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OIL EXPLORATION IN THE BIG THICKET

by James J. Cozine, Jr.

On October 11, 1974, President Gerald Ford signed Public-Law 93-439 establishing an 84,550 acre Big Thicket National Preserve in Southeast Texas. The creation of the preserve ended a 47-year struggle by environmentalists to set aside a portion of this unique Texas wilderness from the destructive influences of man. At one time the Big Thicket spread an emerald canopy over Newton, Jasper, Polk, Liberty and Hardin Counties as well as portions of adjacent counties. This region is similar to the mixed hardwood-pine forest which covers much of East Texas. However, the thicket is distinguished from adjacent woodlands by the rich variety of flora found within its confines. Its botanical diversity, which includes orchids, carnivorous plants, rare ferns and cacti, led some latter-day naturalist to call the thicket the biological crossroads of North America.¹

The name, Big Thicket, is a misnomer. It conjures up an image of a vast region so dense that travel is impossible. This is not the case. There are, of course, areas that qualify as thicket but interspersed within the region are open woodlands, prairie lands and low-lying swampy areas called bay-galls. The Big Thicket is well watered by numerous rivers and creeks. As might be expected, the areas of greatest densities, which give the region its name, are located along these waterways.²

Early environmental groups estimated that the Big Thicket originally covered approximately 3,250,000 acres. More recent investigation has set the original size at a more moderate 2,000,000 acres. Regardless of its original dimensions, the Big Thicket was nearly totally cut-over by the bonanza timber operations of the early 1900s. By the time the preserve was established in 1974, environmentalists claimed that only one-tenth of the original Big Thicket had survived man's assault.³

Actually, many forces other than timber operations contributed to the demise of the thicket. One such force was the pellmell development of the three great oil fields in Hardin County — the heart of the Big Thicket region. From 1902-1908, the Big Thicket wilderness was attacked by hordes of roughnecks and roustabouts who poured into the tiny hamlets of Sour Lake, Saratoga and Batson. Their crude drilling methods, combined with a total disregard for the environment, spelled disaster for hundreds of acres of the Big Thicket wilderness. Oil spills killed trees and fouled waterways. Poison gas escaping from the wells polluted the air. The social institutions of the thicket were also strained by the influx of loose women and gamblers who followed the oil field workers. Indeed, it was a tumultuous period marked by a lack of concern for the wilderness. Men were determined to extract the precious black fluid from the ground even if it meant destroying the thicket.

The mania of large-scale oil exploration in Texas dates from the discovery of oil at Spindletop, just a few miles south of Beaumont. On January 10, 1901, the Lucas gusher, which sat astride a salt dome, blew in, and inaugurated the modern era of oil exploration.⁴ This was the first oil produced from this particular geological formation.

The salt domes were gigantic plugs of salt, at times measuring more than three miles in diameter. The domes had moved up from the bowels of the earth, thrusting themselves through thousands of feet of sediment. As the salt sprang

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upward, the surface land was often pushed into small mounds or hills. At times, the salt domes penetrated the surface, but usually they remained deep within the earth with only the surface mounds betraying their presence. The salt plugs were generally covered with a caprock of sand, sandy clay, or limestone. Within these various caprock structures, the oil explorers discovered the huge pools of oil that revolutionized the oil industry.⁵

After Spindletop, men sprinted over Southeast Texas looking for the telltale mounds which promised unlimited riches to the lucky driller. They soon found the first salt dome within the Big Thicket at the sleepy resort village of Sour Lake in Hardin County. People had known of the existence of oil at Sour Lake long before Spindletop. Years before the white man settled in the region, Indians drank the sulphur laced waters to cure a variety of disorders. The region around Sour Lake was first settled by Stephen Jackson, who received the area as part of his land grant from empresario Lorenzo de Zavala in 1835. As the Indians before him, Jackson realized the curative effects of the waters.⁶

Actually, the settlement at Sour Lake was comprised of a series of small lakes. Escaping gas bubbled to the surface of the water, where it was joined by sulphur and small quantities of oil. Word of the curative waters spread through Texas, and Sour Lake became a resort haven. Sam Houston sought refuge and health at the resort, and Frederick Law Olmstead described the spa on his trip through Texas in 1856. Brochures from Sour Lake claimed that its seventeen varieties of water could cure eczema and all cutaneous afflictions. Men slapped Sour Lake mud on their bald heads and prayed for hair, while women, seeking to recapture faded beauty, spread the slimy concoction over their faces.⁷

