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RED SOIL, WHITE OIL: PETROLEUM AND WHITE SUPREMACY IN THE  
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## Abstract

“Red Soil, White Oil” explores how white settlers and federal officials in early-twentieth-century Indian Territory and Oklahoma erected a regime of petroleum extraction that undermined the property rights of Native Americans, encouraged dispossessive violence towards Indians and Black people, and situated oil as a source of modern energy that supposedly served industrial society best if it was controlled by white property owners and their representative governments. Oil abundance served as a means through which white landowners, businessmen, and government officials produced an extraction-based system of racial capitalism that relegated Indigenous, Black, and non-white mixed-race peoples to an inferior class of propertied citizenship. Whites insisted, through measures both legal and extralegal, that non-white peoples would squander petroleum resources or use oil wealth to undermine racial hierarchy, and that therefore oil land and royalties should be transferred or seized in the name of white civilization. These commitments to white supremacy and racial capitalism bled into petroleum’s labor regime, as oil companies reserved high-paying drilling work for white men. White oilmen also sought to build a resource-management state within Oklahoma’s borders that protected small-scale, “independent” oil producers from the domination of nefarious “outside” monopolies and the imposition of the federal government. Petroleum’s central role in the history of the twentieth-century American West and the broader United States grew out of the efforts of white oilmen and their allies to build market power and political strength through the tenets of racial supremacy and settler self-rule.

## Introduction

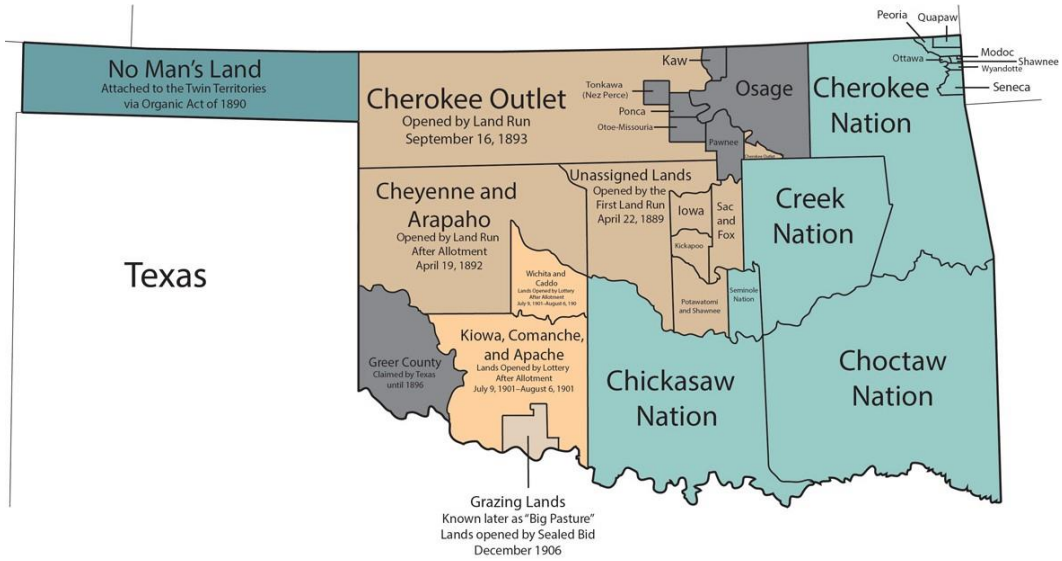
In the late summer of 1904, Max Weber traveled to the American West. In August, the German sociologist and political economist sent his publisher the first part of what would become his most famous work, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, before departing for New York. After lecturing on agrarian economics at the 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis, he traveled southwest to Indian Territory where he hoped to see firsthand a capitalist frontier. On his sojourn, he experienced a world under rapid transformation. Writing to his wife while traveling near Tulsa, the German intellectual surmised that “the virgin forest’s hour has struck even here.” He was disturbed to see woodlands “dying off” and smoldering trees that “stretch[ed] their pale smoky fingers into the air in a confused tangle,” scorched by fires set by farmers to clear the land. Wood-frame houses had largely displaced the log cabins of Native Americans, whose residences were “recognizable by the colorful shawls and laundry hung out to dry.” Weber also encountered a natural resource that was increasingly fueling modern life: petroleum. He recalled traveling through fields of cotton, when “suddenly it begins to smell like petroleum: one sees the tall Eiffel Tower-like structure of the drilling holes, right in the middle of the forest, and comes to a ‘town.’” The “towns” that Weber saw consisted of “tent camps of the workers” and “‘streets’ in a natural state, usually doused with petroleum twice each summer to prevent dust, and smelling accordingly.” Oil carried with it the scent of modernity, which seemed to spring from the ambitions of the white settlers whom Weber watched.<sup>1</sup>

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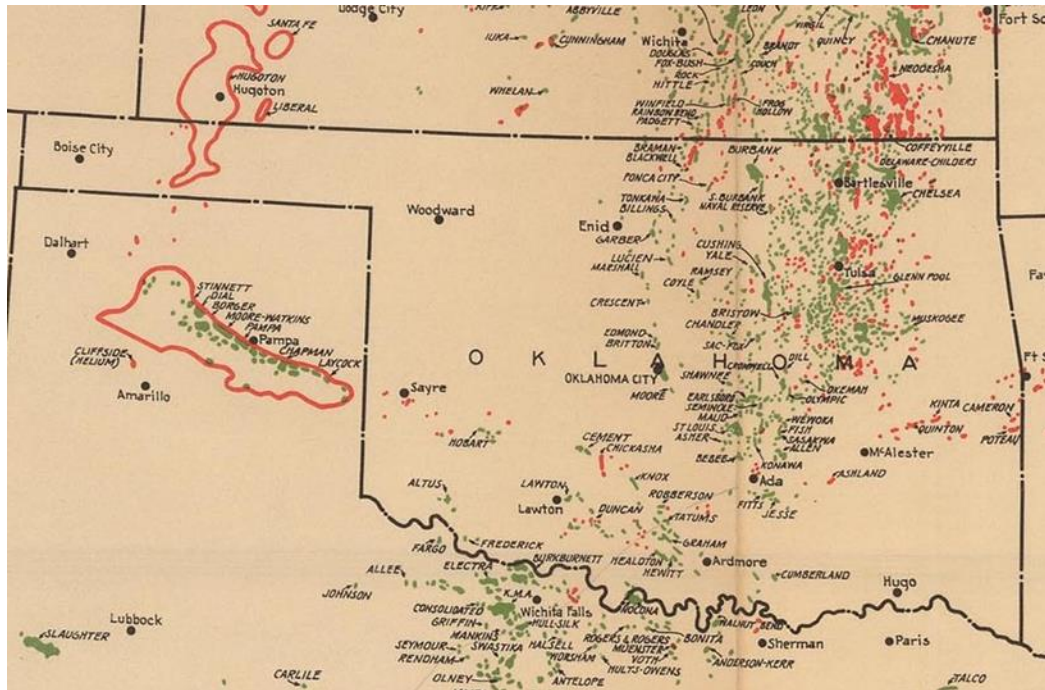
<sup>1</sup> Max Weber, September 28, 1904, in Marianne Weber, *Max Weber: Ein Lebensbild* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1926), 304-5; 1988 [1926], 291–92, cited in Lawrence A. Scaff, “Remnants of Romanticism: Max Weber in Oklahoma and Indian Territory,” *Journal of Classical Sociology* 5, no. 1 (2005): 65-66, accessed February 5, 2019, DOI: 10.1177/1468795X05050038.



The very fact that Weber, a white man, could more or less freely watch other white men drill for oil and build their livelihoods in a place called “Indian Territory” pointed to a central aspect of the petroleum frontier he confronted. Beginning around the time the German intellectual visited the territory, the production of oil and gas began to reshape the legal, social, cultural, and ecological boundaries of belonging among groups of people who, whether by choice or by circumstance, became involved in the broader region’s early oil booms. The commodification of land and minerals, the labor that went into crude’s production, and the state power deployed to structure and manage oil markets in Indian Territory and the subsequent State of Oklahoma (established in 1907) all contributed to this particular petroleum-based energy transition. Crucially, the contours of citizenship in this world—one’s experiences as a property owner, a worker, a subject of government power—were molded by the interaction between oil production and race. The diverse social and ecological relationships people created through the production of petroleum in Indian Territory and Oklahoma produced a distinctly racialized extractive order, one premised upon settler-colonial land seizures, anti-Black violence, and the veneration of self-rule for white settlers vis-à-vis “outside” monopolies and the federal government. These phenomena emerged not as coincidental, individual racial conflicts in a specific place and time. Rather, in Indian Territory and Oklahoma the promises of industrial extraction and widespread white landownership became wedded through the object of oil. The human relationships that capitalist oil production required facilitated a combined project of expropriation and violence that was both the culmination and extension of a longer tradition of American imperialism and white supremacy. The imperatives of expansion across the North American continent and the extraction of raw materials in a transnational setting came together in Indian Territory around white people’s struggle to seize oil-rich land from Black, Indigenous, and mixed-race peoples.



The Native nations of the Indian and Oklahoma territories. Oklahoma Historical Society.



Oil and gas fields, 1941. Oklahoma Historical Society

How race and petroleum intertwined had important consequences for how the oil industry and its activities shaped early twentieth-century conceptions of property, private enterprise, and state power. Weber's trip and the first largescale discoveries of oil in Indian Territory occurred when the region's Indigenous governments were in flux, their authority increasingly undermined by the demands of white settlers. These settlers had begun to legally migrate to the territory in the late 1880s. By the turn of the twentieth century, they were urging the federal government to finalize the privatization of collectively held tribal land. Not least among these were numerous "wildcat" oilmen, small-scale enterprising producers who searched far and wide for subterranean deposits of oil. Throughout the nineteenth century, the federal government had refused attempts by white oilmen to sign leases with the Five "Civilized" Tribes of Indian Territory (the Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole nations), whose land is located in what is today the eastern half of Oklahoma. However, as Indian Territory's prospects for oil abundance improved, the voices of these white independent oilmen grew in frequency and volume, urging a liberalized private-property regime that would allow them to freely lease land from Indian property owners and commence their drilling operations.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> W. David Baird, "Are the Five Tribes of Oklahoma 'Real' Indians?" *Western Historical Quarterly* 21, no. 1 (Feb., 1990): 4-18, accessed April 21, 2019, DOI: 10.2307/968973; Jeffrey Burton, *Indian Territory and the United States, 1866-1906: Courts, Government, and the Movement for Oklahoma Statehood* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1995); David A. Chang, *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1929* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Chang, "Enclosures of Land and Sovereignty: The Allotment of American Indian Lands," *Radical History Review*, Issue 109 (Winter 2011): 108-19, accessed August 17, 2020, DOI: 10.1215/01636545-2010-018; Angie Debo, *And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940); Kendra Taira Field, *Growing up with the Country: Family, Race, and Nation after the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); Gerald Forbes, "Oklahoma Oil and Indian Land Tenure," *Agricultural History* 15, no. 4 (Oct., 1941): 189-194, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3739783>; Tanis C. Thorne, *The World's Richest Indian: The Scandal over Jackson Barnett's Oil Fortune* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003); Erik M. Zissu, *Blood Matters: The Five Civilized Tribes and the*

It was through these initial campaigns by white businesses to claim their right to extract resources from Indigenous lands that oil first became implicated in the culture, institutions, and practices of racial capitalism in Indian Territory. First coined by the Marxist political theorist Cedric Robinson, racial capitalism contends that the processes of race-making and racial subordination and the creation, accumulation, and transaction of private property go hand-in-hand, co-producing one another across time and space. Just as their earlier counterparts had done across the American West (and across the rest of the Anglo-settler world), white settlers in Indian Territory and Oklahoma sought to remake Indigenous peoples and their land on distinctively racial-capitalist terms. White settlers came to locate petroleum at the center of this imperial campaign. The white men who owned and operated the vast majority of oil companies sought the most favorable leasing terms from Native, African-Native, and mixed-race landowners, which in their eyes provided ample reason for the expansion of settler property rights and sovereignty. This sowed conflict between oilmen and the federal government. The Department of the Interior was tasked with managing Indian land based on the “blood” possessed by Native landowners, bestowing more liberal property rights to those Natives whom federal officials considered “whiter” than others. This practice limited the ability of Native allottees to alienate their land, annoying

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*Search for Unity in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 2001). The Osage Nation’s relationships with oil is closely related to that of the Five Tribes. The Osage reservation is located in Indian Territory (present-day Osage County in northeastern Oklahoma) and proved rich in petroleum. The Osage differed from the Five Tribes in that the tribe maintained collectively owned reservation lands and mineral rights, which provide all tribal citizens with a portion of the revenue made from oil production. I focus very little on the Osage, only because their story is relatively well-known, especially among historians, and because the Five Tribes’ experience with oil was more directly affected by subnational forms of power, namely via state and county officials, than that of the Osage, whose reservation lands were overseen by the Department of the Interior. See Philip J. Deloria, *Indians in Unexpected Places* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004); David Grann, *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and the Birth of the FBI* (New York: Doubleday: 2017); Terry P. Wilson, *The Underground Reservation: Osage Oil* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985).

white oil producers and other settlers. It also meant that, in their dealings with tribal citizens who owned oil-rich land—in federal officials’ assessment of the “competency” of allottees, in oilers’ petitions for the right to exercise leases with Native landowners, in the stories whites told about the supposed squandering of petroleum resources by non-white property owners—settlers and federal agents were simultaneously inventing both racialized subjects and propertied individuals. More oil led to more stringent legal oversight of non-white people’s property, which encouraged the construction of certain groups of Natives as incapable of achieving the property-based rights of citizenship that whites expected and enjoyed. In this sense, racial capitalism in the oil fields of Indian Territory and Oklahoma represented more than the ad hoc mistreatment of non-white peoples who happened to be oil-rich. The occurrence of petroleum abundance incentivized forms of racialization that marked people of color as incapable of stewarding a particularly valuable resource.<sup>3</sup>

This brand of oil-inspired racial capitalism not only insinuated itself into the lives of Indigenous people, but also African-Indigenous peoples and Black settlers. This project primarily focuses on the Five Tribes and, in particular, the Creek Nation, whose lands proved to be home to

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<sup>3</sup> Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Books, 1983). See also W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Souls of White Folk,” in *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1920); Barbara J. and Karen Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (Verso: London, 2012); Cheryl I. Harris, “Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June, 1993): 1707-1791, accessed April 26, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1341787>; Jodi Melamed, “Racial Capitalism,” *Critical Ethnic Studies* 1, no. 1 (Spring 2015): 76-85, accessed March 21, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/jcritethnstud.1.1.0076>; Walter Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2020); Ananya Roy, Michael Dawson, Nathan Connolly, et al., *Race and Capitalism: Global Territories, Transnational Histories* (Los Angeles: UCLA Luskin, 2018), accessed August 10, 2020, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/9pz3j3bd>; Amanda Werner, “Corporations Are (White) People: How Corporate Privilege Reifies Whiteness as Property,” *Harvard Journal on Racial & Ethnic Justice* 31 (2015): 129-148.

