

“NOT BORN FOR OURSELVES ALONE”

A snapshot of the chamber world in the early 20th century.

By Chris Mead

Most people are more interested in organized crime than in organized business. Chambers of commerce do not often attract headlines except for the occasional, inevitable dustup with a public authority. For that reason, this April’s 100 year anniversary of the founding of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce may pass without much public attention. This would be a shame, as groups of companies have left their fingerprints all over the American civic landscape, and were busy even at the birth of Tom Donohue’s organization in 1912.

President William Howard Taft, who called the U.S. Chamber into existence, was a frequent visitor to local chambers of commerce. He once joked that even towns without any commerce had a chamber or a board of trade. Indeed, during the Progressive Era these groups were proliferating wildly, and filled with excitement .

Behind much of the excitement stood a man named Ryerson Ritchie. Starting in 1893, he turned the Cleveland Chamber of Commerce into the most dynamic civic organization in the country. One of its hundreds of activities was to vet the charities that approached its members, a policy that eventually led to its introduction of federated giving in 1913, which in turn led to Community Chests and the United Way.

Ritchie, whose personality was as difficult as his ideas were brilliant, moved rapidly from chamber to chamber, becoming something of a Johnny Appleseed of the chamber movement. Soon dozens of business organizations were proclaiming, Ritchie-like, that they weren’t old-fashioned boosters and “factory grabbers” any more. Instead they were civic transformers, improving education, city government, city planning, you name it. The Boston Chamber of Commerce even had a committee seeking a cure for the common cold.

Chambers seized the innovations of commission government (initiated in Galveston in 1901 after the disastrous hurricane) and city manager administration (first set up in Staunton, Va. in 1908), spreading them into dozens, then hundreds, of communities. These were seen as businesslike ways to improve the efficiency of local government.

City planning was the rage, too. The Washington Board of Trade was a prime mover in setting up a commission that, among other things, got the ugly railroad tracks removed from the Mall and helped set up the capital’s park system. The Cleveland Chamber enlisted the eminent planner Daniel Burnham to help create the city’s Public Square. And in Chicago, the Commercial Club and the Merchants Association united to fund and publish Burnham’s magnificent Plan of Chicago in 1909, considered by many to be the greatest achievement in this field for that era. ▷



Some of the 700 delegates who founded the U.S. Chamber on April 22, 1912. They assembled at the request of President William Howard Taft.

Photo: Courtesy of U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Washington, D.C.

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Business organizations in this period were remarkably optimistic about their communities and their abilities. The president of the San Francisco Chamber wrote after the earthquake and fire of 1906, “it could have been worse.” In nearby Santa Rosa, a group of merchants formed a chamber after the quake and used the opportunity to widen streets for the new-fangled horseless carriages. (The same chamber, including its founder, Frank Doyle Jr., would lead the push for the Golden Gate Bridge in the 1920s.)

In the capital of commerce, the New York Merchants’ Association sprang up like a weed after Manhattan, Brooklyn, and nearby areas became an expanded New York City in 1898. The NYMA, which soon would have thousands of members, fought against everything from West Side “rowdies” to the common house fly. It asked its members in bold print, “Are you doing your share?”

In 1906, a much older chamber, the New York Chamber of Commerce, explored fundamental changes to the nation’s financial system. But because a New York-led banking reform movement would be a political nonstarter, the Chicago Association of Commerce (an aggressive new chamber, founded in 1904) was asked to set up the key lobbying organization. The effort was then folded into the new U.S. Chamber of Commerce in 1912, and led to success: the following year, President Woodrow Wilson signed into law the Federal Reserve Act.

Small cities were active and innovative, too. The chamber in Binghamton, N.Y., created a new bureau in 1911 to coordinate business, academic, and federal assistance for farmers. Its “farm bureau” concept spread to the chambers in Watertown, Cortland, and elsewhere. This movement soon became independent, although still calling itself the Farm Bureau, and by the 1920s involved more farmers than did any other organization in the nation.

Other chambers did much to change their communities. With Galveston devastated by the 1900 hurricane, the Houston Chamber of Commerce redoubled its ancient efforts to beat a better path to the sea. In order to get the needed money for its Houston Ship Channel, the chamber led one of the first major efforts to raise local matching funds to go with federal appropriations. Meanwhile, one state away, the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce engineered a coup of its own: getting the state to move the capital from Guthrie to Oklahoma City in 1910.

