



# *The Quack Shack*

*Baytown's Recipe for Success*

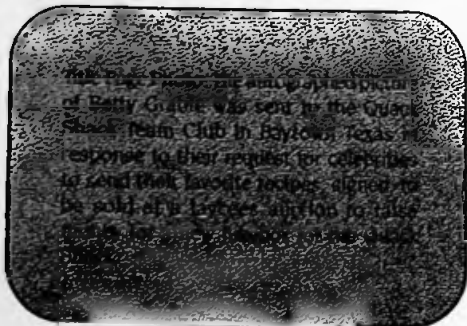
*by Kelly Hall*

In 1944, fear consumed the industry-based community of Baytown, Texas, located twenty-five miles north of Houston. At this time, teenagers and even younger children were becoming involved in crimes that had once been the territory of older youths. Baytown was not the only town riddled with fear. All over the nation, the numbers of crimes committed by children were beginning to grow. In Baytown, the problems with youth crime were attributed to lack of adequate supervision. Magazines ran stories about the youth problems facing the nation while newspapers ran stories about the young criminals. During this period, a phrase was coined to fit the new criminal element: "juvenile delinquent."<sup>1</sup> In response to this growling fear of juvenile delinquency, members of the Baytown Junior Chamber of Commerce began an experiment, hoping that, if they could provide a recreational facility that would entertain teens on Friday nights during the school year and other days during the summer, then perhaps the community's youth

would not become involved in illegal activities. They named this facility "The Quack Shack."

Criminal cases involving juveniles under eighteen had climbed from 3,672 cases reported in 1933<sup>2</sup> to 14,537 cases only ten years later.<sup>3</sup> As a point of reference, police agencies reported that the numbers of youth-committed larcenies in 1992 had reached 401,812.<sup>4</sup> In *The Crucial Decade and After: America, 1945-1960*, Eric Goldman described typical cases of juvenile delinquency during the post-war period.<sup>5</sup> One such case involved three girls in Nahant, Massachusetts, who were babysitting at the home of a local doctor. The girls, who were fifteen, sixteen and seventeen years old, stole \$18,000 from a box in one of the closets in the house. The three teens then went to New York and spent as much as they could on Christian Dior suits and tips for cab drivers.<sup>6</sup>

According to records received by the Federal Bureau of Investigation, larceny was not the only crime on the increase among youths. The cases in Borger, Texas, and Mattoon, Illinois, are two case examples that show teenagers' involvement in serious offenses. In Borger, teen clubs arranged "house parties" where boys would receive numbers and then pair with matching numbers held by girls before going away to either "a shack or an automobile to have intercourse," said Goldman. He also told of another such case that occurred in





Chaperones, usually parents or wives of Jaycee members, serve refreshments at a Quack Shack dance of the 1950s. Photo courtesy of Baytown Jaycees.

Mattoon, but this case had a slight variation. A girl was "initiated" by having intercourse with one male in the presence of another male and pledged herself to have intercourse at least four times a month if she was to remain in good standing.<sup>7</sup>

The rapidly increasing crime rates quickly attracted the nation's attention. Many prominent magazines, such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and even *Better Homes and Gardens*, ran articles featuring the causes, the delinquents, the victims, and the various experimental solutions, such as the "deputizing" of gang members in San Antonio, Texas in order to encourage them to expend their

energies bettering their city.<sup>8</sup> As reported in *Time* magazine, after a San Antonio gang fight late one June evening of 1944, William Brogan, an investigator for the local Police Department, implemented a simple solution to the city's growing gang violence rate. He "turned the juvenile gangsters into cops."<sup>9</sup> Brogan told the arrested boys they could stop fighting for "Tojo and Hitler" and instead help end the war. According to the article, the newly-appointed juvenile detectives assisted police in handling many cases with which the department was having difficulties, including "car robberies, bicycle thefts," and

"even horse rustling."<sup>10</sup> Other cities also implemented solutions to keep young people off the streets. In Cedar Rapids, Minnesota, policemen established a Youth Center, paid for by their department's Annual Field Day, and eventually acquired ten acres for growing victory gardens.<sup>11</sup>

