

3-2008

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Recommended Citation

Hall, Ilta S. (2008) "Life in the Shadows of Oil Derricks," *East Texas Historical Journal*: Vol. 46: Iss. 1, Article 11.

Available at: <http://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/ethj/vol46/iss1/11>

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LIFE IN THE SHADOWS OF OIL DERRICKS

By Ilta S. Hall

Without a doubt, my grandmother was a colorful character. As a child, I can recall my Granny recounting stories from her childhood through the time she moved to Houston in 1946. These stories, filled with adventure, tragedy, and humor, astonished me as a young girl. On many occasions my mother would add her memories of the same incidents, tamed down, yet still exciting. Some of my favorites among Granny's recollections involved her early married years living in the East Texas oil fields. With much assistance from my mother, I have recorded these wonderful memories of life in the shadows of the oil derricks.

My Granny was born Elsie Lesteen Vest on July 28, 1906, in Dawson, Texas, which is located twenty-one miles southwest of Corsicana. She was the first child of her sharecropper parents, Eula Florence Cagle and Thomas (Tom) Franklin Vest. She endured a childhood typical of most poor children; she worked long hours picking cotton, attended school sporadically, and helped her mother care for four younger siblings. Between growing up with a harsh father who demanded arduous work and often doing without basic necessities, Elsie emerged with a strong, survivalist personality and a desire for recognition and appreciation for her accomplishments.

Granny's family moved to Raleigh, Texas, when she was twelve years old. Her father worked as a blacksmith and on farms owned by others, hoping to save enough money to get into the cattle business. Tom went broke when his previous herd had to be destroyed due to blackleg disease. He could not get another loan at the bank to buy more cattle because he already owed too much, and the bank foreclosed on his land and his home. The only other occupation that Tom knew was farming, so he had to resort to sharecropping to provide for his family. As the oldest girl, Elsie was needed at home, making school attendance low on the list of priorities. When she was fourteen, Elsie played on the girls' basketball team and met a handsome twenty-year-old spectator named Robert Price. He was a cousin of her friend and he worked on his family's farm a few miles down the road from Raleigh.

Elsie and Robert (called Ott by his family) both attended the local Methodist church in Raleigh, and they soon fell in love. It was not unusual for teenaged girls of Elsie's age to get married because they were mature enough to handle a household on their own. Elsie was also anxious to get away from her father's harsh rules and the hard work on the farm. Elsie's parents agreed to the young couple's plan to marry because it meant one less mouth to feed. Family members and friends attended Ott and Elsie's wedding at the preacher's house on June 19, 1921. There were so many people in the house to witness their vows that the wooden floor fell in from the weight!

The newlyweds moved into a two-room wooden shack near Raleigh. Ott worked in the fields while Elsie stayed at home keeping house and canning.

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On June 18, 1924, the day before their third anniversary, Elsie and Ott became the parents of a baby girl. Elsie wanted the baby named after her, while Ott wanted to name the baby Pauline because he liked the name Paul. After much discussion, they named their daughter, my mother, Elsie Pauline, but Ott always called her Pauline.

The young family struggled to make ends meet and farming work for Ott was slow. Many northeast Texas folks were farmers and the competition triggered low agricultural prices. Also, many people had no money to buy food and grew their own crops. Elsie and Ott helped their families on their farms often, especially during cotton-picking time. Elsie grew tired of the laborious life and just scratching out a living. She wanted a better life for herself and her daughter, so she pressured Ott to get a better job, one that paid more money. A few of his unemployed friends were hired in the oil fields. Ott had grown up around Corsicana where oil was discovered in 1894 as contractor's drilled artesian wells to help the local farmers. He had seen oil derricks all over the town, as well as a refinery that produced kerosene and later gasoline for automobiles.¹ To please Elsie, Ott began to look for a manual labor job in the oil fields.

