

An Application for an Official Texas Historical Marker for

Baytown's Historic Oak Tree

800 Texas Avenue
Baytown, Texas

Presented to the Harris County Historical Commission
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For the Baytown Historical Preservation Association²

CONTEXT

Trees in general have had symbolic value to humans, probably from the dawn of civilization. The cedars of Lebanon are prominent in ancient literature of multiple cultures as were fig and olive trees. For European cultures, the oak symbolizes strength and long life. In the American South, especially along the Gulf Coast the live oak is, perhaps, our most magnificent tree. It grows fast and typically has a thick trunk and has long gnarly branches which often touch the ground. Many are so massive that people assume individual specimens to be centuries older than they actually are.

Despite our society's love of trees, we have ruthlessly exploited them because of their value as lumber, furniture, and fuel and cleared entire forests to make room for fields, pastures, and subdivisions. And it is the rare specimen that survives being in the way of a road. Virtually all of the virgin forests that our ancestors encountered when they settled North America are gone. Nevertheless, from time to time and in place to place, people have set aside individual trees and copses³ for preservation, almost as totems. This is the story of the one live oak tree that the leaders and people of Baytown selected to be emblematic of their community.

OVERVIEW

The Texas Avenue oak tree has been a city symbol⁴ and a historical site in the eyes of most of the Baytown area's citizens. It has given "silent witness" to passing time and history. Its years have recorded the stories of citizens and events. Time, along with many attempts to destroy it, has taken its toll; yet it still stands. It is a testament to the pioneer Pruett family that the avenue and the town of Goose Creek⁵ grew up around the oak tree, as did folklore of the tree itself. The tree still has an influence on Baytown history.

A cultural icon or symbol that is identified as representative of the citizens of the town is important. This old oak tree strengthens the distinctive character of Baytown and has encouraged local pride over the years. It has represented our heritage, and is a historic landmark and a legacy for future generations.

The oak tree was used as a symbol of the city for many years and was already featured on city vehicles before City Council formally designated it as the “official symbol of the city of Baytown” on June 12, 1986.⁶ Although it has not yet been definitively proven as to when it was first used on city vehicles and stationery, in 1966, nearly twenty years before the formal designation, *The Baytown Sun* referred to it as “the symbol of Baytown,” and noted that “its picture is etched on every city employe's 10 year service button . . . and it is a symbol, an observer and the delight of Baytonians.”⁷ In 1972, Wanda Orton, then Associate Managing Editor of *The Baytown Sun*, described the passion that long-time Baytonians have for their historic tree.

"I think that I shall never see, An efficient, well organized channelization of concrete traffic patterns . . . As lovely as a tree." That's how I feel about the majestic live oak tree in the middle of Texas Avenue. The thought of removing the big tree for improvement of traffic flow is, to most oldtimers here, near blasphemy. It is a landmark, an emblem, a symbol of old Goose Creek. And no one loves that old tree any more than our former Mayor R. H. Pruett, who has done more than any single individual in town to preserve it. The big tree's life was in danger back in 1950 when it was being eaten away by termites. Through Luther Stark in Orange, Pruett hired a tree surgeon who stripped away two inches of bark, exterminated the termites and gave the dying "patient" a life-saving "hypo." A curb and gutter were built around the tree. Also 12 to 15 cubic yards of dirt that had no food value were dug out, Pruett recalls, and replaced with good soil. The tree surgeon informed Pruett then that posters should not be tacked onto the tree because insects accumulate behind them. To this day, when Pruett sees a poster nailed on the tree, he quickly takes it away. The tree, like all of the downtown area, was originally located on the Pruett homestead. How old is it? According to the tree surgeon's estimate, the tree could be as old as 1,000 years. Live oak trees grow slowly Pruett pointed out, and back in 1902 it was as big then as it is now. Termites were not the only danger encountered by the big oak tree. Back in about 1949, Pruett recalls that the Baytown City Council actually voted to cut it down. Pruett persuaded them to not do it, promising he would take charge of having it cared for and preserved. Later, when Pruett was mayor⁸ he was pleased to see a city budget cover decorated with a picture of the big oak tree. And he points with pride to the fact that the Baytown city employes' service pins are decorated with a big oak tree emblem. Further evidence that the big oak tree is a widely accepted emblem of Goose Creek was found some years ago way up in Colorado. Bill Strickler, who was running a service station in the Rocky Mountains, posted signs

designating the number of miles to New York, San Francisco, Chicago and -- to "the big oak tree in Goose Creek." And have you ever noticed that picture of the tree above our Around Town column on Page 1 of The Sun every day? That's the tree, all right.⁹

Around 2003, the then-city manager created a new city emblem featuring an egret,¹⁰ but popular sentiment for the Old Oak Tree was strong, and there are many later references to the tree as "the symbol" of Baytown.¹¹

Many published accounts, such as the one above, have repeated the story that Baytown's old oak tree is 300 to 1,000 years old. Stated most often is the 1,000 year estimate. However, it is more likely to be 300-400 years old, and that could possibly be a stretch. Its life has spanned the history of Baytown from Pre-Republic time until the present. In an effort to establish a more accurate age of "the Baytown Oak," the Baytown Historical Preservation Association (BHPA) enlisted the help of the Houston Archeological Society. Louis Aulbach and Linda Gorski performed the task with an archeological tape measure. Three measurements of the tree trunk were made and each one came in around 14 feet and two plus inches. That calculates to a diameter of about 54.2+ inches. Using the method from the Hunker.com website, the estimated age of the oak tree ranges from 277.0 years to 280.3 years.