Dr. B. F. Schumard, the State Geologist, officially proclaimed the presence of oil at Sour Lake in his 1858 report to the Texas legislature. Spurred on by the lure of oil, Peter Willis drilled a well at Sour Lake in 1866 and hit a small pocket of heavy oil. The discovery created little excitement, and large scale exploration did not begin until nearly thirty years later.⁸

In 1895, W. A. Savage and his brother J. S. Savage, men with experience in some of the eastern oil fields, began to drill for oil at Sour Lake. By the end of the year, the Savage brothers had three shallow wells in production; none were deeper than 230 feet. A few years later, the Gulf Coast Refinery Company, a small firm capitalized at only \$25,000, began operating at Sour Lake. The refinery had a limited capacity of only 100 barrels a day. The company contacted the Savage brothers, and consummated a deal which called for the brothers to deliver 50 barrels of oil a day to the refinery. After negotiating the contract, the Gulf Coast Refinery Company laid a pipeline one-half mile long, connecting the Savage brothers' well to the storage tanks of the refinery. Unfortunately, the Savage brothers were unable to fulfill the contract, and the first oil refinery in Texas was forced to close in 1899. For the next few years, Sour Lake resumed its rather tranquil role as a health spa.⁹

In 1901, the tranquility was shattered by the discovery of new oil deposits. Encouraged by the success of Spindletop, the J. M. Guffey Company began drilling around the salt dome at Sour Lake.¹⁰ By September, 1901, the Guffey Company had struck oil which they claimed would rival Spindletop. The news of the Guffey find produced a flurry of excitement in oil-crazy Beaumont. The Beaumont *Enterprise* proclaimed, "Oil men, real estate men and speculators have begun to dig up their maps of the Sour Lake district and another favorable report from the Guffey well will inaugurate at least a small boom."¹¹ Just ten days later news reached Beaumont of another find at Sour Lake. This time the Oteri syndicate, headed by Santo Oteri of New Orleans, had brought in a small gusher.¹²

These discoveries were not able to lure producers from the Spindletop region. Nevertheless, favorable reports from Sour Lake continued to pour into Beaumont, and drillers kept a wary eye trained on the newspapers for accounts of new discoveries. In November, 1901, the Gulf Western Oil Company encountered hot salt water impregnated with sulphur at 800 feet. Encouraged by these signs, they moved the drilling rig to another location. The move proved profitable, for on March 7, 1902, they struck oil.¹³

Other promising reports filtered into Beaumont from Sour Lake. On July 11, 1902, at 8:00 a.m., the Guffey No. 2 well encountered exceedingly strong gas pressure at 800 feet. The drillers were unable to check the gas flow, and were forced to abandon the well. Just a few minutes later, the drilling pipe and bit were thrown from the hole by the escaping gas, and in the words of one observer, "... danced around the derrick like popcorn in a skillet."¹⁴ By 8:30 a.m. the roar of the gas was so deafening that it was impossible to converse within 200 yards of the well. People, hearing the roar from miles away, came to gape at the spectacle. The pressure in the well kept building, and by noon the entire derrick had crumbled. By this time a solid stream of gas and mud twelve and one-half inches in diameter was spewing from the well. When the well was finally brought under control, the gas had gorged a hole ten feet in diameter around the casing.¹⁵

All of these accounts excited the oil men in Beaumont, and they began drifting toward Sour Lake. In late 1902, Walter Sharp, a pioneer oil man working for the recently formed Texas Company, drilled two successful wells at Sour Lake. However, the company did not publicise its success. The officers of the Texas Company were determined to keep their discoveries to themselves for they were in the process of negotiating a contract to sell their Sour Lake oil at sixty cents a barrel. The company realized that any publicity concerning the discovery of huge deposits of petroleum would send the price of oil spiraling downward.¹⁶

