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OIL IN THE PEA PATCH:
THE EAST TEXAS OIL BOOM

by Bobby H. Johnson

When Columbus Marion Joiner finally brought in his "Daisy Bradford No. Three" in October, 1930, little did he realize that the dirt-poor region of East Texas would soon become the scene of a mineral boom comparable to the gold fields of California nearly a century before. As a modern-day representative of the lonely prospector, "Dad" Joiner hit pay dirt—or, more appropriately, "pay sand"—with a third time's charm, having already failed to find oil in two earlier attempts. Although his find drew skeptical attention at first, Joiner was eventually recognized as a pioneer in the petroleum industry. His achievement today ranks with the oil discoveries at Titusville in 1859 and Spindletop in 1901. The boom that followed that eventful day in the fall of 1930 not only pulled East Texas through the Great Depression, but it also focused national attention on what would become to date the largest oil field in the contiguous United States.

Subsequent discoveries near Kilgore and Longview, graphically symbolized by the Crim and Lathrop wells, indicated that Joiner had indeed found an oil field of tremendous proportions. Ultimately, billions of barrels of oil would flow from the 25,000 or so wells drilled in East Texas—and experts are hopeful that the field has more years of life ahead.¹ Sleepy communities suddenly pulsed with the excitement of "black gold" as "lease-hounds" and oil men of all varieties rushed to the East Texas countryside. Henderson, Overton, Kilgore, and Longview swelled with the influx of "boomers" seeking—in traditional frontier style—to strike it rich, or perhaps to bilk those who did. Indeed, the East Texas oil boom embodied many of the age-old notions associated with the frontier so admirably set forth by Ray Allen Billington in *America's Frontier Heritage*, i.e., the hope of economic improvement, a penchant for hard work, and a tendency toward lawlessness.² These traits and others were evident in the persons who flocked to East Texas, both job-seeker and gambler alike. It was inevitable that some degree of friction should arise between the "boomers" and "nesters," as the natives were sometimes known. In the end, however, a fairly homogeneous group emerged as the more stable oil field element became assimilated into the community at large.

Before turning to more specific comments, some explanation should be offered of the oral history approach, upon which this paper is based. Pioneered by the late Allan Nevins and Columbia University, oral history simply means the collection of information through interviews. A good example of this technique is *Tales from the Derrick Floor: A People's History of the Oil Industry*, compiled by William A. Owens and the late Mody C. Boatright.³ The historian must use such material with care, however, being aware that he is "building impressions rather than offering documentation," as one practitioner has noted. This project was made possible by a grant from Stephen F. Austin University. During a six-week period in the summer of 1970, about thirty persons directly involved in the East Texas oil boom were interviewed. This sampling, small as it may seem, allowed me to reach some conclusions about the boom. Moreover, comments otherwise destined to obscurity have now been chronicled, since the transcripts have been placed in the Stephen F. Austin library and are available to other scholars.⁴

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With these general remarks behind, we may now turn to the East Texas oil boom. Certain factors are evident in any large movement of human beings. In earlier frontier times, the presence of free land drew the pioneer to the edge of civilization. In more modern times, economic security in the form of employment has drawn people across the land. This was especially true in the early 1930s when the nation suffered the worst depression it has ever known. In a real sense, then, the East Texas oil rush took place against a backdrop of depression and financial disaster.

Many persons came in search of work. Since the Depression took little notice of education or background, college graduates and farmers alike frequently found themselves in the same predicament. One person remarked that he had to return to East Texas from Houston in quest of a living, despite the fact that he held a degree from the University of Texas.⁵ Another early immigrant recounted that he moved to the oil field because he nearly starved to death farming in West Texas.⁶ Two members of the author's family came to East Texas seeking work. A. C. Hopper, an uncle, made three trips to Kilgore in 1931 before he finally acquired a rough-necking job. Previously, he had gained experience in the Seminole, Oklahoma, field. Harold R. Johnson, the author's father, was also drawn to East Texas by the lure of potential employment. An Oklahoma farm boy by background, he had worked in various five and ten cent stores in Oklahoma and Dallas. He was unable to get a job in the oil field in 1933 but did acquire employment at a variety store in Kilgore. He later gained employment with the Humble Company at New London and ultimately retired after 39 years of service.