Baytown's solution to reduce and prevent crimes originated in the Robert E. Lee High School Auditorium during a spring "membership meeting of the Tri-Cities Junior Chamber of Commerce."<sup>12</sup> The guest speaker, William D. Hinson, a Harris County probation officer, spoke about the causes and results of juvenile crime. Hinson blamed the local occurrences in part on the "glaring lack of wholesome recreation" for teens. He challenged Baytonians to build a place where teens could safely and properly gather. This challenge was met by the local Junior Chamber of Commerce, or "Jaycees," who decided to try to "provide adequate facilities" for Baytown's youth.<sup>13</sup>

The Jaycees appointed a three-man committee consisting of Larry Hale as chairman, assisted by Freddy Allgaier, and Tommy Cook. The committee's job was to investigate the possibility of creating a facility that would provide entertainment for teens while also offering the proper supervision. The committee found that wartime restrictions prevented the construction of a building that would house the facility, and Baytown had no va-

cant buildings spacious enough. Another major problem was the apparent lack of funds for the project. The Jaycee's scrapbook, *The Baytown Junior Chamber of Commerce*<sup>14</sup> contained a news article of unspecified origin written in 1948 or 1949 by an unidentified Jaycee who explained, "the Jaycee treasury was fortunate to contain as much as \$150" at the time the project began.<sup>15</sup>

At the first organizational meeting, the "Quack Shackers" expressed the sentiment that they "wanted a building of their own, completely divorced from the school."<sup>16</sup> The meager profits from the Coke machine and snack bar were allowed to accumulate over five years so that, when the Jaycees should find a permanent building, they would be able to provide equipment. Finding a building to meet the students' and Jaycees desires proved to be difficult, but was eventually solved with the aid of the area's congressman, Albert Thomas. As "The Quack Shack Story" explained,

[United States] Representative Albert Thomas and the WAA<sup>19</sup> were contacted with reference to the mess hall or the barracks buildings at the Baytown Ordnance Works. We were assured by both that we would be notified before any building was disposed of and the next thing we knew the mess hall was being moved. Contacts with Humble Oil & Refining Co. proved fruitful and in

November, 1947, Humble donated [a] 30' by 90' two-story barracks building to the Baytown Junior chamber.<sup>20</sup>

Even though a building had been located, no moving companies offered bids to move the building to the new location which was yet to be found.

In late 1947, the school district at first agreed to let the Quack Shack building be moved to a small part of their undeveloped property, but after an argument with residents of the small adjacent community of Highlands, who wished to have the Quack Shack moved to their area, the local school board backed out of the offer. At that point, Sam Stassi, a resident and businessman in Baytown, offered to lease some of the land he owned to the Jaycees. The land in question was located just across from the high school. Stassi agreed to lease the land for the "Shack" for \$1 a year.<sup>21</sup> Houston Lighting and Power came to Baytown and dug foundation holes<sup>22</sup> for the foundation designed by Jaycee engineers, and the Jaycees themselves poured the concrete.<sup>23</sup> With a solid foundation backing up the seriousness of the service group's intentions, two moving companies offered bids.<sup>24</sup>

Once the building was moved and twenty feet taken off the end of it, the Jaycees devoted twelve hundred man-hours and \$7200 to restoring and renovating the former barracks and Boy Scout headquar-

ters. Then the real fun began. The Jaycees painted, covered "bare studs on the inside wall,"<sup>25</sup> and closed off the end of the building that had been cut off. However, this was not all the organization desired. Before they were finished, the upper story had been refinished with plywood paneling and housed a dance floor, booths and tables, chairs, a nickelodeon [jukebox], piano, a soft drink bar with two electric boxes, and a sink and stove to prepare snacks. A receptionist's desk stood at the entrance. The lower story was partitioned to form a game room.<sup>26</sup>

The Quack Shack held its last event in its former location of the Lee High School gym for on August 10, 1949. The Quack Shack closed for two days — a Thursday and Friday — while crews moved the club belongings to the new building. The Quack Shack celebrated its new opening with a two-day party on August 13 and 14, 1949. The parents of club members, Jaycees, and their wives were invited to attend the open house. A band provided live music for dancing. Jaycee officers and other people who were "instrumental" in creating the club signed a post on the inside of the building.<sup>27</sup>

The Quack Shack was only open one night a week during the school year, but during the summertime, the canteen was open five nights a week. On Saturday nights, Baytown's KREL radio station would broadcast a two-hour music



1950s Teenagers slowdance under rafters draped with Spanish moss at a Quack Shack Saturday night social. Photo courtesy of Baytown Jaycees

and news program called the "Quack Shack Hit Parade" directly from the Quack Shack dance floor.<sup>28</sup> The program debuted on KREL the last Saturday in July 1950.<sup>29</sup> Activities such as dances, fund raisers and membership drives also took place in the two-story white building.

