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THE FOLKLORE AND FACTS BEHIND THE LULING DISCOVERY WELL

by Riley Froh

Although truth is often stranger than fiction, there are many stories which lend themselves to folklore, and, while they are entertaining when told with zest and inventiveness, the actual facts are no less interesting. Therefore, it is the purpose of this paper to dispell the folklore and present the facts about a fascinating New England Yankee who came to Luling, Texas, and discovered oil where others had failed.

The bulk of mistaken information about Edgar Davis and his Luling Discovery well is to be found in magazine and newspaper accounts. For example, an October 22, 1951, obituary in *Time* magazine states that Edgar B. Davis, the eccentric Texas oil millionaire, was "best known for his support of a famous Broadway flop, *The Ladder*, which he kept going for two years because he wanted to help its author and spread its message of reincarnation. Davis made a fortune in Sumatra and got 12 million for the sale of his oil wells in Texas, spent his money lavishly on such items as \$1,000,000 in bonuses for drillers and a golf course for his Negro servants."¹

Typically, this brief notice about the Texas wildcatter is only partially true and contains several false statements about the man, because Davis, a legend in his own time, inspired such exaggeration. In reality, the \$1,000,000 was not earmarked for his drillers but rather for his management committee; the drillers received smaller bonuses. He did not build a golf course for his Negro servants. Instead, he constructed similar recreation centers for all the black and white citizens of Luling. The gesture to the Negro minority in the 1920s was even more remarkable for the time than an enlarged tale of a golf course for black employees.

Many have called Edgar B. Davis eccentric, and perhaps it was his unconventional personality that led to several halfruths about a career that would be exceptional without embellishment. Davis's peculiar life-style made him part of the folklore of the oil industry. He was a charming, internationally known character. He played an excellent game of bridge, told a fine story with style, and as a youth had been a recognized athlete. A wealthy man, Davis made three fortunes on his own, and this success, coupled with his extreme generosity with his millions, combined to establish him as legendary.

Riley Froh, of La Porte, Texas, presented a version of this paper to the Fall, 1977 meeting of The Association.

It is in keeping with his fame that the story of the Davis discovery well is wrapped in drama. Edgar Wesley Owen, in his recent monumental history of exploration for petroleum, *Trek of the Oil Finders*, calls Rios #1 “. . . about as wild a wildcat as one ever encounters.”² Yet, the most often repeated incident related to the discovery well, the account of the gusher’s coming in on August 9, 1922 and drenching Edgar B. Davis with oil, was not true of Rios #1.

Word of mouth kept this version alive in Luling for years, and writer Ken Force finally put it into print in 1947 for the Silver Anniversary Luling Oil Jubilee. According to tradition, this is what occurred. Davis was out of money and had exhausted his credit. To raise capital, he was going north to approach old contacts. Davis and two companions, W.F. Peale and Miss Agnes Manford, made one last trip to Rios #1:

It mattered little to Davis that he had a big overdraft at the bank, that he had given creditors notes for returned checks, that his telephone had been cut off, his automobiles and office furniture sold, his hotel bill overdue, his drilling crew unpaid, that he had not a cent in his pocket or a postage stamp to his name. Such material things were only the sinews of war to Davis who had seen something like that which Paul saw on the road to Damascus.

Therefore, he was not too disturbed that hot afternoon when the Rafael Rios No. 1 did nothing. He talked with the crew a moment. He could have said such words as ‘Carry on,’ for there is no turning back to the man, then he returned to the car. As Peale sat under the wheel, Miss Manford in the back seat, the kindly cheerful giant put a heavy foot on the runningboard and said in his pleasant, quiet, cultured voice, ‘Well, shall we go? I must go to town before—’

Just then Miss Manford stiffened up as if charged with electricity. Her arm shot out, her index finger pointed in a way Dorothy Dix would disapprove of. ‘Look, Boys, look!’

