

ST. CHARLES CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

When the population of St. Charles County decreased ten percent during the 1880s, local businessmen established a Board of Trade to encourage economic development. St. Charles grew to 6,161 residents by 1890, a 23 percent increase since 1880. Successful businessmen like Mittelberger; Jacob Zeisler, owner of a soda-water bottling company; Stephen Merten, one of the organizers of the Union Savings Bank; and John Hackman, a successful grain dealer; all served as mayor of St. Charles.

German-Americans like Henry Kemper and John Thro had been instrumental in establishing a Board of Trade to encourage economic growth in St. Charles by the 1880s. Most of the retail store owners in St. Charles County were of German background. Among those advertising in 1905 as “dealer in general merchandise,” were Emil Marheineke (St. Peters), the Westhoff Brothers (O’Fallon), J. Wilmes (Josephville), J.C. Debrecht (Flint Hill), Achelpohl Bros (Orchard Farm), J.H. Machens (Machens), August Lindemann (Harvester), H.J. Seib (Hamburg), J.H. Schiermeier, (Defiance), C.W. Tuepker, (Schluersberg), Herman Knippenberg (Femme Osage), Charles Meyer (Augusta), and A.C. Hoefner (New Melle). Gottfried Duden had acknowledged Jewish settlers in the region and, for decades German Jews had been merchants in St. Charles County, including Simon Baer, “one of the energetic, enterprising business men of St. Charles County,” who had emigrated from Baden in 1873 and opened stores in St. Peters and Cottleville.¹ German-Americans named Moehlenkamp, Steinbrinker, Hackman, Thro, Rechtern, Hunning and Dierker were successful businessmen in St. Charles. The *St. Charles County*

Directory advertised dry goods businesses run by German Jews, including Julius Frank and

¹ 1885 history, 467-468. While this source does not identify Simon Baer’s religion, Julius and Sigmund Baer were also born in Baden about a decade after Simon Baer, immigrated to St. Louis in the late 1870 and were also in merchandising, eventually becoming partners in Stix, Baer and Fuller Department Stores. Simon Baer married Jennie Steinberg from a prominent Jewish family in St. Louis at the time. Walter Ehrlich, *Zion in the Valley, The Jewish Community of St. Louis*, Volume I, (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), 267, 308; See also 1905 plat map of St. Charles County; 20th Letter of Gottfried Duden, 1826, Vol. 13. *MHR*. 45

Louis Kohn. Emil Weil, an immigrant from Alsace-Lorraine who became a successful businessman in St. Charles, bought out Kohn and another business owned by Ike Constam and opened the Palace Men's Clothing Company on Main Street in 1899. Three of the four contractors big enough to advertise, and all the saloon owners in St. Charles, had German surnames.²

The *Cosmos-Monitor* discussed connections between St. Charles and St. Louis in 1890, asking:

Is it not now a good time for our Board of Trade to look into some new quarter and see if a good live movement cannot be inaugurated that will afford relief? The narrow gauge system was extensively talked about some time ago, but it ended in talk. Would not an electric system be feasible? A glance at the map of St. Louis county would show an almost air line along the rock road, opening up a new territory for suburban towns, and the distance is not too far for electric cars. Some of the companies of St. Louis are extending their lines westward, away beyond the populous portions of the city. Could not a committee of the Board of Trade prepare a paper or send a delegation over the route and show its almost unequalled advantages for future improvements.³

The article continued, "We will all rise up and bless the company that will give us rapid transportation and thus enable us to build up our beautiful little city and bring prosperity upon those who venture a little now to secure the rich prize."⁴ Discussion began in 1894 about a new bridge to carry vehicles and pedestrians across the river. Two years later, Congress chartered a private corporation to build a highway bridge at St. Charles. The bridge was completed in December 1903, at a cost of \$400,000 and the lives of four workmen.⁵ Construction began on a

² Frank was a prominent Jewish name in St. Louis. Nathan Frank was elected to Congress in 1889 and later served on the World's Fair Commission. Ehrlich, *Zion in the Valley*, 341; Edna McElhiney Olson, *Historical Articles*, Vol. II, 367. Contractors in St. Charles included Fred Franke, Carl Bull & Son, Henry Wortmann and Henry Ehlmann & Son. Saloon owners included Ben Rau, Ed Ohlms, William Schulte, J.O. Boettler, Louis Els, Henry Klippel and Henry Elmendorf. 1905 Plat Map; 1885 history, *Ibid.* 385, 407, 440.