When Pauline was three months old, Ott heard that drillers were hiring workers in the oilfield in Mexia. The discovery of oil in Mexia four years earlier had created a massive growth spurt for the little town in Limestone County. The population increased from near 3,500 to almost 35,000 in a few years, and the frenzy caused martial law to be established there for a short time.²

Ott landed a job stacking pipe in the derricks. Drill pipe came in thirty-foot joints that were connected as the bit drilled deeper, pulled out and stacked when the cuttings needed to be removed from the hole, and then rejoined as drilling continued.³ The job was considered dangerous and most workers did not want to take such a risky position. Ott accepted the risks since it paid well. Elsie later boasted that it paid much more than what her brother Roy made working for the Works Progress Administration (WPA). With their few belongings, Ott brought Elsie and Pauline to the Wortham lease, where they lived in a tent house, a one-room structure with walls three-foot-high topped by a tent. They joined other former sharecroppers who set up tent cities or "rag towns" to call "home."⁴ Here, the family celebrated the baby's first Christmas.

Not satisfied with living in a tent, Elsie persuaded Ott to move to a small house located next to the railroad tracks in the middle of the Wortham Oilfield in February 1925. A big oil strike there the previous November led to the drilling of 300 wells in one year. Production and profits were high.⁵ Ott made enough money to purchase a used Buick touring car with a canvas top. Elsie learned to drive and visited her family in Raleigh to show off her new car and baby, let them see how well she was doing. She packed up and, in her ignorance, placed Pauline on the floorboard so that she would not fall off the seat. Upon their arrival at the Vest farm, Elsie's family reprimanded her for subjecting the baby to gas fumes. Undaunted, she paraded Elsie and the car in front of all her relatives before returning to Wortham.

Many oilfield workers, including Ott, found that when the oil drilling began to decline, they had to look for other work, any work. In August 1926, Ott took his family back to help with the harvest at the Price's family farm between Frost and Raleigh. They rented the old Vincent place and tried to make another go of sharecropping. After the harvest, the landowner kept most of the profit and refused to honor the deal he had made with the farmers. Unhappily, Ott and Elsie had to depend on help from their families to keep going.

Work in the oilfields picked up again in early 1929, but the closest employment that Ott found was near Luling. For a short while, the family lived in a two-room yellow house next to a house where Elsie's cousin and his wife were renting. Young Pauline received a little broom for Christmas. When she was sweeping the porch one day, the landlady's donkeys came up next to the house and frightened her. Instinctively, she poked her little broom at them; one of the donkeys grabbed it and ate it, causing Pauline to cry for hours.

There were only a few other children to play with Pauline. The landlords' children were occasional playmates but much of the time she played alone. When Pauline went with her mother to visit Ott on the derricks, her father would let her climb on the drill pipe and play in the "doghouse" where the workers changed clothes. The only place where she was not allowed to play was on the rig floor. Elsie boasted that Pauline spent more time in the oilfields than most workers.

When the stock market crashed in October 1929, the country's economy suffered. Many Texans became unemployed and families were hungry.⁶ The Great Depression had little effect on Elsie and Ott, who managed well enough since they had little money anyway. Many people were desperate after the stock market crash, but oilfield labor was about the most lucrative work to be found. Ten major oil companies operated in Texas in 1929, and many independent oil companies also employed oilfield workers. Also, there were important refineries in Port Arthur and Baytown.⁷ Ott continued to get steady work in the oil patch.

Elsie's talents and ingenuity helped her manage during the Depression. She made Pauline's clothes on a borrowed sewing machine. Outgrown clothing was sent to her brother Roy's daughter. There was no problem getting food on the lease because Ott had steady employment. He and Elsie bought coffee, flour, sugar, and other things that could not be grown on the farm to send back to their families along with some money.⁶

When the wells were all completed, Elsie and Pauline stayed with the Vests a few weeks until Ott found another job in Van, twenty miles northeast of Tyler. The Pure Oil Company used seismograph soundings to direct their drilling and discover oil in Van in October 1929. This find attracted several oil companies that signed a joint agreement with Pure Oil for unitization to reduce competition and promote conservation.⁷ Ott took a position as a roustabout, tightening and loosening the joints of the drill string.

Shortly after the move to a boarding house, Elsie received a message that her mother was ill and in the hospital in Corsicana. Elsie took Pauline and drove to her mother's bedside. That day, Elsie's mother passed away at the age of forty-two from a ruptured appendix and gangrene. Her death was a blow to a family with two children still at home. Elsie tried even harder to send any extra funds home to her little sisters.