The club's scrapbook contained a list of rules and procedures for the club. In order to be a member of the club a person had to be under twenty and live in the Baytown area. The club had eleven general rules

that each member had to obey or run the risk of losing membership. Those rules included no gaming [gambling], drinking alcohol, or fighting. Also included in the rules was an outline for plans that could be made for the "shack."<sup>30</sup> A dress code was included in the list:

You will be expected to dress for the occasion—this includes wearing shoes at all times and excludes shorts and "Flying Shirttails." Girls will not wear slacks or peddle[sic] pushers except



In November of 1950, the Quack Shack celebrated its successful Christmas Card sale in a parade in Baytown. Photo courtesy of Baytown Jaycees

on occasions at "Blue Jean Dances" which will be announced in advance.<sup>31</sup>

The members of the Shack were allowed to bring out-of-town guests to visit, but there were to be no local guests according to the membership guidelines that accompanied the general rules of the club. The membership guidelines also stated that the officers, who were elected by the members of the club, and Jaycee appointed directors would act as a governing body and had "full authority to revoke, suspend, or deny membership to anyone at all times."<sup>32</sup>

Lucille Rockhold, who along

with her husband, high school track coach Beverly Rockhold, served as the Quack Shack Director, often drove members around Baytown and sometimes took them into Houston to perform on Houston's budding television station Channel 2. At the time, Channel 2 needed teenage dancers for a local program similar to the nationally televised music and dance show, "American Bandstand." The Quack Shack provided some dancers for the Houston program, said Wanda Orton, a member of the club and, later, a well-known reporter for the *Baytown Sun*.<sup>33</sup>

Some of these young perform-

ers, like Quack Shack member Bobby Thompson, later became professional dancers. The Quack Shack, said Orton, became the "breeding ground" for the best dancers. However, other up-and-coming talent also found its roots in the Quack Shack.

The Shack played a key role in bringing the little city on the bay examples of the latest form of music. "The Quack Shack was where Baytown was first introduced to rock-n-roll," said Orton. Yet ballads such as "Stardust," slow and romantic, were still the most popular dance tunes, she added. In Baytown, big band music was still "all the rage."

After seeing many of its youth on the newest television entertainment source in Houston, the community became more actively interested in the club. The Humble Club, composed of the families of employees of the local refinery, donated a television to the canteen. They first, however, replaced the ten-inch screen with a fourteen-inch screen. In 1951, a letter from A.R. Knox, the Shrine Parade Chairman, invited the members of the teenage club to participate in the "Annual Shrine Crippled Children's Fund Drive Parade."<sup>34</sup> A committee from the Quack Shack was appointed to help with plans for a float.<sup>35</sup> One night the Quack Shack held a "can" dance, to which members gained admittance by donating a canned good to the needy. The club held parties for the students going away

to college and for those who came home to visit over the holidays.<sup>36</sup>

The project that the Jaycees had begun soon gained recognition across the state and nation. Henry Garwood, State Treasurer for the

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Miami Junior Chamber of Commerce from Miami, Oklahoma, wrote a letter asking how the Baytown Jaycees had begun the project, about the by-laws passed by the club and the problems arising during the early portion of the project.<sup>37</sup> R.C. Stephenson, the Jaycee "Quack Shack" committee chairman, responded, sending a copy of the club's constitution and a copy of a Jaycee's publication that detailed the organization of the Quack Shack.<sup>38</sup> Similar inquiries came from small towns all over Texas, such as Rawls, Ranger and Texas City. The Jaycees from Ranger re-



quested a copy of a film made about the Quack Shack.<sup>39</sup>

However, members of the United States Junior Chamber of Commerce were not the only people learning about the club. Vivian Brown of the Associated Press wrote in a San Francisco paper, "It would be wonderful if every town could afford to operate a 'Quack Shack' for their young people similar to the one at Baytown, Texas."<sup>40</sup> Dues, reported Brown, were \$1.50 a year, which allowed the youths to go to the club at a cost of 1.25 cents per night.<sup>41</sup>