A black column was rising from the Rafael Rios #1, the crew was scattering. The column was rising higher, higher, like an aroused, giant snake. Miss Manford and Peale quickly hopped out of the car as the black column rose higher, rose up above the crown block, and began to spray the black, gummy stuff of which millions are made.³

This saga has been repeated in various publications for the last thirty years, and Ken Force has been shamefully plagiarized. Finally, when a group of Luling citizens got together the Golden Anniversary celebration in 1972, they printed for distribution the

same incorrect Foree account of the Silver Anniversary.⁴ Why not, for what could be more dramatic than a timely gusher?

The truth is quite simple. Drew Mosely, the driller, noticed a little oil sign in the mud which was emerging from the hole around the rotary drill. As he stopped the machinery to investigate further, K.C. Baker, who was a combination tool pusher and land man, arrived. The novice Baker, who had been a forester with Davis in the rubber business in Sumatra, insisted on drilling deeper to hit the oil which he assumed lay underneath the faint trace in the mud. The experienced Mosely refused, hung the brake, declared that he would not ruin a well, and thereby saved the discovery. Boring deeper would have hit the salt water which acted as a natural pressure to raise the oil lying above it for recovery. The usual operations completed the well, which began to flow by heads as the pressure built and receded.⁵

These commonplace events contain drama enough. Operating past the usual cut off date on credit and with a drilling crew and office staff working unpaid, Davis was able to continue exploration because of a solid strike. One well could not "prove" his field; but each successful oil well told the enlarged story of a real petroleum find. The development of his oil leases was what Davis called his "toughest fight."⁶

It was during this struggle to map out the leased acreage that the folklore of the witnessing of the gusher merged with the actual "baptizing in oil," as Davis referred to the experience which he considered so important. Subsequent drilling did produce gushers; that is, oil spurted up and over the 94-foot high crown block of the drilling rig. The importance of these spectacular scenes in 1922 is that they were convincing; oil erupted with authority in front of townspeople, petroleum scouts, traveling spectators, newspapermen, and photographers. It was the second Davis well, the Merriweather #2 in Guadalupe County, where Edgar Davis, W.F. Peale, and Miss Agnes Manford were drenched in oil.⁷ Obviously, the drama was present in the incident; the difference between success or failure depended on such a strike; Davis would have lost control of his operations without followup production; but for the sake of folklore the incident is better experienced at Rios #1. Few raconteurs want the truth to get in the way of a good story.

But if the folklorist wants a good tale, other strange events relating to Rios #1 are true. These circumstances have to do with what Mody Boatright calls the role of chance: "Luck," he concludes, "was present at the birth of the oil industry, and the role it has since played has been both factual and legendary."⁸

One of the most common accounts of good fortune has to do

with the fortuitous location of the drilling rig at a site away from the spot designated by the geologist. Several big strikes in Texas are attributed to such an intercession of fate, and although most of the stories are pure fantasy, some are true. For instance, the Santa Rita discovery did not result in the drilling at the point of a breakdown of the equipment wagons. However, the Cooke Oil Field in Shackelford County came in because trucks could not climb a hill to the site—later proved dry—the geologist had chosen. Putting down a shaft at the foot of the hill brought a gusher. The crew of Daisey Bradford #3, the discovery well of the giant East Texas Field, drilled at a spot from which the men simply could not move the dilapidated rig with their improvised equipment.⁹

Edgar B. Davis similarly located his discovery well strictly by chance. Drilling on the recommendation of only one geologist and against the advice of several, Davis located his seventh well at random. In early summer, 1922, Davis was at the end of his rope financially. Returning to Luling from a trip abroad to push a gigantic rubber consolidation scheme for international cooperation to stabilize the price of crude rubber, Davis learned that his fourth well had been a costly duster.¹⁰ He decided to use what little money remained and what further credit he could get to put down three wells simultaneously beginning the first week in July. Drilling right along the fault which Vern Woolsey, the discoverer of the Luling fault, had mapped, the United North and South Oil Company set up a derrick for Cartwright #3 near the other two failures on the same tract. They began rigging up the Ghormley well across the river in Guadalupe County near tiny Sullivan, Texas, and encountered a problem in making a third location.¹¹