several of Indian Territory and Oklahoma's most prodigious oil fields, as well as one of the United States' major oil cities, Tulsa. At the turn of the twentieth century, nearly a third of the Creek Nation's roughly 15,000 recognized citizens were Black. Thousands more "Estelvste" claimed ties of family and kinship to the tribe but were not recognized as citizens by the federal government. Likewise, thousands of African- and mixed-race individuals were among the tens of thousands of tribal citizens from the Cherokee, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole nations. Depending upon the nation, Black tribal citizens had rights to land and thus became wrapped up in the property politics surrounding petroleum. For African Indians, this meant being subjected to Jim Crow state laws that assigned white guardians to administer their oil-based revenues, as well as the extralegal violence that whites exhibited towards wealthy people of color. On the other hand, some Black Indians and African American settlers saw in petro-capitalism dreams of racial uplift. A handful of Black oilmen arose in the early twentieth century, building small oil companies that they positioned as tools of collective Black deliverance from social and economic subordination. Other Black entrepreneurs operated at the margins of the oil economy, from middle-class lawyers who represented both Black and Indigenous landowners to domestic workers who labored in the homes of white oilmen. Black affluence amid Indian Territory and Oklahoma's oil booms was centered in Tulsa, specifically in the segregated downtown neighborhood of Greenwood. Greenwood's destruction at the hands of white mobs in 1921 exhibited in dramatic form the processes of racial-capitalist dispossession that forged Indian Territory and Oklahoma's oil-drenched world.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Chang, *The Color of the Land*; Field, *Growing up with the Country*; Daniel Littlefield, *Seminole Burning: A Story of Racial Vengeance* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 1996); Tiya Miles and Sharon P. Long, eds., *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Jesse T. Schreier, "Indian or Freedman?: Enrollment, Race, and Identity in the Choctaw Nation, 1896-1907," *Western Historical Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Winter, 2011): 458-479, accessed April 21, 2019, DOI: 10.2307/westhistquar.42.4.0459; Rose Strelau, *Sustaining the Cherokee Family: Kinship and*

As an analytical tool, racial capitalism helps draw together several historiographies that are often positioned separately but are, in the case of this project, intimately connected. In recent years, scholars have most often used the concept of racial capitalism in connection with the twentieth-century history of Black Americans, especially to illuminate how financial institutions, real estate policies, urban renewal, and other aspects of capitalist political economy in the United States have perpetuated racist outcomes. Meanwhile, numerous scholars have studied how Native Americans interacted with, participated within, and shaped the practices of late-nineteenth and twentieth-century capitalism in the United States. These latter historians do not typically use the term “racial capitalism.” However, like those who do, their work is closely attuned to how race and capitalist institutions have been co-constructed. In Indian Territory and Oklahoma, there were often unclear boundaries between who was Black and who was Indigenous, even as white settlers obtained statehood and erected a racial binary that, at least in the realm of public accommodations, defined all persons who possessed any degree of African descent as Black and everyone else as white. At the same time, the white-settler state that the federal government established in 1907 was born out of a bonanza of both individual and corporate enterprise. Indeed, oil abundance encouraged the sidestepping of a racial binary specifically within the realm of extractive capitalism, as whites sought the race-based administrative control of both Black- and Native-owned petroleum land. This required the close surveillance and differentiation of Black, Native, mixed-race, and white

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*the Allotment of an Indigenous Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Circe Sturm, *Blood Politics: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Gary Zellar, *African Creeks: Estelvste and the Creek Nation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007).

people, a project that first and foremost required the continued racialization of peoples on non-binary terms.<sup>5</sup>

In this latter sense, my goal is to bring racial capitalism into closer conversation with the concept of settler colonialism, the latter of which Native Americanists have now long embraced. As purveyors of a settler-colonial project, white people in Indian Territory sought to replace Native Americans, largely through cultural assimilation and demographic absorption by means of intermarriage. Indeed, white Oklahomans often touted the Five Tribes as especially “civilized” and thus easily assimilable. However, this assumption rarely extended into the realm of oil extraction and the industrial modernity that Oklahoma’s petroleum abundance was supposed to conjure. The scholar of settler colonialism Patrick Wolfe rightly differentiates between the social goals that white people sought to achieve through the practice of anti-Native and anti-Black racisms, arguing that more often than not whites sought the subordination of Native peoples in order to possess their

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<sup>5</sup> For recent examples, see Mehrsa Baradaran, *The Color of Money: Black Banks and the Racial Wealth Gap* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017), Nathan D.B. Connolly, *A World More Concrete: Real Estate and the Remaking of Jim Crow South Florida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *Race for Profit: How Banks and the Real Estate Industry Undermined Black Homeownership* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2019); For Native Americanists who have written on the history of capitalism, see Joanne Barker, “The Corporation and the Tribe,” *American Indian Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (Summer 2015): 243-270, accessed August 17, 2020, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/583850>; Chang, *The Color of the Land*; Katherine Ellinghaus, “The Moment of Release: The Ideology of Protection and the Twentieth Century Assimilation Policies of Exemption and Competency in New South Wales and Oklahoma,” *Pacific Historical Review* 87, no. 1 (Winter, 2018): 128-49, accessed October 19, 2019, <http://phr.ucpress.edu/content/87/1/128>; Donald L. Fixico, *The Invasion of Indian Country in the Twentieth Century: American Capitalism and Tribal Natural Resources, 2nd edition* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2012) Alexandra Harmon, “American Indians and Land Monopolies in the Gilded Age,” *The Journal of American History* 90, no. 1 (June 2003): 106-133, accessed August 17, 2020, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/3659793>; Harmon, *Rich Indians: Native People and the Problem of Wealth in American History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); H. Craig Miner, *The Corporation and the Indian: Tribal Sovereignty and Industrial Civilization in Indian Territory, 1865-1907* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976).



*land*, while whites subjugated Black people in order to secure a pliant source of enslaved or minimally compensated *labor*. However, in Indian Territory and Oklahoma, Black Indians were landowners when many white people were not, and were thus subjected to settler-colonial campaigns meant to sever Natives from their land, even as they simultaneously suffered under the racial policies of Jim Crow. Furthermore, while few Natives worked in the early twentieth-century oil industry, their nominal whiteness vis-à-vis Black people ensured that they had a better chance of working at a drill site or in a refinery than the latter. Black people's labor was not welcomed within the high-paying realm of oil-field work. I suggest that anti-Black racism and settler colonialism became combined through the project of racial capitalism that made early twentieth-century oil so lily white.<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, the settler-colonial and anti-Black racism that often marked the oil booms and underpinned petroleum's racial-capitalist order emerged through the practices of white supremacy. White supremacy took forms that were violent and non-violent (at least in immediate terms), legal

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<sup>6</sup> Patrick Wolfe, "Land, Labor, and Difference: Elementary Structures of Race," *American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (June, 2001): 866-905 and Wolfe, "After the Frontier: Separation and Absorption in US Indian Policy," *Settler Colonial Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011): 13-51, accessed May 11, 2019, DOI: 10.1080/2201473X.2011.10648800; Chang, *The Color of the Land*; Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). This work also draws on studies of geography and white supremacy as well as the older but still relevant field of whiteness studies. See Alastair Bonnett, "'White Studies': The Problems and Projects of a New Research Agenda," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 13, no. 2 (1996): 145-55, accessed February 4, 2019, DOI: 10.1177/026327696013002010; Anne Bonds and Joshua Inwood, "Beyond White Privilege: Geographies of White Supremacy and Settler Colonialism," *Progress in Human Geography* 40, no. 6 (2016): 715-33; Neil Foley, *The White Scourge: Mexicans, Blacks, and Poor Whites in Texas Cotton Country* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Harris, "Whiteness as Property"; Laura Pulido, "Geographies of Race and Ethnicity I: White Supremacy vs White Privilege in Environmental Racism Research," *Progress in Human Geography* 39, no. 6 (2015): 809-17, accessed March 22, 2020, DOI: 10.1177/0309132514563008; Jamie Winders, "White in All the Wrong Places: White Rural Poverty in the Postbellum U.S. South," *Cultural Geographies* 10 (2003): 45-63, accessed February 4, 2019, DOI: 10.1191/1474474003eu266oa.

and extralegal, dramatic and mundane. For instance, many white people believed that Indigenous peoples could be remade into “useful” citizens, including many of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) agents who mediated the sale and leasing of Native-owned land. They championed the federally managed assimilation of Native and Black-Indigenous people into market relations, into economic practices that Euro-Americans understood as “white.” Dana Kelsey, a BIA agent in Muskogee, Indian Territory whose meager office handled 10,000 oil-and-gas leases in the early days of the booms, wrote to his superiors in 1906 justifying the sale of one Indigenous man’s allotment by explaining that the allottee “has every appearance of being [a white man] except for his dark complexion.” What Kelsey meant was that, despite the man’s skin color, he more or less acted like a white person. The man spoke English “as fluently as though he were a white man” and “has always been in contact with white people.” For Kelsey and other white Indian agents, it was up to federal officials to bestow expanded property rights upon this individual and others like him who had absorbed, as the historian David Chang puts it, the “whitening culture of capitalism.” At the other end of Kelsey’s racial spectrum were “full-blood” Indians and Black Indians who demanded the continued sovereignty of their nations and opposed the authority of white governments in Indian Territory. Kelsey labeled these Indigenous political actors “law breakers” and reminded them that the goal of the allotment of tribal land was to “equally dispose of the land and monied interests of the tribe, share and share alike, and prepare [Indians] for citizenship.” For Kelsey and his white contemporaries, “citizenship” represented a pliant acceptance of the ideology and practice of racial capitalism.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Dana Kelsey letters to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, December 20, 1905 and August 28, 1906, and Dana Kelsey letter to Iste Larney, May 7, 1906, 1905-1906, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Five Civilized Tribes Agency, Records of the Office of the Superintendent, General Correspondence of Dana Kelsey, Box 1, Record Group 75, National Archives and Records Administration—Southwest, Fort Worth; Chang, *The Color of the Land*, 112.

White settlers in both territory and state devised their own means of deploying a white-supremacist property regime, especially within the realm of oil production, that both shared with and differed from the strategies that paternalistic federal officials developed. Indeed, the very transition from territory to state created a new semi-sovereign state government that was led by white settlers who hoped to wield power in ways that achieved their specific racial-capitalist. They erected what the historians Noam Maggor and Stefan Link call a “development state”—a state replete with public institutions that exerted significant discipline upon market actors. What Maggor, Link, and other historians who urge scholars to “bring the state back in” have written less about is how state-led market building and racial power merged. The property relations that sprang up around oil production in Indian Territory and that remained in place following statehood represented such a merger, as white settlers reconfigured the distribution of oil wealth based upon a race-based politics that determined who controlled petroleum property.<sup>8</sup> Founding their state upon the principles of settler-colonialism and Jim Crow anti-Black racism, Oklahoma’s early

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<sup>8</sup> Noam Maggor and Stefan Link, “The United States as a Developing Nation: Revisiting the Peculiarities of American History,” *Past and Present* (December 2019): 1-7, accessed January 8, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtz032>; Maggor, “To Coddle and Caress These Great Capitalists: Eastern Money, Frontier Populism, and the Politics of Market-Making in the American West,” *American Historical Review* 122, no. 1 (February, 2017): 55-84, accessed June 1, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/122.1.55>. See also Black, *The Global Interior*; Brent Cebul, Lily Geismer, and Mason B. Williams, eds., *Shaped by the State: Toward a New Political History of the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019); Danney Goble, *Progressive Oklahoma: The Making of a New Kind of State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980); Laura Phillips Sawyer, *American Fair Trade: Proprietary Capitalism, Corporatism, and the “New Competition,” 1880-1940* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Martin J. Sklar, *The Corporate Reconstruction of American Capitalism, 1890-1916: The Market, the Law, and Politics* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1988); James T. Sparrow, William J. Novak, and Stephen W. Sawyer, eds., *Boundaries of the State in U.S. History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Kyle Williams, “Roosevelt’s Populism: The Kansas Oil War of 1905 and the Making of Corporate Capitalism,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 19, no. 1 (January 2020): 96-121, accessed January 28, 2020, DOI:10.1017/S1537781419000446.

lawmakers created a guardian system that placed the estates of wealthy Indigenous and African-Indigenous landowners under the authority of white custodians, who controlled landowners' oil royalties and could more or less do what they pleased with the revenues collected from their subjects' property. This racialized property system not only allowed whites to funnel non-white petroleum wealth into their own pockets, it also kept many Indians and Black Indians destitute, which fed into settler narratives that claimed Indigenous poverty amid extractive plenty was proof of the inherent inferiority of non-white peoples. At the same time, white property owners petitioned all levels of government in demanding the sovereignty of white landowners, business owners, and municipal voters over the course of oil development. This involved both the owners of oil-producing property, especially the small-scale "independent" oilmen who urged the state government to protect the market share of the "little guy" from corporate monopolies, as well as residential and commercial property owners who worried about the consequences of rampant drilling on and around their land.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> "Independent" oilmen were those who claimed that they were not directly beholden to the Standard Oil Company or its subsidiaries. It was first and foremost a political identity used to situate oneself on the losing end of the monopoly system that supposedly governed oil. Like all political identities, "independents" did not always adhere to a straightforward or pure ideology of anti-monopolism and a considerable discrepancy in terms of wealth and market power separated many "independents" from one another. For the best recent scholarship on the political-economic and cultural fights between "independents" and "majors," see Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2019). The guardian systems that whites deployed to dispossess Native Americans in Oklahoma was first revealed for what it was by the historian Angie Debo in 1940. Her work is still the most detailed and definitive scholarship on the matter. See Debo, *And Still the Waters Run*. For a primary-source account of the guardian system and its detrimental outcomes for Native peoples, see Gertrude Bonnin (Zitkála-Šá), Charles H. Fabens, and Matthew K. Sniffen, *Oklahoma's Poor Rich Indians: An Orgy of Graft and Exploitation of the Five Civilized Tribes—Legalized Robbery* (Philadelphia: Indian Rights Association, 1924), accessed May 23, 2019, <https://heinonline.org/HOL/P?h=hein.amindian/oklpoori0001&i=12>.