In addition to the disputed age of the tree, a second persistent, and oft refuted, story is that a black man was lynched from this tree. Subsequent research has determined that in September 1917, Bert Smith¹² was lynched from a tree in Middle Town (later known as Pelly).¹³ See map on page 8.

Other myths have included the claim that General Sam Houston and his army spent the night under the big oak just before meeting Santa Anna's army at San Jacinto.

The still-stately oak stands just off center, dividing the traffic on Texas Avenue, the main street in the town. Its once magnificent horizontal branches spread almost across the entire thoroughfare. The lower limbs that once almost swept the ground have been knocked off or pruned. Acorns from the oak tree are periodically gathered and seedlings started, being distributed by the Baytown Parks Department on Arbor Day.

The tree, a Live Oak (*quercus virginiana*) native to the area, was already a landmark when Price Pruett and his wife Georgie Estelle Lawrence, daughter of Soloman Freeman Lawrence and Julia A. Rhea of Cedar Bayou, moved their family to the 293 acres surrounding it in 1902.¹⁴ Price Pruett was the son of Beasley Pruett, Jr. and Rebecca Linney, and the grandson

of rancher Beasley Pruett, Sr.¹⁵ The senior Pruett was one of the Liberty area pioneers and purchased 400 acres, including the old homestead, from the Dr. Harvey Whiting¹⁶ heirs in the 1890s. Price and Georgie Pruett built a comfortable house east of the old Whiting homestead near the giant oak tree that stood in their front yard where children played and climbed on its branches.¹⁷

When the town site of Goose Creek was laid out by Ross Sterling and Price Pruett in 1917, the tree was on the outskirts of town and Texas Avenue, 70 feet wide, ended at the tree. In 1919, when Sterling had his fledging refinery going, a road was needed past the tree to the refinery. Apparently the road was not extended in 1919, but more like 1927. There might have been a trail there before that, but the official county road did not happen until 1927.¹⁸

Engineers from Goose Creek Realty Company and Harris County were running the line for the new road west of the tree on Texas Avenue and plans called for the tree to be cut down. It was Sterling, who was later elected Governor of Texas, who saved the tree from the ax. “It required many years for nature to produce such a beautiful thing like that and we must save it,” he said. Sterling instructed the engineers to bend the road slightly to the south.¹⁹ Price Pruett,²⁰ who owned the land where the tree stood, and who had given the right-of way for the road, made an agreement with Harris County Commissioner Charlie Massey²¹ that the tree would be allowed to stand until it died of natural causes.²²

The new road to the refinery curved a little south of the tree and the Pruett livestock still grazed to its edges. The Pruett children still played beneath the tree’s heavy branches and cooled their feet on hot summer days in a small stream that ran just east of the tree and was covered on Texas Avenue with a bridge. To the west and farther away the land unrolled into Goose Creek stream.

After Texas Avenue was extended to Market Street, it was made 100 feet wide at the “Big Oak.” Pruett then paid for the addition of 15 feet on each side of the tree to a distance of 75 feet east of the tree, making the street a total of 130 feet wide at the tree. With the additional street width, the curbing, and the directional signs, the traffic hazard argument has almost disappeared. Pruett provided for continued care of the tree in his will.

It seems that all trails went by “the Big Oak.” It was a rendezvous point for horse riders, picnickers, courting couples, and workers from town who took their sack lunches each noon to eat in its shade. Holiday parades formed there, and at its base travelers used it as a mileage

measurement point.²³ The tree was decorated for Christmas for many years, a tradition that ended in 1985. It was also used as the starting or ending point for the grand parades that opened the annual Baytown Fair,²⁴ the Shiners parade, and others. For example, in 1949, the Fair was heralded with a seven-column headline on page 1 of the Baytown Sun.²⁵

As automobiles came more into use, there was talk of how dangerous the tree was with no guard rails or lights to warn drivers. On October 26, 1929, refinery worker Marvin Epperson was killed when the jitney [taxi] he was riding in to work the midnight shift at the refinery, hit the tree; apparently, the driver had been blinded by on-coming traffic. He is the only casualty on record caused by the tree.

In the 1930s, the town grew rapidly. New businesses formed and old businesses moved from their original sites to relocate along Texas Avenue. The tree was much larger then and traffic was still routed on the south side in 1935, but sometimes trucks went on the north side to avoid low hanging limbs.

From 1928 to 1950, Home Lumber Company (later the site of Culpepper Furniture Store) was located at the tip of the tree's northernmost branches and used "By the Big Oak Tree" as its address on its letterhead and in adverts.²⁶ In 2008 when Baytown celebrated its 60th anniversary the Honorable Ted Poe acknowledged the city's history and the oak tree.²⁷ A more recent nod to the old oak tree as a Baytown symbol was given in a 2015 article by Matt Hollis in *The Baytown Sun*.²⁸

In 1950, the second big crisis in the life of the tree arose. Not only was it being called a traffic hazard, but the tree seemed to be sick and dying. Price Pruett's son R. H. "Red" Pruett, then a Baytown city councilman,²⁹ was out of the city the night the council voted 6-0 to cut down the tree.³⁰ On his return, Pruett persuaded the mayor and four of the other councilmen to reverse their votes and allow him time to try to save the tree. It was also reported at this time that Pruett had "an agreement signed by the county commissioner when his father dedicated the land to the county that the tree would not be cut down as long as it lived."³¹ Later news articles indicate that the agreement between Price Pruett and Commissioner Massey was a verbal agreement.