Others came for different reasons. The late Captain B. C. Baldwin came to East Texas to provide security for the Humble Company, a position he was well-equipped to handle in view of his past experience as an FBI agent and Texas Ranger. Lawyers, such as P. A. Sanders of Nacogdoches and Mrs. Olga Lapin of Kilgore, came to handle the inevitable litigation that arose from land transactions. Oil men of all varieties—including the legendary H. L. Hunt—descended upon East Texas in large numbers. Thus, the frontier dream of economic gain held true in East Texas.

Like earlier pioneers, the newcomers faced the immediate problem of finding shelter. Some merely endured the elements until better housing became available. Capt. Baldwin noted that many "would stay under a tree or cut limbs and make a shelter. . . ." Albert Adams, then a deputy sheriff in Gregg County, observed that the woods were "full of what we might call 'squatters'." Many built houses of scrap metal, cardboard boxes, and other make-shift materials. He particularly remembered one section in Kilgore known as "Happy Hollow," a shanty-town described by another observer as "a miserable looking place."⁷ Others resorted to tents, which, under the circumstances, were quite practical. A. C. Hopper recalled that he bought a tent, built a wooden floor and partial walls, and lived in it for about a month while working near Gladewater. "It was really a nicer place to live than in one of those pine cabins," he said, because the tent flaps could be raised to allow freer air circulation.

Public accommodations were indeed scarce. Hopper humorously recounted his first night in Kilgore. He arrived about midnight after hitching a ride on a milk truck and spent the night in a large tent full of cots which rented for twenty-five cents apiece. Cyril A. Parker, an early newspaperman in Longview, also noted the dearth of living accommodations. Virtually every type of structure was put to use, he recalled, with sunrooms renting for as much as \$90 a month. Bill N. Taylor, then the city manager of Longview, recounted that nearly every home in Longview took in renters because of the shortage of living accommodations. Crown Dixon of Kilgore observed that he had about a dozen roomers in his two-story home; they slept in shifts—four to the room. An employee of the Humble Pipe Line Company, Homer J. Davis, recalled that he moved his family

into one room of an old farmhouse out in the oil field. Two other families lived under the same roof. The leading hotel in Longview even placed cots in the main dining room, thereby presenting difficulties for the Rotary Club which met there weekly.

As the oil field took shape, more permanent dwellings began to appear. The most common were familiarly known as "shotgun houses," box-like structures generally 12 to 16 feet wide and three rooms deep, with perhaps a screened-in porch on the back. A shotgun blast through the front door would travel the entire length of the house—hence the name. H. R. Johnson built one of these single-wall houses for about \$80. One flourish he included was an "Arkansas window frame" which allowed his wife to hang curtains and thereby "dress up the place." Land rent averaged \$12 to \$18 a year, and modern conveniences became available as the oil companies laid gas and water lines. The oil field camp eventually relieved housing problems for some employees, especially company officials who were furnished with more substantial cottages. Two types of camps emerged; one was the official camp just described, and the other was the "poor boy" camp for employees who did not rate company houses. Companies would acquire a plot of ground, furnish utilities, and then allow employees to build their own houses. While some threw up crude shacks, others took pride in their homes, planted shrubbery, and kept nice yards. "It was almost like living in a modern-day city," Johnson observed. These camps were usually located near company headquarters so employees could walk to work. Out on the leases, workers frequently used horses to reach their work.⁸

The interviews indicate that some of the most enduring memories of the early oil field concerned the weather and road conditions. A period of drought broke just as the oil field began, thereby complicating living and working conditions. One high school girl who moved to Kilgore early in 1932 gained a vivid memory of East Texas because it rained for the first three months. The streets were so muddy, she recalled, that everyone had to wear knee-high boots.⁹ Another newcomer noted that "you had to keep walking, or you'd sink to your knees—that's just how wet the ground was."¹⁰ Before the advent of oiled or paved roads, one answer to the mud was curduroy or "rub-board" roads built by laying down pine saplings or boards. Land-owners frequently built such roads across their land and then charged a toll to use them—perhaps fifty cents or so. One story held that some landowners even hauled water and poured it into the mudholes on the highways to make them impassible so the tollroad operators could make a little money.¹¹ One family near New London simply parked their car and walked the mile and a half to the grocery store.