³ *Cosmos*, November 5, 1890.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ McElhiney, *My Hometown*, 4.

streetcar line connecting St. Charles to Wellston, to be known as the St. Louis, St. Charles and Western Electric Railroad.

Like the Board of Trade established in the 1880s, the St. Charles Improvement Association sought to attract additional new industry. A 1906 publication by that organization, addressed “To Manufacturing and Mercantile Interests and Real Estate Investors, Who desire to locate where material and means dwell in abundance and enjoy the freedom of an unrestricted, law abiding and considerate community...,” explained, “St. Charles is located on the great Missouri River, with two trunk line railroads, the M.K. &T., and the Wabash; with lines radiating to all parts of the North, West and South, affording all the advantages in rates on raw material and manufactured products as enjoyed by enterprises located in St. Louis, St. Louis rates apply to and from all principle points. That makes St. Charles an ideal location for all kinds of manufacturing enterprises.”⁶

A Chamber of Commerce was chartered in 1918, and like its predecessor, promoted economic growth which, by creating more jobs for workers and more customers for businesses.⁷ A Chamber of Commerce publication supporting the public schools proclaimed that there was time, “when an eighth grade education fitted a man for the keen competition that he was forced to meet in the life battle for an honest living. That time has come to an end. The grade school of to-day is only a preparation for another more necessary step – the High School.”⁸ The Chamber of Commerce emphasized the leveling influence of public education, boasting in one publication, “The idea of social rank, of class distinction by blood and lineage, of aristocratic segregation, of religious separations, is coming to an inevitable end under the influence of our public schools.”⁹

⁶ The *St. Charles, Missouri Citizen Improvement Association, 1905-1907*, front cover and 1.

⁷ Thelen, *Paths of Resistance*, 181.

⁸ “Progressive St. Charles,” St. Charles Chamber of Commerce, 1916.

⁹ “Progressive St. Charles,” St. Charles Chamber of Commerce, 1916.

To attract more motorists to St. Charles, the Chamber of Commerce proposed in 1923 that the State Highway Commission purchase the privately owned U.S. 40 Bridge. Agitation to reroute U. S. 40 to avoid the toll prompted an agreement by 1926 whereby the bridge was sold to St. Charles and St. Louis counties for \$1.25 million, with the money to be recovered by continued tolls until 1931. Decisions by the State Highway Commission had become critical to the county's future.¹⁰

Inactive during the Depression, James Duggan, Abe Hess, Dr. Joseph Jenkins, J. Edward Travis, Dave Weil and Saul Wolff re-established the Chamber of Commerce in 1939. Reflecting the renewed confidence of the business community, it immediately became active in promoting economic development in St. Charles. In December 1940, J. Edward Travis, newly elected president of the Chamber of Commerce, urged businesses in St. Charles not to over expand because of wartime contracts. He did not want St. Charles to become a "ghost town" after the war. He was also concerned about social problems that could be created by the influx of 8,000 to 12,000 workers at Weldon Spring. Arrests by St. Charles police tripled in 1941 over the previous year. Equally important, the influx of construction crews and plant workers was creating a housing shortage in the city. Allied victories in the summer of 1944 led the Chamber of Commerce to adopt a resolution in September asking all stores to close and all residents, upon Germany's surrender, to attend a thanksgiving service at the church of their choice.

¹⁰ Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 167; Schiermeier, *Cracker Barrel Country*, Vol. III, 209; Louis J. Launer, "Victory Highway," *St. Charles County Heritage*, Vol. 13, No. 1, January 1995, 25; *Polk's City Directory 1929-1930*, 13. There were 100 hotel rooms available in four hotels in the city. Ibid. *The Bridges at St. Charles*, 14; Morris, *O'Fallon, Missouri*, 83; *Banner-News*, November 19, 1927, April 19, 1928.