Pruett soon advised the Council that he had talked to a tree expert who said that the tree could be saved.³² Because the cure was expensive, and the city did not have the money for it, Pruett paid the cost in memory of his father and Charlie Massey. Pruett promised that steps would be taken to keep the tree alive and that warning lights and a curb would be placed around

it to avoid accidents, adding, “though I've always believed that anyone that can't see and avoid an object that big has no business driving anyway.”³³

The tree experts said one of the problems with the tree was the hundreds of posters that had been nailed to the trunk. Insects were attracted to the nail holes and were under the tree's bark. When pieces of the bark were removed, quarts of termites fell out. Portions of the trunk were scraped, holes filled in and medicated and dead limbs pruned. A crew dug out all the rock and shell around the tree's roots and a dozen yards of topsoil and fertilizer were hauled in and put around the base. The concrete curb was installed to allow the rainwater to run in. All of this cost Pruett over \$1,000.

The first oil well in the Goose Creek Oil Field was discovered on June 12, 1908, and activity continued for many years. In 1917 when a gusher broke up the community, many citizens scattered. Ross Sterling, one of the founders of Humble Oil and Refining Co., purchased land for the building of what would be known as the Baytown Refinery of the company. The company established settlements for the workers and their families. Seeing the need for a town, in 1917 he purchased three-fourths of a square mile from Price Pruett to build what would be called Goose Creek.³⁴

Over the years the Texas Highway Department made suggestions to the City of Baytown on how to increase the flow of traffic and business on Texas Avenue—most of which involved cutting down the tree that still stood on property owned by Price Pruett.

The last proposal to cut down the tree, because it was a traffic hazard, was made in 1972. But Pruett argued that a driver who cannot see a tree four feet in diameter probably can't see a pedestrian either and has no business driving an automobile. The proposal was rejected.

The tree has also been infected with a bout of Formosan termites, which are more dangerous than native termites because they prey on live wood. In the fall of 1989, an unknown person poisoned the oak with herbicide,³⁵ nearly killing it before it rebounded a year later.³⁶

The tree is under the care of Baytown Parks and Recreation Department, Scott Johnson, Parks Director.

SIGNIFICANCE

The Texas Avenue Oak Tree's historic significance is associated with local events through the years and is important as a marker in the landscape that has been affected and influenced by human involvement. Texas Avenue and the town of Goose Creek developed around this tree, which has an influence on Baytown to this day, serving as a monument to the past and a symbol of the city's future.

The story of this tree begins with the early Pruett family that had influence on the city for many years with three generations serving on the Baytown City Council. The tree was the "official" symbol for Baytown for many years and served for numerous celebrations and gatherings.

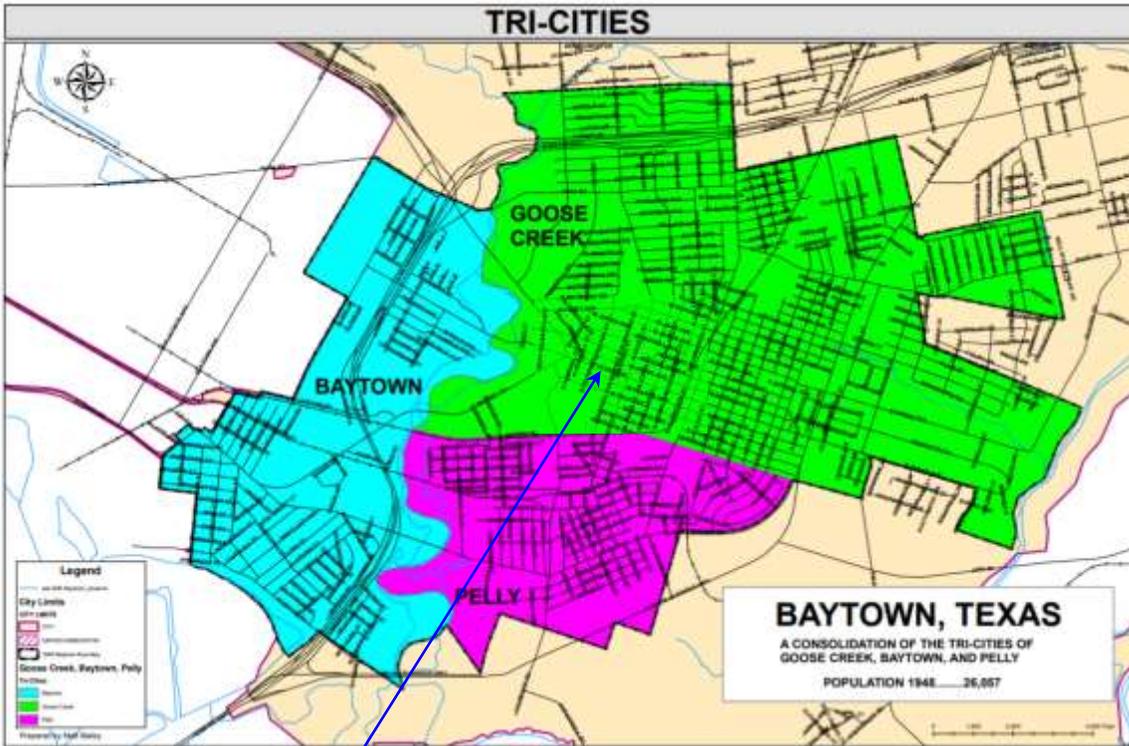
Not only are trees essential for life, but as the longest living species on earth, they give us a link between the past, present, and future. This regal oak tree is the heart of Baytown, Texas. It has been a 'silent witness' to passing time and history and its years have recorded the stories of citizens and events. Time, along with many attempts to destroy it, has taken its toll on this grand old tree; yet it still stands.