Chambers were prime movers behind the “good roads” movement of this period. Indeed, a U.S. Chamber expert, G. Grosvenor Dawe, noted in 1912 that an explosion in the number of chambers over the past 15 years had coincided with the growth of the good roads movement. Why? It was simple, he reported. Towns had to have access to the nation’s road network or they would be bypassed by the new automobiles. Business people were among the first to see the need for connection, and they organized into chambers so as to push, sometimes desperately, for the asphalt.

Even in the do-gooder Progressive Era, the old chamber urge to promote and market the community never completely disappeared. No one could top the Los Angeles Chamber’s Frank Wiggins, who would later be called by Life magazine “the greatest city booster who ever lived.” It was his chamber that sent out the brochure—bragging about the community’s 350 days of sunshine per year—that caught the attention of Colonel William Selig in Chicago. Selig in 1907 dispatched a team to Wiggins’s city that would bring a new industry to California: motion pictures. Three years later, the Los Angeles Chamber grabbed another sun-loving field of enterprise, putting on the first major air show in the United States and thereby “virtually hijacked the newly developing aviation industry in its entirety to Southern California,” according to historian Kevin Starr.

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Frank Wiggins poses with actors at a Los Angeles motion picture studio in the early 1900s.

Photo: Courtesy of University of Southern California, on behalf of the USC Special Collections.

Photo: Courtesy of Roxbury Latin High School.

Wiggins was a genius, but the Honolulu Chamber of Commerce knew something about promotion, too. For example, it seized on Mark Twain's description of the territory as "the loveliest fleet of islands anchored in any ocean." Moreover, it set up a display on Atlantic City's teeming boardwalk and showed off a drink that Chamber Trustee James Dole had just figured out how to bottle: pineapple juice. The drink was an instant sensation. Dole produced 2,000 test bottles in 1909 and 2 million the following year, creating an effective liquid advertisement for Twain's paradise.

In this time of optimism, new horizons, and big dreams, one thing went terribly wrong. On its maiden voyage, the New York-bound passenger ship Titanic struck an iceberg on April 14, 1912, sinking the next day. One of those on the ship was Isidor Straus, a Macy's executive and a member and former vice president of the New York Chamber. Although offered a spot on a lifeboat, he decided to stay aboard the ship and let younger men or others live. His wife Ida refused to leave him, and they went down together.

The Straus's deaths were perfectly in line with the motto of the New York Chamber: "Not born for ourselves alone." Hundreds of poems were written about them (and indeed the couple was depicted in James Cameron's movie, *The Titanic*). Three other members of the chamber also died in the North Atlantic, including an Astor and a Guggenheim.

One week after the Titanic sank, on April 22, 1912, 700 business people, led by Chicago banker Harry Wheeler, formed the Chamber of Commerce of the United States. All of a sudden, the New York Chamber became the second most important business organization in the land. It would still have great moments, such as in helping create the Port Authority

of New York and New Jersey, but most of its greatest deeds were behind it. It would no longer be the place where, as admirer President Theodore Roosevelt had written in 1902, "no [other] body of men can render a greater service."

Other local chambers, too, were giving something up. But unlike the separate states that came together to make up the United States, the local chambers did not lose any freedom of action. They did relinquish a bit of their call on the attention of the nation. From now on, for many Americans, "the chamber" meant the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

For most chambers, this was a small price to pay for having an organization with the muscle to stand up to organized labor and even, occasionally, to Uncle Sam. And over the succeeding century, the local business groups would cooperate frequently with their national organization. The project didn't work out too badly: the coming 100 years would bring American industry and commerce to unprecedented, almost undreamed-of levels of wealth and power.

And what of all that ambitious, local civic spirit that animated so many people and groups and chambers of commerce in 1912? Has it disappeared in pervasive national or international organizations and institutions and corporations? Have we given up so much money and responsibility to governments that we are incapable of doing really ambitious things together, on a voluntary basis?

Perhaps, for the next century, the big questions will not be about institutions, but about us. The New York Chamber first confronted such issues at its founding in 1768. Are we, indeed, not born for ourselves alone? And if so, what will we do for the places where we live? CE



Chris Mead is ACCE's senior vice president of member and sponsor relations. He is working on a history of chambers, *The Magicians of Main Street*.



Industrialist James Dole, known as the Pineapple King, inspects one of his pineapple fields in Hawaii.

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