

Chamber celebrates 95 years of bringing industry to the county

The Obion County Chamber of Commerce is celebrating its 95th anniversary this year.

Union City for decades has had an association of commerce to look after the business interests of the community. Soon after the turn of the century there was organized a Commercial Club in which Walter G. Reynolds and Charles Dietzel, among others, served as president. The club operated on a voluntary basis and among its projects were good roads, civic improvements and endeavoring to get additional hotel facilities.

During the second decade of the century, the Lions Club was formed and it was an active civic club, and in the early 1920s began to seek additional industries. An industrial committee was formed within the Lions Club to secure industries. They contacted Brown Shoe Company in the fall of 1922 and were advised that if the city would raise sufficient funds, Brown Shoe Company would erect a plant in Union City. Under the leadership of Robert Rush and H. M. Oliver, the necessary funds were raised. The Lions Club was not a business organization and they reorganized the old Commercial Club in the fall of 1922 into the Union City Chamber of Commerce and then secured its charter in January of 1923. The plant was opened on June 5, 1923.

According to a local newspaper article, "The object of the organization is to further the promotion of public enterprise in Union City and to take care of the unfinished business now in the hands of the shoe factory organization. The Chamber of Commerce is to take the place of the temporary organization which conducted the shoe factory campaign. It is a legally constituted body which can transact business for the city, giving its attention to matters that are not within the city charter to be handled by the board of mayor and aldermen. It is intended to work in harmony and cooperate with the board of mayor and aldermen in furthering the general public interests of the city."

The first board consisted of R.H. Rust, president; H.M. Oliver, vice president; A.F. Tittsworth, C.L. Andrews, W.M. Turner, C.H. Cobb, T.R. Meadow, W.E. Hudgens and Hugh Smith, directors; and Hunter Elam, Harris Parks and H.A. Beck, trustees.

The Union City Chamber of Commerce operated until 1929. A few short months after it stopped operation, the Union City Lions Club sponsored a meeting in September to reorganize the chamber "in the best interest of Union City and Obion County." Farmers and others were invited to attend since the business of the chamber "will affect all parts of the county and every line of industry."

No organizational steps were made during that first meeting, but a second was called for on Sept. 16, 1929. Union City Chamber of Commerce president E.P. Futtrell was asked to preside.

With one of the largest gatherings of citizens of the city to come together in a long time on a similar mission, the Union City Chamber of Commerce was completely reorganized and a new group of officials selected. They included prominent businessman Charles E. Keiser being elected president of the body and Cecil Moss as vice president. The new board of directors included W.G. Reynolds, W.E. Hudgens, Dr. William Turner and Hugh Smith.

“The board pledged itself to get busy at once and carry on plans for getting the Chamber of Commerce organized for work. Those present pledged their full-hearted support to the new officials and it is expected that with added zeal given by the lively meeting the Chamber of Commerce of Union City will carry on the work in an effective manner,” The Union City Daily Messenger reported after the meeting.

Among other businessmen of the city who were present at the meeting were W.R. Reynolds, J.C. Burdick, Jr., C.W. Miles Jr., G.H. Niles, H.M. Oliver, J. Willis Williams, C.P. Merryman, T.R. Reynolds, R.M. McAnulty, G.B. Baird, Harry Harper, J.W. Kerr, F.A. Nailling, Dr. Ira Park, T. Witherington, C.G. Guill, J.R. Newbery, H.P. Devers, Hunt Roper, Dr. M.A. Blanton, Z.W. Corum, C.T. Lovelace, Joe Rogers, H.O. Vincent, Ben Howard, W.H. Harris, C.B. Dement, Hunter Elam, S.D. Woosley, J.A. Prieto, R.E. McGowen, Dr. R.G. Latimer, Dave Shatz and E.P. Futtrell.

The first meeting of the newly-elected board was held a short time later, with Harry O. Vincent selected as secretary, Mrs. Orene Westbrook as assistant secretary and H.P. Deevers as treasurer. J.C. Burdick Jr. was selected president of the board.

During the second meeting, the board revised the by-laws and started plans for a membership drive.