This historic oak tree is a legacy for everyone, revealing aspects of our community's origins and development as well as our evolving relationships with one another. It provides scenic, economic, ecological, social, recreational, and educational opportunities to the community.

"Baytown's Big Oak" lives and thrives — and stirs memories for Baytonians of all ages across the years and throughout their subsequent moves to other states and countries. It has witnessed the birth of a booming downtown to its near demise, and now proudly stands watch over its rebirth.

APPENDIX

Map & Photographs



<https://www.baytown.org/home/showdocument?id=1415>



Texas Avenue Oak Tree



Louis Aulbach and Linda Gorski of the Houston Archeological Society



Louis Aulbach with Chuck Chandler, Vice President of the Baytown Historical Preservation Association, measuring tree for age

BAYTOWN, TEXAS

HON. TED POE OF TEXAS
in the HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
Wednesday, January 23, 2008

Mr. POE. Madam Speaker, the city of Baytown, Texas will celebrate its 60th anniversary on January 24, 2008. Baytown's rich history of rugged Texas pioneers, oil boom settlements and economic contributions to Texas span more than 150 years.

Some of the first settlers to the area included Nathaniel Lynch who set up a ferry crossing in 1822 at the junction of the San Jacinto River and Buffalo Bayou. The crossing, now known as the Lynchburg Ferry, continues in operation today by Harris County. William Scott, one of Stephen F. Austin's Old Three Hundred families, received a land grant in 1824. A settlement grew near his home on San Jacinto Bay which included a small store and a sawmill. This settlement became known as Bay Town.

The story of the present Baytown also encompasses the cities of Goose Creek and Pelly. The discovery of oil was the common thread that wove the three cities' history together. In 1916, the Goose Creek oilfield became famous as the first offshore drilling operation in Texas. Both of the towns of Pelly and Goose Creek developed around the oil field. Ross S. Sterling and his business associates built a refinery near Goose Creek in 1917 and founded the Humble Oil and Refining Company which later became Exxon Company U.S.A. Humble Oil purchased 2,200 acres in the area and called it Baytown. The town grew up around the refinery as the company built streets, sold lots, provided utilities and offered financing for workers to purchase a home. Each city operated independently for several years but talks began to arise among residents of consolidating the three cities after World War I. After several failed attempts at consolidation, the cities reached an agreement in 1947. On January 24, 1948, the city of Baytown was officially established.

Today, Baytown continues to live up to its rich legacy of industry and community spirit. Exxon is still a major part of the city's petroleum industry along with several other major oil companies. Baytown is now also home to Goose Creek Consolidated ISD and Lee College which provide outstanding educational opportunities for students. The future of Baytown shines bright as a great city in which to live, work and play.

There are two well-known landmarks in Baytown, a giant live oak tree and the Fred Hartman Bridge. One landmark illustrates the rich history of the city's past and the other symbolizes its promising future. The live oak tree, estimated to be more than 1,000 years old, grows in the center of West Texas Avenue. It has lived since Native Americans roamed the coastal plains, the battles of the Texas Revolution were fought and the Texas oil field discoveries were made. The 440-foot tall Fred Hartman Bridge, a steel cable bridge that spans across the Houston Ship Channel, is Baytown's symbol of modern engineering and Texas-sized strength.

It is an honor to represent a part of Baytown as a portion of the Second Congressional District. My fellow colleague and friend, Gene Green represents the other part of Baytown in the United States Congress. Congressman Green and I are proud to have worked with Baytown Mayor Stephen DonCarlos and the city council on numerous projects concerning the city. They are commended for their leadership in helping Baytown grow. I look forward to seeing Baytown prosper in the future and wish the city Happy Birthday as it celebrates its 60th anniversary.

And that's just the way it is.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

A number of published works have been used for this manuscript, but excerpts from the “Old Oak Tree” from the book, *The Making of a City: Baytown, Texas, since consolidation, 1948-1998*, by Buck Young,³⁷ well-known Baytown local historian and author, have been used extensively. Young used both historical accounts and oral history and is the most accurate and complete history of the old tree that also tells history of the City and people as they relate to the old tree. A second extensive work is that of Mark Alford’s “Baytown’s Big Oak Tree” from Baytown Vignettes. Through the years *The Baytown Sun* has published articles regarding the old oak.

