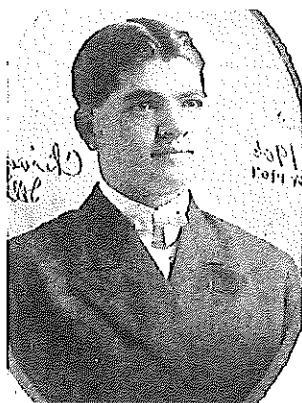


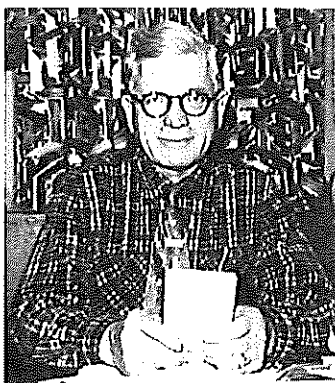
EARLY CONROE HISTORY AND THE I&GN RAILROAD
as related by Obie Etheridge in 1967

The narrative that follows was written by noted Conroe civic leader Obie L. Etheridge in November 1967. He shares remarkable historical information about early Conroe that he had personally collected over the years. On March 14, 1911, Etheridge, debonair and single, stepped off the train in Conroe at age 23, and was hired by businessman Pete West to work at the *Conroe Courier*. By 1919, he owned the *Courier* and had married a local Conroe girl—Hilda Beasley. With only a formal six grade education, Obie Etheridge years later studied for and passed the state bar in 1934 at age 44 with the help of local Conroe attorney James Crane. He sold the *Conroe Courier* in 1931 and pursued his law practice and various real estate investments in Conroe.



Obie L. Etheridge in 1906

Obie L. Etheridge was a beloved Conroe lawyer and civic leader, former *Courier* editor and owner, distinguished Mason, Conroe historian, and early visionary of what would later become the San Jacinto River Authority. He died in a tragic automobile accident on December 17, 1977, ten years after the following narrative was written.



Obie Etheridge (circa 1975)

Introduction by Larry L. Foerster, Chairman
Montgomery County Historical Commission
April 3, 2020

CONROE HISTORY AND I&GN RAILROAD

By O. Etheridge November, 1967

District court is the place to try land cases and boundary suits but "Allen" Street in Conroe has stirred up such a recent controversy that a little history might be interesting to those who read.

Conroe is not what it used to be,
But it is on the same old ground!!

In 1871, ninety-six years ago, when the I&GN railroad came by there was no settlement of any kind on or near this hill. The surrounding ten or so square miles now covered with Conroe was swamp, pond and thicket with big pine trees in between. The I&GN was owned at that time by the Missouri Pacific railroad system as it is today.

MONTGOMERY OLD COUNTY SEAT

Montgomery was the settlement west where the county seat court house was located from 1837 to 1890, fifty-three years. Southwest was Old Kentucky, down past Pinehurst. East, passing what is now Beach was the old Houston-Danville road with San Jacinto river crossing down below "Kidd" school house at Ivy McNeese tan yard where former Montgomery banker T. L. Wilcox said he was born in the 1870s. Mr. Quincy Crooke can tell you something of those early days. Dr. J. Q. Kidd was his grandfather and Roy Kidd, Frank Kidd and Bugg Kidd were his uncles. Bell's crossing was another San Jacinto river ford down that way. Up north was Danville, on the hills above Willis (before Willis). Also Waverly, Huntsville and Cincinnati (Riverside). Montgomery county went all the way up to Trinity river in Republic days.

COMES THE RAILROAD

In 1871 the railroad picked the beautiful sand hills eight miles north of where Conroe now is for the metropolis and established Willis, named after Peter J. Willis, pioneer merchant of Montgomery who agreed to and did move to Willis. San Jacinto Masonic Lodge No. 106, was, in 1875, moved from Danville to Willis. I believe Sam Houston was present at the organization of this lodge at Danville in 1853 for he always insisted on naming everything he could San Jacinto. The lodge records were burned about 1920 at Willis so we can not tell for sure, but at Huntsville we have the old minute book of San Jacinto Chapter No. 7 Royal Arch Masons in 1850 and Sam was there acting as one of the

officers, so I believe he was at Danville in 1853 and named San Jacinto Lodge No. 106. Danville was quite a town. (Now out in a pasture.) Dr. C. B. Stewart of Montgomery had a drug store there and here was a new Methodist church and maybe a Baptist church there.