The number of women in the workforce declined immediately after the war. While Mayor Homer Clevenger declared the second week of October 1945, “Business Women’s Week” in St. Charles, men dominated the Chamber of Commerce, and service clubs like Rotary did not admit women.¹¹ Nevertheless, the Chamber of Commerce advertised that, “Male and female workers are in adequate supply for new industrial and commercial plants.”¹² The percentage of women in the workforce began to increase again by the 1950s. The impetus for a wife to take a job was no longer to “Beat the Axis,” but to add a second family income to guarantee a middle-class life-style.

Shortly after the war, the Chamber of Commerce advertised the fact that the St. Louis Bus Company provided bus service to St. Louis every 30 minutes, while the St. Charles Transit Company provided bus service within St. Charles. Many workers in St. Charles still walked to work. With automobiles unaffordable during the Depression, and unavailable during the war, there were waiting lists for those wanting to purchase a new car.

Robert Linnemann, who had served three terms in the Missouri House of Representatives, was elected to the Missouri Senate in 1946, becoming the first St. Charles Countian to serve in that body since 1902.¹³ His victory helped the Republicans gain control of the Missouri Senate. A pamphlet published by the Chamber of Commerce the next year declared, “Local and state governments are well-managed and conservative. There is no necessity for a high tax structure to support extravagance and waste.”¹⁴ Republicans hoped to return to the White House in 1948, after a 16-year absence. Thirty-four-year-old St. Charles lawyer Robert Niedner announced early as a candidate for the Republican nomination to run against Congressman Cannon. Before

¹¹ Cleta Flynn, “To Be Mayor of a Small Town,” *St. Charles County Heritage*, Vol. 25, No. 1, January, 2008, 28.

¹² “You, Your Business and St. Charles County,” 12.

¹³ Ibid. November 7, 1946. Senator Robert Linnemann, born in St. Charles in 1882, was a product of the public schools and St. Charles College. An engineer and contractor by profession, and a member of the Masonic Lodge, he was first elected to the House of Representatives in 1940. *Official Manual of the State of Missouri*.

¹⁴ “You, Your Business and St. Charles County,” St. Charles Chamber of Commerce, circa 1947, 13, MHS Library.

serving as prosecuting attorney, he had been chairman of the Republican County Central Committee since 1938, past president of the Chamber of Commerce, and past president of the St. Charles Rotary Club.

The Chamber of Commerce revived the St. Charles County Fair in 1946. Held annually at Blanchette Park in St. Charles, its popularity evidenced the continued importance of agriculture in the county. The *Banner-News* suggested as early as 1948 that it was time to look for a larger fairground. In 1952, a committee began to study prospective sites for a new fairground and to explore ways of financing one of the few remaining free fairs in the state. Stockholders of a private corporation, the St. Charles County Fairgrounds Association, met in April 1953 and elected Otto Wilke president. The association then purchased land on the south side of what would become Interstate-70 (I-70), at the Fairgrounds overpass, where the St. Charles County Fair grew and prospered.¹⁵

A publication by the Chamber of Commerce in 1947 boasted that, in St. Charles, “the lawns are well kept.” Many of the new arrivals from Southern Missouri and Arkansas took up residence in the area of St. Charles that had become known as “frog town.” The “scrubby Dutch” did not applaud the reappearance of the “southern Man.” Like earlier generations of German-Americans, they looked down on these poor whites from the south, who did not spend a lot of time on lawn care and home maintenance, as rootless and lazy. The Chamber of Commerce proudly reported in 1947 that the population of the city was, “94% native-born white, a good source of loyal, intelligent and efficient labor.”¹⁶ The percentage of blacks in the county sank to 1.5 percent in 1950, and continued to decline. The county was becoming a nearly all-white blue collar community.

¹⁵ *Banner-News*, September 14, 1948; *Cosmos-Monitor*, September 12, 1952; *Journal*, July 30, 1959; *Cosmos-Monitor*, April 15, 1953.