In the fall Pauline began attending kindergarten and gave Elsie the opportunity to seek her own job rather than spending her days at home canning fruit and vegetables. Elsie had never enjoyed staying at home. It was unusual for a wife to be employed and no other females in Elsie's family had ever worked outside the home, but she was bored there. A job gave her a chance to get out of the house, find adventure, and earn money of her own. She worked at Thompson Commercial Company in Van in the dry-goods department. She enjoyed meeting people and saved some of her money to buy her own car. She could buy fabric at a discount and sew for Pauline. The little girl was dressed well, with bloomers to match every dress. Having only one child, which was uncommon for most families, Elsie kept up her duties at home while enjoying her job. Most wives of oilfield workers stayed at home on the lease to raise their children and perform household chores. Many of the workers were young men who had not yet married. These single men found accommodations at "cot houses" or boarding houses.

Employment in Van began a period when the family moved wherever Ott could find work for independent contractors on another well. He heard about an Oklahoma promoter named "Dad" Joiner who spudded wells in Rusk County. Joiner, using only his intuition, had leased 10,000 acres in East Texas and began drilling, on his third attempt, the Daisy Bradford #3, he struck oil in October 1930. His discovery was followed by two tremendous strikes and the vast East Texas oilfield began production of over six billion barrels of oil in the next few years. Joiner attracted investors to the area and many independent drillers, called "wildcatters," began their own wells in search of a big strike. Ott worked as a roustabout whenever and wherever he could find work.⁸

For the first two or three months, the Price family lived in a rooming house and ate meals with the owners and other boarders. The family had to move often because the rigs were drilled in a set number of days and when they were completed, the crews moved on. Wherever the next contract required them to drill was where they would live, sometimes in the same town, other times twenty or thirty miles away. A possessive woman, Elsie never wanted Ott out of her sight when he was not working. This attitude drove her to follow him to every oil lease. Elsie and Pauline would trail the group of roustabouts in their car, find a place to spend the night, and then locate a place to live. Because of the hard economic times, most people with a spare room would rent it, whether in a rooming house or a private home. Such frequent moves meant that Ott and Elsie had no furniture of their own. Nothing could be accumulated because they did not stay in one place long enough. Perhaps this was the reason that my Granny amassed so much "stuff" in her later years.

Every place the family lived, Ott planted a garden. They often had to move before anything was produced, but Ott enjoyed growing food. It gave him pleasure to give produce away and he enjoyed leaving the garden for the next renters. Between the garden and the lease store, food supplies were not a problem, although there may not have been a big variety. When Ott, Elsie, and Pauline visited the Vest farm, Grandpa Vest slaughtered hogs and sent them home with ham, bacon, and sausage from the smokehouse. On occasion, they bought chickens to add to the staples they purchased at the lease store.

Pauline went to school wherever they lived. During one four and one-half month period, she attended seven different schools, each one not long enough to learn the teacher's name or get a report card. Most of the schools were two rooms, one for first through third grades and the other for fourth through sixth grades. Teachers were available but some were not well educated. Children such as Pauline, who come from the oil leases, were put in the grade that their mothers thought they should attend. Pauline would find a chair and follow the other children's lead until it was time to move again. She learned to read, and Elsie listened to her read aloud and help her with the more difficult words if she knew them. The children were taught phonics and their books usually consisted of a reader, speller, and a math book.

Ott continued to work wherever he could. The East Texas oilfield was the largest oilfield in the United States, covering parts of Gregg, Rusk, Upshur, Smith, and Cherokee counties.¹⁰ Ott found employment on the Cook #2, owned by Mr. W.H. Cook, in December 1930; then for the Sun Oil Company at the J.W. Akin #1 site, and later on the T&P RR Company's Fee #1 site, among many others. He worked as a roustabout on several wells but because of his experience, he held the position of derrick man on a wildcat well near Troupe, Texas. He stood on crossed boards on the derrick where he grabbed a snap hook, pulled up a link of pipe, stacked it, and continued the process in and out of the hole. On one well between Gladewater and Longview, Ott assumed the position of driller. He always worked on rotary rigs, which were becoming more common than the traditional cable rigs. Rotary rigs required a minimum of five workers per shift. The "boss" of the rig was the tool pusher, followed by the driller, the derrickman, and two roughnecks.¹¹

The more Ott worked, the more Elsie hounded him to make more money, putting stress on their marriage. Occasionally, Ott went to local beer joints with co-workers at the end of the day, only to come home to Elsie's fury. Elsie gave up her job at Thompson's in Van to stay in closer proximity to Otto. They lived in several communities, including Troup, Arp, Overton, Henderson, Greggton, and Gladewater.