WILLIS FAILS TO GET THE COURT HOUSE

Twice Willis tried to win the county seat from Montgomery and twice failed. In 1889 Conroe did win. The town started on the East side of the I&GN by the Santa Fe in 1883, when it built the Central & Montgomery from Navasota to Cleveland. Conroe was about to grow up! Wow!!!

CAPTAIN J. K. AYRES ACTS

About four years after 1885, J. K. Ayres laid out Ayres Addition to Conroe, gave a block each for court house and jail west of the I&GN in the big thicket infested with bear, panther, raccoons and squirrels by the thousands, and the town started to move over. Jim McShan from out east and Ben Hicks from southwest when they were young country men worked at the new court house and jail for "Frenchy", foreman for the contractors, Moodie and Ellis. They told me about how they lived mostly on squirrels killed in oak flats nearby and that they killed a big black bear down on the branch near what is now Frazer Street. (And FRAZER is the right way to spell it.)

J. K. Ayres saw mill was down south a mile on west side of I&GN at the present Bear and Rigsby places. J. L. Garwood's saw mill was down east of the railroad where Grogan's mill is now located. This was all in the 80s and 90s.

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By this time the old Houston-Danville road was about abandoned but parts used by settlers for years could be traveled most of the way up to the 1920s.

CAPTAIN ISAAC CONROE AND HIS TRAM

Capt. Isaac Conroe came up here from Houston about 1881 and soon bought the J. G. Smith survey at Beach. He was from Red Bank, N. J. He built the saw mill at Beach near the Houston-Danville Road before the Santa Fe moved in. He built a tram railroad to the I&GN with 4x4 oak rails, coming in north of what is now Oakwood cemetery and connecting with the railroad at what is now Lewis Street, his switch

turning to the south. Many people believe the Conroe tram followed the course to be later used by the Santa Fe but this is not so. I have seen references in land field notes of Conroe tram north of the hill and Will Conroe, son of Isaac and grandfather of present William Conroe, often told about location of the old tram as I have stated and he would tell about when he was a young man he drove the mules that pulled the lumber cars in from the mill to the railroad. At that time the I&GN main line was the present long switch west of the present main line track. For the first fifteen years of I&GN life there was not even a whistle stop on this hill, now Conroe. The south whistle stop in Conroe's Switch (the first name of Conroe) was at the north end of the hill where the Will Griffin house was later built. Maybe because people believe the Conroe tram came in where the Santa Fe does is because Isaac Conroe moved to town after 1885 and had his commissary, office, etc., where the old Conroe home (now Wooldridge) is. This was the first post office about 1891 and G. A. McCurdy was postmaster and justice of the peace. He was father of Wallace and E. C. McCurdy who were born in a house in that block.

CONROE MOVING WEST

Soon after 1895 it looked like Conroe would move to the west side of the I&GN. There was great friendly rivalry between the two captains, Capt. Conroe and Capt. Ayres. Captain Conroe was deceased when I came here nearly fifty-seven years ago but Captain Ayres was very much alive. He often told me how he kidded Captain Conroe that he, Capt. Ayres, had named his alley next to I&GN railroad "Ave Z" on the filed map in the court house records because there would soon be nothing on the other side (east) but the "so forth." In a suit in later years, in 1898-1904, Captain Ayres lost all his land and his lots in Conroe he had not sold except his homestead home on lots where Red Arrow now is, and a business homestead, his office, sixteen feet square in the building now occupied by Westmoreland store on east side of the court house. Captain Ayres often told me about his troubles and said he was just too "contentious" in those days. He often told me how he gave the court house land and then lost everything in that court house. Captain Ayres died about 1925. The town started moving west to the new court house, and the depot ought to be on the same side of the track as

