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The Lawful and the Lawless: A Social History of Kilgore

by Suzanne Baldon

Kilgore was a small East Texas community founded in the latter half of the nineteenth century by pioneers to Texas. When settlers entered East Texas in the early 1800s, the area was inhabited by the Nadacos, a sub-tribe of the Tejas. In 1872, the International Great Northern Railroad established Kilgore as a railroad town and by 1882, there were 300 people living there.¹

Timber was harvested and sold, but the economy came to be based on cotton as the land was cleared. During the 1920s, the growth of cotton depleted the land and the Cotton Crash occurred at the end of the decade. Charles Robert Florey lost all his acreage, except for his homestead. His family had been in East Texas since 1870 and Charles had moved to Kilgore from a site near New London in 1910.² He opened a general merchandise store and was generous in allowing credit. He bought cotton by day from the farmers and sold it by night to the highest bidder over the telephone. When the stock market crashed, the banks called in their loans and foreclosed on unpaid liens. Crim State Bank accepted thirty acres from Charles to clear his \$5,000 debt.³

The discovery of oil mitigated the Great Depression and the Oil Boom brought Kilgore into the modern era. The oil well known as the Lou Della Crim #1 came in on Sunday morning, December 28, 1930, and the population of the town immediately increased from "800 to 8000," according to popular lore. In 1930, the census total for Gregg County was 15, 778 and in 1940, during the oil production phase of the boom, that total was 58,027.⁴

Due to the sudden population increase, the need for law enforcement became urgent. Charles' son, Frank Hewett Florey, became a Deputy Constable for Gregg County in 1931 and worked with the police and sheriff's departments. In June 1936, he became a Highway Patrolman, with the badge number of "one."⁵

One night, a Gladewater filling station operator, George Buckio, drew his gun on his neighbor, Joe Hawkins, during a discussion about the burglary of Hawkins' garage. Buckio made Hawkins sit in a chair in front of him and held the garage owner at gunpoint. As reported by the *Kilgore Daily News*, "Hawkins' partner telephoned the constable's office and Deputy Constable Frank Florey answered. Florey walked into the filling station with the remark to Buckio: 'I guess you know me!' Buckio immediately cocked his pistol in Florey's face. The latter turned and, as he dodged, he shot the lights out. Buckio had already fired once. Just then, Deputy Sheriffs Jess Florey and Stanley Bean walked up. Buckio fired at them."

Shots were exchanged before Constable A. P. Farrar and George Casey arrived. Casey was warned as he walked in and ducked in time to avoid a shot. Buckio shot once more before the scene was quiet. The officers found him

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wounded in the hips. Charges were filed in court with Justice of the Peace Homer Glover.

Meanwhile, the next morning, Texas Ranger M.T. "Lone Wolf" Gonzauillas took Chester Doss, an oil field worker, to the justice court on charges of "an affray and rudely displaying a weapon," after Doss' alleged hold-up of J.O. Evans of Shell Camp the previous night. Doss pleaded guilty and paid fines and court costs of \$50.00 before his release.⁶

During the boom, hijackings were common occurrences. Early one morning, after having worked all night, Frank was driving home and heard on the police radio that there had been a murder in Gladewater. A man had shot a waitress and his description was broadcast. Frank saw the man walking along the road, picked him up, took him back to Kilgore and put him in jail, before continuing home.

In the robbery of a Kilgore cafe, the perpetrator was an escaped convict from the Oklahoma penitentiary. When apprehended, he and his two companions had four six-guns, a sawed-off repeating shotgun, and a number of black jacks. The cafe owner, Harrison, robbed at gunpoint, took down the car license number as the hijackers drove away. Officers tracked them down and surrounded them so quickly that the desperadoes "dropped their guns without firing once."⁷ Arresting officers were Constable Farrar, Justice of the Peace Leo Bradshaw, and Deputy Constables Johnnie Martin and Frank Florey. The arrests cleared up several crimes in Texas and Oklahoma, including the robbery of P.D. Kitchens, who identified William Carl, a.k.a. Bill Nelson, by the new shoes Carl was wearing. He had stolen them from Kitchens the night of a hijacking on the Kilgore-Gladewater Road.⁸