¹⁶ “You, Your Business and St. Charles County,” 12.

The 1951 flood did \$250,000 in damage to these clubhouses, with a like amount to county roads. Paul Niedner, Chamber of Commerce president, estimated \$1 million in damage to the local economy, with more than 500 farms, 50 homes and 25 businesses flooded.¹⁷

The Chamber of Commerce boasted the fact that, in St. Charles, “Many of the workers have a rural background and possess a native ingenuity which makes them unusually resourceful and adaptable even when faced with an unfamiliar type of work.”¹⁸ Mechanization, while easing the labor of farmers, continued to push people off the land.

When the plant closed on September 16, 1953, the personnel department at American Car and Foundry said it would take applications for jobs from employees laid off by International Shoe, and the Chamber of Commerce tried to acquire the plant and find another industry to relocate there. While 100 of the employees were transferred to the company's Madison Street plant in St. Louis, 250 former workers, mostly women, remained unemployed on December 23, 1953.¹⁹

Population growth after 1940 decreased the German-American majority in St. Charles. Addressing the town's heritage in 1956, the St. Charles Chamber of Commerce explained, “German it remained until well into the 20th century when the homogenizing influences of natural assimilation and population shift made it what it is today, a typical American city, proud of its historic past – proud of its fast growing suburban future,”²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid. July 4, 1951 and July 25, 1951.

¹⁸ “You, Your Business and St. Charles County,” 12.

¹⁹ *Cosmos-Monitor*, November 9, 1949, August 12, 1953 and December 23, 1953. It was not until mid-decade that the two competing unions united and shut down the St. Louis and rural shoe factories of Brown and International shoe companies. Feurer, “Shoe City, Factory Towns,” 16.

²⁰ Notes about St. Charles, published by the St. Charles Chamber of Commerce, St. Charles Papers, August 1, 1956, MHS..

The Chamber of Commerce had boasted in 1946, “There are no slum areas in St. Charles.”²¹ This was not entirely true, as the McElhiney Addition, where black families had lived since the Civil War, was seriously blighted. Mayor Vogt and three St. Charles City Council members met with the Brotherhood of St. Johns A.M.E. Church ten years later to discuss a proposed federal housing project in the McElhiney Addition, known in the 19th century as “Africa Hill.”²²

When St. Joseph Hospital broke ground for a 100-bed expansion in St. Charles in 1959, the entire community got behind the effort as it had in the past. The Chamber of Commerce honored Saul Wolf As the decade progressed, economic conditions continued to improve in St. Charles County.

The Board of Directors conducted a campaign in 1961 to raise money for a new Boys Club building in Blanchette Park. Businesses, labor unions and approximately 400 volunteer laborers worked to build the facility. Representative Clarence Cannon again spoke at the dedication ceremony for the new facility in December 1962. The Chamber of Commerce named local businessman Ted Schoetker, chairman of the building committee, “Man of the Year” for his efforts.²³

²¹ “You, Your Business and St. Charles County,” 11.

²² *Cosmos-Monitor*, March 30, 1955. Henry Vogt, born in 1903, attended St. Peters Grade School and Brown Business College. He married Catherine Dallmeyer and worked for the Missouri Pacific Railroad before going into the poultry business. He was elected mayor of St. Charles in April, 1951.

²³ *Banner-News*, September 28, 1955. Other officers were Paul Blessing, Elder Holiday and Hugh I. Holmes. Other board members were Arthur Baue, John Becker, Homer Clevenger, Lester Plackmeyer, Henry Vogt, James Siegler, Albert Ostmann, William Mayer, Ted Schoetker, Walter Trump, Andrew McColloch, Webster Karrenbrock, Earl Pryor, Brand Wilhelm, Francis Mueller, Omar Osiek and Forest Watts. Ibid. December 21, 1955, October 10, 1956, April 26, 1961, September 13, 1962, October 30, 1962 and December 14, 1962. Not only Schoetker, but Travis, Blessing, Becker, Clevenger, Holmes Karrenbrock, and Vogt were later named Citizen of the Years by the St. Charles Chamber of Commerce.