

InMemoriam

A legend within surveying circles along the Gulf of Mexico and in the petroleum and pipeline industries worldwide, John Chance died May 1, 2008 at his home in Lafayette, Louisiana. “Mr. John,” as he was affectionately known by his friends, was born John Edward Chance on January 18, 1924 in Hardin County, Texas. His great-uncle and father participated in the development of the famous Spindletop Oilfield near Beaumont, Texas. Through them Mr. John gained his first insight to the oil and gas industry.

Chance graduated from high school in Silsbee, Texas. He served with the U.S. Army in the European Campaign of World War II and was wounded at the Battle of the Bulge, after which he was awarded a Purple Heart. He attended the University of Texas in Austin and earned a BS in Civil Engineering.

After graduation Chance joined Sun Oil. His seismic survey work took him down to Houma, Louisiana. While partaking in the festivities of Mardi Gras, one of the contestants for Miss



Photo: Allen Breaux Studio

Wearing the honorary gold hard hat, LAGCOE Looley reigned over the Louisiana Gulf Coast Oil Exposition.

John E. Chance

1924 – 2008

Terrebonne Parish caught his eye and he made a point of meeting her later at the dance. He asked her to take in a movie with him and she agreed. The young lady was Joretta Achee who was crowned Miss Terrebonne Parish. They courted and a few years later they were married and

started their family, settling in Lafayette. They were married for 56 years at the time of his death.

In 1957, while working for Sun Oil, and realizing his position within Sun Oil had reached a plateau, Chance recognized an opportunity and left what many friends

>> By J. Anthony Cavell, LS, C.Fed. S.



Chance and crew setting up the Hydrodist distance surveying system. It worked day and night in all weather conditions.

saw as a steady, reliable job to start his own surveying company.

At my last meeting with him four years ago he explained, “Working for the oil company seemed like a dead end. There were more companies coming into the area and they needed good surveying, too. When they hired an ordinary surveyor and asked for a location to be staked, that’s exactly what they got—a stake in the ground at the right place and a drawing and/or report depicting it.”

But Chance offered more. “I gave them a stake and a drawing, but coming from an oil company I also knew what else they needed, so I provided information about how to access the property, the best routes to use, and so on. They needed someone to help solve their problem, not just a stake in the ground! I did that for them. That’s why they liked me.” That insight accounted for much of Mr. John’s business success—offering the client what was needed, not just what was required.

In 1957 with a just few dollars and a station wagon Chance set out to build his survey business. “We took a niche and expanded it. We got into something new almost every day,” he told students at a 1989 LSU Visiting Business Executive Program. “It’s hard to compete with



The towed generator was used to charge batteries on the run, thereby eliminating interruptions for battery service.



The R/V Seis Surveyor collects high-resolution remote sensing information for permitting, planning, and design activities, oil and gas exploration, and academic research. It can be rapidly deployed to survey sites within the North and South Americas.

AT&T and IBM. On the other hand, if you start something that anyone can get into with little money and knowledge, there will be too much competition. You need something in between; a niche, a small slot. My business is built on niches. We look for them all the time.”

“I never studied management or finance. I felt handicapped. Many companies fail because a person doesn’t have these skills.” But that didn’t stop him—he hired people who had the

necessary skills. “We hired real managers who knew all about business.”

Innovation had always been a hallmark of his company John E. Chance & Associates (JECA). In 1990 JECA won the U.S. Senate Award for Innovation for the development of STARFIX.

Chance explained, “We knew the government was working on a system and we came up with something that worked almost the same, but we had it up and working before GPS was useful.” In fact,



STARFIX antenna farm at the control center in Houston, Texas.



View of the rear deck showing STARFIX antennae mounted amidship.

Chance said STARFIX was operational after a \$10 million investment, while GPS was still developmental and at a cost many times larger.

“How did the idea get planted?” I asked. He said, “A man brought the idea to us for how to do it. He slept in his car in front of our office so he would see us first thing. I figured if he believed in his idea that much we should give it a shot.”

Expecting development to cost \$2 million they started. “Besides, if we didn’t do it someone else would and blow us out of the water!” Then the bottom fell out of the oil industry in the mid 1980s and made things precarious. “In three months I lost everything I had made in fifteen years.” Ten million dollars later in 1986 STARFIX was ready for its debut just as the industry began its recovery and the need for positioning increased.

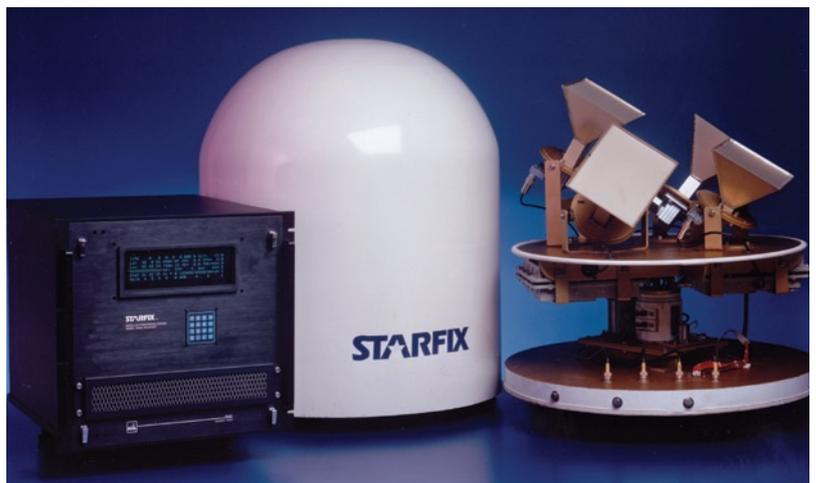
For the first few months no one would hire the STARFIX system because it was too novel, but shortly there were 70 units working steadily earning