Such conditions not only inconvenienced the public but they also hampered the work of the oil field. Derricks and other drilling equipment were frequently moved by mules, which often bogged down. One eye-witness told of seeing a teamster cut his mules loose on South Commerce Street in Kilgore to prevent them from drowning.¹² H. R. Johnson recalled large tractors buried up to the exhaust pipes in early Kilgore. It was not uncommon to spend three or four days moving equipment only a few miles from the railroad.¹³ One answer to this problem was the oil road, made by mixing oil and dirt. Once pounded down by the traffic, the oil road provided a relatively hard surface.

Despite the difficulty of travel, many observers were nevertheless impressed by the appearance of the "oil patch," as it was sometimes called. Raymond A. Robinson, who operated a grocery store in New London for many years, noted that "it was something to see—just to drive around over the country . . . and see the derricks, see how thick they were and wondering in your mind how they managed to get that thick." One could climb a derrick, he continued, and there would be "a sea of derricks as far as you could see in every direction." Others mentioned the beauty of the pine trees and the awesome glare of the gas flares at night.

No treatment of the oil field would be complete without some comment on the thrill and excitement of the boom. Judge Charles M. Langford said one could sense the

excitement—like a touch of fall air in late summer. Tom E. Foster, who published the first newspaper in Kilgore after the boom began, summed it up when he said: "I'm certain there will never be another like it in my lifetime, because it was a boom comparable to the California gold rush and Alaska all thrown into one. You just don't go through those types of experiences more than once in a lifetime." Indeed, some participants have no desire to relive those days. Deputy Sheriff Adams indicated that he "wouldn't want for anything in the world to go back over the same days again because it was just like a nightmare." Crown Dixon of Kilgore, who was operating the only cafe in town when the boom hit, expressed similar feelings when he reflected upon his early experience of trying to feed the hungry masses. His City Cafe remained open around the clock from the beginning of the boom until he sold out in May, 1931. A two-inch thick cake of mud soon covered the floor, despite Dixon's efforts to keep the place clean—which, at times, degenerated to using a hoe. His main dish was chili, made up in number three wash tubs and sold for fifteen cents a bowl. Competition quickly appeared, however, and, according to Dixon's estimate, Kilgore boasted nearly 150 eating places by March or April of 1931.

Much of the excitement centered around the leasing and drilling processes. City Manager Taylor observed that the streets of downtown Longview were so crowded that it was difficult to navigate between the post office and the leading hotel. "You had to shove your way down the sidewalks," he noted, for 15 to 18 hours a day. Those with notary seals were especially in demand to notarize deeds and royalty agreements. Such persons merely placed bands on their hats announcing "Notary Public" and circulated among the crowd to draw business.¹⁴

Out on the leases, the prospects of a well about to come in attracted thousands of spectators, especially in the early days. The country lane leading to "Dad" Joiner's well was completely blocked for hours before the well came in. A similar throng flocked to the Crim well near Kilgore, according to eye-witness Verner Laird. Hamburger stands and soft drink salesmen did a thriving business among the excited onlookers. Deputy Sheriff Adams reported a massive traffic jam when the Lathrop well came in on January 26, 1931, a few miles west of Longview. He and the Gregg County sheriff spent the entire day there trying to keep the road open around the well. "It was just a sight to see," he said. "The people were everywhere and the cars were stacked . . . It was just an awful crowd of people." Mrs. A. C. Hopper recounts another scene full of humor and pathos that often accompanied the discovery of oil. Since her husband worked on a particular rig, she and several other persons were invited to witness the well as it came in. An old woman in her seventies owned the land, and she was understandably excited about the prospects of instant wealth. As the well blew in, Mrs. Hopper asked the elderly woman what she was thinking. "Now I can go to town and buy all the chewing gum and bacon I want," she replied. Dr. James L. Nichols, then a school boy in Kilgore, recalled another type of excitement. "Everyday at school it seemed like somebody's daddy had been injured on the job," he noted, "A crown block would fall and decapitate him or break a leg."