The rig had been set up on the Meriweather tract, but Peale had not secured a clear title to the lease because of a technicality in the ownership of the land involving an illegitimate child. Davis wanted to move to the nearest clear lease, in this case the Rafael Rios farm about five miles northwest of Luling and a mile north of the San Marcos River. The consulting geologist disagreed. However, Davis had the rig skidded a mile to the location which became known as the Rios #1.¹²

Bringing in a well against scientific advice has been an intricate part of the folklore of the oil industry. In Davis's case, he struck oil in Luling by going against most geological evidence and opinion. In the nineteenth century and into the very early twentieth century, men located oil by wildcatting on the basis of "surface" geology. They looked for above ground seeps of oil or recognizable salt domes such as the one at Spindletop. By 1920,

however, geology was a respectable science. It was usual for trained men to map a given region carefully before going to the expense of drilling. At that point, the geologist would choose the spot to set up the rig.

Throughout his early drilling activities, Davis had negative advice; with the exception of Vern Woolsey, who had gone to work for the Atlantic Oil and Refining Company after his brief stay with Davis, no geologist supported further exploration in the area, explaining that the numerous dry holes had graphically illustrated that oil did not exist in paying quantities; furthermore, the Edwards Lime and the Austin Chalk, the two strata that could produce liquid, were obviously porous with salt water.¹³ Finally, one of the most respected geological consultants had given Davis only the slimmest of chances: "In an ordinary wildcat well, you have one chance in a hundred. Here in this situation, you have but a small fraction of one per cent of a chance."¹⁴

Yet, in storybook fashion, Davis brought in a well and then a major oil field; and this has been the saga of the wildcatter and thus his importance in the unending quest for black gold. Engineering techniques, no matter how advanced, can only speculate; in the final analysis, it is the drill bit that must probe and prove the mind of man right or wrong. And it is the wildcatter who will gamble on whatever hunch or notion drives him. The major company would rather go with the odds recommended by its well-paid scientists, who can find favorable circumstances but can predict no further.¹⁵

What does motivate the wildcat-speculator in general and just what drove Davis past the point where most men would quit? This question is not easily answered, for Davis was vague in explanation of his inner drives. There is much evidence to indicate that Davis did not attribute his fortune to luck but to spiritual guidance instead. "From the beginnings of the oil industry until today," writes Mody Boatright, "there have been oil locators whose methods were professedly occult. They get their information from the dead, from the stars, and from whatever other sources fortunetellers have used through the centuries."¹⁶ Luling has had several unorthodox seekers after oil.

There are stories of a mysterious figure in Luling who went off by himself in pastures to commune with the spirits in order to locate oil. Who this was is not clear, but "characters" are common in the early period of oil exploration in any area. Much closer to the oil was pioneer Luling citizen, Thomas Wilson, who had emigrated from England to Luling in 1878, and who made a fairly accurate map in 1903 on which he predicted where he believed oil to be located within a hundred yards of the future

discovery well. It is not clear where Wilson got the idea so early in this century that petroleum existed in depth.¹⁷

Others who sought oil through the spirit world are more definite. Morris O. Rayor, an early prospector for oil in Luling, was known as "spooky Rayor" by the Lulingites because of his mysterious ways in looking for places to bore for oil.¹⁸ Rumor suggest that Rayor "put a great deal of faith in his ability to communicate with the cosmic forces which he thought controlled his destiny as an oil speculator. He would hold seances on the grounds of his new location before he prepared to sink a new well, wherein a group would gather to help him get the guidance of the spiritual in his next endeavor to discover oil. Actually, it is believed that Rayor had little faith in the petroleum geologist, and thought it to be a waste of time and money to employ one for the location of a geological formation or the location of a well."¹⁹