However, this well-guarded secret nearly evaporated in January, 1903, when Sharp brought in a gusher which scattered oil over the nearby trees. Fortunately, for the Texas Company, a heavy rainstorm washed away all traces of the oil and the secret was safe. Only after the contract had been signed, and the Texas Company assured of receiving sixty cents a barrel, was news of the tremendous amount of oil at Sour Lake made public. As expected, the price of Sour Lake oil plummeted to ten to twelve cents a barrel. However, the Texas Company continued to receive its premium price, and its coup became part of oil history legend.¹⁷

Although the discoveries of the Texas Company generated much excitement, it was the success of the Gilbert Well No. 1, which blew in during May, 1903, gushing from fifteen to twenty thousands barrels a day, that signaled the beginning of the oil rush toward Sour Lake. The well produced \$125,000 worth of petroleum in the first thirty days, and destroyed all doubts about the value of Sour Lake. By August, 1903, the assault against the Big Thicket was in full sway. Two hundred and twenty wells dotted the land, and production was over 100,000 barrels a day.¹⁸

Early reports claimed that the productive area of the oil field measured one mile wide and three miles long, embracing between six and eight thousand acres. There were five main divisions of the field. The Texas Company's 812 acres was the largest tract; however, perhaps the most famous area was the Shoestring district. The district was divided into long, narrow strips measuring 27 by 1100 feet which the drillers claimed resembled shoestrings. The Gilbert and Wirt Davis tracts, which resembled the shoestring district, were dotted with 150 wells. The last major division was the small Cannon tract. Prior to the oil rush,

Pete Cannon, a peddler by trade, raised hogs and corn on his 14 acres. By 1903, oil derricks had sprouted on his land.¹⁹

The boom at Sour Lake was short-lived. In the frenzy of 1903, 8,700,000 barrels of oil poured from the wells. This level was not maintained. In 1904, production dropped to 6,442,237 barrels. Just one year later only 3,362,153 barrels were pumped to the surface. The dismayed drillers began to drift away from Sour Lake. They did not have far to go, for just twelve miles away, oil fever had gripped the little community of Saratoga.²⁰

Like Sour Lake, Saratoga had a long history of oil exploration before large-scale production began. Saratoga also possessed its own health springs where oil and gas seeped to the surface. John F. Cotton, an enterprising settler at Saratoga, had observed oil on his pigs which grazed in the region. Cotton easily found the oil by simply following his pigs into their grazing area. In 1865, Cotton joined in a partnership with Edward Von Hartin of Galveston to explore for oil on Cotton's land. According to the agreement, Von Hartin was to furnish all money, machinery, and labor. In addition, he agreed to supervise all the work and to sell whatever petroleum they discovered. In return for his labors, Von Hartin was to receive three-fourths of the profits. Von Hartin utilized the hand-powered spring-pole device to drill his well. He struck some heavy oil, but was forced to abandon the well because his crude drill was incapable of plunging deeper.²¹

Although this early attempt failed, other producers eventually moved into Saratoga. In 1896, the Savage brothers, who were also drilling at Sour Lake, began operations in Saratoga. The brothers drilled a deeper hole at the exact site of the old Von Hartin well. At 250 feet they struck oil. Although the production of this well was very small, it vindicated the judgment of Cotton and Von Hartin.²²

After Spindletop, a rash of drillers moved to Saratoga. By late fall, 1901, Hooks well No. 1 had tapped the salt dome and was producing 25-100 barrels a day. This discovery did not provoke much excitement. However, in March, 1902, the Hooks well No. 2 struck oil, and interest about Saratoga mounted. On May 1, 1903, the Teel No. 1 came in and cemented Saratoga's promise of oil in commercial quantities. By June, fourteen more wells were pumping oil at Saratoga. By the end of the year, the Saratoga field had yielded 150,000 barrels. While Sour Lake's production was declining, Saratoga's output rose. However, the boom at Saratoga was over by 1906. The field had reached its peak in 1905, producing 3,125,028 barrels of oil. Annual production at Saratoga leveled off to a steady but much lower level over the ensuing years.²³

Unlike the other two boom towns in the Big Thicket, Batson did not have a long history of oil exploration. Located in Hardin County, just seven miles from Saratoga and twelve miles from Sour Lake, Batson was the last true boom town in the Big Thicket. Drillers were drawn to Batson by the presence of gas bubbles in water holes and shallow wells. Encouraged by these signs, the Libby Oil Company drilled a well over the Batson salt dome in 1901. The well reached a depth of 1,000 feet, but only slight traces of oil were encountered and the project was abandoned.²⁴