White settlers also used extralegal forms of violence to discipline both white and non-white peoples who seemed to threaten white supremacy. These practices acted as the handmaiden to the policies that underwrote the power of white settlers to seize oil for themselves. Vigilante activity flourished in the oil fields of Oklahoma and in cities such as Tulsa, as white residents mobilized against influxes of working-class migrants who were attracted by the oil booms and seemed to challenge both racial and class-based hierarchies. For examples, the explosion of racist violence that occurred in Tulsa in 1921 was bookended by earlier bouts of government-sanctioned violence carried out against labor organizers in the oil fields and the subsequent takeover of the state government by Klansmen. The Klan in 1920s Oklahoma was closely tied to the state's business interests and its mainstream political bodies, which meant it was heavily populated by oilmen. However, other formal and informal modes of white supremacy shaped the petroleum industry in important ways. Oil's workforce, especially in the high-paying realm of exploration and production, was reserved for whites only. This practice of racial solidarity helped mend relations between oil's white workers and its capitalist class, which undermined attempts to unionize the industry's workforce. But these attempts were further limited by crude's material qualities—compared to other fossil fuels, such as coal, the mining of petroleum required fewer workers with fewer skills. It also necessitated a workforce that was constantly traveling to new production areas, and was thus incapable of establishing long-term communities of laboring families. Those who did organize risked bodily harm, as well as the long-term violence that came via industry blacklists and chronic harassment.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> These parts of the dissertation are especially indebted to the work of labor historians of the American West, especially those who incorporate race/ethnicity and environmental history into their work. See Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Touraj Atabaki, Elisabetta Bini, and Kaveh Ehsani, eds., *Working for Oil: Comparative Social Histories of Labor in the Global Oil Industry*

Ensuring that white people—more precisely, that particular groups of white settlers—ultimately controlled the “oil game” rested upon the fraught commitment to the “rule of capture” as petroleum’s presiding property regime. The rule of capture held that crude could only be claimed as property once it was secured by a driller in a tank or a pipeline at the surface. Nothing underground could be claimed as property, thus there was no incentive to conserve oil, especially when landowners demanded that lessees sink wells. This meant that whenever a new oil field was discovered, a mad rush of drilling commenced. Hundreds of individual producers might arrive at a single field, securing leases and erecting derricks in a matter of days, hoping to secure as much crude for themselves before the field was exhausted and grew too expensive to profitably produce. The problems surrounding this race for oil were compounded by the geologies that drillers tapped into and the liquid and flammable nature of the resource they sought to commodify. As drill bits penetrated oil-bearing geologic strata, they let loose natural gas and produced gushing, uncontrollable oil wells that destroyed cropland, poisoned waters, and often created deadly, days-long conflagrations. Beneath the surface, rampant drilling caused crude and gas to migrate underground, adding another layer of unpredictability. More than likely, these practices resulted in the destruction of more than half of the petroleum that originally sat beneath the soils of Kansas,

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(London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Joanna Dyl, “Transience, Labor, and Nature: Itinerant Workers in the American West,” *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 85 (Spring 2014): 97-117, accessed August 19, 2020, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/43302750>; Greg Hall, *Harvest Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World and Agricultural Laborers in the American West, 1905-1930* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2001); “Workers’ Weed: Cannabis, Sugar Beets, and Landscapes of Labor in the American West, 1900–1946,” *Agricultural History* 91, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 320-341, accessed August 19, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3098/ah.2017.091.3.320>; Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880-1930* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Myrna Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil: Environment, Labor, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1938* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

Oklahoma, Texas, and surrounding states that were part of what became known as the Mid-Continent oil region.<sup>11</sup>

The rule of capture stood in stark contrast to the desires of Native leaders, who believed their tribes should maintain collective ownership of oil. It also rankled a handful of white oilmen, so much so that some began to call for “unitized” oil fields drilled in a coordinated manner by a handful of partnering companies. And while historians have rightly identified small-scale “independent” oil companies as the primary defenders of the rule of capture, these operators were not all zealots on the matter. Independents strongly opposed rampant, uncontrolled drilling, as such conditions collapsed prices to such a degree that undercapitalized companies could not survive. On these latter terms, the fight over the rule of capture became central to the anti-monopolistic

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<sup>11</sup> For the history of property law and oil, see Terence Daintith, *Finders Keepers? How the Law of Capture Shaped the World Oil Industry* (Washington D.C.: Resources for the Future Press, 2010). For the environmental history of oil production, see Brian C. Black, *Petrolia: The Landscape of America’s First Oil Boom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Brian Frehner, *Finding Oil: The Nature of Petroleum Geology, 1859-1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2011); Jason P. Theriot, *American Energy, Imperiled Coast: Oil and Gas Development in Louisiana’s Wetlands* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014). There are a handful of historians who have produced fascinating studies on the social and environmental impacts of modern energy systems on Indian societies and lands. These include James Allison, *Sovereignty for Survival: American Energy Development and Indian Self-Determination* (Yale University Press, 2015); Sherry L. Smith and Brian Frehner, eds., *Indians and Energy: Exploitation and Opportunity in the American Southwest* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2010); Needham, *Power Lines*; Traci Brynne Voyles, *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015). I am indebted to these authors, but this dissertation also differs from their perspectives in important ways. For one, these authors primarily focus on reservation lands, not on privately owned homesteads that were allotted to individual Indians. This had important consequences for how leasing and resource extraction occurred, as tribal governments had no real say over how their citizens’ land was alienated or utilized. That fell to individual landowners, white guardians, and oil companies. These authors also tend to primarily focus (though not exclusively) on the post-1960s period when Native claims for sovereignty flourished. In contrast, the oil booms in Indian Territory and Oklahoma occurred in what could well be considered the nadir of Native American power in the American West, as white Americans went to great lengths to strip Indians of all semblances of collective power.

politics of the Mid-Continent. This too was ultimately a fight over white-settler self-rule—over the claims of “local” whites that their interests within racial capitalism demanded certain political sovereignties—as independents embraced certain aspects of the prevailing property regime and hoped to deploy government (specifically state government) against larger competitors, whom smaller proprietary firms and their defenders often labeled as “outsiders” or “foreign.” In this environment, the politics of oil became wrapped up in the idiom of states’ rights.

The lens of racial capitalism—including a focus on the co-production of government and market—that I apply to the following narrative offers new paths for thinking about environmental history. In the last several years, environmental historians have begun to think critically about race and the environment, moving from a focus on the despoilation of the natural world towards an analysis of ecological inequalities drawn from the environmental justice movement, which seeks to address the disproportionate environmental burdens borne by communities of color due to pollution, physical development, and the production of raw materials. These shifts have offered not just new historical themes, but a new way of analyzing the history of the material world by centering the stories of non-white historical actors. These histories often focus on the conditions and experience of environmental injustice and the social movements formed in response, but rarely can they be defined as histories of capitalism or political economy, per se. My hope is that the application of the concept of racial capitalism to a history of oil’s rise as a vital raw material in the United States can more clearly show the interplay between race, markets, and state-building within environmental history. White settlers and federal officials fretted over both the management of racial difference and the administration of petroleum capitalism, and because both projects were rooted in the distribution of landed property, they often overlapped. Oil as a geochemical force threatened the project of white-civilizational modernity not simply because its environmental



unruliness undermined market functions or capital investments, or threatened water, cropland, and flammable structures, but also because its unpredictable occurrence led to the financial aggrandizement of people of color. White supremacy, technical know-how, and the power to govern property towards a narrowly defined public interest were all needed to harness petroleum's potential energies.<sup>12</sup>

Ultimately, oil and race helped write the terms of democracy in a place transitioning from Native nationhood to a white-settler state that adhered to the subordination of Black and Indigenous peoples. In this sense, the creation of both a modern energy system and racial citizenship intertwined. In his book *Carbon Democracy*, the historian Timothy Mitchell argues that twentieth-century European and North American democracy emerged through the social and technological systems that produced, distributed, and consumed fossil fuels as energy. He argues that, whereas bringing coal to market required the work of many skilled laborers and thus provided new opportunities for expansions of working-class egalitarianism, oil ultimately lent itself to a more limiting definition of democracy, one committed to a political economy premised on the

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<sup>12</sup> For works on environmental justice, see Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality*, second edition (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994); Robert Gottlieb, *Forcing the Spring: The Transformation of the American Environmental Movement*, second edition (Washington, D.C.: Island Press, 2005); Andrew Hurley, *Environmental Inequalities: Class, Race, and Industrial Pollution in Gary, Indiana, 1945-1980* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995); Brian McCammack, *Landscapes of Hope: Nature and the Great Migration in Chicago* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); Eileen Maura McGurty, "From NIMBY to Civil Rights: The Origins of the Environmental Justice Movement," *Environmental History* 2, no. 3 (July, 1997): 301-23; Linda Nash, *Inescapable Ecologies: A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006); Julie Sze, *Noxious New York: The Racial Politics of Urban Health and Environmental Justice* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); Sylvia Hood Washington, *Packing Them In: An Archaeology of Environmental Racism, 1865-1954* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2005). For recent works that consider ecology, energy, and capitalism from a robust theoretical perspective, see Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming* (London: Verso, 2016); Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015).

technocratic decision-making of non-elected experts. Oil companies extracted and transported liquid crude through far less labor-intensive means than coal demanded, and crude could be more easily shipped across long distances, its markets transcending unfavorable political boundaries via a global economy that favored capital over workers.<sup>13</sup>

This dissertation draws upon Mitchell's argument but provides a different perspective on oil and its implications for "democratic" citizenship. Mitchell writes about petroleum while rarely directly engaging with the people who drilled for oil, built pipelines, planned company towns, worked in refineries, earned royalties from leases, or were in any other way immediately involved in the extraction of crude. In his telling, oil as a substance contains immense economic and political power, but largely as a consumer good and as a device for measuring economic activity and wealth on a global scale. While fully embracing the assertion that petroleum dependencies have deeply

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<sup>13</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (New York: Verso, 2011), 1-9, 36-45. Another scholar who engages with the collision between oil abundance and the experience of democratic citizenship is Matthew T. Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013). Huber's perspective primarily deals with how policies that emerged during the New Deal and were expanded during and following World War II made oil "cheap" and thus facilitated the widescale mass-consumption of petroleum. The very definitions of American freedom as the realization of a suburban, mass-consumer lifestyle hinged on the engineered preservation of low oil prices. For other scholars whose work deals with energy, technology, and the state, see Megan Black, *The Global Interior: Mineral Frontiers and American Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Bathsheba Demuth, "The Walrus and the Bureaucrat: Energy, Ecology, and Making the State in the Russian and American Arctic, 1870–1950," *American Historical Review* 124, no. 2 (April, 2019): 483-510, accessed April 17, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhz239>; Christopher Jones, *Routes of Power: Energy and Modern America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Martin V. Melosi, *Coping with Abundance: Energy and Environment in Industrial America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985); Andrew Needham, *Power Lines: Phoenix and the Making of the Modern Southwest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); David Nye, *Consuming Power: A Social History of American Energies* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998); Peter Shulman, *Coal and Empire: The Birth of Energy Security in Industrial America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015); Richard White, *The Organic Machine: The Remaking of the Columbia River* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1995).

shaped the formal contours and quotidian experiences of citizenship in the twentieth- and twenty-first-century world, this dissertation applies Mitchell's lens to a specific North American context, focusing on the particular places where oil production first occurred at the onset of transport-energy dependency. This version of carbon democracy was based upon notions of white supremacy that placed oil production at the center of a civilizational campaign whose practitioners insisted that non-white peoples and other anti-settler entities would squander petroleum abundance if left to their own devices.<sup>14</sup>

The racial regime of oil production that predominated in the Mid-Continent in the early twentieth century undergirded an energy transition that remade the United States and the world. Within a few short years of Weber's brief trip, Indian Territory, the later state of Oklahoma, and the larger Mid-Continent petroleum region emerged as the country's most productive and, for many years, the preeminent oil region in the world. Throughout the bulk of this period, Oklahoma was often the United States' leading producer of oil, as numerous individual fields in both the territory and statehood periods proved to be among the globe's most abundant sources of crude. From the sinking of the first commercial well in 1897 to 1940, oil companies drilled a hundred thousand wells in Indian Territory and Oklahoma and pulled from the earth three billion barrels of crude, worth around \$4 billion. This boom in oil production coincided with the rapid rise of the gasoline-powered internal combustion engine in the United States. Between 1900 and 1912, the number of automobiles registered in the United States grew from 8,000 to 902,000. The number

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<sup>14</sup> In his introduction, Mitchell suggests that actors within the oil industry itself are important to his argument, writing, "if oil appears to affect the producer states largely after its transformation into flows of money, that appearance reflects the building of pipelines, the placing of refineries, the negotiation of royalties, and other arrangements that from the start, in their effort to evade the demands of an organized labor force, were concerned with questions of carbon democracy." However, the actual people and organizations who participated in these industry activities are largely absent from his book. See Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy*, 5.

continued to explode after World War I. In 1920, the United States claimed 3.4 million registered vehicles. By the end of the decade, the number exceeded 23 million and Americans owned three out of every four cars on the planet. This rapidly mobilizing society depended upon Oklahoma oil, and the society that brought that oil to market structured its petroleum-based culture and political economy upon the tenets of white supremacy.<sup>15</sup>

The following narrative is laid out in five chapters, plus a conclusion. Chapter 1 situates Indian Territory and early Oklahoma's emerging oil abundance within the context of the allotment of Indigenous land. The dreams of petroleum wealth underwrote demands made by white prospectors that the federal government circumscribe its authority over the leasing of Native-owned allotments. It also transformed oil-rich Indigenous and African-Indigenous individuals into racialized and propertied subjects who drew the close attention of white settlers, state and local authorities, and federal Indian agents. These Native and African-Native individuals maneuvered through the many social and legal obstacles that oil wealth erected, strategically accommodating or defying white claims that they were unfit to control their mineral patrimonies. What's more, a handful of Indigenous people managed to break into the oil industry as independent producers. However, the possibilities of hydrocarbon citizenship remained limited for non-whites, as oil wealth attracted the ire of white settlers and their state representatives who wielded both bureaucracy and racist violence to ensure their hold upon the region's mineral wealth.

Chapter 2 argues that this project of control was not only vexed by Native and Black-Indigenous landowners, but also by the very physical nature of oil and gas. Certain material

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<sup>15</sup> Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 80, 87-95, 109; *The WPA Guide to 1930s Oklahoma* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1941), 27-42, 44-45; Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 210-11.

properties of crude—its subterranean occurrence, its liquid and gaseous form, its flammability—made its commodification under the rule of capture perpetually difficult. Petroleum’s materiality, in conjunction with the insistence that the rule of capture be honored, caused frequent crises that were at once geological and ecological. White oilmen and their defenders used assumptions about racial superiority to insist that only white property owners could properly steward petroleum resources. However, as we will see, white oil operators frequently proved incapable of preventing irruptions of oil and gas from inundating and undermining both physical environments and markets. In 1915, oilmen in Oklahoma and their allies in state government responded to overproduction and collapsing prices by vesting the state corporation commission with broad powers meant to not only prevent “physical” overproduction, but also “economic waste” that disproportionately burdened small-scale oil producers. In other words, many oilmen called on the state to take a semblance of direct control over supplies and prices, which was, up to that time, the most far-reaching authority over petroleum markets bestowed upon a government within the United States. The commitment to government intervention at the state level, even among independents who were supposedly anti-statists, stood out as the primary strategy through which “local” oilmen sought to achieve settler self-rule over oil vis-à-vis large integrated firms and the federal government.

If the owners of oil companies and their representatives in settler government primarily understood petroleum through the language of property, monopoly, and market share, it was oil’s working class that experienced crude as a dangerous and unpredictable substance that inundated land and water, poisoned bodies, and quite literally remade the ground beneath people’s feet. Chapter 3 deals with the experiences of oil workers in the Mid-Continent. The region’s oilmen were fortunate that petroleum-rich strata coexisted alongside one of the early twentieth-century

United States' poorest agricultural populations. Tenant families flocked to oil booms in search of relatively high-paying work, moving back and forth between the farm and the "oil patch." Unlike their fellow resource extractors in the American West, oil workers remained relatively non-union up to World War II. Worker mobilization was not non-existent. Unions operated in all of the United States' oil fields and at times, especially in the first years of the New Deal, membership flourished. These workers organized against the toxic conditions they constantly encountered on the job and struggled to maintain their relatively high wages. However, non-union solidarities also helped tie these workers together. Oil's workforce was almost exclusively white and American-born and both oilmen and their laborers protected white labor's racial privilege. Unionization was further undermined by the anti-labor, anti-radical practices of white-supremacist groups such as the Klan. Whiteness both circumscribed who could labor in the oil industry and defined the limits of working-class organizing.