Frank often performed his duties on horseback. He almost drowned while helping round up George Culver's cattle during a flooding of the Sabine River and clung to tree branches for over an hour in the rushing waters. There was constant rain and the tales of mud became legends. Mules sank to their stomachs. "You can stand in the mud and get dust in your eyes" was a popular saying. Only one street was paved and enterprising persons would charge a dime per board for a pedestrian to walk on the "corduroy" streets. The bank had to be shoveled and hosed every day. Baths cost 25¢ to 50¢ at the barbershop. A huge but basically unorganized lawless element arrived with the *boomers*. Prostitutes walked the streets of the red-light district in their pajamas, a type of stylish clothing.

Much of the criminal activity during this Prohibition Era involved illegal *choc* beer and *Louisiana Special* whiskey. An astute detective, Frank spotted a "modern brewery" consisting of a "200 gallon copper still fired by a battery of high-pressure gasoline burners...located in a creek swamp six miles west of Kilgore in the direction of Gladewater at an old sawmill site."⁹ This was on a Sunday. Constable Farrar planned an attack for Monday and enlisted the aid of then Rusk County Deputy Sheriff Stanley Bean to lead the raid, with back-up from Frank, Constable Thomas from Precinct 4, and Texas Rangers Robert Goss and Jim Huddleston. The still was fired up and a run had just been started

"when the raiding officers swooped down upon it, nabbing Clyde Bullock and G. B. Brown, who were detained as the alleged operators."¹⁰ They confiscated a number of fruit jars filled with mash.

"Lone Wolf" Gonzaulles offered a welcome assistance. He first came to Pistol Hill (now known as Laird Hill) disguised as an itinerant. It was a rowdy place where men said, "Get your knife out and fight fair."¹¹ After scouting the action, Gonzaulles cleaned up, mounted his horse Tony and rode into town as a Texas Ranger. Later, other rangers joined him and they boarded with Lou Della Crim. Frank invited them to his house for dinner and social visits.

The lawmen launched a major effort at corralling offenders. Prisoners were chained to a "trotline" outside, men by the neck and women by the ankle. To use the bathroom, they passed a bucket. Most heeded urgings to leave town upon release. Dishonest seeming men whose hands showed no signs of manual labor were asked to get out of town.¹² The Baptist Church, which had been used as a dancehall, was used as a jail. Vagrants took up residence in the churches. One night during the Hot Oil Wars, arsonists burned the churches and several other buildings. General Wolters ordered a "shotgun quarantine."¹³

The oil shifted in the Woodbine sand and ownership was based on the English common law of the "rule of capture." Oil fields nationwide were facing economic ruin due to the lowered prices resulting from the excess production of East Texas' high quality crude. In July 1931, a federal court stated that the Railroad Commission was constitutionally limited to conservation and could not control the field. Governor Ross Sterling, an oilman with Humble, declared martial law and sent in the National Guard. In December of 1932, the Supreme Court ended martial law in East Texas and the Railroad Commission took a tougher stance. They fought hot oil producers, who were using ingenious means to divert the crude, and shut down the field until January 1933. The producers blatantly ignored the allowable amount of oil flow. The Connally "Hot Oil" Act was passed in 1935 and it became a federal offense to transport or possess crude which could not be proven by record to have been legally produced.¹⁴ These hot oil stories are "colorful folklore with a sort of Robin Hood flavor" with the little independents battling against the majors and the sheriffs.¹⁵ There was a cynical view of laws concerning unenforceable regulations and the events peaked at the end of Prohibition in 1933.¹⁶ However, in 1932, 1500 legitimate oilmen, tired of the bootleggers stealing and keeping the price down, formed a vigilante committee, bought all the buckshot and shells in Kilgore, and spent two months blasting the bootleg pipelines.¹⁷

Louise Florey, nee Taylor, had been named Miss East Tyler in 1925 and would later win the title of First Lady of Kilgore in 1979. During the Oil Boom, she was married to Frank Florey and had three small daughters. The family remained in Tyler because Frank did not consider Kilgore to be a safe place. However, transients seeking work in East Texas found boarding in Tyler. Louise and the girls slept on a bed in the kitchen and rented the other rooms in their duplex. In Kilgore, housing was scarce and *boomers* lived in piano

crates and cardboard boxes in Happy Hollow, which is now the site of Kilgore Park, the county offices, and the library. "Both sides of town were on the wrong side of the tracks."¹⁸