The Quack Shack's fame continued to spread. Ray Cargill, one of the Jaycees' appointed directors, attempted to help a young German girl establish a similar club in her town in Germany. Hannelore Wendt, the pen pal of club member Patty McCaghren, wrote a letter in her native German language to the members of the Quack Shack. She told them that in Germany, finding a building with as many rooms as the "Shack" was not easy.<sup>42</sup> She also replied that she was unable to provide Cargill names or addresses of "prominent young men" (21 to 36 years of age).<sup>43</sup>

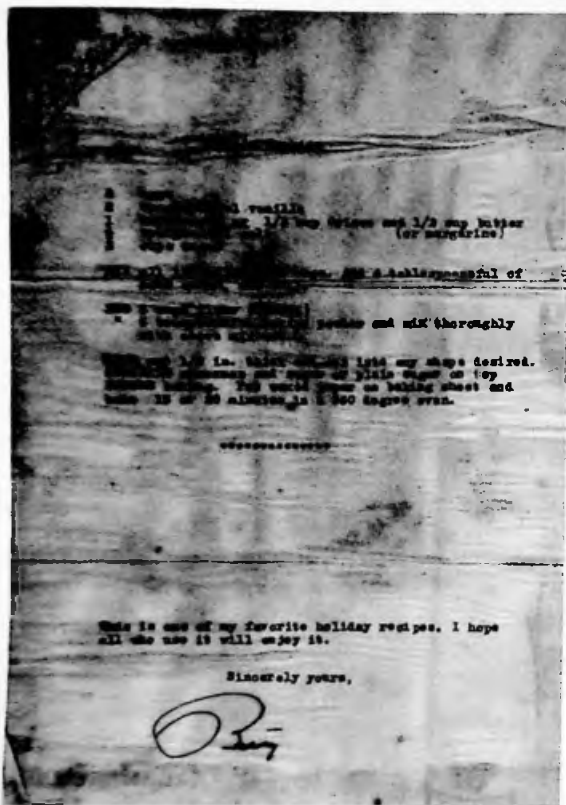
When the Quack Shack's nickelodeon began to grow old, the club members decided it was time for a new one and came up with a unique idea for raising the money themselves. They decided to hold an auction and sell something, but what could they sell? Recipes on Christmas cards was the final deci-

sion, but shouldn't there be something special about the recipes? Famous people all around the world received a letter similar to the one that the Hollywood actress, Dorothy Lamour, received:

The Quack Shack, a teenage club sponsored by the Baytown Junior Chamber of Commerce, has selected a group of famous people and we are asking them to please send a personally autographed copy of their favorite holiday recipe for cookies, candy or cake to be printed and bound in specifically designed Christmas cards.<sup>44</sup>

The list of people receiving these letters was, to say the least, star-studded. Movie stars Loretta Young, Betty Grable, and Dennis Morgan, radio stars Monica Lewis, Bing Crosby and Art Linkletter, and radio star-orchestra leader Kay Kyser were among the celebrities who sent their autographed recipes to be published on the cards. All the celebrities sent recipes personally autographed. The recipes themselves were to be auctioned.

Movie stars were not the only people who sent recipes that were published and sold. "Food expert" Duncan Hines, founder of the company bearing his name, as well as oil and hotel man Glenn McCarthy, President of the United States Junior Chamber of Commerce Dick Kemler, and Texas Secretary of State John Ben Shepperd replied. Bess Truman, wife of President Harry S.



A cherished souvenir in the Baytown Jaycees Quack Shack scrap book — a signed recipe from Betty Grable. Courtesy of the Baytown Jaycees.