Chapters 4 and 5 relay the oil-based histories of two settler cities that became synonymous with the petroleum industry—Tulsa and Oklahoma City. Beginning in the first decade of the twentieth century, Tulsa grew into a major center of oil finance and refining and became home to hundreds of petroleum-related firms and thousands of oilmen and petroleum workers. Tulsa and the oil fields surrounding it were located in the Creek Nation and the city's wealth was built on petroleum-rich land owned by Creek citizens. The fraught collaboration between white oilmen and Creek allottees was essential to Tulsa's rise. Furthermore, the booming town drew a large population of Black residents, including African-Indigenous peoples who had lived in the area for generations and African American settlers who had moved westward to Indian Territory and Oklahoma. I argue that the vagaries of the oil economy, the non-white affluence that oil helped underwrite, and the desire of whites to reassert control over the city's industrial real estate all

culminated in the 1921 race massacre. In the aftermath of the massacre, white Tulsans worked hard to market the city to the international petroleum community and enshrine Tulsa as the “Oil Capital of the World,” a project that tapped into the city’s rise as a regional center of the Second Ku Klux Klan. Oilmen spearheaded both of these missions, making Tulsa petroleum synonymous with white supremacy.

Oklahoma City differed from Tulsa in important ways. First, its initial growth was not related to petroleum. Rather, the city grew as a freight, cattle, and agricultural town, as well as the political capital of the young state of Oklahoma. When oil did become integral to Oklahoma City in the 1930s, it was in the form of a massively productive (and threateningly destructive) oil field that stretched across parts of the capital. The Oklahoma City oil field became a focal point of New Deal-era efforts to reign in the disastrously over-productive national petroleum industry. However, the solutions to overproduction that came out of the 1930s were decidedly subnational in character, an outcome achieved by states’ rights advocates including Oklahoma’s governor, William H. Murray, who did much to achieve a system of interstate production agreements that maintained state power over the production of oil. Murray, alongside the white residents of Oklahoma City who demanded a direct say over how production advanced in their city, embodied the commitments to white settler self-rule that had undergirded the “oil game” in Indian Territory and Oklahoma from its beginning.

The conclusion suggests that as the American petroleum industry grew increasingly corporate and globalized during and after World War II, the industry preserved its allegiance to whiteness and to the mythical images of the independent wildcatters. White settlers and their descendants found new ways to commemorate petroleum’s contributions to democracy, even as the headiest days of exploration and oil booms were mostly over. Even so, dissenting voices that

acknowledged Indian Territory and Oklahoma's dispossessive extraction regime came to the fore as early as 1940, and it is those voices that Americans must heed today.



## Chapter 1

### Carbon Allotment: Land, Race, and Oil in Indian Territory and Oklahoma

The petroleum industry's birth in Indian Territory and its rise to the forefront of the twentieth-century United States' economy, ecosystem, and identity were rooted in the political and cultural battles over the proper course of white settlement on Native American land. By 1897, when the first commercially productive oil well was sunk in Indian Territory, there was little doubt that white settlers would be a permanent fixture in the territory. Indeed, the prospects of oil extraction attracted a growing number of oilmen to the Southwest, and these white businessmen and their settler neighbors quickly grew to outnumber the Indigenous population in Indian Territory during the 1880s and 1890s. What remained unanswered was just what system of landed property would be established in Indian Territory. Race and oil were both central to this question. White settlers often used race to identify certain types of land and resource use, and the industrial production and largescale commercial markets that petroleum demanded were most certainly viewed by settlers as white enterprises. What unfolded was a regime of property laws that ostensibly protected Native American and mixed-race landowners from dispossession, but provided avenues through which white settlers could take control of oil and the revenues it produced. Even as individual Indigenous property owners claimed legal rights over their land and oil royalties, white oilmen and their allies devised new ways to control this oil wealth, which was the first step in creating a settler-ruled, oil-centered commercial society in Indian Territory and Oklahoma.

The process of divvying up property rights based upon race was part of a long history of settler colonialism across the United States that became especially vexed in Indian Territory at the turn of the twentieth century. It was at this point that Euro-American reformers made the final

successful push for the allotment of collectively held tribal land into privately owned homesteads. White lawmakers and officials hoped to transform American Indians into property owners, believing that landownership would strip Natives of collectivist cultures that white Americans viewed as backward and uncivilized. As part of this allotment process, the federal government restricted the right of Indian landowners to alienate their allotments and mediated the leasing of Native-owned land to oil producers. Such rules seemingly protected newly minted Indigenous landowners from losing their property. However, allotment also provided a path through which white settlers could make money from resources located on and beneath Native-owned land. The practices that allowed white people to remove oil wealth from Native pockets were the product of a racialized mineral regime, not simply the doings of a handful of unethical and racist individuals. White people wielded institutions such as marriage and legal guardianships to grab hold of the petroleum wealth that citizens of Native nations controlled. Furthermore, white settlers latched onto the national politics of allotment and anti-monopolism to demand that Indian-owned land be opened to “wildcat” oil prospectors. These strategies for obtaining rights to Indigenous-owned petroleum were underwritten by a culture of abundance espoused by white Americans, who insisted that non-whites could not be entrusted with land that held such a surfeit of progress-inducing crude.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Patrick Wolfe, “Land, Labor, and Difference: Elementary Structures of Race,” *American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (June, 2001): 866-905; Wolfe, “After the Frontier: Separation and Absorption in US Indian Policy,” *Settler Colonial Studies* 1, no. 1 (2011): 13-51. Accessed May 11, 2019. DOI: 10.1080/2201473X.2011.10648800; Angie Debo, *And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940); Tanis C. Thorne, *The World’s Richest Indian: The Scandal over Jackson Barnett’s Oil Fortune* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003); Katrina Jagodinsky, “Into the Void, or the Musings and Confessions of a Redheaded Stepchild Lost in Western Legal History and Found in the Legal Borderlands of the North American West,” and Brian Frehner, “Jurisdictional No Man’s Land: Choctaws, Lawyers, and the Coal Question in Indian Territory,” in Katrina Jagodinsky and Pablo

Oil abundance vexed the racial-capitalist project that unfolded by way of allotment in several ways. The historian David Chang rightly casts allotment and the privatization of Indian lands as a federal-government backed scheme to educate Natives in the traditions of individualism and liberalism, to force Natives to learn the “whitening culture of capitalism.” The specter of oil abundance threw a wrench in these plans by offering a handful of “full-blood” and African-Native individuals unimaginable riches through the tapping of dormant petroleum resources, a development that undermined white reformers’ goals of transforming Native people into yeoman farmers and wage workers. For lawmakers, federal agents, and state-and-county officials, this threat to the reformative ethos of allotment helped justify white control of Natives’ oil patrimony. Furthermore, the failure of early oilmen to deploy drilling techniques capable of producing oil without leading to wanton waste threatened to squander a system of production that made allotment economically viable for both Indians and settlers. In fact, the very “rule of capture” property regime that small-scale “independent” oilmen demanded was a central cause of wasted oil. White-settler oilmen opposed collectivism (synonymous with Indian nations at the time) by insisting that crude and natural gas could only be claimed as property once captured by producers at the surface. This encouraged drilling free-for-alls that squandered huge amounts of oil. As we will see in later chapters, oilmen eventually turned to the state and demanded that it govern petroleum markets as a preventative measure against such waste. But not before overproduction threatened to end the continued allotment of Native land altogether.<sup>17</sup>

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Mitchell, eds., *Beyond the Borders of the Law: Critical Legal Histories of the North American West*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2018), 8, 22-23, 203-05, 212.

<sup>17</sup> David A. Chang, *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1929* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010), 110-12, 119-20, 143-48, 176, 193-94; Kendra Taira Field, *Growing Up with the Country: Race, and Nation after the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018), 24-25, 74-80, 130-36. See also, Donald L. Fixico, *The Invasion of Indian Country in the Twentieth Century: American*

The problems of property and oil amid allotment offers a new take on Timothy Mitchell's assertion that, throughout the twentieth century world, oil was responsible for the "engineering [of] political relations out of flows of energy." In Indian Territory and Oklahoma, a myriad of county, state, and federal officials, oil operators, and Indigenous and Black-Indigenous landowners vied for power via contests over the rightful control of oil property. Some Indian leaders, their authority diminished by allotment (which dismantled tribal governments), clung to the belief that oil and other minerals should continue to be owned collectively, while others embraced private ownership of oil but demanded protections against monopoly and graft. Federal officials and guardians of Native estates championed a moderated privatization of Indian resources, hoping to mediate the relations between Native individuals and oilmen. Meanwhile, individual tribal citizens claimed both competency and incompetency, depending on the circumstance, when trying to influence the management of their petroleum estates. They showed a keen understanding of the value of oil and fought to obtain its economic windfalls, even as their white counterparts claimed that only Euro-Americans could grasp petroleum's industrial promise. Finally, the small-scale "independent" oilmen who called for liberal leasing and drilling rights on Native-owned land invoked the anti-monopolist rhetoric of the day, hoping they could grab hold of the Mid-

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*Capitalism and Tribal Natural Resources*, Second edition, (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2012); Gerald Forbes, "Oklahoma Oil and Indian Land Tenure." *Agricultural History* 15, no. 4 (Oct., 1941): 189-194, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3739783>; Paul Frymer, *Building an American Empire: The Era of Territorial and Political Expansion* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017); Alexandra Harmon, *Rich Indians: Native People and the Problem of Wealth in American History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Tiya Miles, *Ties that Bind: The Story of an Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); H. Craig Miner, *The Corporation and the Indian: Tribal Sovereignty and Industrial Civilization in Indian Territory, 1865-1907* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976); Rose Stremmlau, *Sustaining the Cherokee Family: Kinship and the Allotment of an Indigenous Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011).

Continent's burgeoning oil market before "trusts" such as Standard Oil arrived. Thus, contests over cultural, legal, and economic belonging in Indian Territory and early Oklahoma became wrapped up in both the business and the spectacle of petroleum extraction, as a peculiar arrangement surrounding race and property came to govern the flow of oil from geologic strata to commercial market.<sup>18</sup>

*Native Sovereignty, the Politics of Monopoly, and the Discovery of Oil in Indian Territory*

Between the late-nineteenth and early twentieth century, crude oil's place in Indian Territory transitioned from the low-impact, Native-owned use of petroleum as a health product, to the Anglo-American-led establishment of high-intensity drilling ventures aimed at securing one of nature's densest forms of energy. The earliest petroleum-centric enterprises in Indian Territory were tribal-owned health resorts that marketed oil springs as rehabilitative. In 1853 a federal Indian agent stationed in the Choctaw Nation reported that "[t]he oil springs in this region are attracting considerable attention, as they are said to be a remedy for all chronic diseases. Rheumatism stands no chance at all, and the worst cases of dropsy yield to its effects. The fact is that it cures anything that has been tried." The popularity of these oil springs persisted for several decades. Gardner

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<sup>18</sup> Timothy Mitchell, *Carbon Democracy: Political Power in the Age of Oil* (London: Verso, 2011), 5; Megan Black, *The Global Interior: Mineral Frontiers and American Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 5-6, 31, 118-21; Bathsheba Demuth, "The Walrus and the Bureaucrat: Energy, Ecology, and Making the State in the Russian and American Arctic, 1870-1950," *American Historical Review* 124, no. 2 (April, 2019): 487, 490-92, accessed April 17, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/rhz239>; for more on energy, race, and the environment, see James Robert Allison, *Sovereignty for Survival: American Energy Development and Indian Self-Determination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2015); Andrew Needham, *Power Lines: Phoenix and the Making of the Modern Southwest* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014); Sherry L. Smith and Brian Frehner, *Indians & Energy: Exploitation and Opportunity in the American Southwest* (Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, 2010); Traci Brynne Voyles, *Wastelanding: Legacies of Uranium Mining in Navajo Country* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

Tubby, an African-Choctaw man, worked at a tribally owned health resort, where he labored among water springs black with oil and collected petroleum-laden sands that guests used as a salve to treat “boils, cuts, bruises and other afflictions of the human body.” The business thrived for ten or fifteen years, and Tubby recalled that “[t]he sick and afflicted would come from far and near, camp and drink and bathe in the water from these springs.” Native people across North America had long utilized oil seeps and other naturally occurring petroleum springs. Skimmed from water sources by human hands and applied to the body, this method of use in many ways flew in the face of the violent, industrial, often-explosive exploitation of petroleum that the hydrocarbon-energy regime constructed. However, as the twentieth century drew near, surface indicators such as oil seeps increasingly drew the attention of those who valued crude for its combustibility.<sup>19</sup>

The first discoveries of extractable deposits of oil in Indian Territory vexed Native governments, federal officials, and oil prospectors, as the rights of non-Native capitalists and industrial enterprises in Indian Territory remained ill-defined. In 1859, Lewis Ross, the brother of Cherokee chief John Ross, accidentally discovered a small oil pool near Grand Saline in the Cherokee Nation while mining for salt. Ross’ find occurred the same year that drillers in western Pennsylvania sank the first profitable oil wells in the United States. In the years following the Cherokee man’s discovery, a handful of white oil drillers traveled to Indian Territory to sink exploratory “wildcat” wells. These oilmen met formidable obstacles in their efforts to create a viable petroleum industry. For one, Indian Territory remained geographically isolated from

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<sup>19</sup> C.B. Glasscock, *Then Came Oil: The Story of the Last Frontier* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1938), 112; Indian-Pioneer Papers, Western History Collections (WHC forthcoming), University of Oklahoma, Gardner Tubby interview, <https://digital.libraries.ou.edu/cdm/ref/collection/indianpp/id/4265>, accessed October 6, 2019; Brian C. Black, *Petrolia: The Landscape of America’s First Oil Boom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 22.

petroleum markets as well as the industrial materiel and concentrated capital that drilling required. Furthermore, in the late-nineteenth century, it remained unclear to oil prospectors and Indian nations alike how federal policy would govern mineral extraction, specifically the production of oil. The Five Tribes of Indian Territory—the Cherokee, Creek, Choctaw, Chickasaw, and Seminole nations—barred white people from citizenship and restricted landownership to intermarried whites, but retained few clear rights when it came to negotiating leases with outside companies.<sup>20</sup>

By the end of the nineteenth century, the conflicts that arose around oil leasing conjoined with the politics of allotment, which combined race-based defenses of private property and the politics of anti-monopoly to advocate for the dissolution of communal tribal land bases. In the eyes of allotment's supporters, Native nations could not be incorporated into the United States because of their status as collectivities that were not committed to private property. In short, as the anthropologist and historian Patrick Wolfe writes, "Indians were the first communist menace." Senator Henry Dawes of Massachusetts chaired the Dawes Commission, which was established in 1893 to lead negotiations with the Five Tribes and achieve the transformation of their communally held lands into individually owned homesteads. Dawes and other white "Indian theorists" of the time demanded allotment based upon a moral and ethical defense of individually held private property. Dawes described Native people's communal land regimes as "Henry George's system," understanding common property not as a longstanding tenet of Indigenous culture and nationhood,

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<sup>20</sup> Kenny A Franks, *The Rush Begins* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Heritage Association, 1984), 5; Glasscock, *Then Came Oil*, 113-15; Carl Coke Rister, *Oil! Titan of the Southwest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1949), 12-24; For the environmental history of the early Pennsylvania oil fields, see Black, *Petrolia* and Christopher F. Jones, *Routes of Power: Energy and Modern America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014). Jones in particular focuses on the importance of transport in the construction of a fossil-fuel energy system.