A few years later, W.L. Douglas visited the region and collected some oil samples. Douglas traveled to Beaumont, and hired a chemist to analyze the soil. The chemist reported that the soil contained paraffin — a good indicator of oil. Armed with the chemist's report, Douglas, S.W. Pipkin, and several other Beaumont business men formed the Paraffine Oil Company. None of the partners had any previous oil experience. By late October, 1903, the Paraffine Oil Company began drilling its first well. On Halloween, they struck oil at 790

feet. Production was 600 barrels a day. Beginner's luck smiled on these inexperienced oil producers, for just six weeks later their No. 2 well struck oil at 1,000 feet, and yielded 4,000 barrels a day. Their third well was an even greater success, producing over 10,000 barrels a day.²⁵

Inspired by these successes, other producers from Beaumont, Sour Lake, and Saratoga swarmed into Batson. The original oil field, which covered approximately 400 acres, was soon covered with derricks. Production soared. In January, 1904, 440,000 barrels poured from the wells. February's production was a phenomenal 1,848,000 barrels. The peak monthly production at Batson occurred the next month. In March, 2,608,000 barrels of oil gushed from the field. The supply seemed endless, and drillers worked in a frenzy to complete new wells. By mid-August, 1904, 440 wells had been drilled in an orgy of expansion. Most of the drillers were disappointed, for after the fantastic yield of March, production began a steady decline. By August, 1904, production was only 585,900 barrels a month. Three months later, it had dipped to slightly over 300,000 barrels a month. Production remained steady, but the boom in Batson was over by 1908. Drillers left the Big Thicket in search of new salt domes that promised new gushers and new wealth.²⁶

The three oil booms within the Big Thicket had been both a blessing and a curse. The discovery of oil offered the inhabitants of the region an alternate to working for the timber companies or plowing the soil. However, the chaotic development of the three fields resulted in both temporary and permanent damage to the environment. As oil producers rushed into the Big Thicket, trees were indiscriminately cleared from all possible drilling sites, and then used as building materials for derricks or as fuel for campfires. Frequently, gushers would flow for hours, saturating the land and flowing into nearby streams before the wells were brought under control. During the early days at Sour Lake, waste oil flowed as far as three miles from the production area. At one point this waste oil caught fire and began spreading toward the town. Fortunately, some enterprising men erected a barricade which stopped the fire short of the residential area.²⁷

The oil seepage problem was largely due to the crude storing methods. Since the producers had not expected such a tremendous production of oil in the fields, they had failed to build adequate storage facilities. During the first few months of the boom, many of the drillers simply stored the oil in large wooden tanks. Others stored their oil in earthen pits. Such makeshift storage facilities were defective, and oil spilled onto the surrounding area, and eventually washed into the waterways. As a result, Pine Island Bayou and Little Pine Island Bayou, both of which flowed near the boom towns, were frequently polluted with oil. Stock animals along the waterway refused to drink the slimy fluid. On occasion, the oil in Pine Island Bayou would ignite, and spectators would be treated to the horrifying sight of burning water. Flames from the Bayou spread onto the banks and razed several acres of timber.²⁸

Salt water, however, posed the greatest danger to the environment. Since these three oil fields were located over salt domes, huge amount of salt water were pumped to the surface along with the oil. The water was separated from the oil and allowed to flow freely over the ground and into the surrounding waterways. Naturally these man-made salt lakes strangled the vegetation and killed the trees. Rice farmers in the Sour Lake area, who depended on the waterways to irrigate their crops, finally secured an injunction which prohibited producers from dumping huge quantities of salt water into the streams.²⁹

Eventually both the problems of oil seepage and salt water pollution were conquered. New steel storage tanks combined with an improved pipeline system

greatly curtailed oil pollution. Also, new methods of salt water disposal were invented. Producers began pumping the brine into specially built salt-water disposal pits. Here the natural process of evaporation dissolved the water. Yet another method allowed the drillers to pump the salt water back into the ground if such a practice would not pollute underground water supplies. Unfortunately, the damage to the wilderness was not totally repaired. In the 1970s, trees killed by salt water around Sour Lake and Saratoga still stand as mute reminders of man's assault on the Big Thicket.³⁰

