

## Walter Parker Moore, Sr.

*The Founding Father*

*By Richard G. Weingardt, P.E.*

Among the many noteworthy American family-owned businesses born during the dark days of the Great Depression that are still in operation and thriving today is a Texas-based engineering design firm known as Walter P Moore (WPM). It is now a corporation with diverse ownership and far-reaching projects. Its founder, after whom the firm received its name, was a true son of Texas – a dedicated Houstonian his entire life. Said his oldest son, Walter, Jr., “My father didn’t especially like to travel, but when he did, he could hardly wait to return. He never failed to compare his hometown to where he had just been and was always delighted and reassured that Houston was the best place in America to live, and have an engineering company.”

Born in Hillsboro, Texas, on December 10, 1903, Walter Parker, Sr. was the middle child of Walter (without a middle name or initial) and Mary (Hill) Moore. His older sister Minnie and younger brother Thomas Robert were also born in Texas. Their father was from Illinois while their mother was a native of Texas. In the 1920 U.S. Census, Walter’s age was listed as 50 and his occupation was listed as farmer.

Walter P. was the first in the family to graduate as a civil engineer from college, which he did two years before the horrendous Stock Market Crash of 1929. He was 25 at graduation, and clearly more mature than his classmates.

After receiving his Bachelor of Science degree, conferred with distinction from Rice Institute (now Rice University) in central Houston, Walter P. joined a local consulting engineering firm headed by H.M. Sanford, whose operations were not far from the Rice campus. Among Sanford’s significant Texas projects was the Brooks Federal Building in Beaumont. Named in honor of long-time U.S. Representative Jack Brooks – who today is much admired by the U.S. architecture and engineering community for instigating the Brooks Act legislation that required designers of federal projects to be selected by qualifications, rather than low bid – the monumental structure has been a prominent Texas landmark since its opening in 1933. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1977.

Suddenly, in 1931, Sanford pulled up stakes and moved to California, leaving a surprised Moore unemployed. The country was by then totally in the grips of the Great Depression, and prospects looked bleak indeed. The young bachelor engineer was still living at home with his 62-year-old mother and 24-year-old brother, and since his father had passed away by then, he was the family’s only money-earner at the time. With no other real opportunities available, he decided to take the plunge and open his own structural engineering practice. He sold his fancy car, a Stutz Bearcat, for capital and boldly launched Walter P. Moore and Associates (WPMA).



*Walter P. Moore, Sr. Courtesy of Walter P. Moore.*

At first, and for several years after, things were a struggle. Many of Moore’s earliest projects involved designing foundations for large homes in the new River Oaks neighborhood for \$5 apiece, \$7.50 if they were particularly complicated. Semi-skilled construction or factory workers at the time, if they could find work, were making \$10 to \$15 a week. Residents of River Oaks, situated in the center of Houston, were among those with better paying jobs, and the upper-class development would in time become one of the most exclusive and wealthiest communities in the country.

A year after he opened his office, on February 20, 1932, 29-year-old Moore married Zoe Alma McBride. She had attended Rice at the same time as he in the late 1920s. Walter and Zoe would have two sons, Walter Parker, Jr. and Robert Laurence. Following in his father’s footsteps, Walter Jr. would become a structural engineer and join his father’s firm, while Robert (Larry) would become a professor of history at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York.

Among Moore’s clients were several talented young architects who, like he, were weathering the challenges of the Depression as best they could. Many of them eventually established some of Houston’s most important architectural practices and prospered. Few of them forgot the structural engineer who had worked with them and helped them survive those difficult early years. Included in the core group that Moore counted as his lifelong and close personal friends were S.I. Morris (founder of Morris Architects), George Pierce (founder of Pierce and Pierce, now PGAL), Herman Lloyd (co-founder of Lloyd Jones



*Rice Stadium, Houston, Texas. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons-Jyardley.*



Hyatt Regency Hotel, Houston, Texas. Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons-WhisperToMe.

Brewer), and Irving Klein (founder of Klein Partnership, now FKP Architects).