but in Euro-American terms that equated communalism with single taxers, Marxists, and other radical leftists. He further lamented that, with such a property regime, “there is no enterprise to make your home any better than that of your neighbors. There is no selfishness, which is at the bottom of civilization.” The Dawes Commission and its supporters also viewed allotment as a means to fight monopoly. Allotment would, in theory, redistribute land controlled by a privileged minority of “mixed bloods,” or those Natives considered “whiter” than others—usually by a combination of white racial lineage and commitment to market relations, alongside other tenets of Euro-American culture—to the majority “full bloods,” those individuals considered furthest from racial and cultural whiteness. In order to combat Native land monopolies and corrupt dealings by prospective white land purchasers, the commission placed restrictions on the sale of individual Indians’ allotments based on blood quantum, which was established through often unreliable surveys. The more Native “blood” an individual was deemed to have, the longer that Indigenous person was required to hold onto their land and, in the process, absorb the nuances of white yeoman culture and the rules of private property.<sup>21</sup>

Indian Territory’s Indigenous nations proved especially opposed to allotment. The Five Tribes had been exemplars of self-directed adaptation to white civilization, adopting Anglo-American-style constitutions and governmental institutions prior to their forced march westward from the southeastern United States to Indian Territory. However, by the late-nineteenth century,

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<sup>21</sup>Wolfe, “After the Frontier,” 25-26; Henry George was an American political economist who advocated for the creation of a single tax on land as a means to alleviating growing poverty and inequality during the late-nineteenth century. George argued that economic value derived from land should be collectively held. His book, *Progress and Poverty* (1879), sold millions of copies worldwide. Alexandra Harmon, “American Indians and Land Monopolies in the Gilded Age,” *The Journal of American History* 90, no. 1 (June 2003): 106-133, accessed August 17, 2020, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/3659793>; Debo, *And Still the Waters Run*, 21-22; Peter Linebaugh, *The Magna Carta Manifesto: Liberties and Commons for All* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 247; Chang, *The Color of the Land*, 79-80, 110-11, 119-20.



these nations represented allotment's strongest detractors. White officials grew convinced that the tribal nations in Indian Territory would never voluntarily give up their communal land base and would have to be forced to transform. When Congress passed the 1898 Curtis Bill, which created the final framework for the Five Tribes' allotment, a Cherokee man voiced misgivings that other Indigenous peoples shared, sardonically writing, "there will be oil leases, asphalt leases, gold leases, stone leases, marble leases, granite leases, air leases, and possibly the very blessed light of the sun (should it prove capitalizable) may be captured and monopolized by some shrewd speculator under one of Charlie Curtis' wonderful lease-traps." While Native opposition was often fierce, the leadership among the Five Tribes begrudgingly accepted allotment, understanding that recalcitrance would end with the forced breakup of their collective land bases at the hands of the United States, an outcome that would leave Indians with no control over the allotment process.<sup>22</sup>

Amid ongoing prospecting and leasing, Indigenous nations sought to maintain a semblance of sovereignty by controlling the growing power of white oil producers and federal officials who worked to mediate oil production in Indian Territory on their own terms. At the turn of the twentieth century, federal officials granted large leases in the Cherokee and Creek nations without consulting tribal governments, arousing active opposition from Native leaders. Leaders within the Five Tribes understood the politics of allotment in many of the same terms that Dawes and his contemporaries articulated, and specifically feared how oil abundance might fatally undermine the already difficult and controversial changes that were afoot. In 1901, following the Department of the Interior's decision to lease over eleven-thousand acres of Cherokee land to the Cherokee Oil and Gas Company, principle chief Thomas Buffington protested that the white-owned company

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<sup>22</sup> Stremlau, *Sustaining the Cherokee Family*, 72-73; D.W.C. Duncan, *Vinita Chieftain*, August 25, 1898, cited in Miner, *The Corporation and the Indian*, 151-53.

believed it held a “vested right” to its leases on Cherokee land, regardless of the tribal government’s misgivings. He called on the Secretary of the Interior to ensure that such claims would be solved in court, with the oil producer as plaintiff, not defendant, as outsiders should be the party burdened with proving right to Cherokee land. Buffington castigated “the paid lobbyists of great corporations” and he connected the plight of the Cherokees not to other Indigenous peoples, but to the citizens of Texas, whose legislators were embroiled in an ongoing fight over the taxation of oil produced in the newly discovered Spindletop field near Beaumont. Buffington argued that “those representing the soulless corporations are before the legislature trying to convince its members that Texas ought to be satisfied with a song and clog dance and a minimum oil tax.” Liberal leasing rights in the Cherokee Nation threatened to expose Indians to similar elements of corporate domination. Ultimately, in Buffington’s eyes, oil abundance threatened the rights that accompanied United States citizenship, which the Five Tribes were promised as part of allotment:

The granting of leases of any kind at this time would only complicate matters more and prolong our dying days. I believe the citizens of this nation want to hold their lands, when it is individualized, under the same system and tenure as the United States make it to her citizens, owners of everything beneath, as well as above the surface. During the ten years this lease has run which the Cherokee Oil and Gas Company now seek to get possession of, the paltry sum of twenty-five dollars has been received by the nation as royalty. Such returns to our common treasury do not justify the retarding for a score of years, the progress and advancement of thirty-six thousand land holders, besides the great hardship, the leasing of this land now would cause, double that number of industrious United States citizens already in our midst.

Oil production on the federal government's terms threatened both the sovereignty of still-functioning Native governments and the rights of Native citizens as landholders, at a moment when the meaning of both remained in flux.<sup>23</sup>

Other Native leaders begrudgingly supported the allotment of land but called for the collectivization of mineral property. Principle chief Pleasant Porter of the Creek Nation regretted the discovery of oil made by white and "mixed-blood" drillers in the summer of 1901, on Creek lands located near a tiny cattle town called Tulsa. Porter feared that oil discoveries would complicate the allotment process, making land that was previously worthless from an agricultural standpoint suddenly valuable and in high demand. He believed that allottees should seek out a home and livelihood on tracts that had a "normal use as agricultural lands," but oil land should be declared surplus and proceeds from it distributed for the benefit of "every citizen of the [Creek] Nation." However, this latter hope would not be realized among the Five Tribes. Individual Indian landowners, through the mediation of local, state, and federal officials, would sign leases and earn royalties from oil produced on their allotment. These conditions not only met the Dawes Commission's conception of allotment as a mediated introduction of Indians to white people's market economy, but also fit the notion that Indians' communal holdings were in fact operated as monopolies by nefarious outsiders and that the preservation of any such property relations would devolve into the same.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> "Protest of T.M. Buffington to Secretary of Interior," *Cherokee Advocate*, September 14, 1901, in *Litton Papers, Vol. III, Cherokee: 1889-1901* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1945), accessed February 5, 2019, <https://www.okhistory.org/research/digital/litton/litton.v3.pdf>, 392-96, 398-400, 415-16. See Harmon, "American Indians and Land Monopolies in the Gilded Age," on the similarities in anti-monopolist politics between members of the Five Tribes and white Americans.

<sup>24</sup> Pleasant Porter speech, unnamed, undated newspaper article, "Regrets the Finding of Oil," in L.C. Heydrick Collection, WHC, packet 1, folder 8.

Meanwhile, white settlers found their own means to obtain closer control over Native oil resources even before allotment had been undertaken. William Johnstone, a Canadian immigrant to Indian Territory, founded the town of Bartlesville and married a Cherokee woman in 1882. He subsequently became a tribal citizen, which according to one turn-of-the-century oil promoter, allowed him and his family to own “practically all of the oil land in the vicinity of Bartlesville.” One of Johnstone’s wells became the first commercial oil well in Indian Territory when it was sunk in 1897. Johnstone served a term on the Cherokee legislature and was essential in negotiating tribal oil leases in the pre-allotment period. As the promoter aptly described him, Johnstone’s “past and present form the connecting link between two civilizations.” Johnstone’s position within the Cherokee Nation revealed one fact about all of Indian Territory’s tribes: they were thoroughly mixed-race nations that incorporated a diversity of peoples into their citizenries. However, Euro-Americans would treat Cherokees and other Indians who lacked Johnstone’s white “blood” much differently, questioning whether or not acquisitive Indigenous and African-Indigenous people were really Native peoples at all. For settlers, race was the primary factor in determining who was appropriately wealthy and who was not, which explains how white men such as Johnstone could control vast acreage of tribal oil land without question, while Indians who were similarly rich but did not meet Johnstone’s claims to whiteness were considered illegitimate monopolists.<sup>25</sup>

The politics of monopoly surrounding allotment also painted white demands for more liberalized leasing and extraction rules and growing calls for the establishment of a state, which would be organized on the terms of white property owners, especially direct producers such as

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<sup>25</sup> George E. Wheaton, *Kansas-Indian Territory Oil and Gas Fields* (Chanute, KS: S.N Francis, 1904), in Beinecke Library, Yale University, Zc39 +904wh; Bartlesville eventually became the headquarters of the Phillips Petroleum Company, known in the United States for its Phillips 66 brand. Harmon, “American Indians and Land Monopolies in the Gilded Age,” 128.

independent oilmen. Seymour Riddle, a white attorney representing the United Commercial Clubs of the Indian Territory, testifying before a senate committee in 1906, derided federal rules that barred lessees from selling their leases for profit and required oilmen to prove that they held \$5,000 in cash before development of a lease. “No individual or corporation without a vast amount of money can comply with these rules and the result is that only the very wealthy individuals and corporations of unlimited means have been able to secure the approval of very many oil and gas leases.” Riddle’s allusion to “corporations of unlimited means” was a veiled reference to Standard Oil, which wildcatters assumed was ever poised to dominate new petroleum regions such as the one emerging in Indian Territory. Furthermore, Riddle insisted that these restrictions reduced the value of tribal land and thus ultimately harmed Native Americans. Riddle and other oil-and-gas developers hinged their arguments against federal rules on what often appeared esoteric, such as the requirement that drillers secure a bond that would insure their lease in case of a failed operation. However, such questions struck at the core of both allotment and oil development: how should property be administered, and to whose ultimate interest? For Riddle and many other white oilmen—especially small-scale, independent drillers—restrictions on the alienation of Indian property was “wrong on principle” and violated “business rule,” and thus must be eradicated, lest Standard and other monopolists—who perverted the tenets of Jeffersonian producerism—be allowed to dominate markets in land and oil.<sup>26</sup>

Before the same senate hearing, “Colonel” J.W. Zevely, a white man who represented the Muskogee Commercial Club, lambasted not only federal restrictions, but also the risk that Indians

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<sup>26</sup> U.S. Congress, Senate, Select Committee. *Report of the Select Committee to Investigate Matters Connected with the Affairs in the Indian Territory with Hearings, November 11, 1906-January 9, 1907*. 59<sup>th</sup> Cong., 2<sup>nd</sup> sess., 1906-07 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1907), 164-67.

represented to the proper commercial use of oil and gas. Zevely objected to federal rules that required oil producers to pay allottees (in this case Creeks and Cherokees) fifty dollars annually for unutilized gas wells. He argued that such wells might one day be productive once more pipelines entered the region, and developers should not be penalized for discovering resources that did not have a present market. Race played into Zevely's concerns. If a white oil producer abandoned a gas well, then control of the well reverted to the Indigenous allottee, "and he may not exercise the care that the lessee must preserve not to waste it." Zevely was further angered by the fact that he could not obtain signatures on any documentation pursuant to the establishment of a lease without first paying an exorbitant bonus to the individual Indian in question. Zevely lamented the annoyance and out-of-pocket expenses this brought about, and complained that "[a]n Indian may not know the value of his land, but just try to get a lease from him on some of his land, and you will see that he has a pretty good idea of what its value is—generally an inflated idea, though." Ultimately, what angered Zevely most was that, in his view, the Department of the Interior unilaterally established the rules that governed how oilmen interacted with Indians and obtained access to their land. Zevely asserted "that it is not proper for the Secretary of the Interior to say that, if I want to have a well drilled, I shall pay for it thus and so, or I shall not pay for it thus and so," that such close oversight of private enterprise was beyond the authority of the state, and that the Secretary of the Interior exercised his power to restrict drilling on Indian land as arbitrarily as "any potentate the world has ever seen." Zevely ended his statement by asserting that Congress "can't pass laws that will protect a man against himself," regardless of race.<sup>27</sup>

What Zevely and many of his contemporaries in Indian Territory desired was their own state, which would offer white-settler businessmen a mechanism through which they could set the

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 599-600, 606. 607-08, 618-19.

rules of the oil game. White men realized that dream in 1907, when Indian Territory and Oklahoma Territory were fused to form the State of Oklahoma, just as the largest oil booms yet seen in the region—booms that disproportionately occurred on Native allotments—commenced.

### *Race and Oil Leases in the Cushing Boom*

The allotment of tribal land and the discovery of new oil fields continued throughout the first decade of the twentieth century. In 1905, drillers again struck oil near Tulsa, opening the Glenn Pool field, the first large oil find in the territory. The Texas Company (Texaco), Gulf Oil, and others built pipelines connecting the oil-producing area to refineries in Texas, Kansas, and Chicago. Tulsa quickly grew into a regional hub for the oil industry, becoming home to bankers, refineries, and oil-field service companies. The Glenn Pool field's success meant the dreams and efforts of capitalists centered in New York City, drillers from Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia, and farm families from across the beleaguered cotton and wheat fields of the South and West became permanently affixed upon the region's oil prospects. Wildcatters continued to open modestly producing fields until 1912, when another massive oil find was made fifty-miles west of Tulsa, near the town of Cushing in Creek and Payne counties. Many "full-blood" and freedmen tribal citizens became embroiled in the economic, political, and ecological stakes of oil production in the Cushing oil field. These oil-rich Native landowners vied with oilmen (mostly white, but as we will see, not all) who worked with legal guardians to shirk royalty responsibilities, and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) officials who championed the rights of lessees as often as they defended allottees. Native women and children who owned oil-rich land were especially scrutinized, as

white federal officials used the concept of “incompetency” to assess the ability of Indigenous landowners to manage their property. Finally, the pell-mell act of pulling crude from the earth resulted in the waste of large amounts of oil and the flooding of markets with cheap petroleum, which heightened the anti-monopolistic anger of white independent oilmen and threatened the entire regime of allotment-based oil production in the Creek Nation.<sup>28</sup>

Following the completion of the first successful well in 1912, Cushing quickly grew into one of the world’s most prodigious oil fields. Not only did the field produce large amounts of oil and natural gas, the crude that drilling companies extracted from the Creek Nation was of especially high grade, perfect for refinement into gasoline, the demand for which had exploded with rises in automobile use and continued to expand as World War I began in Europe. Production in the field peaked in April of 1915 at over 300,000 barrels a day, which at the time represented more than two-thirds of the high-grade crude oil produced in the Western Hemisphere. Oil companies extracted more than forty-nine million barrels (2.6 billion gallons) in 1915, with drilling centered on an area only ten miles long and three miles wide. Thirty refineries operated in the town of Cushing throughout the boom period and the field was home to the largest complex of petroleum-storage tanks in the world, which covered 160 acres and contained four hundred 55,000-barrel tanks that could hold up to sixty million barrels. Native landowners were prominent in the

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<sup>28</sup> On the Glenn Pool field, see W.L. Connelly, *The Oil Business as I Saw It: Half a Century at Sinclair* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1954); Franks, *The Rush Begins*, 68-83, 133-35; Arthur Menzies Johnson, *Petroleum Pipelines and Public Policy, 1906-1959* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 36-42; Rister, *Oil!*; Katherine Ellinghaus, “The Moment of Release: The Ideology of Protection and the Twentieth Century Assimilation Policies of Exemption and Competency in New South Wales and Oklahoma,” *Pacific Historical Review* 87, no. 1 (Winter, 2018): 128-49, accessed October 19, 2019, <http://phr.ucpress.edu/content/87/1/128>.



field, as upwards of forty percent of the oil leases in Cushing faced federal restrictions based on the blood quantum of the lessor.<sup>29</sup>

The process of leasing Native-owned lands for the purpose of oil production took place at the intersection of race, law, and extraction. Mineral leases both articulated and helped set in motion a set of commercial relationships based upon the racial identities of landowners, the obligations vested in oil companies, and the state, broadly construed here as represented by federal Indian agents, state and federal courts, and white guardians empowered by the State of Oklahoma. On Native-owned property, an oil lease represented not only the legal rules and financial agreements that tied together lessee and lessor; it also often required federal approval, a peculiar form of settler oversight that mediated white-Indian relations. An oil lease also outlined the right of the acquiring oil producer to use land, water, and other “useful” parts of nature found on the lessor’s property. On leases overseen by the Department of the Interior, drillers could be relieved of all obligations to a lessor by paying all outstanding royalties plus one dollar to the federal officer overseeing the lease. Furthermore, the Secretary of the Interior could declare the lease null-and-void without consulting the Native landowner. This matrix of regulations and relations governing oil production often ended in material dispossession for Native lessors. However, it also provided opportunities for Indigenous individuals to claim rights as citizens and to exercise a semblance of control over their oil estate.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> George O. Carney, *Cushing Oil Field: Historic Preservation Survey* (Stillwater: Department of Geography, Oklahoma State University, 1981), 7, 26; Debo, *And Still the Waters Run*, 286; Ray Miles, *“King of the Wildcatters”: The Life and Times of Tom Slick, 1883-1930* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996), 31. The significant concentration of pipelines and storage tanks in Cushing, which originated with the initial oil boom, continues today. Because of its status as an oil-transport hub, Cushing acts as the price point for North American oil futures contracts traded on the New York Mercantile Exchange.