When the market became flooded with East Texas oil, prices fell from a dollar a barrel in 1930 to eight cents a barrel the following year. Also, because small producers controlled the East Texas oilfields, the major oil companies called on the Texas Railroad Commission to limit oil production. The independent producers countered by marketing "hot oil" in defiance of the Railroad Commission's limitations.¹² "Hot oil" was a term used to describe oil

that was produced beyond the restrictions of the Railroad Commission or obtained illegally by siphoning from pipelines.¹³ A volatile situation existed in the East Texas fields, and jobs with independent producers were harder for Ott to find, so he took whatever positions were offered to him in order to provide for his family, even if they involved "hot oil."

When Pauline started the third grade, Ott got a job as a lease foreman for Stroube & Stroube, turning wells on and off as the Railroad Commission would allow. This independent company had made a tremendous strike in 1930 only 600 feet north of "Dad" Joiner's Daisy Bradford well, when oil prices were high and large profits common.¹⁴ Ott received top pay and he performed his duties independently of any crews. The family moved into a company house on a lease in White Oak, located east of Gladewater near Kilgore. This allowed them enough stability and purchased their first pieces of furniture. Elsie and Ott opened a charge account at the grocery store and could pay at the end of each month. Then Elsie could buy groceries without having cash and she allowed Pauline to buy ice cream or milk on their account, but never candy. The family never worried about what they did not have and they were relatively happy, except for incidents involving Ott's "drinking with the boys," which collided with Elsie's aspirations for a better life.

In 1933, Elsie's youngest sister Mackie came to live with the family and go to school because their father had remarried. She stayed until another sister, Evlin, got married and settled and Mackie went to live with them so that she could be closer to the rest of the family and her friends. With Pauline and Mackie attending school in White Oak, Elsie became involved with the Parent Teacher Association. The PTA put on plays and sold tickets to the community to raise funds for school projects. Elsie found her place in the limelight by acting in the plays and occasionally forcing a reluctant Pauline to take part. A highlight for Elsie occurred when Mackie won a trip through the 4-H Club to A & M College in College Station. Elsie accompanied Mackie as a representative from Gregg County.

On a visit to Grandpa Vest's farm, Pauline fell in love with a little brown goat. She begged to take it home, so Grandpa Vest put it in a gunny sack with its head sticking out and Pauline rode home sitting on the floorboard of the backseat, holding the goat she named Billy. Pauline played with the goat after school. They chased each other across the long front porch. One day, Elsie hung a pair of blue rayon pajamas she bought to wear on the College Station trip on the clothesline to dry and Billy ate one of the pajama legs. Elsie was so angry that she called a man to come and get Billy and barbecue him. When the man returned with a large pan of barbecue, the family, along with cousin David, who was staying with them, sat down to eat. Suddenly, David said "Baaaaa" and Pauline burst into tears. She felt betrayed by her mother, but Elsie felt no remorse. The meat was returned to the man and no one ate that night.

Ott and his family spent almost three years in White Oak. Other oilfield workers and their families continually moved on and off the lease, living

wherever space was available. Oilfield boomtowns rarely had paved streets. The streets turned to mud whenever it rained and the big trucks transporting pipe kept the roads in a quagmire. In the leased company home, Ott, Elsie, and Pauline adjusted well. Many of the larger oil companies provided housing for their workers on their leases. These homes were rented to employees for a nominal costs and encouraged company loyalty and discouraged labor union support.¹⁵

At the lease house, as usual Ott planted a garden. They had no running water, but there was a well on the end of the porch. There was an outhouse in the back and Pauline was assigned the job of scrubbing it with hot water and a broom every Saturday. Pauline despised the job, especially with the spiders.

At White Oak School, there was no electricity, and the children pumped their own water in the front yard into tin cups brought from home. One day, a boy who did not have a tin cup of his own tried to pump water into a snuff glass. In the process, the snuff glass broke so the boy threw the pieces and one hit Pauline in the arm, causing a surge of blood. The boy's father paid to get the wound stitched and Elsie sent Pauline back to school the next day.