Eventually, the homeless broke out the windows of the Presbyterian Church. When the members arrived for the service, they found people living there. During the service, one man got up and said, "Brother, we're going to stay."¹⁹ After the churches were burned by vandals, Kilgore was known as "the city without any churches."²⁰ Louise's church, the First Baptist, met in homes and schools before establishing a building at Happy Hollow in 1933.

Frank would stay with his mother in Kilgore on some nights and Louise would come visit. The family moved their home to Kilgore after the city founders incorporated and insisted on law and order. On February 20, 1931, Kilgore became a city and Malcolm Crim was elected mayor. The government was organized, city planning was initiated, and civic improvement progressed rapidly with the advantage of a system of taxes and the cooperation of energetic citizens, both newcomers and old settlers.

Louise's memory of those first days in Kilgore is colored by the smoke from the oil field fires burning off the gas, especially one that lasted for weeks while the men battled both the fire and the mud. Often, Red Adair was called to come from Houston and put out the fires. Along with the oil came a plague of roaches brought by the boomers and mosquitoes brought by the rain. Confidence tricksters sold stuff called Sweet Dreams. Purchasers were told that if they spread the liquid all over their bodies, it would keep the mosquitoes away. Two men who tried it even poured it on their beds, but said that the mosquitoes swarmed worse than ever. There was an outbreak of malaria, typhoid fever, and cholera before the city utilities were installed.²¹

During the days of the "Big Deals," Louise worked at the Kilgore Hotel Coffee Shop as a cashier. The men would come in and drink coffee all day, sitting for hours to work on their leases and deals. Louise's boss required that she sit and drink coffee with the customers when she was not busy. This practice kept the customers' business in the shop, especially when someone would come in without a coffee drinking companion. Visiting with the customers gave Louise a chance to rest her feet, as well. Entertainment was provided by a rat named George who would walk the telephone lines outside and was never caught. People would go to windows and outdoors to watch his act. At night, the oilmen brought their families back to the coffee shop for dinner. During the war, the soldiers would come to eat and leave good tips for the waitresses. As a cashier, Louise did not share these tips, but she was very glad to have a job.

There were other women working during the Oil Boom, but there were not many socially acceptable jobs for women in those days and oil field work was male-oriented. Generally, the prostitutes lived with the "double standard," visited by the men, but unaccepted by mainstream society. They ran from rural poverty to action and money, but were exploited and endangered by their livelihood, despite any good qualities of their personalities. They came with

their pimps to the oil fields, followed the workers and the money and plied an open trade.²²

The prostitutes mostly stayed in one part of town on Commerce Street called the "red light district." Frank would never take Louise down that street, but she managed to go exploring there with friends. They saw the girls hanging out of the windows. Some of the pajamas the women wore were very nice and some were plain and simple. During martial law, the National Guard prohibited their wearing beach pajamas and the busy girls suffered a slump in business.²³ The slump may also have been due to the stop in oil production. Later, as a welfare worker for Gregg County, Louise would help the prostitutes and roughnecks who had settled in Kilgore. Age, alcohol, and ill fortune had taken a toll from these people and their hard lives showed on their faces.

Odessa was a prostitute who did not ask for welfare, but sometimes she would send one of her employees to see "Mrs. Florey" for a little emergency assistance. Odessa managed the Pines Motel. As a child, this author believed that truckers stayed there because it was cheap to rent a room, but later realized that most of these men did not stay there all night. The Pines was owned by the brother of an East Texas politician. Odessa and her girls worked for the criminal element based in Houston. The girls worked at the motel for about a week at a time, before moving around the circuit that included Houston to the south, Kilgore to the east and the town of Odessa to the west. The motel kept a low profile with the public during election years, but continued to service the politicians.