<sup>30</sup> An example of a federal-mediated oil lease between a Native allottee and an oil producer, including correspondence, can be seen online courtesy of the Oklahoma Historical Society,

Indigenous land-and-royalty owners demanded rights as citizens through litigation in county, state, and federal courts. Such court proceedings reveal how oil booms raised vexing questions about the rights of Native property holders to participate in the petroleum economy. Mollie Harjo, a “full-blood” Creek woman who claimed rights to an oil-rich Creek County allotment, reflected how Indigenous landowners navigated a legal borderland that circumscribed the property rights of both Native and non-Native individuals through the policing of race, land ownership, and petroleum production. Harjo’s allotment in Creek County was located sixty miles from her home in Okfuskee County, where a county judge had deemed her “incompetent” and assigned to her a white guardian named Luther A. Nye. Harjo and Nye alleged in court that in June of 1915, the Prairie Oil and Gas Company—a subsidiary of Standard Oil—used “money, threats and misrepresentation” to induce Mollie and Albert Harjo, both “full-blood” Creeks, into signing away their deed for \$500, despite the land possessing some twelve to fifteen producing oil wells worth at least a million dollars. Prairie’s attempts came on the heels of previous efforts by white men to gain title to Harjo’s land. In 1909, a pair of purchasers knowingly misrepresented the value of an allotment she inherited from her deceased infant son, gaining land that had a prospective worth of “many millions of dollars” for a mere \$800 by convincing Harjo that the tract was timber land unsuitable for anything but grazing. The part of the sum that was paid was in fact given to Harjo’s ex-husband, a white man who had kidnapped Harjo’s son—presumably to gain access to the allotment—and who had been in possession of the infant when he died.

Harjo’s lawyer and guardian protested that Mollie and her husband “had never seen any oil lands that they knew of, and that they were wholly incapacitated to transact business affairs of any

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<https://www.okhistory.org/research/forms/HenryAppletreeB1F3.pdf>. See also Charles Francis Colcord Collection, WHC, box 19, folders 3 and 4.

consequence” and, due to their Indigenous heritage, had “no conception of the value of property...especially real estate.” The petition alleged that Harjo’s incompetence was the product of her heritage, explaining that she was born in the Creek Nation and “grew to womanhood under the influence of said Tribe and under its usages, customs and traditions.” Importantly, the latter assertions regarding Harjo’s inability to understand the value of oil-laden land were made by her own counsel in hopes of cancelling the fraudulent deeds. Furthermore, Harjo’s counsel likely brought up her womanhood because white officials were more likely to protect the royalties of women than men, as they hoped to force the latter into farming and wage dependency. While Harjo regained a portion of her lost royalties, she could not fully escape the mechanisms that transferred oil wealth from Indians to whites. Harjo hired a white man, W.A. Grace, to recover her property at the cost of one-half of whatever was recovered. Grace then offered a law firm one-third of the property gained from Harjo. Such deals further alienated Indigenous allottees from oil revenues.<sup>31</sup>

A handful of “mixed-blood” Native men and African-Native men, drawing upon their possession of petroleum-rich allotments and ability to navigate the legal codes surrounding race and property, successfully established oil companies during Oklahoma’s early oil booms. Perhaps

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<sup>31</sup> Jagodinsky, “Into the Void,” Jagodinsky and Mitchell, *Beyond the Borders of the Law*; Stacey Patton, “The Richest Colored Girl in the World,” *The Crisis* 117, no. 2 (Spring 2010): 31-34, accessed October 10, 2019, [https://books.google.com/books?id=5HrU1YeIc3UC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs\\_ge\\_summary\\_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?id=5HrU1YeIc3UC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false); Luther A. Nye v. Prairie Oil and Gas Company, “Reply of Plaintiff to the Answer of the Prairie Oil and Gas Company,” District Court of Creek County, State of Oklahoma, 5, Cruce, Cruce, and Bleakmore Collection (“CCB” forthwith), WHC, box 42; Mollie Harjo and Albert Harjo v. George E. Black, R.S. Bush, J.M. Van Winkle, John D. Richards, J. Spencer, C.B. Voorhis, Hub Petroleum Company, the Prairie Oil and Gas Company, Franchot, and the Atchison, Topeka, & Santa Fe Railroad Company, District Court of Creek County, State of Oklahoma, 2-3, CCB, box 42; Petition, Dr. Luther A. Nye, as Guardian of Mollie Harjo, incompetent v. Prairie Oil and Gas Company; Margaret A. Keys, Court of Creek County, 5, CCB, box 42; Contract, W.A. Grace and Stuart, Cruce & Riddle, July 24, 1918, CCB, box 42; on women and allotment, see Chang, *The Color of the Land*, 125.

the most famous of these individuals was Thomas Gilcrease, benefactor of Tulsa's Gilcrease Museum, which is today one of the world's leading repositories of Native American and western art. Before establishing his successful petroleum corporation, Gilcrease—much like Mollie Harjo—navigated the legal ambiguities surrounding Indian land, and in doing so, further revealed how oil helped structure race in Oklahoma. Gilcrease was the son of a white man and a Creek woman, and as such, was assigned an allotment not far from Tulsa. Forty-nine wells had been drilled on Gilcrease's land beginning in 1906, when he was still a minor, and these wells produced upwards of 25,000 barrels per month, making Gilcrease rich before he reached legal adulthood. When the original lease on his allotment was due to end in 1911, the twenty-one-year-old entered into a partnership with several investors in order to keep the rigs on his land running. However, he took his partners to court just two years later, claiming that he was in fact incompetent, uneducated, and inexperienced in matters of business, and that as a result the partnership should be dissolved. Gilcrease likely made such claims in court because he was in debt to one of the partners. The defendants in the case argued that Gilcrease was in fact of "more than average intelligence," and of "at least three years active successful experience in business." They insisted that Gilcrease understood the oil industry—the costs and risks of drilling, as well as the laws that governed extraction. At a more fundamental level, they were proclaiming that Gilcrease was white. In effect, Gilcrease's partners argued that the Creek man's experience in the oil business established his identity as a white man, and thus he should not be subject to the paternalistic state and federal laws that limited the property rights of Native citizens. Thus, both "full-blood" and "mixed-blood" Indians attempted to wield the legal precept of incompetency to their advantage, despite differing positions of power within Oklahoma's racial caste system.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Gilcrease, Thomas vs. G.R. McCullough, et al., 1914, CCB, box 40, folder 11.

One tract of unusually productive Cushing oil land was especially fraught with questions over leasing, royalties, non-white wealth, and the sustainability of allotment amid the oil boom. Martha Jackson was a “full-blood” Creek who claimed ownership of an inherited allotment adjacent to the tract Mollie Harjo inherited from her late son. The disputed piece of land was originally titled to Barney Thlocco, a “full-blood” Creek man who, along with numerous members of his immediate and extended family, died during an infectious-disease epidemic in January of 1899. The large number of sudden deaths within one family, and the lack of clarity over the order in which the Thloccos succumbed to the disease, made inheritance a murky question. Subsequently, there were at least 147 claimants to Thlocco’s estate, including Martha Jackson, who was Barney Thlocco’s step-daughter and claimed to be the nearest living relative to him following the 1899 epidemic. In 1914, an African-Creek “freedman” and lawyer named J. Coody Johnson represented Martha, who was still a minor at the time, and her father, Saber, in court. In exchange for representation, Saber Jackson—who was still Martha’s legal guardian in 1914—agreed to lease part of the allotment to Johnson for the purpose of oil-and-gas drilling. In collaboration with a handful of white partners, Johnson formed the Black Panther Oil and Gas Company. The Black Panther’s first well on the Thlocco allotment produced twelve-thousand barrels per day, a colossal amount of oil, the daily value of which at the time was upwards of \$10,000. Johnson used profits from the Black Panther to settle many of the competing claims for the Thlocco allotment, allegedly paying out a total of three-hundred-thousand dollars to Indian claimants. While it is likely that many of these claims were fraudulent, many Creeks and other members of the Five Tribes maintained kin ties that could not be easily squared with Anglo-American legal tenets that tied inheritance to nuclear families and direct “blood” relatives. The

desire of white officials to manage Native property on terms acceptable to such property laws made conflicts over oil and inheritance that much more frequent.<sup>33</sup>

The great wealth that the Thlocco tract promised garnered widespread attention in the press and led to the introduction of a central mechanism through which white settlers dispossessed Natives of oil wealth—the insertion of a white guardian to oversee their estate. In addition to federal trusts that oversaw the property of “restricted” Indian allottees, in 1908 the State of Oklahoma began authorizing county courts to assign legal guardians to oversee property held by Indian minors and “incompetents.” This practice was especially prevalent in the oil fields, where guardians often sold the assets they oversaw to friends and family at below-market prices while pocketing parts of their ward’s estate as service fees. In this case, Martha and Saber Jackson accused Coody Johnson of using his clout as a well-known lawyer and his “great influence” among the Creeks to declare Saber unfit to act as guardian to Martha and her now-wealthy estate. The Jacksons claimed that Johnson demanded that courts assign one of the Black Panther partners, R.W. Parmenter, to oversee Martha’s oil royalties. Johnson accused Saber Jackson of “drunkenness” and of “flirting and scheming” with “certain interests” regarding the allotment, and that such behavior made him unfit to manage his daughter’s affairs.<sup>34</sup>

Unlike Mollie Harjo and Thomas Gilcrease, Jackson and her lawyers fought back against the notion that either Martha or Saber was incompetent and incapable of administering her oil

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<sup>33</sup> Proposed settlement of claim of Martha Jackson as minor heir of Barney Thlocco, deceased, May 4, 1918, , Bureau of Indian Affairs, Five Civilized Tribes Agency, Records of Tribal and Probate Attorneys, Case Files of Creek National Attorneys, Record Group 75, National Archives and Records Administration—Southwest, Fort Worth (forthwith “Creek National Attorneys, NARA, Fort Worth”), box 11, folder 2.

<sup>34</sup> “Objection to Dismissal of the above Appeal,” CCB, box 31, folder 7; Memoranda in re to Martha Jackson case, April 8, 1920, Creek Nation Attorneys, NARA, Fort Worth, box 11, folder 2; Thorne, *The World’s Richest Indian*, 10-12.

estate. Before the Supreme Court of Oklahoma, Jackson accused Johnson of leading a fraudulent campaign to remove Saber Jackson as guardian and appoint Parmenter. Jackson's lawyers contended that "designing and artful persons" desired to "cheat, defraud and rob" Martha of her estate and inheritance by making false claims before county judges regarding her "competence." Jackson alleged that J. Coody Johnson's Black Panther partner, James Brazell, and her guardian, Parmenter, refused to give her the cash payouts that her estate accrued until she promised to cease opposing Parmenter's guardianship, and that the Black Panther owner had defrauded her of \$1.2 million over a span of four-plus years. In May of 1919, just days before her eighteenth birthday and a subsequent county-court hearing on her competency, Jackson was kidnapped from the Dwight Indian Training School in Seminole County by unknown assailants. Oil companies operating in Oklahoma frequently kidnapped Indian lessors, especially minors, in hopes of forcibly securing a signature from the allottee. For instance, Thomas Gilcrease was alleged to have whisked a Creek boy on the verge of gaining his majority as far as London in hopes of garnering a lease. Such kidnappings represented a violence that white officials did little to stop. Despite the kidnapping and Jackson's subsequent absence from court, the county judge still declared her incompetent, arguing that Martha was well known to him and that the court had "full knowledge of [Jackson's] mental capacity." Martha Jackson survived her ordeal and eventually won \$300,000 from Black Panther. However, this represented only a quarter of what she claimed to have lost.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Martha Jackson, et al. v. B.F. Davis, County Judge of Seminole County, Oklahoma, and R.W. Parmenter, Supreme Court for the State of Oklahoma, No. 11226, Creek Nation Attorneys, NARA, Fort Worth, box 11, folder 2; Oklahoma Appellate Court Reporter, Vol. XIV, 482-83, Creek Nation Attorneys, NARA, Fort Worth, box 11, folder 2; *The Petroleum Gazette* 17, no. 1 (April, 1912), accessed March 3, 2019, <https://books.google.com/books?id=iQcdAQAAMAAJ&dq=%22dana%20kelsey%22%20%22oil%22&pg=PR9#v=onepage&q=%22dana%20kelsey%22%20%22oil%22&f=false>.

Black Panther's Thlocco lease became further implicated in the problems of racial property when questions about oil monopolies and resource conservation arose around the company's production efforts. During the early twentieth century, crises of overproduction and oil waste frequently gripped the Southwest's petroleum region, as scores of individual producers raced to capture as much oil from flush fields as quickly as possible. The result was momentous amounts of wasted crude, which ran freely down creeks, rivers, gullies, and streets, and the collapse of oil prices due to the glut of supply. The Cushing field buckled under such conditions by early 1915. Oil slicks frequently accumulated on the Cimarron River, a tributary of the Arkansas, which flowed adjacent to the Thlocco allotment. These slicks routinely caught fire, charring and blackening the river's wooded shoreline. Economic problems accompanied the ecological fallout. Due to oversaturated markets, prices had plummeted from over a dollar a barrel to around forty cents in less than a year. At the same time, Black Panther's Thlocco lease was considered by many to be the most productive oil land in the state, valued at \$2 million, and a major contributor to the overproduction crisis. As a result, Johnson's lease became the object of scrutiny for white oilmen and public officials.