\$1,000 a day, years before GPS could provide 24-hour service. The research was paid for, and by 1992 JECA was sold to a Netherlands company, Fugro-McClelland B.V. At the time its annual revenues had grown to \$42 million with 450 employees.

STARFIX wasn’t Chance’s only venture into technical innovation. The company was crucially supportive of development of microwave ranging systems like Electrotape and Autotape and HydroDist. The company’s database of wells and pipeline locations was ahead of its time. Most platforms in the Gulf had several points on them marked by



Seismic array tail buoy sporting bright floats, RADAR reflector, flashing lights, LORAN, radio, batteries and probably towing a generator.



Left: Receivers and processor unit of the STARFIX 5200A. **Right:** Four antennae mounted on gimbals and turntable.

bolts or padlocks in grating marking positions with known coordinates stored in the database from which JECA could position a rig or pipeline.

In the early days of offshore oil exploration Chance would rent shrimp boats for surveying. The fit wasn't exactly optimum, with poor communication and no air conditioning to relieve the heat below the deck. They decided to have their own boat built to specification (including air conditioning) starting Survey Boats, Inc. based in Patterson, La. and in a few years the fleet had grown to 15 boats, including the R/S Seis Surveyor (pictured).

The so-called John Chance Buoy could be made on-the-fly by crews on a ship deck. Made from iron billet, cane poles, flags and rope fastened with knots and electrical tape, it was designed to ride vertically for visibility. It would go on to make thousands of target locations for drilling rigs, dive boats and pipe laying barges. Other innovative ideas included differential LORAN developed to locate anchor handling boats and tail buoys on seismic arrays to within a few feet relative to the main vessel. Seismic jobs could last many days with crews working in shifts. Because batteries would go dead in tail buoys designed with the high tech gizmos, they developed a self-contained generator towed from the tail buoy to charge them!

In 1976 he established a scholarship in Civil Engineering at the University of Southwestern Louisiana (now renamed the University of Louisiana at Lafayette), and later endowed the John E. & Joretta A. Chance Professorship there. He made substantial contributions to Our Lady of Fatima School where his children attended. He was appointed to membership in the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, a papal appointment for Catholic individuals in recognition of past distinguished service.

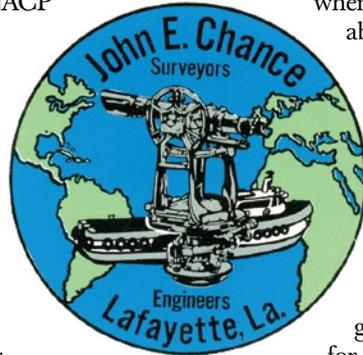
In 2000 he was enrolled in the Acadiana Business Hall of Fame where it was said, "His sensitivity to the needs of others is without end." He served as King Lacassine XVII in 1985 and as King Gabriel XLVII in 1987 (king of Mardi Gras in Lafayette). He was a member of the Lafayette Mardi Gras Association, the Krewe of Gabriel, the Krewe of Troubadours and the Mystic Krewe of Louisianans of Washington, D.C. In 2003 the Louisiana Gulf Coast Oil Exposition chose him as "LAGCO Looney" for 2003-2005.

Honors for his work included the Louisiana Society of CPA's Free Enterprise Award, the Louisiana Engineering Society James M. Todd Technological Accomplishment Medal, the International Trade Development Group's International Achievement Award, the Goodyear/NACP Conservation Award of Merit for accomplishments in Resource Conservation, the University of Texas at Austin Friend of ALEC Award and the Marine Technology Society's Marine Compass Industrial Award. He was named to the Times of Acadiana Hall of Fame for Business Achievement in 2000.

Chance served the community on the Board of Directors of Lafayette General Hospital and the Acadiana Mental Health Treatment Center. He also served on the Louisiana State Advisory Council for Vocational and Technical Education. He was a Director on the Boards of the Lafayette Petroleum Club, American

Bank and Trust Co., and the Bank of Lafayette. He was also an active member of the ACSM, the Louisiana Engineering Society and the Louisiana Society of Professional Surveyors.

Our meeting was about to conclude and handshakes had commenced when the subject came up about my own family and our ties to the Hooks family from Texas. With that Mr. Chance said, "I have something to show you...." He pulled out some papers and began to show me the familial links through his Hooks family genealogy. But that is story for another day. 



Author note: I would like to thank members of the Chance family, C & C Technologies, Fugro-Chance, Inc., and many others who contributed to this article.

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U.S. Senator J. Bennett Johnston presents the U.S. Senate Innovation Award to Chance in 1990.