

History Comes Alive!

Tales From the City Archives



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The L.A. Chamber of Commerce

Here's the story of how the association began.

Although I try and write on the City of Los Angeles for these articles, once in awhile, I find a subject that also includes the county as well. This is one of them.

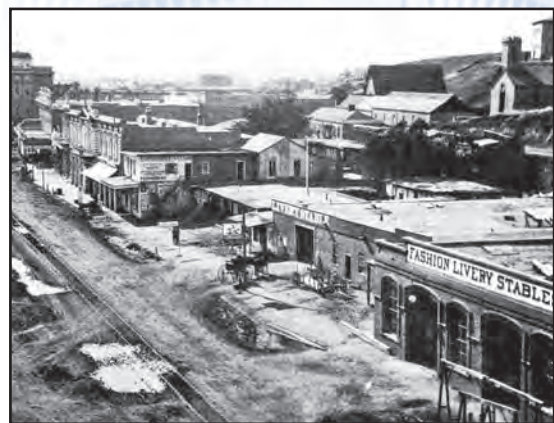
Most people think of chambers of commerce as an important part of a city, which is correct. In this country, they were founded as early as the 1780s, often led by bankers, realtors and representatives from other service industries. The chamber organizations flourished because of economic growth, urban political reform and labor unrest. Crime was often associated with this period as well.

According to historian Dr. Leonard Pitt and his wife, Dale, in their monumental volume, *Los Angeles A to Z: An Encyclopedia of the City and County*, "The first chamber was formed in 1873 as the Board of Trade, and reorganized on a new footing as the Los Angeles Chamber of Commerce in 1888."

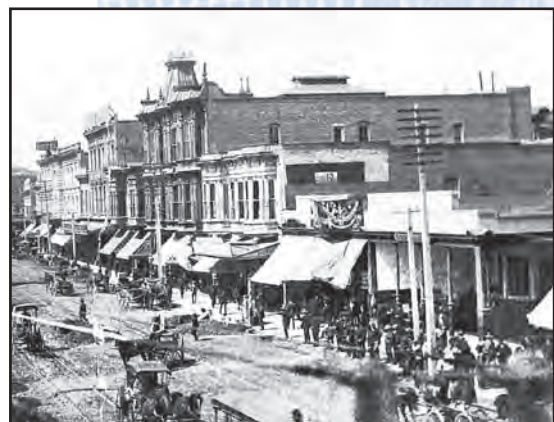
By the account of Harris Newmark in his volume, *Sixty Years in Southern California, 1853-1916*, the Board of Trade became a reality in the summer of 1873, as stated above, in a meeting in the old court house on Bullard Block built by John Temple in 1859, for a city market and theater on the upper floor. Ex-Governor John G. Downey was chosen Chair, and J.M. Griffith was made Secretary *pro tem*.

Nine days later for the next meeting, there were more than 100 merchants that had joined. At that meeting on Aug. 9, 1873, a constitution and by-laws were adopted. A board of eleven directors (the Chamber) were chosen and the fee to join was five dollars. Two days later the organization was incorporated. Of the 11 directors chosen, the officers were Soloman Lazard President and I.W. Lord, Secretary. They met in Judge Widney's office on the Temple Block.

The Chamber set to work on commercial interests of Southern California. Also this group assisted Congress for a survey and improvement of the San Pedro Harbor. The Board of Trade members prepared descriptive brochures throughout the country about the virtues of Southern California. Steps were also taken to build up a trade system with Arizona and the surrounding territory. The onset



Main Street from the junction with Spring Street at Temple, circa 1870.



A view of North Main Street, 1880.

of intercontinental railroads would soon complicate the Board of Trade and where the Chamber of Commerce would become a permanent reality in Los Angeles, as well as other places in the United States.

What occurred follows with the acknowledgment of the two rail systems listed. In 1869, the first railroad system in the City of Los Angeles became a reality. It covered a 21-mile stretch from the city of San Pedro to the City of Los Angeles. By 1876, it gained connection to the newly connected Southern Pacific Railroad from San Francisco Bay to Los Angeles, which gave Los Angeles its first intercontinental hookup. Nine years later the Southern Pacific monopoly was broken by the Atchison, Topeka, and the Santa Fe Railroad entered the Los Angeles area in 1885. These two "Iron Horses" played havoc on the Los Angeles area. The huge impact flooded Los Angeles with new migrations.