Odessa saw West Texas in her dreams and remembered herself as a little girl who looked out the window of her farmhouse across flat country to a background of mountains with heavy clouds and snow sheeting around her home. In the foreground was a windmill and water tank. In the late 1970s, she asked this author to paint that picture for her and I did it in oils, as a favor to the woman who told me about her first time to take money from a man. There was a young man whose folks were wealthy. He wanted to date Odessa, but she knew that he would never marry her. She went out with him and he tried to woo her with pretty words and expensive gifts. She finally told him, "Look, don't bring me these gifts and string me along. Just give me money, instead, and we'll call it even."²⁴ Odessa was pragmatic and lacked fancy tastes. She would turn down lobster, saying that it tasted like a tough old shrimp to her. When she went to the Seagoville Federal Correctional Institution for a year, it was nothing personal, just politics. It was part of her job.

The judgment of the law strikes a stamp over some jobs, the judgment of morals imprints others, and sometimes the judgments overlap, but people are always willing to make a choice about their entertainments. Many people liked to go dance at Mattie's Ball Room, run by Mattie Castleberry, "Queen of the Honky Tonk." It was a large establishment that continued after the boom and boasted taxi dances and Big Name Bands.²⁵

Before the boom days, the church was the main center of social life for young people. They would meet to walk barefoot together, sometimes jumping

from one place to another to keep their feet from getting hot. Baptist and Presbyterian preachers took turns coming to Kilgore for the services. The Methodists had a preacher on Wednesday and Sunday, so everyone went there, except when their own preacher was in attendance once a month. John Vinson Florey, who was a pharmacist at Brown's Drug Store, recalled an incident in which two women were tried by the Methodist Church for going to dances. They were found guilty and excommunicated. Further gossip was provided by two groups of women who fought over a change in the sanctuary. There was a nightly meeting that provided a show for three months. Those people with money usually were the most persuasive. When the Methodist Church was burned during the boom, the congregation voted to rebuild on the original site. However, a few people with money over-ruled the voting and won their demand to have the church built across the street.²⁶

According to Louise, there were even dances held on church property, with little socials and watermelon parties. Fiddlers provided music. There were "picture shows" and visits in each other's homes. People gathered at Brown's Drug Store for sodas. Louise always took her children and friends uptown to watch people.

A *Kilgore News Herald* editorial, dated July 24, 1947, stated that entertainment for one's children and their friends should be available in the home in order to prevent juvenile delinquency. The minutes of the Kilgore Youth Advisory Board for that same date called for a Youth Center in Kilgore as "a place where the young people could enjoy music, explaining that criminals are not musical minded." The article suggested that sports, dances, a snack bar and democratic meetings of young people should be made available. There was concern that some citizens would oppose the taxes to create the center "because dancing might be included in the program." The minutes of the February 7, 1948, meeting revealed that the center was not to be funded by the city, county or federal grant. It was decided that the youths would ask civic clubs for support. As reported by subsequent *Kilgore News Herald* articles, the young people needed a place to get an evening Coke or play a game of pool without having to "kick aside the beer bottles and drunks to shoot a game." The youth committee held a talent show, a boxing tournament and engaged in other money raising projects. The county agreed to provide \$6 - 7,000.00 for the youths. The radio ministry of the First Baptist Church of Kilgore told the teens to come to church picnics and Vacation Bible School, and urged parents to help in planning "'good times' as will aid in developing Christian character."

No one can speak of music and Kilgore without mentioning Harvey Lavan "Van" Cliburn, Jr., the world famous pianist. Louise's daughters took piano lessons from his mother. At recitals, Mrs. Cliburn had Van play as the guests arrived, and her pupils were the featured artists.

It was during World War II, when so many of the men went to war, that women went to work in defense plants and in business. There is a very active Business and Professional Women's Club in Kilgore. Louise was in the

Women's Defense Corps during the war and worked in the coffee shop for two years. She became a welfare worker for Gregg County in January 1945, and held this job until her retirement in 1985. She continues to act as City Registrar.

In 1945, Louise's boss, Jack Bean, told her not to worry about deciding to whom she should extend welfare assistance, because nobody would even ask for it unless they really needed the help. Welfare was not organized as it is now and pride prevented the acceptance of charity except in an emergency. However, welfare became more popular and Louise has case histories that go back four generations with some families. Some clients were unsuccessful boomers and some were new people bringing their families from another state to look for work in the oil town.