Often guests or family members came to visit Ott and Elsie. Adults spent the evening playing dominoes or talking. The children were shielded from most "grownup talk." Most of the crime in the area was limited to petty thefts, but they never talked about crime, sex, or having babies around children. Elsie and Ott bought a radio, first with earphones and then later one without them to hear the latest broadcasts. Every Sunday the family attended church, returned home, and killed a chicken. They cleaned and fried it, accompanied by potatoes, and ate lunch around 2 P.M. They killed additional chickens when anyone else showed up for a visit.

As Pauline progressed in school, she enjoyed the traveling shows that performed at the schools once a month. Children could attend the shows for ten or fifteen cents admission, depending on the performance. Sometimes they would be entertained by bands or minstrel shows. Once, an expert archer demonstrated trick shots, including one where he shot objects out of a child's hand. The most memorable visits for Pauline were a performance of Shakespeare's "As You Like It" and an appearance by some members of Admiral Richard Byrd's expedition.

Elsie became more involved with social activities in White Oak. In addition to working with the school PTA, she joined the local Rebekah Lodge, which was the women's division of the Oddfellows. Because Elsie would not leave her daughter alone at the lease house, Pauline went along to all the meetings and sat in the anteroom with other members' children. Out of boredom during the two-hour meetings, they "hollered" at people who passed the window and Pauline stayed in constant trouble with Elsie.

Elsie did a great deal of community service work. She sewed dresses for neighbors and clothing for their children if they purchased the cloth, usually at a nickel a yard. She cut up worn men's shirts and made clothing for babies.

She cooked meals and took them to those in the area who were in need. Elsie's humanitarian and social pursuits took up much of her time, so naturally, she could not handle all the duties of the household. A local black man told her that he had a daughter that needed to work and Elsie agreed to let Geneva do her housework and live with the family. She placed a cot in the corner of the garage for Geneva to sleep. Elsie treated Geneva well otherwise and enjoyed her cooking and cleaning abilities.

After Geneva arrived, one of Pauline's school friends showed her some white rabbits. Pauline asked Ott if she could have some rabbits since she was the only child on the lease and had no one to play with. He bought her two pairs and a double hutch. The rabbits multiplied so Ott bought another hutch. Elsie insisted that Pauline be in charge of their care since they were her pets and she did not want them to be eaten. When there were more rabbits than the hutches could hold, Ott built a pen on the ground for them. Elsie got angry with her daughter for trying to get Geneva to help her clean the pen, so she went out in the yard, lifted the side of the pen, and herded all the white rabbits, about seventy-five of them, into the nearby woods. Their descendents probably still live in the forests of East Texas. Pauline cried, but Ott was not concerned because the cost of feeding the rabbits was taking a toll. After this incident, Geneva's father discovered that his daughter was sleeping in a drafty garage, so he told Elsie that Geneva's mother needed her help and he took her home.

Working on the oil derricks had many dangers. Several times there were oil well fires on the leases. Ott and other workers took great risks in controlling the fires. Once while in White Oak, there was a heavy rain and the runoff flowed into a slush pit that contained oil from a well that had just come in. A bolt of lightning struck near the pit, igniting the oil. The water began to boil and the burning oil overflowed. Pauline followed her father as he and other workers heard the calls for help and tried to extinguish the flames by shoveling dirt over them. As the streams of overflowing oil and fire ran downhill, Ott called for Pauline to get back. The fire grew so fierce that it blocked her view of the men. Pauline watched with increasing uneasiness, then panic, fearing that the inferno had engulfed her father. Eventually, she could see Ott and the others through the flames that surrounded them as they continued shoveling dirt on the fire. Pauline believed that she saw angels in the sky above the flames and that God had sent them to save her father from harm. None of men suffered major injuries that night.

By 1934, the Great Depression had begun to have negative effects on the oil industry. Prices for petroleum continued to decline and oilfield jobs were scarce. Ott was temporarily promoted to a position reading gages for Stroube and Stroube Oil Company. He gauged oil in the tanks and turned valves on when required, running oil in the pipes to the refinery.