Indeed, danger and hard work characterized the process of extracting oil from the earth. Roughnecks on a typical drilling rig worked twelve hours a day—sometimes seven days a week. A. C. Hopper recalled that he made \$6 a day as a roughneck for various contractors. Later, when he went to work for the Humble Company in 1932, his work day dropped to eight hours. Another roughneck noted that "it didn't take too long to drill a well" in East Texas. "It was pretty hard work," he observed, "but everybody enjoyed it. You get a good crew and you get along."¹⁵ According to one old-time driller, "Everything about it was hard, but I don't think that hard work ever killed anybody." He did admit that a man had to be tough to stay. The driller's main task was to understand the formations and keep a correct measurement of pipe in the hole. By his estimation, it took two weeks to set up, drill, and move on. A crew spent about a week drilling, he recalled, and the rest of the

time they were "moving and setting up, tearing down and moving on."¹⁶ Such ease of drilling no doubt accounted for the thousands of wells that soon dotted the field. The lack of modern safety devices made drilling a dangerous proposition; therefore, a well-coordinated crew was of primary importance. As one early contractor noted, there was constant danger of a blow-out and fire. "You [had] to be very careful about these things," he concluded.¹⁷

The economic impact of the oil field brought permanent changes to East Texas. The boom hit, of course, during the Great Depression, when economic conditions were bad throughout the nation. Longview—like all of East Texas—was hurting, largely because the Texas and Pacific Railroad had recently moved its shops to Mineola. City Manager Taylor reported that it was one of the poorest places he had ever seen when he was hired in 1928. But when the boom hit, "everything went into pandemonium." In fact, the region was soon acclaimed as one of the few bright spots in the nation's economy. This was a new role for the worn-out farmland formerly capable of producing mainly peas and a few row crops. Speaking of conditions before the boom, one man observed that the "blood of most residents would have tested 98 percent pea juice," because peas were about all they had to eat.¹⁸ Other towns were also feeling the pinch of the Depression. Joe D. Lacy had visited Hendeson before the boom and found it to be a sleepy country town. He returned after the discovery of oil and the change struck him as nothing less than "revolutionary." Commenting on Kilgore before 1930, Judge Langford noted that "you were out of it before you were in it" when passing through on a train. Overton was about the same size. Each of these towns quickly experienced a tremendous population increase, however, as did the entire countryside. No accurate figures seem to be available on the population at the height of the boom, but both Kilgore and Longview soared to 10,000 or more within a decade.¹⁹

Business picked up immediately, as indicated by the comments of several early business people. Mrs. E. H. Spear, an early Longview merchant, noted that her mercantile store enjoyed a good steady business. Among the leading items she sold were work clothing, slickers, and boots. "I tell you, they bought overalls by the dozen pairs," she commented. Raymond A. Robinson, who operated a grocery store along Corsicana Row in New London—so-called because most of the people came from the earlier boom town of Corsicana—also enjoyed a good business when his store opened in 1934. Robinson estimated that 99 percent of his business was on credit, but he collected nearly 100 percent. He, too, carried the clothing and equipment necessary to oil field work, particularly canvas and leather work gloves.²⁰ A gentler type of clothing also sold well in the ladies' ready-to-wear shops that eventually came to Kilgore. One early clerk was amazed at the number of expensive dresses, coats, and evening gowns that were sold. "We sold beautiful lounging pajamas," she remarked, "and clothes that you wouldn't associate with the oil field at all."²¹ The newspaper business even became quite lucrative, according to Tom E. Foster, who was able to publish both morning and evening editions for a while in Kilgore. One long-time resident probably best summed up the economic impact when she noted that the boom was simply a "life-saver" to many East Texans.²²