After World War II, Kilgore businessmen realized the need for diversification from the monopoly of oil as an economic base. Various manufacturers and distributors involved in industries ranging from clothing to toilet bowls set up shop in Kilgore and prospered. These businesses, along with oil field production, kept the town thriving. A lot of good people came in with the boom and stayed to build the town after the transients moved on. Schools had been built and teachers hired during the influx of population. Kilgore College had been founded in 1935 and the famous drill team, the Rangerettes, was organized in 1940 by Gussie Nell Davis.

It was into this enthusiastic atmosphere of development and education that Louise plied her profession. Kilgore was a part of a greater linkage network which joined the town to worldwide systems of commerce. It was founded by a railroad and unshielded from any sense as an East Texas isolate by the petroleum industry. There was a vitality and energy brought into Kilgore to supplement that of the original settlers. This energy was mirrored by the economic force of the black crude drawn out by the vibrating oil well pumps. There is the excitement of adventure that goes beyond economic goals in becoming involved with a vital growth force. Whether a person is pushed from a rural home by a need for money or pulled to town by the lure of economic opportunities, that person may still have a predisposition to participate in emotionally and politically stimulating environments. Economics may not even be the real motive. According to Belshaw, "When towns undergo rapid spurts of growth based upon immigration, the motivation for the immigration is not based entirely, and perhaps not even primarily, upon job-hunting in a simple sense. The primary motivation is to share in a new and exciting way of life."²⁷

When I was a girl, I stood on my grandmother's front porch to let the thump-thump of the oil well pumps flow through my feet and into my chest, like a giant heart beating, like the bass drum of a homecoming parade. It was a boom from the body of the earth and an unmanaged consumption of resources that has left Kilgore fifty years later sitting on top of salt water like that of the sea that covered the land many eons ago. But everyone had wanted to take out their piece. As one hot oil producer was heard to say, "It's my oil, and I'll drink it if I want to."²⁸ The independents had to pump it to pay for

pumping it, "displaying a fire and temper which shows them only one or two generations removed from the hardy pioneers."²⁹

When needy individuals came to Louise, they had no pump left in them, no jump start for that energy flow. Sometimes, they just needed a one time stake, a break from the cycle of down and out, but there were other circumstances that led families to request help often. One young teenager was trying to keep her family fed. Her mother was gone and her father was an alcoholic who drank up every bit of money he made. She got enough money to buy a chicken for their dinner, but daddy came home drunk and urinated on the food just as his children were about to eat. A twelve year old girl was raped by her father and Louise helped her to face the courtroom. I was younger than that girl as I sat at her father's trial and tried to understand how such a thing could even be possible. I thought it was the poverty, because my observations at that time had been of welfare cases. I admired Louise, who got up whistling and happy every morning at five o'clock and was not crushed by the concept of horror that could walk into her office door that day.

Louise brought her cases home with her. Itinerant wanderers found their way to her table for a meal, until the police department insisted on relieving her of issuing these invitations. Abandoned children and handicapped persons found refuge at Louise's house while awaiting a hearing or permanent placement. She worked with other agencies and with Kilgore Charities, founded in 1942, to insure the best response to each child's and adult's problems.

Louise drove county patients to hospitals in San Angelo, Austin, Dallas, Terrell, Rusk, Houston, Galveston, Tyler, Overton and Longview, making the best seating arrangements possible in her car. These were the days of segregation and it was difficult to please everyone. If she had several white people and one black one, she would put the black person in front with her and the white people all together in the back seat. One day, Old Man Bulldog came out of his shack to rage at Niney for putting Mrs. Bulldog in the back seat of the car, while a "nigger" rode in the front. Years later, after Old Man Bulldog's death, his wife described the event which killed him as having resulted from his getting his head stuck "in 'twixt the bedstead and tater bin" for three days while she was too drunk to unstick him.

Sometimes, the blacks and whites would converse during the trip to the county facility, but when we arrived at the clinic, they would go to separate waiting rooms, through separate doors, use separate drinking fountains and separate restrooms designated as "Men," "Women" and "Colored." Many a little white child of the Old South got a whipping for drinking from the "Colored" water fountain, expecting that it should spout kool-aid or soda pop.