Buck A. Young. *The Making of a City: Baytown, Texas, since consolidation, 1948-1998* (Baytown, Texas: Lee College in cooperation with BayCoast Medical Center (1997).

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Margaret Swett Henson. *The History of Baytown* (Bay Area Heritage Society, Baytown, Texas; © 1986).

John Britt & Muriel Tyssen, eds. *Baytown Vignettes One Hundred and Fifty Years in the History of a Texas Gulf Coast Community* (Baytown, Texas. Lee College. © 1992).

Olga Miller Haenel, *A Social History of Baytown, Texas 1912-1956* (Thesis, Master of Arts Degree, The University of Texas: January 1958).

Articles from *The Baytown Sun*, 1301 Memorial Drive, Baytown, Texas. David Bloom, Managing Editor.

DOCUMENTATION

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² Mailing address: P. O. Box 1244, Baytown, Texas 77522-1244. Physical Address: Republic of Texas Plaza Park, 5117 North Main Street, Baytown. Telephone: 281.421.2099 Email: info@baytownhistory.org Website: <http://www.baytownhistory.org/>

³ “A copse is a relatively small group of trees, smaller than a forest. The term would include orchards, thickets (if of trees), etc. In the Gulf Coast Prairie, they are/were also called islands, i.e. an island of trees in the prairie. The one I know best is Eagle Island in Brazoria county, home of William and Sarah Wharton and their family.” Paul Scott, Marker Chair, Harris County Historical Commission.

⁴ Kari Griffin, "City to expand oak tree buffer", *The Baytown Sun*, 17 February 2008, pg. 3A. "District 2 Councilman Scott Sheley is excited about what this project will do for Texas Avenue, specifically the area surrounding the Old Oak Tree. It's going to be the start of a magnificent setting that will not only service the symbol

of Baytown, the Oak Tree, but it will also serve as a venue for concert gatherings,' Sheley said." <https://newspaperarchive.com/baytown-sun-feb-17-2008-p-3/>

⁵ One of the "Tri Cities" of Goose Creek, Pelly, and Baytown that consolidated into the city of Baytown in 1948.

⁶ "Councilman wants tree made symbol," *The Baytown Sun*, 25 May 1986, pg. 1. "Baytown City Councilman Jimmy Johnson wants the old oak tree on Texas Avenue designated as the official symbol of the city of Baytown. ... The oak tree symbol currently graces Baytown city vehicles. Johnson said the oak tree has been the informal symbol of the city for years. He now thinks it's time to make it official. The 50-foot high oak tree, growing right smack dab in the middle of Texas Avenue, is estimated to be anywhere from 200 to 2,000 years old. It has survived disease, car wrecks and attempts to cut it down." <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/8267752/>

"Oak tree now city's official symbol," *The Baytown Sun*, Friday, 13 June 1986, pg. 1. "The old oak tree on Texas Avenue is now the official symbol of the city of Baytown. City Councilmen Thursday unanimously approved a proposal, making the tree the city's official symbol. The oak tree, estimated to be anywhere from 200 to 2,000 years old, has been the city's informal symbol for many years. It has survived disease, car wrecks, termites and periodic movements to cut it down. An official historic tablet was placed at the tree recently by the Goose Creek Chapter of the Daughters of the American Revolution." <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/6356202>

⁷ Peggy Florida, "Verbal Agreement Saves Baytown's Old Oak," *The Baytown Sun*, 02 October 1966, pg. 2. "Never under-estimate the power of a verbal agreement. It has served the symbol of Baytown not just once, but at least three times according to record. ... Besides, its picture is etched on every city employe's (sic) 10 year service button, and it is a symbol, an observer and the delight of Baytonians." <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/6603791/>

⁸ Rolland Henry "Red" Pruett (21 Dec 1911 - 9 Apr 1994) served as mayor, without pay, from 1953 to 1961. Mike Blackman, "Red Pruett, The Fastest Moving Mayor in Texas," *The Baytown Sun*, Tuesday, 23 January 1968, pg. 16. <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/9077513/>
<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/54664830/rolland-henry-pruett>

⁹ Wanda Orton, "Wandering," *The Baytown Sun*, Friday, 14 July 1972, pg. 6. <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/23827170/>

¹⁰ Timothy Williams, "The Civic Pride. Resident designed Baytown flag, wants it official," *The Baytown Sun*, Sunday, 9 March 2003, pgs. 1, 6. "BAYTOWN — Calvin Evans designed a flag for Baytown that flies on fewer poles than he'd like. Named The Civic Pride, the flag depicts six symbols known to Baytonians and significant in the area's history. The flag is built on a field of red, white and blue, and has a star on the left side. Pictured on the flag are the Old Oak, Fred Hartman Bridge, Houston Ship Channel, an oil derrick, and a ferry that are situated between the five points of star (sic). The Baytown emblem is in the star. ... Evans said the flag is a (sic) primarily a collection of symbols. ... the Old Oak located on Texas Avenue is pictured between the left and bottom left point of the star. 'It represents people who have lived here a long time and are concerned with the health and welfare of the community,' Evans said. 'It represents life.' ... The city emblem, an Egret standing in a (sic) wetlands, is placed in the center of the star." <https://newspaperarchive.com/baytown-sun-mar-09-2003-p-1/>
<https://newspaperarchive.com/baytown-sun-mar-09-2003-p-6/>

"We're still the home of Lee College," *The Baytown Sun*, Tuesday, 5 March 2013 (photo caption) Two workers ... paint around the top of a water tower along Baker Road last week in Baytown. The new look, which shows the city of Baytown emblem, replaces the rusted one that read "Baytown Home of Lee College" and had been in place for years.

