In the early 1920s Harlingen had no building over two stories high. If any of these had elevators, they were likely crude affairs for freight use. In 1923 the Wittenbachs, father, C.H. and son A.J. (Adolph John, the grocer), constructed a three story building on A Street south of the Lozano Building. When a hamburger joint on a lot to the south burned down, the following year they constructed the large 5-story, 50 foot wide Wittenbach Building at 119 South A Street at the corner of Van Buren Avenue. It was Harlingen's first high rise and would have the city's first passenger elevator.

The C. H. Wittenbach family had come to Harlingen in 1922. In the early 1900s he had been a grocer in Chamois, MO, but in 1908 had moved his family to Electra, TX near Wichita Falls. He built a family home at 622 W. Van Buren and then a 20-room apartment house beside it.

In 1933 the Wittenbach office building will take on the name "Embee Building" when purchased by salesman/farmer turned insurance agent, Robert Newton Jones, and his Embee Corporation partners, lawyers E. Richard Criss and G. Lorimer Brown. Jones would have an office there and Criss would also for a short time when he was general manager of the Realty Acceptance Corp.

In this same decade the building would house among others: Key Confectionery in its lobby, Lee Printing and Rubber Stamp, Real Silk Hosiery Mills, Inc., the American Legion Office, the office of contractor Andrew Goldammer, the National Collection Agency, Burroughs Adding Machine, American National Insurance Company and the office of Dr. Georgia A. Howell, a chiropractor. In the following years numerous doctors and lawyers would work in the building. The Embee Pharmacy later with its pharmacist, Kenneth MacPherson, was in the building on the lobby floor. The Harlingen Business College was occupying the third floor of the addition by 1937 and later this space would be used by the Durham Business College. The building was again sold in the mid-1940s. By 1956 the structure took on the name the Commonwealth Building likely because of the Commonwealth Credit Corp. now in it. This company may have been part of the Bentsen family investments.

In the early 60s the condition of the building was such that only a few occupants were in it. One was Storey's Gun and Fishing Tackle Shop. It was empty by early 1984 and an effort was made to secure a $250,000 Urban Development Action Grant to refurbish the 26,000 sq. ft. structure. This failed. By May 1984 it was scheduled for demolition as termites had devastated much of its wooden interior and the 12" by 12" timbers framing the brick veneered structure.

The elevator in it was manufactured by the Otis Corporation. It was Elisha Otis (1811-1861) who invented the first successful elevator safety brake in 1852 and installed a steam passenger elevator with a safety brake in a five-story store in 1857. A next step would be the use of geared hydraulic elevators, the only system capable of high speeds in the new skyscrapers. While electric geared elevators were introduced in the late 1880s they couldn't compete with hydraulic ones in taller buildings because of their slow speed. The major breakthrough came in 1904 when the Otis Elevator Company installed its first electric gearless traction machines. These made hydraulic elevators obsolete.

As with all elevators of its time, the Wittenbach Building one had an outer accordion or scissors folding metal door that would be latched from inside the elevator shaft. The inner door of the about 6' by 6' elevator was of expanded metal. At the top and at the bottom of the elevator shaft was a giant spring. Their purpose was supposedly to cushion the impact should the operator or some misfortune move the elevator beyond the parking positions. I doubt that passengers felt more secure in the knowledge that they were there. The elevator was operated manually. For many years this was the job of Mike Deleon, who also served as the building's janitor. Now at 87 years age, insurance man Bob Jones, son of Robert, recalls that as a teenager, he operated the elevator as a stand-in. As he remembers, it was less a
task than an adventure.
The control, mounted on one side of the elevator had three setting-- up, neutral and down. The operator's skill and experience were necessary to bring the elevator to the proper position for patrons to enter and exit. The operator would observe the front interior of the shaft and gage his controls by visual features of the floors. He would operate the controls with one hand and unlatch and open the doors with the other. The elevator had a safety feature in that it would not move until the doors were properly latched. The elevator's drive mechanism was located in housing on the roof of the building. Counter-weights that moved up and down on tracks balanced the weight of the elevator and its passengers. Naturally the manual controls were not by any means state of the art. Often the elevator would be stopped either some inches above or below the floor level. The operator would then have to caution the passengers to “Watch your step” and “Please step up (or down).” The elevator moved quite slowly, and that, coupled with any jerky start-stop motion to adjust shortcomings, offered the reason not to reach perfect alignment every time. However, proficient operators became pretty good at gaging the floor levels. In larger cities the operators wore uniforms and white gloves. This was never the case in Harlingen.
Elevators have come a long way in 160 years. Now they are not only functional but stylistic. Of course, those passengers afraid of heights are not pleased with elevators transparent on three sides.