Disagreements between Ott and Elsie grew, and Ott's drinking increased. This brought the fragile marriage to the breaking point and Ott and Elsie separated. Ott had learned that he would lose his job, so he helped Elsie move into a rental house across the highway. Ott packed his duffle bag and joined some

of his friends at a rooming house. Within six weeks, Elsie packed her car and moved their furniture to a four-room, yellow rent house on Eastview Street in Longview. Wasting no time, she went to work at K. Woolens in dry goods and enrolled Pauline in the fourth grade at the elementary school. Elsie's cousin, Dora Cagle, came to live with them for a short time and shared expenses.

Shortly after their divorce was final, Elsie began dating again. When a gentleman came to the house for dinner, Pauline was instructed to be on her best behavior. But, in the middle of the meal, Pauline got tickled at something that was said and strangled, spitting tea all over the table. The suitor never came back.

Elsie would not let Ott see Pauline often unless he brought money to help her. He went back to work on the derricks again, often as a driller, whenever he could find work, and he brought money to Elsie whenever he could. Elsie and Pauline lived in Longview for a year and a half until Elsie remarried. Her new husband, George, provided plenty of food for them because he owned an interest in a butcher shop at Greggton. The new family rented a house close to Pine Tree School, where Pauline attended the sixth grade. Unfortunately, George and his partner lost their lease on the butcher shop, so the family relocated to Overton for a short time, and then to Kilgore when George took a job at the Wickham Packing Company processing meat, including wild game.

George bought Pauline a horse because of their joint love of animals. The bay had been a bucking horse in the rodeo in Fort Worth that had lost his desire to buck, so he was a good deal. George and Pauline both enjoyed riding him while Elsie had a cow for milk. A few years later, Elsie had to have all her teeth pulled, so Pauline was allowed to drive her mother's car to school. Pauline attended Kilgore High School and was graduated in 1940, just before her sixteenth birthday. She sold her horse to help finance her first year at Kilgore Junior College. Then George accepted a job in Tyler at Rose City Packing Company, and the family moved into a nice brick house.

When Pauline completed her education at Tyler Junior College, she became a telephone operator for \$15 a week. She lived at home until she moved to Georgia to accept a job making \$50 a week and to experience freedom and adventure. After a while, Elsie joined her there. She and George had divorced, for which she offered Pauline no explanation.

With the beginning of World War II, Elsie and Pauline returned to East Texas. Elsie got a job at the Post Exchange at Camp Fannin and Pauline worked in a grocery store there. Elsie pretended that she and Pauline were sisters to meet soldiers at the camp at a dance featuring Ozzie and Harriet Nelson and their orchestra. One evening, Pauline went to the Post Exchange to have dinner with her mother. While waiting, Pauline met a wonderful young soldier from Louisiana. Pauline and John, the young soldier, fell in love. They married and moved to Houston after John's discharge in 1945.

Pauline and John are my mother and father. They raised four children who were entertained by Granny every day after she bought a house two doors

away and married another a soldier who grew up in Chicago. Granddaddy Ott and his new wife lived in East Texas, Midland, and Louisiana, where he continued to work for oil companies, lastly as a tool pusher, until his retirement in 1962. We grandchildren heard many stories about the oilfields whenever he visited, but none could compare with the tales with which Granny amused us. They have both passed away now, but their stories of life in the shadows of the East Texas oil derricks live on as we share their experiences with our children.

NOTES

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⁶Rupert N. Richardson, Adrian Anderson, Cary D. Wintz, and Ernest Wallace, *Texas: The Lone Star State*, 8th Edition (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, 2001) p. 384.

⁷"Texas Oil Companies, 1910-1930," *Celebrating Texas*, Lone Star Publishing, <http://www.celebratingtexas.com/22-3.html> (June 24, 2003).

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¹⁰Julia Cauble Smith. "East Texas Oilfield," *The New Handbook of Texas, Vol. 2* (Austin, 1996) p. 772.

¹¹Anderson, *Fundamentals of the Petroleum Industry*, p. 130.

¹²Richardson, *et al.*, *Texas: The Lone Star State*, pp. 386-387.

¹³Olien, "Oil and Gas Industry," p. 8.

¹⁴Lawrence Goodwyn, *Texas Oil, American Dreams* (Austin, 1996) p. 34.

¹⁵Roger M. Olien and Diana Davids Olien. *Life in the Oilfields* (Austin, 1986) p. 104.