¹¹ "Deaths: Rolland J. Pruett, 70, ex-Baytown councilman," *The Baytown Sun*, Thursday, 2 August 2001. "The tree now is Baytown's symbol and is pictured on city vehicles and stationery." <https://www.chron.com/news/houston-deaths/article/Deaths-Rolland-J-Pruett-70-ex-Baytown-2026024.php>

Ken Fountain, "Oak Tree victim of hit-and-run," *The Baytown Sun*, Thursday, 11 May 2006, pg. 1. "Baytown's most venerable symbol, the Old Oak Tree, has survived many threats to its survival in its more than 300-year lifespan." ken.fountain@baytownsun.com. <https://newspaperarchive.com/baytown-sun-may-11-2006-p-1/>

Kari Griffin, "City to expand oak tree buffer", *The Baytown Sun*, 17 February 2008, pg. 3A. "It's going to be the start of a magnificent setting that will not only service the symbol of Baytown, the Oak Tree, but it will also serve as a venue for concert gatherings,' Sheley said." <https://newspaperarchive.com/baytown-sun-feb-17-2008-p-3/>

Matt Hollis, "Baytown refinery celebrates anniversary," "The industrial complex that sits along Decker Drive has become as much a part of a symbol of Baytown as the old oak tree on Texas Avenue." 25 October 2015 http://baytownsun.com/news/article_35d8327c-7acd-11e5-b572-2fc0b75ba270.html matt.hollis@baytownsun.com

¹² On September 25, 1917, the *Houston Post* printed an article stating that at the examining trial of the lynchers Deputy Sheriff Bert Veale testified, "As soon as I got loose, I tried to head off the auto they had the prisoner in, but they reached Middletown [later known as Pelly] and strung the Negro up to a tree before I could get to the place."

¹³ Audio recording is part of the collection entitled: Lee College Oral Histories and was provided to The Portal to Texas History by the Lee College. Lynching was in Middletown (Pelly). <https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metaph845103>

Interview with Garrett R. Herring, a resident of Baytown, Texas since approximately 1920. Topics include his early life in Humble and his subsequent arrival in 1917 to Middletown (Pelly), an account of the growth of the town, a lynching, origin of street names in Goose Creek, and the Herring Drug Store.

¹⁴ S A Franks (femme sole) to Price Pruett, 293 acres in Whiting survey, general warranty deed, 15 Sep. 1902, H.C.D.R. Book 142, pg. 558.

¹⁵ HCHC Chair Janet Wagner researched the title chain in the Henry Whiting Survey A 840, and reported that it was very involved and full of lots of deeds, wills, patents, lawsuits, affidavits, releases, plats, deeds of trust, right of way deeds everywhere, and leases, and was more than 100 pages.

¹⁶ The earliest known medical doctor in Baytown was Harvey Whiting who opened his medical practice in Baytown when Texas was still part of Mexico. His home and medical office were located on Market near the present-day Bicentennial Park. Numerous descendants of Whiting still live in Baytown. The streets Harvey and Whiting are named after him. Dr. Whiting was born in Darien, Fairfield, Connecticut in 1794; died January 12, 1853 in Goose Creek, Harris, Texas. Married Abigail Quinby in New York on March 10, 1817. (Various family trees posted on Ancestry). Dr. Whiting's death date is given as 1852 by Henson, also stating, "The Whiting property was divided among family members . . . The fenced Whiting family cemetery just off Market Street was dismantled sometime after the 1930s."

¹⁷ Per R. H. "Red" Pruett, a son of Price Pruett.

¹⁸ Price Pruett Quit Claim Deed to Harris County, for a road 60 feet wide, beginning in the center line of Texas Avenue 855.8 feet west of the city limits of Goose Creek, for continuation of Texas Avenue, 27 Aug. 1927, H.C.D.R. Book 931, pg. 442. This parcel was sold to Harris County for one dollar, whereas other sales by Pruett were for \$500 and up, supporting the contention that he "donated" this one. The date corresponds to Charles Massey's first year on Harris County Commissioners Court.

¹⁹ Betsy Weber, "It was Sterling Who Spared Our Big Oak," *The Baytown Sun*, 04 July 1976, pg. B5.