Once again reality has been obscured. Legends about Rayor and Davis contain some truth but only half of the facts. Actually, Morris O. Rayor was a 1911 engineering graduate of the University of Colorado who had a healthy respect for the scientific approach to finding oil. He utilized the services of the State Geologist of Texas and consulting geologists from Rio Bravo Oil Company and of Shell Oil in the early drilling in Luling.²⁰ But he did bring a medium from Detroit, Michigan, to Luling and he did conduct the rumored seances.²¹ And therefore the labels applied to Rayor — wildcatter, engineer, geologist, and spiritualist — are generally correct; moreover, his pioneering efforts prepared the way for others. Finally, Rayor continued to drill in the Luling area in the 1930s, and is credited with bringing in the discovery well in the small Dunlap Field. He left Luling in 1940 for Wyoming but returned in the mid-1960s to drill a producing well in an area which he had explored unsuccessfully prior to the discovery well in 1922.²²

If Rayor relied on a combination of oil finding methods, the other noted spiritualist wildcatter stuck exclusively with operations of the occult to explore the region for liquid wealth. Some time in 1921 a singular oil exploration crew arrived in Luling composed of a young businessman, David Kahn, and his clairvoyant friend Edgar Cayce. To locate petroleum, Cayce went into a trance, spoke in detail of the underground production structure, while Kahn took notes. In this way they supposedly located first the town of Luling and then the oil reservoir. With three thousand acres under lease, the pair entered upon the frustrating drilling operations that depleted their funds. David Kahn records that he met Edgar Davis shortly thereafter in Fort Worth and then again in New York, where he related his psychic

information to him. It has been suggested that both Kahn and Cayce had a bearing on Davis's later success.²³

That Davis put much stock in such chance conversations is doubtful, but he was interested in psychic phenomena. For instance, he considered it most significant that Rios #1 came in on his mother's birthday. In 1929, he was trying to get in touch with Edgar Cayce, and in the 1930s he did have several interpretations of his life given while Cayce was in his trance. Davis never actually met Cayce.²⁴

Edgar B. Davis believed that he was divinely led in his business activities. This is made clear in his preamble to the charter of the Luling Foundation Farm he bequeathed:

[I believe] that a kind of gracious Providence, who guides the Destinies of all humanity, directed me in search for and the discovery of oil . . .²⁵

What has never been clear in the folklore versions is that Davis's spiritual direction was a general message he believed to be directly from God; that is, Davis was guided by a deep faith in divine providence. Often in conversation he described a religious experience of 1904 in which he said a voice anointed him for special service to his country and mankind. Every action thereafter in the rubber industry or in the oil business was conducted in the belief that eventual success would come; financial reverses such as going broke in Luling were simply the testing of his faith.²⁶ His belief in eventual success did not make business operations any easier, for his trials were many. But so were his victories.

Davis risked more fortunes than other men ever make because of this 1904 experience and his faith in a mission. His upbringing had prepared him for a turbulent business career. Reared a devout Congregationalist in Brockton, Massachusetts, by a religious mother, Davis was imbued with the belief of victory over trial and tribulation. Moreover, the traditional Puritan belief was innate that God's way of showing His favor to his servants was through success in one's enterprise. To round out his work-oriented background, Davis was a thorough student of the sage practical, Puritan mystic, Ralph Waldo Emerson. Finally, throughout the year 1922, Davis read and re-read Kipling's "If," a poem he considered written especially for him. His underscorings in his personal copy of Kipling left creases through several layers of pages which are visible fifty years later:

If you can make one heap of all your winnings
And risk it on one turn of pitch-and-toss,
And lose, and start again at your beginnings
And never breathe a word about your loss;

First and foremost Davis was an enterprising and resourceful capitalist who considered it moral treason to quit. Davis himself says it best; he wrote of his determination to go on in February of 1921, a year and a half before his discovery well:

We may or may not get oil. It is an act of faith with me, but I would not feel that I had played the game without another trial and I cannot figure too nicely on what failure would mean. I feel that as a retailer of lemonade I played the game right up to the hilt; likewise in the Eaton Company; likewise in the Rubber Company; and I want to do the same in oil and feel that if we lose out, I will be the gainer from having played the game to the limit.²⁷

Davis was in a sense a wildcatter before he ever began to drill for oil in an area previously considered unproductive. It takes a rare breed to become this kind of gambler. Ed Bateman, who made his lucky strike in the giant East Texas Field in the early 1930s has written an explanation of the unconventional search for oil: "security is not what the wildcatter is after. Whether he hits pay or not, he gets a solid satisfaction, a kind of spiritual experience, in piercing the unknown and finding an answer that to him is personal."²⁸ Folklorist J. Frank Dobie concluded that "wildcatting is a synonym for imagination as well as daring."²⁹ And fellow wildcatter Morris Rayor wrote that "the first oil, the Luling Field, resulted from the amazing determination and persistence of Edgar B. Davis."³⁰

The legend will persist as long as the people have only part of the story, and the lore must not obscure the truth, but gradually the myth gains respectability. As late as 1972 the *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* listed in its "Southwestern Collection" section "The Incredible Life of Edgar Davis," by Thomas Ricks, in *Texas Parade*. This article relies heavily on the 1947 Ken Foree booklet and contains other inaccuracies from various sources.³¹

How this leads to the further possibility of historical error is pointed up in the recently published supplement to the *Handbook of Texas*. While the *Handbook* is a monument to accurate scholarship, the entry on Edgar B. Davis is clouded by inaccuracies. For instance, he arrived in Luling in September, 1919, not "about 1921." The *Handbook* suggests that Davis came to Luling to discover oil specifically to use the money to teach diversified farming to cotton poor farmers. The fact is that he came to Luling to find oil. While wildcatting, the practical Yankee noticed the obvious poverty brought on by a one-crop economy. After making a fortune, he decided to spend some to correct this evil and to leave the money in an area which had benefitted him.

Unfortunately, the *Handbook* supplement also describes the Buckeye well as a third field discovered in Luling. Buckeye was a freak blow out near Bay City, Texas, on the Gulf Coast, a pioneer effort in deep-drilling techniques that looked like another Spindletop briefly but that played out to leave only scattered production today. It is hardly a "field" and certainly is not at Luling. A minor error, probably from the Foree booklet, describes "a Negro athletic clubhouse" in Luling which is more accurately a building designed for social gatherings.³²

As the traditional beliefs of a people, folklore is often more appealing than an accurate but systematic account. Fortunately, though, the historian, unencumbered by a specialized terminology, still speaks to the educated layman as well as to the fellow members of his craft. Therefore, the chronicler of actual events can still directly reach the public in competition with the free lance writer to provide inspiration or entertainment without histrionics.

In relation to Davis, the facts are as intriguing as the legend and the authentic story should become the history. It has been shown that even in an encyclopedic work of usual accuracy, an incorrect version has been relayed. But one can only hope that the truth will be the traditional narrative handed down from this generation to the next to describe the man, Edgar B. Davis, and the fascinating circumstances which surrounded the discovery of the Luling Oil Field.

NOTES

¹"Milestones," *Time*, October 22, 1951, LVIII, 113.

²Edgar Wesley Owen, *Trek of the Oil Finders: A History of Exploration for Petroleum* (Tulsa, Oklahoma, 1975), 847.

³Kenneth Foree, Jr., *Citizen of Luling* (Magnolia Petroleum Company, 1947), 2-3.