Whenever overproduction gripped a field, small producing companies bristled at the power of larger companies and alleged monopolies, such as Standard's subsidiary Prairie Oil and Gas. These latter companies often controlled pipelines that connected smaller producers to refining markets and their large-scale capitalization allowed them to weather periods of low prices when independent producers could not. When the Oklahoma Corporation Commission attempted to protect smaller companies in the Cushing field by arbitrarily inflating the price of oil, the Standard subsidiary cited Black Panther as a company that willingly sold oil at basement prices and therefore stood as proof that there was no need to artificially raise rates. Cushing's independents criticized



Black Panther as “the recreant Cushing price cutter” and urged producers and oil-field workers to support the corporation commission’s restrictions on sales. These oilmen believed that the corporation commission was the only bulwark preventing “one man from ruining the business of a thousand” and wanted to prove to Black Panther’s African-Creek owner that he “cannot monkey with the bread and butter of an entire industry without getting thrashed for it.” This kind of rhetoric positioned white-settler independents as the victims of both African-Indigenous-owned Black Panther and “outside” monopolies, reflecting the deeper intersection of anti-monopolism and racism that marked the politics of small-scale oil operators.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to the anti-monopolist anger exhibited by mostly white independent producers over Black Panther’s operations, white officials questioned the leasing terms on the Thlocco allotment and wondered whether allotment should continue at all amid the prolific waste of oil. The terms of the lease allegedly called for the landowner to compensate the oil company for improvements, which would effectively leave the landowner indebted to Black Panther once oil had been exhausted from the property. The BIA, tasked with assessing whether or not leases benefited the interest of the agency’s Indigenous wards, questioned these abnormal provisions. Furthermore, the many outstanding claimants to the allotment riled the state legislature, especially considering that the careless drilling practices in the Cushing field meant the oil resources located on the lease were likely to be exhausted before ownership questions would be legally resolved. These problems prompted legislators in both Oklahoma and Washington D.C. to consider ending the allotment of unassigned Creek Nation land in order to preserve the oil left beneath the tribe’s

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<sup>36</sup> “Oil Burning on River,” *Tulsa Daily World*, Feb. 5, 1915, 10; “Prairie Trying to Force Oil down to Forty Cents,” *Sapulpa Herald*, Jan. 6, 1915, 1. All newspapers are from the Oklahoma Historical Society’s “Oklahoma Digital Newspaper Program,” <https://gateway.okhistory.org/explore/collections/ODNP/>.

former land, which was valued at \$30 million in 1915. Doing so would have meant ending the distribution of landed property and replacing it with uniform cash payouts, which would have further severed Creeks from their land.<sup>37</sup>

While the Thlocco controversy did not lead to the end of allotment in the Creek Nation, the fact that it was discussed as a possibility revealed the stakes that petroleum abundance presented for both settler oilmen and their Indigenous lessors. Oil could interrupt the regime of enclosure that was ongoing in the former Indian Territory, enrich a handful of non-white individuals, and draw the subsequent anger of white settlers who saw themselves as the rightful inheritors of political and economic power in Oklahoma. All of the preceding stories placed in flux the well worn assumptions that whites had about Native people, mainly that they could not grasp the value of oil and were doomed to misuse or pilfer it. Indigenous oilmen and litigants seemed to contradict these stereotypes. Furthermore, the white-owned oil companies that were responsible for a drilling regime that squandered the majority of crude that naturally occurred underground defied the assumption that Euro-American capitalism was especially well equipped to responsibly produce oil. However, the mediated property relations that governed Indian oil remained intact and continued to provide white settlers with ready access to capital torn from the oil estates of non-white landowners.<sup>38</sup>

*“The Richest Colored Girl in the World:” Oil (Mis)fortune, Racial Capital, and Sarah Rector’s Creek Nation Allotment*

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<sup>37</sup> “More Trouble for Barney Thlocco Indian Allotment,” *Tulsa Daily World*, Feb. 5, 1915.

<sup>38</sup> “Origins of Federal Oil Regulation in the 1920’s,” *Business History Review* 47, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 60, accessed May 21, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3113603>.

The policing of race and oil extraction extended to the leasing of land owned by African Creeks, where the legal oversight of Indigenous citizens and Jim Crow-era whites' assumptions about Blackness intersected. Sarah Rector was a ten-year-old Creek freedman when the Cushing boom commenced. As a minor and, from the eyes of whites, a racially ambiguous lessor, she and her oil-rich allotment came under special scrutiny. Rector was by some accounts the first Black woman to become a millionaire, and she gained international fame as “The Richest Colored Girl in the World.” Creek freedmen—the descendants of the system of plantation-centered African slavery that Creeks had adopted while still living in the American Southeast—had been granted full citizenship within the Creek Nation as part of the tribe’s treaty with the United States government following the Civil War. As full citizens, African Creeks received 160-acre allotments and were included on the tribal rolls, but because Black Creeks were defined as “freedmen” and not “Indians by blood,” the BIA did not claim jurisdiction over their allotments. However, county and state courts as well as the Creek Nation’s lawyers took a keen interest in how Rector’s land and the allotments of other Black Creeks were handled by the many oil companies vying for leases in the Cushing field. The ways in which Rector’s white guardians managed her wealth revealed how allotment not only reduced income for individual tribal citizens but also prevented wider redistributions of oil revenues to Black and Indigenous peoples.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> For African Creeks, see Chang, *The Color of the Land*; Field, *Growing Up with the Country*; Gary Zellar, *African Creeks: Estelvste and the Creek Nation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007). For the fraught politics surrounding the inclusion of Black Indians as citizens of other nations among the Five Tribes, see Daniel Littlefield, *Seminole Burning: A Story of Racial Vengeance* (Oxford: University Press of Mississippi, 1996); Tiya Miles and Sharon P. Long, eds., *Crossing Waters, Crossing Worlds: The African Diaspora in Indian Country* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Miles, *Ties that Bind*; Jesse T. Schreier, “Indian or Freedman?: Enrollment, Race, and Identity in the Choctaw Nation, 1896-1907,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 42, no. 4 (Winter, 2011): 458-479, accessed April 21, 2019, DOI: 10.2307/westhistquar.42.4.0459. The exception to the limits of privatized oil wealth can be found in the Osage Nation, which maintained collective ownership of mineral rights and thus

Controversy surrounding Sarah Rector's land and oil wealth blew up in 1913 as the oil boom in Cushing grew, eliciting a series of investigations into Rector's white guardian, the Prairie Oil and Gas Company, and the Rector family itself, all of which hinged on how race, property, and the vicissitudes of oil extraction interacted. Sarah and her mother, Rose, father, Joe, and five siblings lived in a small house with a single bed located north of the Cimarron River near the all-Black town of Taft in Muskogee County. Like many Creeks, Rector did not live on her allotment, which was located sixty miles to the west of Taft, northeast of a boomtown called Oilton. Prairie Oil and Gas drilled forty-nine producing wells on Rector's allotment and during a five-month period in 1913 and 1914, the company paid Rector \$46,000 in royalties. In addition to drilling for crude, Prairie extracted natural gas that was piped and refined into gasoline on Mollie Harjo's inherited lot, located less than ten miles from Rector's.

Sarah's father, Joe, had been the legal guardian of his children's estates, but the great wealth that Sarah accrued from oil royalties prompted a county judge to assign a white man, J.T. Porter, to oversee the girl's finances. The specific ways in which Porter invested and managed Sarah Rector's money reveal the mechanisms through which Native and African-Native individuals and families could lose royalties in financial and real-estate markets, as well as how white officials and guardians used oil wealth to "modernize" their Indigenous and Black-Indigenous wards. Rector's estate accrued \$54,000 by mid-1914, of which \$46,000 came from oil production. Porter loaned \$42,000 of this total at an eight-percent interest rate, including to members of his family and members of the Rector family. A new lease negotiated with Prairie in

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distributed oil payments to every tribal citizen. See Terry P. Wilson, *The Underground Reservation: Osage Oil* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1985).

1918 garnered the Rector estate another \$300,000, which Porter used to loan out mortgages, purchase a 452-acre farm on the Verdigris River, and invest in \$50,000 worth of government bonds. Sarah could support family members using her royalties, but only in the form of loans entirely controlled by her white guardian. Her royalties were further used, without her or her family's consent, to purchase settler real estate and support the federal government during World War I. Thus, white guardians used oil abundance to instruct and include Black and Indigenous individuals in the web of debt and monetary obligations that capitalist markets were built on.<sup>40</sup>

The voices of Sarah and her family members remain largely absent from the testimony and litigation surrounding her estate, but a handful of reports from probate lawyers and court rooms reveal how the Rectors navigated their circumscribed wealth and maintained a semblance of control over Sarah's estate amid the oil boom. Joe Rector, Sarah's father and a farmer, testified before a Muskogee County court that he wanted his daughter's guardians to purchase a nearby tract of Arkansas River-bottom land known as the Fish property. Rector testified that he had known the land his entire life and, due to his firsthand knowledge, was confident that the property was capable of producing a bale of cotton per acre, fifty bushels of corn, and two tons of alfalfa. He was already renting a portion of the property and at work cultivating parts of it and ensured that he would look after the land, make improvements for and seek out tenants, and maintain connections with nearby markets. Rector's request can be viewed as not only an attempt to profit from his daughter's oil royalties, but also a strategy for sinking stronger roots into the soil in the area surrounding his familial home. At the same time, Joe Rector and Sarah's guardian insisted

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<sup>40</sup> Oliver Bradley, U.S. Oil Inspector, "Development and Operation," Creek National Attorneys, NARA, Fort Worth, box 15, folder 2; WMH to Hon R.C. Allen, June 17, 1914, Creek National Attorneys, NARA, Fort Worth, box 15, folder 2; Charles A. Looney, Direct Examination, December 5, 1918, Creek National Attorneys, NARA, Fort Worth, box 15, folder 2.

that offering portions of the land to sharecroppers would likely accrue twice as much income for Sarah's estate as renting it for straight cash. Diversifying oil royalties into other forms of capital placed the Rectors on the winning end of the sharecropping system, one of the Southwest's most insidious farm-labor regimes.<sup>41</sup>

White officials not only erected the guardian system to alienate Creeks and other Natives from valuable allotments, but also to quell fears that the considerably large payouts that oil leases offered Native landowners would allow kin groups and neighbors to maintain forms of communal subsistence that undermined the ultimate goals of allotment. At times, Rector's family was reluctant to meet the desires of white officials who wanted Sarah's estate invested in ventures that did not benefit the larger family. Like many Indigenous peoples, Sarah's parents likely expected to support networks of kin with the proceeds from the lease and did not immediately subscribe to white officials' assumption that individual property owners should be the sole beneficiaries of oil royalties. Thomas Leahy, a county judge, wrote to the Secretary of the Interior defending the fact that Sarah obtained only six-hundred dollars between October, 1913 and May, 1914, despite her estate earning tens-of-thousands of dollars over that span. Leahy argued that "other members of the family and neighbors" benefited from any cash paid out directly to Sarah more so than she did personally. In 1914, a probate attorney in Muskogee wrote to Judge R.C. Allen in Washington,

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<sup>41</sup> In the County Court in and for Muskogee County, Oklahoma, Hearing on Valuation of Property Known as Fish property, May 1, 1917, Creek National Attorneys, NARA, Fort Worth, box 15, folder 2; WMH to Hon R.C. Allen, June 17, 1914, Creek National Attorneys, NARA, Fort Worth, box 15, folder 2; For how families in the Five Tribes navigated allotment, see Chang, *The Color of the Land*; Field, *Growing Up with the Country*; Stremlau, *Sustaining the Cherokee Family*; For sharecropping, tenancy, and rural poverty in Oklahoma and on the Southern Plains, see Jim Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904-1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999); James R. Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism: Radical Movements in the Southwest* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Nigel Anthony Sellars, *Oil, Wheat, and Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World in Oklahoma, 1905-1930* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998).

ensuring that Rector's parents were "of fair intelligence and apparently hard-working, industrious people." However, while Rose and Joe Rector realized that Sarah's estate was of "considerable value and that it is a growing estate," they did not fully embrace the idea that "the estate of their child is to be used wholly for [Sarah's] personal comfort and advantage."<sup>42</sup>

The management of Rector's estate by white authorities went beyond controlling oil royalties and dictating investments; guardians and BIA officials also used oil money to transform the daily lives of the Rector family and to physically remove Sarah from her home and eventually from the Creek Nation altogether. With the discovery of oil, Leahy and the guardian "agreed upon certain changes looking toward the betterment of conditions for Sarah and the entire family." For Leahy, this meant purchasing new furniture and twenty acres of land that would become the site of a five-room cottage. Eventually, Sarah's oil wealth proved great enough that white officials, both local and federal, sought out "two or three of the best schools in the United States" for Sarah to attend, laying the groundwork for her semi-permanent separation from her family and their land. Indeed, she soon matriculated at Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute in Alabama. Leahy stated that her parents "strenuously objected to her leaving home at that time, she being but ten years of age." Sarah used some of her allowance to purchase a phonograph; beyond this, there's no indication that she purchased any additional personal items or gifts of her own accord.<sup>43</sup>

Sarah Rector's wealth resulted in considerable fame in both the white and Black presses, as well as among white politicians in Oklahoma, whose responses to the existence of exorbitantly wealthy people of color revealed the racism at the heart of Jim Crow Oklahoma's oil-boom culture.

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<sup>42</sup> Judge Thomas W. Leahy, Muskogee County, to Secretary of the Interior, May 27, 1914, Creek National Attorneys, NARA, Fort Worth, box 15, folder 2.

<sup>43</sup> Judge Thomas W. Leahy, Muskogee County, to Secretary of the Interior, May 27, 1914, Creek National Attorneys, NARA, Fort Worth, box 15, folder 2.