the main part of town, so a curve was made in the track just north of Lewis Street, from there using the old Conroe tram roadbed to run the trains on the east side of the depot. This curve was maintained in the I&GN long after I came here fifty-six years ago. You can drive down to the curve in the North 2nd Street paving just north of Lewis Street, get out of your car and count your steps up to the present main line and you will see it is only seventeen steps (fifty feet). To go seventy-five feet (the I&GN R/W) you have to go on to the old main line which is now the long switch. Try it and see for yourself. You do not have to hire a surveyor or lawyer. The paving program in 1936 recognized the old wagon road along east side of I&GN; now part of this road is abandoned where the two houses and Wilkins laundry are located. But this paving evidence, only twenty years after the change, with old evidence still on the ground, is physical evidence of the old curve and change in the railroad.

THE RAILROAD STRAIGHTENS THE CURVE

About 1916 the railroad cut into the hill between Lewis Street and Phillips street, built the long new main line dump with most of this dirt and piled the rest up on the spot where the beer warehouse now stands, made the main line straight north without a curve and put a six-ft. iron pipe culvert under the dump at the branch north of Lewis Street. School kids of late teens and 20s will remember this culvert which has since been replaced by a smaller road culvert. The old main line became the long switch to the crossing at the United creosote plant. You can step up to the track in several places north of the paving curve to about Pauline street and you will find it is about seventy-five feet to center of the present main line where the north end of the old curve tapered out. Jim Koen for me hauled 400 loads of this dirt which the railroad had a hard time giving away to clear the view, to the corner where my house is now located. The Methodist church had moved to its present location and I bought the lots. Although this was fifty years ago maybe this is one reason I am so familiar in my recollection with what happened at that time. Rev. J. B. Nutter came to Conroe about the year 1894 as pastor of this church, so Arthur Nutter and Fred Nutter are about the oldest male citizens here except Quincy Crooke and Bud (J. W.) Pruitt.

THE OLD ROAD TO WILLIS

The old road to Willis was on both sides of the I&GN up to the crossing at the United Greasote plant when it went west of the track all the rest of the way to Willis. We who traveled this road before 1916 remember it as a pretty good country road.

JUDGE M. C. COOPER AND OLIVER STOWE

What the present squabble calls "Allen" Street has recent reasons for that name. Philosophers say that every condition has a first cause and usually other attendant little causes. This road was the north of "Conroe" in the 80s and 90s and the road to Willis as I have stated. It was the first road long before the west side was opened up at all. Facing Santa Fe where the Conroe Courier now stands was "MAIN STREET".

Avenue "B" is now called "Allen" Street because L. W. Allen about 1920 bought the old Cooper place which had been under fence since at least 1890. Oliver Stowe built the fence around the R. D. Simonton lots in 1890 and this fence was maintained by Simonton and others until about twelve years ago. This location is now Sinclair service station. The old Guinn place, just south, according to tradition, was fenced by C. M. Cox before 1888 when he built the first house there. He sold the place in 1893 to G. M. Guinn. All three of these fences marked the then east side of Avenue "B", main road to Willis. At Davis Street was the original I & GN railroad crossing from East to West Conroe, 1890.

THE CITY PAVING RECOGNIZES OLD LANDMARKS

When the west side started building up in the 1890s the only I&GN crossing north of the depot was the extension of Davis Street of the old town which did not match the streets on west side but crossed the track just east of Everett parking lot. Old timers will remember that before paving this was "the" crossing. A kind of crossing had developed at Paddock street but in the 1936 paving program this was made the highway crossing as it is today, Davis Street was altered accordingly and named East Davis while Paddock Street was renamed West Davis. City paving curb turnarounds and utility lines recognized the old lines east of I&GN and located their positions accordingly. This was thirty-one years ago and only twenty years or less since the railroad had been improved.

"GIBBS"---DID YOU EVER HEAR OF IT?