Truman, sent a recipe for pecan balls; Mrs. Allan Shivers, the wife of the governor of Texas, sent one for Christmas fruit cookies, and wife of the Vice President of the United States, Mrs. Allen W. Barkley, sent her favorite recipe for Christmas pudding. Queen Elizabeth II of England received two letters but, according to her lady-in-waiting, could not send a recipe because she received so many such requests. However, apparently, the auction did not take place since all of the recipes are still in the scrapbook.<sup>45</sup>

By November 5, 1959, the Quack Shack's recipe card sales were going strong. A youthfully enthusi-

astic report reads "We have sold six thousand cards at ten cents each and before Christmas we hope to sell the entire ten thousand [we] have made."<sup>46</sup> Nine thousand cards were eventually sold and the remainder were sent to Jaycees or kept. The sales from the cards gave the club \$790.35 in profits, which went toward the purchase of a new nickelodeon. This new jukebox was unveiled at a formal dance held Saturday, December 23, 1950. The club invited each Jaycee and his wife to attend the dance held in the Quack Shack on Market Street.<sup>47</sup>

In 1951, the members of the teenage club were anxious to send letters to their friends who had joined the United States Armed Services. The idea was to write to former members of the canteen and keep them updated with news from home. Members gathered over forty addresses and sent a newsletter to each serviceman from the Baytown-Highlands area. Through the efforts of the members, servicemen wrote each other and to the Shack members. This "letter brigade" continued throughout the Korean conflict.

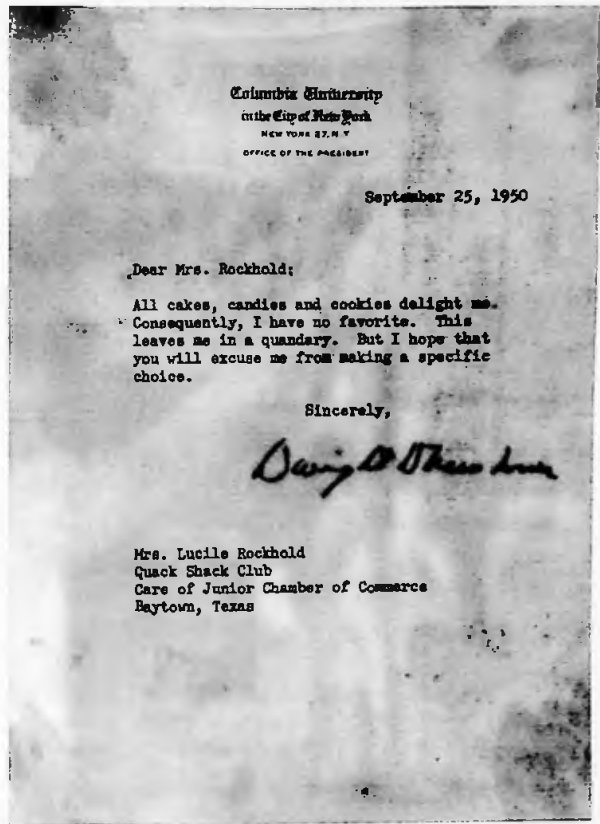
The rules regarding admittance to the Quack Shack building were often tested but always seemed to work out as planned. Occasionally, men who were stationed at Ellington Air Force Base would

travel to Baytown, as Wanda Orton put it, "to look for girls." She wondered whether the men were attracted by the neon sign, which was shaped like a gander in flight, and probably just mistook the club for a "honky tonk." The men would often appear at the Quack Shack's door but were turned away because they did not have membership cards.<sup>48</sup>

The Quack Shack was more than just a teen "hang-out." It offered the teenagers a place to go where rules were followed and enforced, where the young people felt they had a say in the rule-making process, and where they could meet new friends and do something meaningful. The club's scrapbook, "Baytown Junior Chamber of Commerce Award Entry on Youth Activities, 1949-1950," compiled by the Baytown Jaycees, gives no hints as to why the Shack no longer exists.

A Harris County probation officer stated that "juvenile delinquency had been drastically cut as a direct result of the Baytown Quack Shack."<sup>49</sup> The Quack Shack, the great experiment undertaken by the Baytown Junior Chamber of Commerce, proved to work and worked so well that eventually it was no longer needed.

Wanda Orton, though, remembers exactly when the Quack Shack



Before he became president of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower offered this letter to the Baytown Jaycees. Courtesy of the Baytown Jaycees Quack Shack scrap book.

faded into history. In September of 1961, Hurricane Carla swept into the area, leaving behind total destruction, debris, and a trail of broken dreams. Part of that destruction was the damage caused to the Quack Shack building. The building was later destroyed and never rebuilt.