In October 1929 The Union City Daily Messenger reported, “The Chamber of Commerce of this city has an interesting record of achievement to its credit and although it has been somewhat inactive for the past few months the enthusiasm with which the new body of officers has gone to work gives a ton of optimism to those who are anxious to see the body functioning.

“Some of the biggest developments in this city and county are credited to this body. Through its work the Chamber of Commerce had located the Brown Shoe Factory whose payroll last week amounted to over \$10,000 paid out over 700 people. The local creamery and interest in dairying are works of this body, as well as contributing to the welfare and prosperity of the city and county.”

The chamber continued on a voluntary basis and took new life again in 1936 with Clem Burdick as president and Harry Harper as secretary. This voluntary organization continued on until 1949 when the chamber was reorganized with Hardy M. Graham as president and a full-time secretary was engaged. The chamber has since become a part of the active business life of the community.

Currently, membership in the local chamber offers numerous benefits and keeps the business owners on top of important, ever-changing issues and trends within the community and local marketplace.

“We protect and promote our local businesses, engage in public advocacy, community development, workforce development and membership enhancement efforts to strengthen the overall quality of life in Obion County,” said membership director Lauren Tanner, who added, “It’s wonderful to see the growth in Obion County over the past 95 years, and we owe a lot of that to the many men and women who have volunteered their time and talents within our entire county. What’s even more wonderful is the momentum we’ve built over time and continue to use daily to advance our county and region.”

“It’s exciting to be celebrating the Obion County Chamber of Commerce’s 95th anniversary by recognizing where our community has been and where it is today. There are hundreds of people that have been involved over the years, and we must say thank you to each and every one of them,” said Lindsay Frilling, chief executive officer of the Obion County Joint Economic Development Council. “As a membership organization, the chamber belongs to them, which is why it is thriving after nearly a

century! In reviewing the chamber's goals of the past, it's amazing how similar they are to today's initiatives from retail and tourism to agriculture and industry development. Though the process of how we work to grow and strengthen our community has evolved over the years, our overall mission of making Obion County a retail, residential and business destination for families of today and tomorrow is lasting."

Discovery Park of America CEO and Obion County Joint Economic Development Council board member Jim Rippy said, "The Chamber of Commerce has been the driving force for economic development and in improving the quality of life for Union City and Obion County for the past 95 years. Many people have devoted time and effort to make these things happen. I am proud that my father and I have been a part of this economic and social development during the past 95 years. Congratulations to the Chamber of Commerce and all of those that have been a part of this success."

Chamber president Donny Bearden said, "It's an exciting time to be involved in the Obion County Chamber of Commerce. With current businesses adding jobs and new businesses opening all of the time, the future of Obion County is bright and I look forward to seeing our area prosper for years to come. It has been a privilege to sit on the board over the last several years and an honor to serve as the chamber president this year. I have been able to witness firsthand the positive impact the chamber makes on the economic climate of our communities through the professional work of your chamber staff and members. The recent awarding of the Big Muddy Cup is testament to our region's positive direction and potential. By promoting the interests of small business and industry, the chamber helps our towns to remain vibrant and a great place to live and work."

The Big Muddy Cup is awarded to the top metro area by corporate facility projects per capita along the length of the Mississippi River, over an 18-month period ending with the previous calendar year.

Site Selection magazine noted successes in the area include bringing in Titan Tire after Goodyear Tire & Rubber Co. closed, the development of the multifaceted tourist and educational attraction Discovery Park of America and expansions by Colorcoat, Kayser Automotive, Tyson Foods and Williams Sausage.

Mrs. Filling also noted in the magazine that the bi-state region benefits from families of higher education institutions in the vicinity, as well as transportation assets, including the Port of Cates Landing on the Mississippi River in Lake County and Everett-Stewart Regional Airport in Obion County, which is jointly operated with Weakley County.

In a special note of interest, Mrs. Tanner said that although the chamber has not been in its current location of the depot its entire existence, the organization and the building do share the same birth year, with the building being completed in 1923. The building was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1995.

Editor's note: Historical information for this story was compiled by Messenger Associate Editor Donna Ryder and Obion County Chamber of Commerce membership director Lauren Tanner.