion has never stopped.

Sweeny school system, noted as one of the finest in the state, was the first in Texas to grant academic letters. The school district also has the second largest payroll in the city. Sweeny was incorporated in 1945 (its fourth birth date). It has furnished its citizens a volunteer fire department since 1947, a water treatment plant (1959), a modern sewage treatment plant (1965), a gas transmission system (1962), a hospital (1964), a youth baseball park (1965), a library (1966), and two city parks (1967 and 1968).

In 1911, Burton Hurd predicted, "The town of Sweeny will become a thriving town of 500 or possibly 1,000 people..."

Sweeny made it. It hasn't stopped growing since 1947, and its population now exceeds 4,000. The largest building in the community of Old Ocean is the First Baptist Church, founded in June of 1944 by the Rev. M.L. Pendue.

The bulk of the population there once lived in company-owned homes, but as people built their own homes, they fell into disuse, and the last of them are now being demolished. John Sweeny would undoubtedly be surprised at what his plantation looks like, now.

Maxey Brooke