Orton wonders today whether the federal order to desegregate Lee High School played a part in the decision not to rebuild, but because nothing to that effect was ever mentioned, her question remains unanswered. However, Orton, who was



Quack Shack members inspect the Nickelodeon purchased from the sale of their celebrity Christmas cards and recipes. Photo courtesy of Baytown Jaycees

working for the Baytown *Sun* at the time, does remember one question that seemed to be on many minds at a time when Baytown schools were just beginning to face integration: "What if a black boy asked a white girl to dance?"

Could social issues concerning this racial tension in the community and the nation have played a

part in the demise of the teen club that had been part of the solution to another serious social issue? Could the Quack Shack be reestablished in a town with two 5-A high schools which Baytown has today. Would recreation such as the Quack Shack offer help to end gang violence and bring a renewed vitality to the community today? We may never know. . . .

## End Notes

1. John Britt, personal interview with author, September 26, 1995.
2. Frederick Feikler, Director, Bureau of Foreign and Domestic Commerce, *Statistical Abstract of the United States of America*, 1935. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1935).
3. Glen W. King, Chief, Bureau of Census. *Statistical*

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4. Capt. J.C., Director, Bureau of Census, *Statistical Abstract of the United States of America*, 1944-1945. (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1945).
5. Eric Goldman, *The Crucial Decade and After: America, 1945-1960*. (New York: Vintage, 1960), 190-191.
6. *Ibid.*, 191.

7. Ibid., 191.
8. "Bill Brogan's Boys," *Time*, January 1, 1945, 48.
9. Ibid., 48.
10. Ibid., 48.
11. "Citizen Builder," *Newsweek*, October 6, 1941, 16.
12. "The Quack Shack Story," *Baytown Junior Chamber of Commerce Award Entry on Youth Activities, 1949-1950*. n. date.; n. publication data. This source, hereafter referred to as *Baytown Junior Chamber of Commerce Award Entry*, is an unpublished scrapbook compiled by Jaycees and members of the Quack Shack during the formative years of the club. It contains photos, momentos of the club, letters, and new articles, many of which are of unspecified origin.
13. Ibid.
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15. "The Quack Shack Story."
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. A search through several books written on the government agencies formed by the administration of Franklin Delano Roosevelt revealed no listing for any organization with the federal government during the years of 1941-1945 under the acronym of the WAA.
20. "The Quack Shack Story."
21. Chester Rogers, "The Quack Shack's A Hit!" *The Houston Chronicle Rotogravure Magazine*, January 7, 1951. This article can be found in the *Baytown Junior Chamber of Commerce Award Entry*.
22. "The Quack Shack Story"
23. D.F. Taylor, "Jaycees Invest in the Future." *Future: The Magazine for Young Men*. March, 1951, 5-6.
24. Charles E. Sailor to A.S. Bynum, January 21, 1949; A.S. Bynum to Charles Campbell, February 9, 1949, *Baytown Junior Chamber of Commerce Award Entry*
25. Taylor, 5-6.
26. Ibid., 5-6.
27. Carollna Busch, "Jaycees Plan 2-Day Program of Events," *The Daily Sun* (Baytown), August 11, 1949, 19.
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32. Ibid.
33. Wanda Orton, Interview with the author, May 4, 1996.
34. A.R. Knox, letter to Mrs. Beverly Rockhold, January 1950, *Baytown Junior Chamber of Commerce Award Entry*.
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39. Lyman Bryan to Thad Fennema, Texas City State Director, n.d.; Allen J. Full, president of Ranger Junior Chamber of Commerce, to Jim Brown, April 18, 1951; W.H. "Bill" Mayes, Rawls Junior Chamber of Commerce Chairman of Youth Activities, to Youth Activities Chairman of Baytown Junior Chamber of Commerce, April 25, 1951, *Baytown Junior Chamber of Commerce Award Entry*.
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42. Hannelore Wendt, to Members of the Quack Shack Club, January 29, 1951, *Baytown Junior Chamber of Commerce Award Entry*.
43. Ray Cargill, letter to Hannelore Wendt (Sic.), January 22, 1951, *Baytown Junior Chamber of Commerce Award Entry*.
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45. *Baytown Junior Chamber of Commerce Award Entry*.
46. Quack Shack Members to Dick Kemler, October 30, 1950, *Baytown Junior Chamber of Commerce Award Entry*.
47. *Baytown Junior Chamber of Commerce Award Entry*.
48. Orton.
49. Taylor, 6.