At times it seemed as if the wilderness was fighting against this attack. On numerous occasions drillers struck gas pockets which sent gas rushing to the surface with such force that the entire derricks were destroyed. One of the most violent blowouts occurred at Saratoga. The Rio Bravo Company struck a pocket of highly pressurized gas at 500 feet. The gas burst to the surface with such velocity that the ground surrounding the derrick was cracked at a distance of 250 feet. Violent eruptions of mud were flung high into the air. Eventually, a crater approximately thirty-two feet deep and twenty feet wide appeared. The machinery and what was left of the derrick disappeared into the hole.³¹

The most spectacular episode, however, occurred at Sour Lake. George Anderson, Texaco employee, first noticed a crack in the earth near a company storage tank at 7:15 a.m. At the time, the depression was about fifteen feet deep and 200 feet wide. By 8:30 a.m., the sink had plunged to fifty feet. Two sweet gum trees on the site of the depression were slowly sinking in an upright position. By noon, the trees were still standing, but they were totally below ground level. At this time, the sink had dropped to between sixty to seventy feet — its deepest level. Over the next few days the walls around the sink began collapsing and falling into the depression. Eventually, most of the sink was filled. When the ground finally stabilized, the sink was only thirty-seven and one-half feet deep, but possessed a circumference of 1400 to 1500 feet.³²

The sink proved a disaster for several oil wells. Ten wells were adversely affected. Eight of the wells began pumping salt water rather than oil. The production levels of two other wells were dramatically curtailed. Prior to the sink, these two wells had been producing approximately 214 barrels per day. After the incident the wells yielded only ten barrels a day. The sink was probably caused by the removal of large amounts of solids from the ground during oil production. The solids, chiefly salt, had supported the ground. Once this support was removed by concentrated oil drilling, the earth simply collapsed.³³

Such concentrated drilling had another far-reaching consequence. This practice led to the rapid depletion of the natural gas needed to force the oil to the surface. At times, wells were drilled within a few feet of one another. Lease holdings were small; some measured only 20 feet wide and 67.9 feet long. In the shoestring district of Sour Lake, men boasted that they could walk on derrick platforms for over a mile without touching the ground. Conservation had not yet become an accepted doctrine. Fortunately, the leases at Saratoga were large, and there was no "pepper-box drilling" such as at Batson and Sour Lake.³⁴

In addition to the adverse effects on the wilderness, the booms at Sour Lake, Saratoga, and Batson dramatically altered the economic and social structure in these three communities. Land prices skyrocketed as speculators rushed to the region. Land which would have brought only fifteen dollars an acre before the boom, sold for thirty thousands dollars. R.E. Brooks, a resident of Austin, made a fortune overnight at Sour Lake. In one day he pocketed \$200,000 by buying and selling a tract of land. One boomer from Georgia arrived at Sour Lake with \$500, and six weeks later left with \$100,000. Land which was known to be barren of oil also sold for outlandish prices. One businessman who wanted

to build a livery stable at Sour Lake during the boom, bid \$4,000 for a lot measuring 80 x 230 feet. Even grave sites sold at a premium.³⁵

Although land prices were high, wages and other prices were remarkably stable. Oil field workers generally drew ninety dollars a month for working a twelve-hour day. Room and board averaged twenty-six dollars a month. Thirsty drillers paid only fifteen cents for a shot of whiskey or a glass of beer. A haircut and shave cost only forty cents, and workers purchased pants and shorts for fifty cents each.³⁶ Although living expenses were nominal, gamblers and painted ladies left many drillers broke just a few hours after payday.