The well-to-do middle class of Kilgore were generous in giving charity to the less fortunate and articles from the *Kilgore News Herald*, circa 1948-1954, indicate the thoughtfulness with which they approached that responsibility throughout the year. On holidays, various charitable organizations donated and distributed baskets of groceries, clothing and gifts. Occasionally, a group which only participated at Thanksgiving, Christmas or Easter, would

ask Louise for the name of a "worthy" family, then decline to give the children an Easter basket after discovering that one of the parents smoked, drank beer or patronized honky-tonks. Louise did not appreciate such a definition of "worthy," which punished little children for having parents who spent money on "frivolous" items instead of buying Easter bunnies for the kids. On the other side of the "worthy" coin was the thankless statement by one lady who received a Christmas basket of food: "Better late than never."

Louise was adamant that able-bodied persons should work and contribute to their own welfare and that of their families. However, she did not believe in a double punishment for children and often gained sponsorship for individual young people through charitable or business organizations. A 1948 editorial in the *Kilgore News Herald* stated that her duties included keeping "clean the face of society insofar as is possible," cited her for judging each case on its own merits, as people, whether "deserving or not," and called her a "bright spot in a very dark side of the Kilgore picture," as she handled situations which to most would be "bare, evil tragedy." Louise's clients were often "expected to happen in the normal course of events." The article gave examples and included the cases of a twelve year old fifth- grade mother with syphilis and a family of three children who were neglected by their mother while she did church work. This article and another from 1951 mention the rewards of placing babies with a "fine, upstanding...respectable and willing" young couple. The 1951 article reported that Louise was the "busiest woman in Kilgore."

There were no women's shelters. The police sent a woman and her child to Louise's house in the middle of the night for counseling after the woman's husband came home drunk and beat her.³⁰ Louise also took her turn holding meetings of action groups in her home. One activity was to roll bandages for cancer victims.

The Kilgore Improvement and Beautification Committee was formed in 1967 and a clean-up campaign was instigated. Louise is still instrumental in this group and holds board memberships in almost every civic and community organization in the area. The KIBA planted flowers and began a program of awards to the prettiest yards and spots in Kilgore. Caroline Ross, the daughter of Ruth Florey and Sam W. Ross, sold "The World's Richest Acre" to the city, in cooperation with local merchants, for a nominal price. It is adorned with replicas of steel oil derricks. Another commemoration, the Kilgore Oil Museum, was opened in 1980 at Kilgore College.

The Kilgore Council of Garden Clubs sponsored the 1993 Azalea and Spring Flower Trail, routing traffic past a number of attractive attention grabbers. The hand-out material mentions the excellent recreational activities and facilities available for all ages. The pamphlet announces: "Kilgore has been a winner three times at the National Congress on Beautification for Civic Improvement, and twice won the Governor's Community Achievement Award."

In the spring of 1962, the "slant-hole" drilling scandal came to light. Leases were drying up and owners were slanting their pipes into the Woodbine Sand of their neighbors. The Railroad Commission investigated and

discovered 111 deviated wells. They severed 569 suspect wells from pipeline connections, though not all were guilty. It was the last great buccaneer effort by the Kilgore oilmen.³¹ There were 400 deviated wells found and most of the thieves were described as "pillars of the East Texas community...known for their philanthropies and regular church attendance."³² Perpetrators used the audacious excuse that the underground water drive replaced the oil stolen from the east side of the field, so no one was hurt. Due to regulation loopholes, the thieves had made more money than the victims, who were operating legitimately. No civic stature was lost by the pirates, because it was once again a case of the little guys against the "big boys," with "an undercurrent of admiration for men with the temerity to steal from the large oil companies."³³ The Railroad Commission rules allowed a straight well to take migrating oil from neighbors, so why not use a crooked one? In Kilgore, taking oil from under the lease of a major company "was not considered a crime."³⁴ Agency control was difficult because the producers did not want to be controlled, though they had wanted that control in the 1930's.³⁵ In 1959, the conservation that was planned for the field should have boosted the yield from one billion barrels to an expected six billion barrels, which indicates the value of conservation measures.³⁶ However, a common goodbye said during the slant-hole activities was, "See ya later, deviator."³⁷