²⁰ Price Pruett (1871-1941) "Donated land for construction of Texas Avenue, which became a major thoroughfare through Baytown. The avenue splits around a huge oak tree that remained in place over the years because Price Pruett stipulated that it not be cut down. The tree now is Baytown's symbol and is pictured on city vehicles and stationery." Created by: Al Howell, 8 Jul 2010 <https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/54664829/price-pruett>

²¹ Charles D. "Charlie" Massey served as Harris County Commissioner in Precinct 2 from 1927 until his death in March 1935, at which time Beatrice Massey was selected to succeed her husband and served for the remainder of his term. Massey ran for, and won election to the office in 1936. She continued to serve as Precinct 2 commissioner until her defeat in 1938. Harris County, Texas Archives' Manuscript Collection: MC037

²² Peggy Florida, "Verbal Agreement Saves Baytown's Old Oak," *The Baytown Sun*, 02 October 1966, pg. 2. <https://www.newspapers.com/image/?spot=12228792>, <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/6603791/> "Never under-estimate the power of a verbal agreement. It has served the symbol of Baytown not just once, but at least three times according to record. . . . It has had its life in jeopardy at least four times due to the progress of man. It all started back when Goose Creek was a comfortable little cow town and Price Pruett owned the acreage down by the city dump, then the end of Texas Avenue, at the base of the old tree. He and Charlie Massey, County Commissioner of Precinct Two at the time, got together when it was discovered that the complacent old tree was smack in the middle of the right-of-way needed for the new stretch of street to old Baytown. Right then and there

Pruett started what was to become a major bone of contention; he said, "Charlie, I'll give you the land for the right-of-way if you'll promise to leave my oak standing till it dies of natural causes" ... or something similar. Everything was roses, ... well, acorns ..., until 1950, when the council opined that the old oak had to go. It was slowly meeting an untimely death. The paving surrounding its base seemed to limit its food and was a real shock to its nervous system, R. H. (Red) Pruett's nervous system got upset, too ... he made a business call on the city council, asking for permission to have a tree surgeon look at the old tree and see if it could be saved . . . and reminding them of that long-standing verbal agreement. They agreed, and an expert was called in to examine the poor, old rheumatic oak. It was pretty bad. Some of its branches were dead and the rest were drooping, It had termites in its anatomy and crystals in its soil. The doctor lopped off the dead branches, got rid of the termites and advised Red to dig out about 12 yards of old dirt and add top soil and fertilizer. He added more than love. For five years he fed the tree and fought having it removed. Now the oak is in the pink of condition and Pruett erected curbing and reflectors so that the possibility of accidents would be eliminated. He erected these items and attended to the nourishment of the tree at his own expense. The hassle has stopped. The City Manager, the Police Department, the people quickly state that this tree is absolutely no traffic hazard."

²³ Buck A. Young, *The Making of a City: Baytown, Texas, since consolidation, 1948-1998* (Baytown, Texas: Lee College in cooperation with BayCoast Medical Center (1997).

²⁴ "Bands, Floats in Fair Parade," *The Baytown Sun*, Wednesday, 9 November 1949, pgs. 1 & 2. "Downtown Baytown will look like Washington's Pennsylvania Avenue on inauguration day tomorrow when thousands of East Harris and West Chambers residents will be treated to a display of military might and high-stepping school bands in the giant parade officially opening the Baytown Fair at 4:30 p.m. The seven-section parade down Texas Avenue, expected to be one of the most spectacular in Baytown's history, will include a crack battalion of soldiers and practically every high school, band and pep squad in the area. ... all units of the parade must report at the starting point, near the old oak tree on West Texas, at 4 p.m." Pg. 1 <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/8313203> Pg. 2 <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/8313238/>

²⁵ "Huge Parade Opens 4-Day Baytown Fair Celebration," *The Baytown Sun*, Wednesday, 1 November 1950, pg. 1. "The Baytown Fair was off to a ... start today when the huge eight-section parade rolled down Texas Avenue from the Oak Tree to Highway 146." <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/6591773>

"1954 Fair Will Open Next Wednesday," *The Baytown Sun*, Saturday, 2 October 1954, pgs. 1 & 2. "The parade will start at the beginning of Texas avenue, in front of the old oak tree, and wind up at the fair ground's, just outside the city limits on North Main. The rodeo will get started Thursday night and run the two following nights." Pg. 1 <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/6472612/> Pg. 2 <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/6472666/>

²⁶ Full-page advertisement for Girl Scouts, sponsored by 56 local merchants. Most gave their street address, for example, "Kelley's Food Store, 305 W. Texas, Baytown," and "Moore's Shoe Store, 213 W. Texas, Baytown." The building supply stores were "Temple Lumber Co., Gulf at Commerce," and "**Home Lumber Co., By the Big Oak Tree, Baytown.**" *The Baytown Sun*, 31 October 1949, pg. 10. <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/8310839/>

²⁷ <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/CRECB-2008-pt1/html/CRECB-2008-pt1-Pg760-2.htm> See Page 10.

²⁸ Matt Hollis, "Baytown refinery celebrates anniversary," (Opening sentence of the article): "The industrial complex that sits along Decker Drive has become as much a part of a symbol of Baytown as the old oak tree on Texas Avenue." 25 October 2015 matt.hollis@baytownsun.com http://baytownsun.com/news/article_35d8327c-7acd-11e5-b572-2fc0b75ba270.html

²⁹ "Deaths: Rolland J. Pruett, 70, ex-Baytown councilman," *The Baytown Sun*, Thursday, 2 August 2001. "Born on Feb. 13, 1931, in Baytown, Pruett was the son of R.H. "Red" Pruett, who served 12 years (sic) as mayor. He was the grandson of Price Pruett, a rancher who donated land for construction of Texas Avenue, which became a major thoroughfare through Baytown. The avenue splits around a huge oak tree that remained in place over the years because Price Pruett stipulated that it not be cut down. The tree now is Baytown's symbol and is pictured on city vehicles and stationery. Rolland Pruett served on the City Council from 1986 to 1997, first in an at-large position and later representing District 2. He also ran a commercial construction business that was begun by his father." <https://www.chron.com/news/houston-deaths/article/Deaths-Rolland-J-Pruett-70-ex-Baytown-2026024.php>