For their ninety dollars a month, oil field workers faced a variety of dangers. The gas escaping from the Big Thicket wells was laced with poisonous sulphur. The gas stung the eyes, choked the lungs, and frequently brought death to the unsuspecting worker. One of the worst cases of poison gas occurred at Batson. A new well highly impregnated with sulphur gas blew in between 9:00 p.m. and 11:00 p.m. Northerly winds carried the fumes toward the sleeping workers in the residential area. Although some people were killed, most were evacuated with nothing more serious than temporary blindness caused by the vapors. The animals of the city were less fortunate. One eyewitness proclaimed that Batson looked like a battlefield with dead horses, dead chickens, and dead cats scattered about the townsite.³⁷

Gas, however, was not the only danger faced by the workers. At times, explosions ripped through the storage areas, leaving only the charred remains of the drillers. Heads were crushed, and hands were mashed as the producers disregarded all safety procedures to extract the oil from the land. One survivor of the Sour Lake boom vividly recaptured the terrible working conditions. He exclaimed,

How many men in the hurry, scurry, and irresponsible management in the field were taken out maimed, mashed, struck dead, will never be known. To get the oil out of the earth and get it converted into money was the sole thought of the acreage owners; and those engaged in other forms of business were moved by like motives. They halted at no obstacle. Employers paid good wages for what they had done, and slam, bang, clang they had to have results. Hence firemen with eyes so badly gassed they could hardly see the steam gauges worked around the boilers; hence well crews worked with old rattletrap outfits that were liable any minute to fly to pieces and knock them to kingdom come; hence men worked in the tops of derricks, hanging on with one hand, straining with the other to the limit of their muscles to adjust something gone wrong. After forty years of sobering absence, it still seems to me that there was more high-pressure work going on in Sour Lake than in any other place I have ever seen.³⁸

Negro workers were not allowed to share in the dangers or rewards of the oil field. The higher paying positions on the drilling platforms were viewed as white men's jobs. Consequently the Negroes were primarily employed as teamsters to haul drilling pipe and other heavy machinery into the oil field. Negroes were not allowed to live within the city limits. They were forced to live in small all-black communities a few miles from the oil fields. The people in Saratoga went so far as to prohibit Negroes from even visiting or shopping in the town.³⁹

Living conditions in the boom towns were almost as dangerous as working conditions in the oil field. The small towns were totally unprepared for the tremendous influx of oil men. Prior to the discovery of oil, Sour Lake was a sleepy little community with only forty inhabitants. Almost overnight the

population burgeoned to between fifteen and twenty thousand. Thousands more poured into the little hamlets of Saratoga and Batson during their boom periods. The environment suffered as result of these invasions.⁴⁰

The tremendous influx of roustabouts and roughnecks with their heavy drilling equipment joined with the rainfall of the area to turn the roads and oil fields into sprawling quagmires. In Sour Lake one street had such a large mudhole that one local wag planted a "no-fishing" sign next to the morass. Since housing was unavailable, some men cut down the giant palmetto plants in the area and placed them over pole frames to form thatched huts.⁴¹

A stream of gamblers, thieves, pimps and prostitutes followed the drillers into the boom towns searching for easy money. The Big Thicket became infested with a group of characters who could have graced the cover of a cheap paperback novel. One-Quarter Lawson and Monk Fife offered games of chance to the oil field workers. Women such as Six-Shooter Kate, the Swamp Angel, and Jew Annie offered the workers even more. Sour Lake could even boast of a prostitute with a heart of gold. Her name was Mooch Prank, and she was the worker's friend. Whenever a driller became sick or injured, Mooch circulated around the bar and collected money to aid the unfortunate worker. At times she even nursed the workers until they regained their health.⁴²

At the peak of the boom, thirty-two saloons and one church operated in Sour Lake. At first, men were so wild in Sour Lake that the local officials made no attempt to enforce the law. As one eyewitness said, "All they done was to hold inquests and pick up dead bodies . . ."⁴³ The town was so wide-open that the people thought of the region as the "Free State of Hardin County."⁴⁴ Eventually, Sour Lake became so boisterous that some respectable citizens organized the Citizen's Law and Order League to break up the saloon halls and gambling dens. However, conditions in Sour Lake did not improve until the riff-raff headed for Batson.⁴⁵

Of all the boom towns in the Big Thicket, Batson was the roughest. One gambler remarked, "I do not say that everybody here in Batson is a son-of-a-bitch, but I do say that every son-of-a-bitch is here that could get here."⁴⁶ Another resident who had been in Deadwood, South Dakota, and at Cripple Creek, Colorado, during their boom days declared that he had never seen people as "low" as in Batson.⁴⁷