I have an old Rand-McNally Atlas map of 1875-1885, showing some kind of stop on the new railroad somewhere on this hill called "Gibbs." I have searched the land records and at no time since 1837 has there been a name "Gibbs" on any land title near what is now Conroe, but the map is plain. I have been told that in the long ago right after the civil war and maybe after 1871 there was a "Gibbs" saw mill out on Carnelian Creek (now Stewart's) at what we call Butlersburg, hauling the lumber down the Houston-Danville Road to Houston and Galveston, fording San Jacinto river at Ivy McNeese tan yard crossing. Perhaps this accounts for the "Gibbs" on the map which designates it as a Wells Fargo express throw off station. I believe this was at or near Lewis Street where Conroe's tram later met the I&GN railroad. Conroe just followed the old trail. Did you know that in those days there was a buffalo and cow hide tanning factory on San Jacinto river bank at the Alphonso Steele survey, the Ivy McNeese tan yard, and that it was a settlement where fifteen or twenty families lived on the bank of the river?

AVENUE "Z" AND BUILDERS WEST OF I&GN RAILROAD

In 1913 when H. C. Addison rebuilt the Charles Parks one-story brick store into a two-story (now Carter Drug) a controversy arose about the railroad and Avenue "Z" (Pacific Street) measurements and also the north and south measurement of this block. Railroad surveyors, Mr. Addison, John Wahrenberger, S. K. Halley, J. O. H. Bennette and a few sidewalk superintendents had a big measuring field day. West of the railroad the buildings were all out of line, claimed to be encroaching on the I&GN right of way. About 1898 the Santa Fe had prevailed in a law suit against Dr. W. E. Dutton who measured from the new main line at the depot and built his store where Johnson's ice house now stands, and it was as far too far east as the new main line of the I&GN was east of the old main line west of the depot. Santa Fe won the suit and got a tenancy agreement for twelve feet which is still maintained. The I&GN was more lenient and did not sue anybody.

IRON PIPE AND SHOW WINDOW

I listened to the discussion at the Anna Wahrenberger corner in 1913 and a two-inch pipe was put in the ground at what the railroad

surveyors and the others seemed to agree "might" be the true corner of this block. This pipe is still there but Anna Wahrenberger tied a big leaning Yuopon to it to straighten the tree but the tree pulled the pipe over instead. Mr. H. C. Addison had not finished the east end of his building but had gone too far with the walls to make a change for the sixteen inches they all claimed he was short in the north and south measurement of his land, so at the suggestion of others in the crowd he built the east show window (now Rex Cartwright store) out sixteen inches to make a showing that he was claiming the land all along his lot for this sixteen inches. Maybe some people wonder why this show window extends farther out than the walls. This is the "why." I know because I was there and heard the discussion and afterwards watched the building. The show window is there speaking for itself.

John Wahrenberger as district clerk (he was a lawyer too) and as deputy sheriff brought the county books over here from Montgomery in 1890 and later built the Witherspoon (now McGee) hotel, and later the famous Wahrenberger store. I heard him agreeing that the measurement should be from the west switch or thereabouts as it was the main line before the curve was built into the I&GN to run the trains east of the old depot. The present depot was built about 1906.

WHERE WAS THE MAIN LINE?

Any number of old timers can say that the I&GN main line through Conroe town is now just about where it was fifty or sixty years ago, but I do not believe there is anyone living who can say exactly where it was in 1871. We do know that up north of Conroe at one place the railroad is some 200 feet from where the papers say it was in 1871.

In 1871 the I&GN, like all pioneer railroads, had all kinds of low roadbeds, grades and curves to miss hills, gulleys and big trees, and that is the way it was north of Conroe, and probably south; this railroad was no exception to the rule. In later years, grades were out down, curves corrected, roadbeds built up. All railroads did this and I&GN was no exception to this rule either.

The buildings on the west side of the I&GN are not in line with each other, probably never will be, the curve in the paving north of Lewis Street is really there and the road to Willis is not any more up the I&GN railroad.

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