³⁰ "City Fathers Doom Baytown's Old Oak," *The Baytown Sun*, Wednesday, 13 December 1950, pg. 1. "Take a last look. The Old Oak Tree on West Texas, long a Baytown landmark, will be chopped down to eliminate a traffic

hazard, Baytown's City Council decided last night. ... There was very little discussion of the issue. ... There were no dissenting votes.” <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/6606808>

³¹ “Oak Causes City Fathers More Worry,” *The Baytown Sun*, Thursday, 21 December 1950, pg. 1. “The cutting down of the Oak Tree on Texas Avenue will come up at the regular meeting of the City Council December 26. ... The mayor and five members of the Council voted unanimously to destroy the tree. Councilman R. H. Pruett was not at the meeting. Pruett told the group at a meeting recently that he did not want to stand in the way of progress, but the tree has a sentimental value to many Baytonians. He has an agreement signed by the county commissioner when his father dedicated the land to the county that the tree would not be cut down as long as it lived.” <https://www.newspapers.com/image/6609741/>

³² “Sick Oak Slated For Doctoring,” *The Baytown Sun*, Thursday, 5 April 1951, pg. 1. “The Old Oak Tree, Baytown's sickest landmark, will get some doctoring soon. M. G. Edwards, Baytown horticulturist and tree surgeon, notified R. H. Pruett of what would be needed to save the tree. Pruett heirs have agreed to pay for any work necessary to save the tree. They will also pay for a curb around the tree and adequate marking. Pipe will be driven into the ground to aid the 'breathing' of the tree and dirt will be taken from around the roots and new 'vitaminized' loam put in.” <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/8631671/>

³³ “Action on Tree, Fire Truck, Awaits Return of Mayor,” *The Baytown Sun*, Wednesday, 27 December 1950, pg. 2. Pruett recited the history of the tree and told the councilmen that members of his family were willing to do anything necessary to keep the tree alive, if the council would permit it. He ... said he hoped it would be possible to avoid cutting down the tree. Pruett proposed that the council give him permission to widen the hole in the pavement around the tree and get a tree expert to prescribe for it. 'We could put a curb around it and a warning light on each side,' he said, 'though I've always believed that anyone that can't see and avoid an object that big has no business driving anyway.' Final decision on the tree was finally tabled until the return of the mayor.” (incorrectly indexed as 26 Dec pg. 8, because 26 Dec pg. 8 and 27 Dec. pg. 1 are missing) <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/6614314/>

“Old Oak Gets Last-Minute Reprieve,” *The Baytown Sun*, Saturday, 6 January 1951, pg. 1. “Five members of the City Council have changed their minds and decided to leave the Old Oak Tree in the middle of West Texas Avenue. Councilman. E. W. Buelow was the only holdout at last night's meeting. Councilman R. H. Pruett, who was absent when the other councilmen decided to have the tree cut down, voted with Mayor J. A. Ward and Councilmen Rufus Bergeron, M. L. Campbell and W. C. Williams to rescind the order. Pruett promised that steps would be taken to keep the tree alive and that warning lights and a curb would be placed around it to avoid accidents.” <https://www.newspapers.com/newspage/9076086/>

³⁴ “Baytown’s Big Oak Tree” by Mark Alford. *Baytown Vignettes*, John Britt & Muriel Tyssen (Baytown, Lee College, 1992.

³⁵ Per Scott Johnson: “The interesting fact about that is the herbicide (hexazinone) was invented by a Baytonian that worked at Du Pont. We worked with a Du Pont scientist on a solution to save the tree. Hexazinone was the same herbicide that was used to kill the Treaty Oak in Austin six months earlier.”

³⁶ Jessica Robertson, “Some sprucing up in store for Baytown,” *The Baytown Sun*, 17 March 2007. “Baytown’s oldest and perhaps most recognizable landmark has survived attacks from both drivers and termites in the last year. Now, city officials are moving forward on plans to spruce up the Historic Oak Tree on Texas Avenue.” http://baytownsun.com/news/article_f6fa5659-7ddc-5375-8c19-1c745cc6cc4b.html

³⁷ Major Buck Alton Young, USAF (Ret) died Friday, June 24, 2016, in Baytown, Texas, at the age of 83. He was born August 28, 1932 in Pelly, Texas to Alfred Lafayette and Ethel Ruth Young, the fifth of seven children. Buck served his country for 20 years and was honorably discharged from the United States Air Force. He is preceded in death by his parents; his wife, Claire Patton Young; and son, James Morris Young. Buck is survived by his daughters, Lila, Debra and Ginger; son, Neil young; seven grandchildren, Mary, Katherine, Amanda, Jeremy, Sarah, Evan and Rebecca; eleven great grandchildren. He was a part time columnist for the Baytown Sun for several years and also had articles published in several historical journals and in the Handbook of Texas. A visitation for family and friends will be held on Wednesday, June 29, 2016 5 pm - 8 pm at Sterling-White. Funeral services will be held on Thursday, June 30, 2016, 10 am at Sterling-White with burial following with military honors at Sterling-White Cemetery.