By the conclusion of World War II in 1945, the shackles of the Depression were being quickly shed and America was building again. With this economic revitalization came more and more construction, and Moore and his architectural clients were favorably affected.

In 1950, Moore landed a plumb project that would mark the turning point for his firm: Rice Stadium. The massive concrete structure, located between some of Houston's most beautiful tree-lined boulevards, is still regarded as one of the most elegant and functional sports facilities in the country. It was an important achievement because of its scale and importance to the city and to the university.

The second major commission for Moore's firm was another innovative sports facility, the Harris County Domed Stadium, now known nationally and internationally as the Astrodome. It opened on April 9, 1965. It was the world's first covered, air-conditioned, domed stadium, paving the way for a new generation of modern, multi-purpose sports venues and instantly creating an icon associated worldwide with Houston to this day.

By the late 1970s, Moore and his firm had been responsible for more than 15,000 projects throughout Texas, including several at his alma mater; among them, Rice Memorial Center, Fondren Library, Rayzor Hall, Hamman Hall, Allen Center, and five of the institution's eight colleges: Will Rice, Hanszen, Jones, Wiess, and Brown.

Other significant Texas facilities completed by WPMA during Moore's active involvement with the firm included:

- The Houston Hyatt Regency Hotel
- 1100 Milam Office Tower
- Jesse Jones Hall for the Performing Arts
- Houston Center Complex
- Miller Outdoor Theater
- The 52-story Gulf Tower
- The Brown & Root Building
- Parkland Plaza Condominiums

Among Moore's many health-care facilities were 50 major buildings for the Texas Medical Center (including MD Anderson Cancer Center), Texas Children's Hospital, Baylor College of Medicine, Ben Taub Hospital, Houston's Veterans Administration Medical Center, and the original Methodist Hospital.

Moore was sole owner and head of his firm for three and a half decades, from 1931 until 1967, when it was incorporated. At the time, Moore employed more than 100 people in offices in Houston, San Antonio and Dallas. He served as president of the corporation from 1967 until 1971, and as chairman of the board until 1982. He was then chairman emeritus until his death.

About Walter, Sr.'s legacy, Ray Messer, current president of Walter P Moore, said, "Mr. Moore built the firm's reputation through good service and dependability. Given his hardscrabble roots, he took on all the work he could obtain and dominated the Houston market from the late 1940s well into the 1970s." After that, his son Walter, Jr. took over the leadership of his father's company, and when Walter, Sr. died on July 30, 1983, at age 80, WPMA had active projects in 20 states. (The firm's considerable growth outside of Texas will be reviewed in a future "Great Achievements" article.)

Moore held Texas registration number 116, which he received in 1938, the first year that Texas officially began licensing engineers. He was also a registered professional engineer (PE) in nine other states.

Moore became an ASCE Fellow in 1959 and a Life Member in 1963. He was a long-time member of the American Concrete Institute, National and Texas Societies of Professional Engineers, Consulting Engineers Council of Texas, American Consulting Engineers Council (now American Council of Engineering Companies), Houston Engineering and Scientific Society, American Association of Port Authorities, and executive board of the Rice Alumni Association.

Moore was active in Houston's Central Presbyterian Church and in Masonic organizations, and held many offices in the Kiwanis Club locally, statewide



Reliant Astrodome, Houston, Texas. Courtesy of Library of Congress, HAER TX-108-11.

and nationally. He served as president of the Houston Knife and Fork Club, and as a trustee for the Harris County Heritage Society.

Moore was named Engineer of the Year in 1974 by the Texas Society of Professional Engineers, San Jacinto Chapter, and was presented with an honorary membership in the Texas Society of Architects in 1979. In 1980, he was honored by the Houston Chapter of the American Institute of Architects and, in 1982, he received the Fourth Firm Honor Award from the Texas/Oklahoma/Arkansas region of the Concrete Reinforcing Steel Institute.

From Rice, Moore was awarded an Outstanding Engineering Alumnus Award in 1974 and, shortly before his passing in 1983, its Distinguished Alumnus recognition. ■

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