A major ramification from that changed Southern California, primarily Los Angeles County, where 1,000 people left the Los Angeles area every month until the population fell from 70,000 citizens down to 50,000. What the cause was a fare war between the competing railroads and the inducements of overly eager land speculators bringing newcomers by the rail systems to Los Angeles. Within that year, promises of fresh air, warm climate and a prosperous life brought to this area about 120,000 people. Within time, the city was transformed from all over the United States. This created a real estate boom that drove land prices skyward. But then the newcomers became *only* paper millionaires and fled Los Angeles. Once again the City's Mexican American population became an isolated minority, where it had been a ruling class a generation before.

On Oct. 10, 1888, a group of Los Angeles businessmen met to overcome reverses in the area to reinvigorate the communities and its citizenry. The great exodus caused economic issues. It became apparent that there had to be a great transitional focus from early projects of agriculture and international trade to a need to have an agency devoted to civic and political activities. The founding fathers to run the new Chamber of Commerce were Maj. Edward W. Jones, Mayor William H. Workman, Col. Harrison G. Otis, Samuel B. Lewis, J.I. Redick and Thomas A. Lewis.

The early Chamber members devoted themselves to two objectives: stimulate migration; and to market Los Angeles products to other parts of the nation. One of their goals was to attract Midwestern farmers to Los Angeles because of their expertise in agriculture. Because railroads had made such an impact in Los Angeles, the Chamber undertook the idea of a rail expedition called "California on Wheels." It was a two-year tour through the Midwest and South. A railroad car was decked with the state's agricultural products and visited every town of importance. More than a million visitors passed through the exhibit and took home materials from the Chamber.

In 1890, Frank Wiggins, a pioneer Angeleno, became the first Superintendent of Exhibits for the Chamber. He was a mastermind of displays. He pushed to feature California agricultural products at large national and international exhibits that brought fame and fortune to the Los Angeles area. For the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, he conceived and brought to life an 850 pound elephant made from unusually large California walnuts that covered a wire framework to cover the animal. It achieved lasting fame for Los Angeles and the Chamber of Commerce. That display and others like it proved that California had more than climate; it produced a variety of very marketable items.

Additionally, the Chamber encouraged homegrown investments in several manufacturing enterprises such as beet-sugar with technological advancements that encouraged its growth and economy. By the end of the 19th century, these endeavors manufactured 15,000 tons of sugar yearly valued at \$1.3 million. These industries received a



In 1894, the Chamber moved to new quarters at the southeast corner of Broadway and Fourth, in a building designed especially for its use, the then-new three-story Mason Building, which would serve as the L.A. Chamber of Commerce for 12 years.



The L.A. Chamber of Commerce building at 350 S. Bixel St., under construction in April 1994.

monumental boost with the discovery of oil and the introduction of electric power generated water. In the 1920s, the Chamber encouraged aircraft manufacturing due to international air meets at the Dominguez field and communications of meteorological information making flights safer for pilots. An interesting event occurred when the Chamber negotiated with Chicago livestock entrepreneurs in 1921 to create the Central Manufacturing District and Los Angeles Railway. What an interesting segue!

In 1925, the Junior Chamber of Commerce organized to promote trade and extended manufacturing within the state. Two years later, World Trade Week was initiated. In 1932, The Chamber's newly organized Women's Division worked with the Olympic Games to assist with Olympic Visitors coming to Los Angeles. In 1938, Chamber officials mobilized the Los Angeles community to support federal wartime preparedness. By 1946, the Chamber successfully fought for legislation to construct freeways in Los Angeles. During the 1950s, the Chamber worked to bring the Dodgers to Los Angeles. To control air pollution, the Chamber promoted the "Share the Ride" campaign. In 1971, the Chamber's efforts assisted in opening the Los Angeles Convention Center.

After World War II, the Chamber of Commerce realigned itself in another direction, from an organization that sought to attract new business to Los Angeles County into one that now works toward modern issues that affect our daily lives in a large metropolis. The Chamber changed from a county-sponsored organization into a private business organization funded solely by its members. Its advocacy efforts began to include issues relating to four surrounding counties. By 1967, the Chamber changed its name to the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce.

The Chamber's mission is: By being a voice of business, helping its members grow and promoting collaboration, the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce seeks full prosperity for the Los Angeles region. As a trustee for the current and future welfare of the region, the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce champions economic prosperity and quality of life.

The Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce is southern California's largest not-for-profit business federation. It represents the interests of more than 235,000 businesses in Los Angeles County. The address for the Chamber headquarters since 1994 350 S. Bixel St., Los Angeles, CA 90017. Its mission continues daily, and its motto is, "A better L.A. is our business."