Equally important was the social impact of the East Texas oil boom—a subject which drew the attention of Nacogdoches' Karle Wilson Baker in her early novel, *Family Style*.²³ The rapid influx of so many diverse elements brought both good and bad to East Texas. Lawlessness and crime stood out as one example of the latter category. While most of those interviewed considered the majority of people law-abiding citizens, they admitted that a few criminal-types marred the image. Deputy Adams, who later served as police chief in Longview, noted that "we had some of the worst criminals in the United States." Admittedly, much of the crime was petty, but Adams described a variety of offenses, ranging from armed robbery to murder. "It wasn't anything to have three or four robberies with fire-arms every night some place in the county and very often a murder out in the

woods," he recalled. Such activity naturally strained the already inadequate law enforcement agencies. For that reason, the state sent Texas Rangers to Kilgore, including the famed M. T. Gonzaulles, with his beautiful horse, silver-mounted saddle, and fancy guns. One young female attorney in Kilgore was especially impressed by Gonzaulles' impact upon the community. "He was called 'The Law,'" she noted, and the cry of "here comes The Law" would bring people running. "It was the first time I ever saw 'The Law' walking," she added. Capt. Baldwin, the former Ranger, also verified the presence of underworld characters from all over the country. "It was rather dangerous to be on the street or anywhere else," he noted. "You were apt to be held up if you were on the highway and they could stop you," he added. This veteran law enforcement officer was himself stopped once, but the sight of his six-shooter—which he always carried in his car—discouraged the would-be highwayman. Gunmen even reportedly held up work crews on the rigs, taking their money and valuables.

Rather crude jail facilities were pressed into use in many Boom Towns. The Gregg County jail in Longview soon overflowed, forcing the county commissioners to build two frame structures to house the surplus. Kilgore had no jail facilities at first, so, with typical frontier ingenuity, officials bought a long piece of log chain and secured it to a couple of trees. Violators were handcuffed or otherwise secured to the chain, which became known as the "trot line."²⁴ Gladewater built a log "calaboose" and installed a similar system.²⁵

Other types of vice also characterized the early scene. One person described Kilgore as a "wide open" town with reference to gambling, prostitution, and illicit saloons. "You could walk into a wide open saloon in any block of Kilgore," he noted, even before the repeal of national prohibition in 1933. The same was true for gambling joints and prostitution, he added.²⁶ The "pleasurers", therefore, seemed to flourish, probably because of the shortage of law enforcement personnel. This was not always true, however. Mrs. Lapin, an attorney, recalled being rousted out of bed at 2:30 in the morning to arrange bail for twenty-five dancehall girls who had been arrested (reportedly in the nude) after a raid on a show known as the "Midnight Rambles."²⁷ One law officer also noted that ten to thirty prostitutes were regularly lodged in the Gregg County jail, most of them unable to pay the usual fine of \$15.50. Upon their release, they would change their place of operation, but most would be back in jail within the next two or three days for the same offense.²⁸

Such sensational aspects of the boom town should not be overemphasized, however. Most citizens were law-abiding and hard-working. As one former roughneck observed, he did not have time to hang around the beer joints because of the 12-hour shifts he worked.²⁹ City Manager Taylor remarked that the most fortunate thing was that there was so little real crime. Perhaps one of the best commentaries came from P. A. Sanders, a Nacogdoches attorney who commuted from Nacogdoches to Henderson from 1930 to 1934. "I rarely ever passed up a hitch-hiker," Sanders observed, but "they made no effort to take me in or to harm me." The Depression doubtless kept the East Texas boom from being as wild as other boom areas. Both Judge Langford and A. C. Hopper confirm that it was in no way as rough or wide-open as Borger, Texas, or Seminole, Oklahoma.

Indeed, more positive aspects, such as schooling and religion, seemed to draw more attention. Joe Lacy, who served as principal at Carlside High School, was impressed by the great concern for good schools. Others cited the proliferation of churches as a sign of social and moral improvement. The number of churches in Kilgore alone reportedly went from three to 35 or 40 within a few years.³⁰

Social acceptance or rejection of the "boomers" also deserves some attention. A. C. Hopper noted that everyone seemingly had a different opinion on this topic. He detected no rejection in his own case and chose to dismiss as "woman talk" the alleged rejection of

oil field people by the nesters. On the other hand, one native East Texan said the boomers *were* regarded as "outsiders." "It required presence in the community for a number of years to really be accepted into certain small groups," he observed.³¹ In all fairness it should be noted that this is true of many small towns. Still another participant noted that the outsiders "weren't received—they went into isolation." This person felt that it took years for acceptance as a person, although it helped if one could dig up ancestors of note.³² Probably the safest conclusion is that rejection or acceptance depended upon the individual and particular communities, some of which were unfriendly to oil field people.