The oil sands of Kilgore are now depleted, but some wells have continued to operate in East Texas. The end of the power of the oil companies came with the Oil Crisis. We had enjoyed high oil prices at the end of the 1970s and real estate values were high in Houston, Dallas and Denver. The television show *Dallas* was immensely popular. However, the United States was becoming more energy efficient, which lowered demand, there was a build-up of non-OPEC supply and oil inventories were dumped. By the spring of 1986, prices collapsed. There was more oil than market and OPEC was not regulating the procedure.³⁸ The collapse was "devastating to the American oil industry" and created an economic depression in the Southwest and in the oil patch.³⁹ Texas was in bad shape. Bumper stickers appeared which said, "Please God, just give me another boom, and I promise not to blow it this time."⁴⁰

Now, where is the *boom* and how are the lives of the people of Kilgore as we approach the twenty-first century? To what "Big Deals" does Kilgore pay homage? Diverse individuals had flooded Kilgore in the lure of excitement and profit. Has the lure of profit caused them to give up their individuality for standardization? As reported in a special supplement to the March 12, 1993, *Kilgore News Herald*, the Kilgore Chamber of Commerce focused their 1992 banquet on a "Celebrate Kilgore" theme. Kilgore has been certified in the Lone Star City program, having met the following requirements:

1. An organizational structure for promoting economic development.
2. Commitments from business and government to promote economic development.
3. Training of a community individual in techniques of economic and industrial development.

4. Development of a community profile.
5. Development of a "plan of action" for economic development efforts.
6. A team of economic development professionals from outside the region to conduct studies.

The Chamber believes that it can influence economics and not let economics be something that just happens to them. In addition to manufacturers and distributors, Kilgore has the assets of education (Kilgore College) and tourism (the Oil Museum), downtown commemorative features and historical programs.

The attitude of Kilgore has always been one of cooperation. When Coke Wilkins, who became Justice of the Peace in Kilgore for many years, asked Sam Ross, early in the boom, why he did not get out of the mud and the slush and move to sunny California, Uncle Sam replied: "I earned my money here and I have decided to stay here and spend it with my friends."⁴¹

The April 11, 1993, issue of the *Kilgore News Herald* contains an article by reporter Sandy Warren that concerns the findings of Jim Semradek, a site selection consultant for businesses. Negative considerations for selection of the East Texas area include the global problems of the downsizing of industry due to economic conditions and heavy competition among firms, as well as the regional problems of high intra-state trucking and Texas Worker's Compensation costs, low quality of the sites and buildings available and a location "south and west of the most active search area." Work was suggested on transportation outlets, industrial training and supplementation of the excellent local leadership. Assets include the existing industry and the labor force, which was described as "dedicated, hard-working and non-union," skilled and motivated, and possessed of a desire "to be involved in a participative management environment."

The April 13, 1993, issue of the *Kilgore News Herald* blamed the depletion of the East Texas Oil Field for eating into the Gregg County tax bases. Two years previously, the loss to depletion was disguised by the inflated oil price resulting from the Persian Gulf War. A year later, the production allowable was raised from 86% to 100% following a court battle won by major oil companies from the independent producers. In 1993, the effects of the depletion had no disguise.

Kilgore is working hard to recruit industry and retail business, while promoting its best features. The April 1993 *Chamber Notes* of the Kilgore Chamber of Commerce displayed seven awards earned by Kilgore from the East Texas Tourism Association.

We have taken a brief look at the happenings in Kilgore and the attitudes of the residents during the past 100 years. From the quieter days of railroad, timber and cotton through the strident years of petroleum to the present time of depleted oil sands, the citizens have applied themselves to the work ethic or they have gotten out of town, sometimes by force. Assistance has been given to the unfortunate, but they, too, have contributed to the growth of the people

as a whole, either because their needs were temporary and they re-entered the mainstream, because they served as a counter point to the pretentious ones or because they allowed the opportunity for Kilgore to open its heart as a community.