⁴Steve King, "He Gives Away His Millions," *The American Magazine* (August, 1951), 24-25, 96-101; Frank X. Tolbert, "40,000 Guests Attended Religious Oilman's Picnic," *Texas Star*, July 18, 1971; James A. Clark, "How Davis Found Luling," *Big Orange* (1965), 22-27; *Citizen of Luling* (Mobil Oil Corporation, 1972); Thomas Ricks, "The Incredible Life of Edgar Davis," *Texas Parade* (August, 1972), 32-35; Jo Hoskinson and Vera Holding, "Unforgettable Edgar B. Davis," *Drilling* (February, 1976), 66-70.

⁵Vern Woolsey, private interview, Luling, Texas, June 7, 1967; B.H. Chamness, private interview, Luling, Texas, June 31, 1972.

⁶Edgar B. Davis, Confidential Memorandum, 1949.

⁷*Ibid.*; John M. Talmadge, "A History of the Luling Oil Field," (unpublished M.A. thesis, Southwest Texas State Teachers College, 1948), 75; Edgar B. Davis, personal note, Davis Papers; David M. Figart to Riley Froh, May 19, 1970.

⁸Mody C. Boatright, *Folklore of the Oil Industry* (Dallas, 1963), 58.

⁹*Ibid.*, 64, 67-70; Martin W. Schwettmann, *Santa Rita* (Austin, 1943), 13-20; James A. Clark and Michel T. Halbouty, *The Last Boom* (New York, 1972), 39-40.

¹⁰Edgar B. Davis, Confidential Memorandum, 1949.

¹¹Talmadge, "History of the Luling Field," 51.

¹²Miss Kate Nugent, private interview, Luling, Texas, June 30, 1967.

¹³Talmadge, "History of the Luling Field," 50.

¹⁴Hal Bridges, private interview, Luling, Texas, June 9, 1967.

¹⁵Boatright, *Folklore of the Oil Industry*, 88-90; Mody C. Boatright and William A. Owens, *Tales From the Derrick Floor* (Garden City, New York, 1970), 228-229.

¹⁶Boatright, *Folklore of the Oil Industry*, 23.

¹⁷Talmadge, "History of the Luling Field," 21.

¹⁸Clifford Smith, private interview, Luling, Texas, June 30, 1972.

¹⁹Talmadge, "History of the Luling Field," 28.

²⁰Morris O. Rayor to Riley Froh, July 24, 1967; August 2, 1967.

²¹Morris O. Rayor to Riley Froh, August 13, 1967.

²²Talmadge, "History of the Luling Field," 26-27; Morris O. Rayor to Riley Froh, July 24, 1967; Hal Bridges, private interview.

²³Jess Stearn, *The Door to the Future* (New York, 1963), 60-61; David E. Kahn, as told to Will Oursler, *My Life with Edgar Cayce* (New York, 1970), 70-80.

²⁴Mabelle Gurney to Edgar B. Davis, July (?), 1929; Edgar B. Davis to Mabelle Gurney, July 17, 1929; Hugh Lynn Cayce to Riley Froh, December 29, 1965; Gladys Davis Turner to Riley Froh, April 5, 1967.

²⁵Edgar B. Davis, Charter to Luling Foundation Farm, Anniversary Booklet, 1947.

²⁶Edgar B. Davis, Confidential Memorandum, 1949; David M. Figart, private interview, Briarcliff Manor, New York, July 29, 1970; Inez Griffin, private interview, Luling, Texas, June 30, 1967; Miss Kate Nugent, private interview; Hal Bridges, private interview.

²⁷Edgar B. Davis to Oscar Davis, February 28, 1921.

²⁸J. Frank Dobie, *Out of the Old Rock* (New York, 1973), 54.

²⁹Dobie, *Out of the Old Rock*, 55.

³⁰Morris O. Rayor to Riley Froh, July 24, 1967.

³¹"Southwestern Collection," *Southwestern Historical Quarterly*, LXXVI, 332.

³²*The Handbook of Texas* (3 vols.; Austin, 1952), 1976), III, 229-230.