

Company History – Merchants Association of Fresno, Inc.

Merchants Association of Fresno was organized April 7, 1911, by Fresno business and professional organizations interested in establishing a local credit bureau, one of the first merchant owned in California, but also to promote harmony among the trade interests of Fresno County, the regulation of business advertising practices, establishment of laws, and promotion of business intercourse.

Some of the founding organizations are still known or a part of the Fresno business community today: E. Gottschalks and Company, the Warner Company, Webster Brothers, Inc. (Publisher of the Business Journal), Chanslor and Lyon Motor Supply, San Joaquin Power and Light (Pacific Gas and Electric), Homan and Company, San Joaquin Drug (E. P. Casner), Fresno Republican Publishing Company (The Fresno Bee), Pacific Telegraph and Telephone Company (SBC Communications), Valley Foundry and Machine Works, Hobbs-Parsons and Stephen and Bean.

Over the years, Merchants Association members promoted Fresno by advertising “back east” to encourage settlers to move west to Fresno area farms; monitored member business advertising practices and expelled members for violating the advertising rules; offered rewards to capture vandals; voted against day light savings time; worked to outlaw horse racing; promoted local governance to control downtown traffic with signage and speed limits and the establishment of trolley transportation to stops way out north (Pinedale); conducted the annual Raisin Bowl football game in the 30’s; home front support during the Great Wars with bond sales and community activities for the folks at home; and established the Downtown Association as a separate organization in the 60’s, with Merchants Association to focus on credit reporting and debt collection services for the membership.

Merchants was one of the first credit reporting companies in California to adopt automated credit reporting when it joined the Trans Union network in 1974. It was in the forefront by automating its debt collection and mortgage reporting services as well. This “being first trend” continued when it became one of the first credit bureaus in the nation to develop an internet web site for all of its services, and to permit consumers nationwide to order their personal credit via the internet.

As the credit reporting market place changed in the 90’s, the Association’s Board of Directors reviewed the long-term viability of the company and determined that it was in the best interests of its 750 members to sell the company. The decision to sell was not an easy one, as the Association was a part of the Fresno business community for 87 years and over 40 employees would have to find new jobs. Many of the Association’s employees had worked at the company for over 30 years. The Board gave first priority to the employees with assistance in separation pay and locating other jobs, and when the company was closed all employees but three had found replacement jobs.

As a merchant owned association that was incorporated as a non-profit California corporation, the Board, with the approval of the members, elected to distribute the sales proceeds to benefit the central California business community and to make donations to local non-profit charities in Fresno. This two-part donation resulted in the Boys and Girls Club of Fresno County, Break the Barriers, Hinds Hospice

Foundation, Boy Scouts of America–Sequoia Council, and the Fresno Police Activities League, each receiving \$70,000.

With the assistance of the California State University Fresno Foundation, the Board created the Fresno Merchants Association Scholarship Fund with a \$1,700,000 donation to the Craig School of Business. The scholarship funds were designated to assist central California high school students interested in obtaining a business degree at the Craig School. The Merchants scholarship donation also assisted the business school by providing matching funds that enabled full funding of a donation promised by Jenny and Sid Craig.

When the company was closed in 1998, it still maintained the competitive edge against the three national credit reporting companies in the central California credit reporting market.