Frank Florey died in 1957, after having retired as a lawyer to run a cafe on the Longview Highway and receive visits from his family and many friends. Louise is still in the flow of business, having received accolades from the lawful and the lawless, the helpers and the helped, uncaring for the commotion of praise and just glad to have a job.

NOTES

¹Al Eason, *Boom Town: Kilgore, Texas* (Kilgore, 1979), p. 39.

²Morris Penny, *Penny Generations: A History of Riley Penny's Descendants* (Huntsville, 1982), pp. 23-25.

³No oil was ever found on the Florey property. When Mr. Crim later struck oil, he cancelled all his receivable accounts. John Vinson Florey, Sr. with the writer, Kilgore, Texas, 1993, and James Presley, *A Saga of Wealth, the Rise of the Texas Oilmen* (New York, 1978), p. 123.

⁴Fred Tarpley, *From Blinky to Blue-John: A Word Atlas of Northeast Texas* (Wolfe City, 1970), p. 28.

⁵During World War II, he followed General MacArthur onto Okinawa as a Military Police officer.

⁶The *Kilgore Daily News* quotes are from undated newspaper clippings submitted by Louise Florey.

⁷*Kilgore Daily News*.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹*Ibid.*

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Jack Elder and Caleb Pirtle III, *The Glory Days* (Austin, 1986), p. 10.

¹²Robert W. Stephens, *Lone Wolf, the Story of Texas Ranger Captain M.T. Gonzauilas* (Dallas), p. 50.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴James Presley, *A Saga of Wealth, the Rise of the Texas Oilmen* (New York, 1978), 137-179, and Al Eason, *Boom Town: Kilgore, Texas* (Kilgore, 1979), pp. 50-51.

¹⁵Eugene McWorter, *Traditions of the Land, the History of Gregg County, Texas* (Longview, 1989), p. 117.

¹⁶*Ibid.*

¹⁷Jack Elder and Caleb Pirtle III, *The Glory Days* (Austin, 1986), p. 56.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, p. 28.

¹⁹Louise Florey, interview with author, 1993.

²⁰Louise Florey, interview with author, 1993.

²¹Eugene McWorter, *Traditions of the Land, the History of Gregg County, Texas* (Longview, 1989), 111, and Louise Florey, interview with author, 1993.

²²Roger M. Olien and Diana Davids Olien, *Oil Boom, Social Change in Five Texas Towns* (Lincoln, 1982).

²³Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: the Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power*.(New York, 1991), p. 251.

²⁴Odessa, interview with author, c. 1978.

²⁵Jack Elder and Caleb Pirtle III, *The Glory Days*.(Austin, 1986), p. 54.

²⁶John Vinson Florey, interview with author, 1993.

²⁷Cited by John Gulick, "Urban Anthropology," *Handbook of Social Anthropology* (Rand McNally College Press), p. 998.

²⁸*New York Times*, March 1931, cited by Jack Elder and Caleb Pirtle III, *The Glory Days* (Austin, 1986), p. 52.

²⁹*Ibid.*

³⁰Shirley Florey Green, *General Welfare Work: Kilgore, Texas, Gregg County*. Unpublished manuscript and scrapbook, 1951.

³¹Al Eason, *Boom Town: Kilgore, Texas* (Kilgore Chamber of Commerce, 1979), p. 73.

³²James A. Clark and Michel T. Halbouty, *The Last Boom* (Texas, 1972), pp. 275-276.

³³*Ibid.*, 2p. 84.

³⁴David F. Prindle, *Petroleum Politics and the Texas Railroad Commission* (Austin, 1981), p. 83.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p. 91.

³⁶Ruth Sheldon Knowles, *The Greatest Gamblers: The Epic of American Oil Exploration* (New York, 1959, reprinted by University of Oklahoma Press, 1978), p. 266.

³⁷James A. Clark and Michel T. Halbouty, *The Last Boom* (Texas, 1972), 285, and personal memory.

³⁸Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil Money, and Power* (New York, 1991), pp. 715-751.

³⁹*Ibid.*, p. 755.

⁴⁰Seen by author on vehicle bumpers on the road.

⁴¹*Kilgore News Herald* and family legend.