Regardless of the variance of opinion on such matters, we can ascertain the effect of the boom on those who participated—both "boomer" and "nester." A. C. Hopper summed it up when he said that it kept him from starving to death. "Those were the days when people worked, you know—they didn't mooch or march," he concluded, in the language of middle America. His wife better captured the spirit of the frontier when she commented: "We were young and very adventurous and we wanted to make all of the money that we could and save it to prove that we could make a go in life."³³ The old driller mentioned earlier evaluated the boom differently when he noted that he never plunged financially, although he had the money and might have emerged a millionaire. "I just didn't have the nerve to plunge," he continued, with no sign of remorse. He further noted: "I'm glad that I didn't do it because it might have 'ruint' my life and run my wife off."³⁴ A different viewpoint was expressed by the natives of East Texas—especially those who realized quick wealth. One woman whose husband made a considerable fortune observed that her husband liked to remark that before the boom he went to the post office to get his bills—afterwards, he went to get his oil checks.³⁵ Another native of Kilgore reflected that without the boom East Texas probably would have remained a region of sleepy villages.³⁶

For those with a serious interest in history, probably the most meaningful evaluation was voiced by James L. Nichols, now a university history professor. Because of the boom atmosphere which he observed first-hand as a high school student he feels that he has somehow better understood the western town—or as he put it, "the frontier situation." The frontier, then, lived on in East Texas a mere forty or so years ago, and the sounds of it are still audible today.

NOTES

¹For a general history of the East Texas oil field, see James A. Clark and Michael T. Halabuty, *The Last Boom*, (New York, 1972).

²Billington lists the poignant frontier characteristics in his first chapter. See Billington, *America's Frontier Heritage*, (New York, 1966), 3.

³Mody C. Boatright and William A. Owens, *Tales from the Derrick Floor: A People's History of the Oil Industry*, (Garden City, New York, 1970). This work is primarily concerned with earlier oil fields and does not deal extensively with East Texas.

⁴A copy of the transcripts upon which this paper is based is also in the author's personal possession. Interviews will be cited only when necessary for clarity on identification.

⁵Charles M. Langford interview.

⁶N. L. Field interview.

⁷Mrs. L. L. Skeeters interview.

⁸H. R. Johnson interview.

⁹Mrs. Skeeters interview.

¹⁰N. L. Field interview.

¹¹Johnson interview.

¹²L. L. Skeeters interview.

¹³Loyce Phillips interview.

¹⁴Bill N. Taylor interview.

¹⁵N. L. Field interview.

¹⁶Charles A. Casey interview.

¹⁷Phillips interview.

¹⁸B. H. Smith interview.

¹⁹Kilgore's population dropped to 6,708 in the 1940 census, but Longview counted 13,758. See *Sixteenth Census of the United States: Population*, Vol. I. (Washington, 1942), 1058-59.

²⁰Robinson's store only recently closed—evidence of the slow death that has beset much of the East Texas field.

²¹Mrs. Skeeters interview.

²²Mrs. Mary Florey Love interview.

²³Karle Wilson Baker, *Family Style* (New York, 1937).

²⁴Mrs. Olga Lapin interview.

²⁵Mrs. Gladys B. Foshee interview.

²⁶Tom E. Foster interview.

²⁷Mrs. Lapin interview.

²⁸Adams interview.

²⁹Hopper interview.

³⁰Eugene C. Elder interview.

³¹Foster interview.

³²Mrs. Lapin interview.

³³Mrs. A. C. Hopper interview.

³⁴Casey interview.

³⁵Mrs. Sam W. Ross interview.

³⁶Elder interview.