Fannin Street, the main thoroughfare in Batson, was lined with saloons and bawdy houses. Lurid ladies of ill-repute frequently streaked nude through the downtown region, much to the horror of the respectable citizens. One resident estimated that there were at least two hundred prostitutes in Batson at the peak of the boom. The saloons and cat houses ran twenty-four hours a day. Business was so brisk that some establishments never bothered to hang the door on the hinges. Violence flourished in such an atmosphere. Murders, robberies, fist fights, and shootouts were common occurrences.⁴⁸

Every Monday morning, deputies would stroll up Fannin Street and arrest all the prostitutes and saloon owners. The prisoners were then paraded before the Justice of the Peace who held court in the Crosby Hotel. While awaiting their turn before the bar, the women prisoners stood on the second floor balcony of the hotel, and called to potential clients who had lined the street to watch the weekly performance. The official fined the girls \$12.80, while the saloon keepers were forced to pay \$25.00 for each gambling advice in their establishment. After paying the fines, the prisoners were released and allowed to continue operations until the next "round-up." If a prostitute was unable to raise the money, the officials asked a man to pay her fine. The women was then expected to work off the obligation to her benefactor. Persons arrested for serious crimes were

chained to pine trees to await transportation to Kountze, the nearest town with a jail.⁴⁹

The weekly fines and the degradation of being chained to a tree did not quell the rambunctious citizens of Batson. In desperation, the responsible people of the city organized a Good Government League, and called on the Texas Rangers for help. The Rangers, led by Captain Bill McDonald, responded to their pleas. McDonald immediately informed the riff-raff that the Rangers intended to restore order in Batson. In an address to the rowdies, McDonald threatened, "Men, the state of Texas sent us here to fight," then he added, "We like our job."⁵⁰ Unfortunately, the Rangers were not permanently stationed in Batson. Whenever they left, the town reverted to its decadent way, only to be tamed when the Rangers reappeared. The end of large-scale oil production between 1906-1908 signaled the demise of the houses on Fannin Street. The population of Batson sighed with relief as the gamblers and prostitutes rushed toward the new boom town of Humble outside the Big Thicket.⁵¹

Although the booms in the Big Thicket fields were over by 1908, oil production continued to be a vital part of the region's economy. New discoveries at Sour Lake in 1914, and at Saratoga in 1916, created brief flurries of excitement followed by disappointments as production once again declined. Over the ensuing years, new fields were developed in the Big Thicket. Sawmill towns such as Silsbee, Village Mills, Votow, and Buna produced oil as well as lumber. By the mid-1950s there were over 32,000 oil-producing acres within the Big Thicket counties. None of the new discoveries matched the boom towns in either debauchery or oil production. By the time President Ford signed the bill creating the Big Thicket National Preserve, over 231,371,600 barrels of oil had been pumped from the wells of Sour Lake, Saratoga, and Batson. Other oil production in the Big Thicket added well over 180,000,000 barrels to this total.⁵²

In 1975, the amount of oil extracted from the Big Thicket since 1901, could keep all the refineries of Texas operating at peak capacity for over one hundred days.⁵³ Oil pumps, with their monotonous up and down motion, still dot the landscape of the Big Thicket, and extract thousands of barrels of crude oil each day, but the great despoilation is over. Many of the scars left by the early oil explorations, have been healed by the regenerative capacity of the thicket; others, however, remain as a monument to the oil explorers' assault on the wilderness.

NOTES

¹Public Law 93-439, 93 Congress, H.R. 11546, October 11, 1974, 1; Pete Gunter, *The Big Thicket: A Challenge for Conservation* (Austin and New York, 1971), 69-71; Hal B. Parks, Victor L. Cory, and others, *The Fauna and Flora of the Big Thicket Area* (n.p., 1936), 4, 6, 10; Edwin Way Teale, "Big Thicket: Crossroads of Nature," *Audubon*, LXXIII (May, 1971), 12; Howard Bloomfield, "Big Thicket, The Biological Crossroads of America," *American Forest*, LXXVIII (September, 1972), 24-26.

²Teale, "Big Thicket: Crossroads of Nature," *Audubon*, LXXIII, (May, 1971), 25.

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⁴Alexander Deussen, "Oil Producing Horizons of the Gulf Coast in Texas and Louisiana," Donald C. Barton and George Sawtelle, eds., *Gulf Coast Oil Fields* (Tulsa, 1963), 3.

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