Oil wealth and the fame it brought led to the simplification of Rector's racial roots; her background as a person of both African and Indigenous heritage grew increasingly obscured, as both non-Indigenous African Americans and white Americans claimed ownership of her fortune and her future. In 1913, the Black newspaper *Chicago Defender* reported that white people "have become so alarmed at the enormous wealth of this young girl" that some wanted to "enamel" her or devise other methods that would allow Rector to pass as white. The paper further reported that the Oklahoma legislature desired to pass a law declaring Rector a white person. "It's the same old idea of the white man," the paper continued, "that whenever a Negro achieves any distinction...some white men want to declare them white." The Black press took a keen interest in Rector's personal safety given her growing fame and fortune. Their interest was well warranted given the fate of other oil-rich Black children. For instance, in March of 1911, William Irvin, a prominent white Muskogee land man, dynamited the home of a Black family who lived in the Rectors' hometown of Taft, intentionally killing two children, Castella and Herbert Sells. Seven men were indicted for the murders, but only Irvin and a Black accomplice who laid the dynamite were convicted. Irvin organized the murder of the Sells children in order to gain title to their oil-rich Glenn Pool allotments.<sup>44</sup>

White lawmakers' desires to bend racial categories to their will reflected the history of the transition from Indian Territory to white statehood more broadly. White men formed the state as a means to achieving twin goals: the acceleration of the settler-colonial expropriation of Native peoples and their land and the imposition of Jim Crow policies, which defined all people of African

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<sup>44</sup> *Chicago Defender*, November 15, 1913, cited in "Remember Sarah Rector, Creek Freedwoman," *African-NativeAmerican.BlogSpot.com*, accessed October 10, 2019, <http://african-nativeamerican.blogspot.com/2010/04/remembering-sarah-rector-creek.html>; "Life Term for Child Murder," *The Oklahoma Leader*, February 4, 1915, 6.



descent as Black and everyone else (including Indigenous peoples) as white. Just as Oklahoma attempted to erase the histories of mixed-race peoples through the declaration of a racial binary, the state also redefined Sarah Rector's race on a whim based on the apparent whiteness of her considerable wealth. While the Black press positioned Sarah as an African American (but not Indigenous) child worthy of protection, the white press situated Sarah as racially unfit to possess her hydrocarbon inheritance. In 1914, the *Kansas City Star* described Sarah's wealth and the oil riches of other Black Creeks with animosity and factual inaccuracies that served to paint Rector as especially backward, placing her beyond the boundaries of acceptability and declaring her and her race unfit to possess oil wealth. The paper explained how Sarah and her sister had become rich through the possession of land inherited from deceased parents. Joe and Rose Rector, Sarah's parents, were perfectly alive at the time, but the paper insisted otherwise, painting Sarah as "an orphan, rude, Black and uneducated" and "as oblivious to the events of the world as an Eskimo." The Kansas City paper's thoughts on Rector were part of a larger exposé on non-whites who lucked upon wealth in the oil fields, and ended with, "[white] Oklahomans...don't even stop to wonder at the selections Fortune makes when she picks out little darkies and immigrants on which to shower her wealth." White settlers did not consider such money to be "lost," because "[t]hese people will die, or someone will take it away from them and things will go back just like they were. And probably that is the correct solution of Fortune's strange caprices." In the eyes of the white press, Native American and Black wealth was an absurd, unjust coincidence of the oil fields, where immeasurable riches literally flowed from the earth. Amid these peculiarities, many whites

believed that the prodigious wealth that modern energy sources beckoned would inevitably flow to the top of the racial hierarchy, and rightfully so, regardless of the means.<sup>45</sup>

Unlike many other “full-blood” and African Creek individuals, Sarah Rector managed to live a life of relative comfort buoyed by her oil royalties. There is reason to believe that this was largely due to her fame, which brought her personal story to the attention of powerful African American activists, including Washington and W.E.B Du Bois, who revealed her plight under Oklahoma’s guardian system to a national audience of civil rights proponents. She and her family moved to Kansas City in 1917 where she remained throughout most of her adulthood. Rector owned real estate in the city, continued to earn royalties from oil production, and operated a car dealership. She owned a “stable of Cadillacs and Lincolns” and was reportedly a fan of joyriding around the city, especially in large, gas-guzzling automobiles. In this way, petroleum both financed Rector’s wealth and fueled the freedoms that she practiced through that wealth. For so many others in Rector’s position, the fact remained that both cultures of racism and a color-bounded regime of property administered by whites resulted in alienation, dispossession, and violent death.<sup>46</sup>

White settlers devised ways to integrate the dispossession of oil land and oil wealth into settler narratives. When white Americans emphasized the “windfall” that Oklahoma Indians received due to oil abundance, they insisted upon a story of white settlement exempt from the ugly side of colonial dispossession. Native peoples *had* been compensated, they suggested, and whatever happened afterwards was simply confirmation of Indigenous people’s unreadiness for “civilization.” When those same white people insisted upon the transfer of fossil-fuel wealth from

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<sup>45</sup> *Kansas City Star*, May 14, 1914, 11-12, in “Petroleum in Oklahoma,” Historic Oklahoma Collection, WHC, box 42.

<sup>46</sup> Steve Gerkin, “The Unlikely Baroness,” *This Land*, March, 2015, 62-63.

“incompetent” Indians and African-Indians to white overseers, they did so from the modern pedestal of rational administration, which elided questions of power and injustice by invoking the assumed wisdom of law and bureaucratic oversight. Petroleum’s value—not just its energy density, but how it permeated the hopes and dreams of white, Black, and Indigenous residents of the oil fields—drove these cultural and institutional developments, which undergirded Indian Territory’s remaking into Oklahoma. Both material and social power oozed from Mid-Continent crude, spurring the rush to not only drill, but also to reassess the meanings of race, property, and citizenship amid an increasingly fossil-fueled world.

## Chapter 2

### “Oil Running all over the Countryside:” The Politics and Ecology of Overproduction

The Mid-Continent’s oilmen initiated numerous periods of disastrous overproduction during the first decades of the twentieth century. Periods of underpricing and uncontrolled drilling often accompanied booms and led to the production of crude beyond storage capacity. Where overproduction occurred, rivers of oil and saltwater flowed across land and into watersheds, while immeasurable supplies of natural gas, which drillers treated as a waste byproduct, escaped from oil wells into the atmosphere. One refinery supervisor with the Indian Territory Illuminating Oil Company recalled such calamities in the 1930s, stating, “[w]e shot off enough gas to run every motor in the world for a hundred years, and the only way we’ll ever get any of it back is to invent some way of drilling up in the sky where it is. If we’d known then what we know now... we could have saved millions of dollars.” Although the greenhouse gasses that now saturate the atmosphere—whether they got there through waste or consumption—cannot be repatriated, the image of drillers venturing above the clouds was an apt one, reflecting the average oilman’s faith in technology and the assumption that the law would guarantee the right to drill most anywhere. However, the excesses that the refinery supervisor lamented had reshaped the industry, especially in its relation to public power amid a wider Progressive turn. In the aftermath of the Mid-Continent’s first booms, the geochemical worlds of oil production and petroleum markets became unambiguously political. What resulted was the restraint of a drilling free-for-all that, nevertheless, affirmed the rights of producers within the realm of a fledgling hydrocarbon state.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> “We Don’t Want It Here,” WPA-WHC, box 43, folder 20.

Beginning in 1901, the Mid-Continent region became home to a vast network of oil fields, pipelines, railroads, and refineries. The network of technologies that governed oil extraction constantly interacted with the region's atmosphere, soils, and water, often to the vexation of the engineers, geologists, and workers who brought oil and gas to the surface and transported it to and from refining centers. At various times throughout the early twentieth century, a combination of unpredictable geologic circumstances, oversaturated markets, and inadequate corporate and public policy caused oil to flow into aboveground environments beyond the grasp of human control. Across the Mid-Continent, wildcatters tapped numerous prolific oil "sands" (petroleum-bearing geologic strata) that gushed large amounts of crude and gas at relatively shallow drilling depths. However, this bonanza involved the unleashing of geochemical forces that drillers often could not control and that constantly threatened to sink investors. Gas blowouts destroyed equipment and could injure or kill workers. Wellbores flooded with saltwater and unstable sandy formations constantly caved in around drills, preventing crude from flowing to the earth's surface. Fields declined rapidly and unexpectedly in production, causing the collapse of numerous drilling ventures, the names of which could be found on a list produced by the *Oil Investors' Journal* titled "The Morgue."<sup>48</sup>

Drillers and their colleagues coined the term "wild well" to describe instances when drilling operations resulted in destructive "gushers" capable of dumping hundreds-of-thousands of barrels of crude onto surrounding land and bodies of water over the course of mere days. "Wild" proved to be an especially apt term to describe the out-of-control extraction of petroleum. First, while crude oil and natural gas are usually referred to as "mineral resources" and "inorganic" forms of

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<sup>48</sup> Diana D. Olien and Roger M. Olien, *Oil in Texas: The Gusher Age, 1895-1945* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 40-46.

energy, their propensity to seep, leak, flow, and combust—often beyond the grasp of human control—is tied to their origins as the remnants of wild organic matter. Oil and gas are not inert in the ways that quartz, gold, and diamonds are. Petroleum is derived from the densely stored compost of past ecosystems, brimming with potential energy derived from once living things. By bringing petroleum to the surface, humans, in a sense, brought long-dead matter back to life, transforming mostly passive geologies into unwieldy flows of potentially explosive energy. Second, from a legal perspective, Americans treated petroleum property as if it was wild game. The rule of capture held that petroleum resources that abounded beneath the surface could only be claimed as property once extracted and confined within a tank or pipeline by a producing party. This led to largescale free-for-all drilling whenever a new field appeared, as producers raced to capture as much crude as quickly as possible before the mass of drillers drained the field of subterranean gas pressure, which pushed crude toward the surface and made oil production profitable. Furthermore, extracted oil that exceeded storage capacity, gushed uncontrollably from wild wells, and flowed into surrounding watersheds could be claimed and sold by any individual who was able to gather it. Indeed, wild oil often flowed into creeks and rivers at rates so high that businessmen invested resources in damming waterways and collecting riparian currents of crude. This production regime transformed unpredictable above-ground terrains into landscapes and waterways brimming with streams and currents of oil, contradicting images of oil production as a controlled technological process based solely upon subterranean drilling.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> For an extensive discussion of the rule of capture in the oil fields of nineteenth-century Pennsylvania, see Brian C. Black, *Petrolia: The Landscape of America's First Oil Boom* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000). Black's argument emphasizes how a laissez-faire approach to drilling undergirded the rule of capture and brought a new "land ethic" rooted in exploitation to western Pennsylvania. The politics of oil production were more fraught in the early twentieth-century Mid-Continent, where potent ideas about resource conservation and anti-monopoly politicized the rule of capture. On the rule of capture's place in environmental history

Most oilmen lamented conditions of overproduction, which greatly diminished the per-barrel price of petroleum and thus harmed bottom lines. However, smaller independent producers least able to weather periods of depressed prices were often the strongest proponents of the rule of capture and the most vehement critics of conservation proposals. For many independent oil men, the desire of larger producers and public officials to rein in overproduction represented a monopoly plot. Regulating production in order to prevent physical waste and stabilize prices was much more easily achieved if a small number of large, consolidated producing companies controlled entire fields and constructed large storage capacities. For the smaller drilling outfits schooled in Gilded- and Progressive-age political economy, efforts to promote increased regulation and the capital investment needed to build additional storage tanks and purchase the land necessary for large “tank farms” screamed of a conspiracy engineered in the executive offices of Standard Oil. However, no simple, irrepressible binary pitted each small oil operator against Standard and other consolidated “interests.” Oilmen invoked the politics of monopoly and anti-monopoly strategically. Any company, regardless of size, that had refineries far from producing fields, owned large amounts of stored oil, or was unlikely to increase production in the near future supported conservation. Some small companies achieved vertical integration and opposed laws designed to undermine large corporations that only transported their own oil through their long-distance pipelines. Some independent producers proved to be long-term zealots for anti-monopoly and the undermining of the Standard goliath, but contests over power among producers, pipelines, and refineries were, at their heart, fights between individual property holders over the right to make oil flow profitably in

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more broadly, see Arthur F. McEvoy, “Toward an Interactive Theory of Nature and Culture: Ecology, Production, and Cognition in the California Fishing Industry,” *Environmental Review* 11, no. 4, Special Issue: Theories of Environmental History (Winter, 1987): 289-305; McEvoy, *The Fisherman’s Problem: Ecology and Law in the California Fisheries, 1850-1980* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986).

specific places and at particular moments in time. This reality did not necessarily produce political consistency.<sup>50</sup>

Indian Territory and Oklahoma's independent oilmen did consistently believe that the property regime governing oil should be friendly to a white-settler brand of racial capitalism. The producer-take-all ethos that the rule of capture reflected contrasted with calls made by Indigenous nations to maintain collective tribal ownership of minerals. In some cases, certain mineral-resource bases such as coal and asphalt did remain collectively owned by tribes in the wake of allotment. However, with the exception of the Osage Nation, this was not the case when it came to oil and gas. Oil attracted scores of white settlers and their extractive enterprises, and as we saw in chapter one, they demanded access to the resource and only accepted Native landownership on terms that kept oil flowing. The irony, however, was that, while white settlers demanded control over oil property in part through the claim that non-whites were incapable of managing and producing oil and gas, they often failed in their endeavor to stably extract oil from the earth and, in turn, profits from the oil. Euro-Americans were also used to a mixed-use production system whereby landowners leased residential and agricultural property to oil companies. This system could ostensibly mesh with allotment in ways that other minerals—whose areas of occurrence often could not be farmed, ranched, or lived upon—could not. Furthermore, some of the white

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<sup>50</sup> On oil, monopoly, capitalist culture, and public policy, see Arthur Menzies Johnson, *Petroleum Pipelines and Public Policy, 1906-1959* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967); Gerald D. Nash, *United States Oil Policy, 1890-1964: Business and Government in Twentieth Century America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968); Roger M. Olien and Diana D. Olien, *Oil and Ideology: The Cultural Creation of the American Petroleum Industry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Christopher Jones, *Routes of Power: Energy and Modern America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014); Kyle William, "Roosevelt's Populism: The Kansas Oil War of 1905 and the Making of Corporate Capitalism," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 19, no. 1 (January 2020): 96-121, accessed January 28, 2020, doi:10.1017/S1537781419000446.



independent oilmen and their political allies who called for state-level protections for the “little guy” also proved to be the leaders of subsequent white-supremacist movements. By no means were oilmen more inherently racist than their white counterparts. However, their paranoia over the power of “outside” authorities—whether in the form of federal restrictions on Indian land or market domination by large corporations—engendered a localism that rallied around white-settler provincialism and small-scale, proprietary capitalism. Such proclivities could inspire both market protectionism and white-supremacist vigilantism.<sup>51</sup>

Politics, production, and the biogeochemical intermingled so closely in these oil fields that it would be a mistake to imagine government, markets, and nature in isolation from one another. While oil markets operated at a transnational level and the federal government maintained some authority over fossil fuels, it was ultimately sub-national, semi-sovereign state governments that confronted the crises of overproduction most forcefully in the Mid-Continent. The emerging fossil-fuel state was centered in Oklahoma City, Tulsa, Austin, and other state capitals and oil cities, more so than in Washington D.C. In Oklahoma, elected officials deliberately attempted to protect petroleum markets from the freefalling prices that came with overproduction, contrasting the state with its neighbors and the federal government, which did not claim the authority to directly influence supply and demand and instead extended direct governance only to the “physical waste” of petroleum resources. These early debates over conservation largely elided geology and ecology and instead focused on markets and monopoly. Even as oil inundated rivers and creeks, fires swept through tank farms and boomtowns, and the hydrocarbon-saturated air in and around producing

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<sup>51</sup> For the history of Euro-American mismanagement of ecosystems and resources on Native American land, see Richard White, *The Roots of Dependency: Subsistence, Environment, and Social Change Among the Choctaws, Pawnees, and Navajos* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1983), Marsha Weisiger, *Dreaming of Sheep in Navajo Country* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2009).

fields spontaneously combusted, petroleum's stakeholders tended to denature the industry's failures in the realm of direct state administration. Whenever markets maintained a rickety equilibrium, these same oilmen celebrated petroleum as a product of nature's bounty and boasted of their industry's technical expertise, infrastructural capacity, and their strength as masters of a volatile and dangerous natural world. However, the continual crises of overproduction, plummeting prices, and lost oil and the failure to address said problems, despite their obviousness, hardly indicated that humans had conquered nature. Rather, it suggested that petroleum increasingly dominated people, despite the disasters that dependency reckoned. Oil was domesticating human beings.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Stefan Link and Noam Maggor, "The United States as a Developing Nation: Revisiting the Peculiarities of American History," *Past and Present* (December 2019): 13-20, 28-32, accessed January 8, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtz032>; On the place of nature in heavily influencing human history, see Timothy LeCain, "Against the Anthropocene: A Neo-Materialist Perspective," *History, Culture, and Modernity* 3, no. 1 (2015): 1-28; LeCain, *The Matter of History: How Things Create the Past* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017). I deliberately use the term "oilmen" (instead of "oil men") when describing the men (and, importantly, they were almost all men) who owned oil capital and made money from investments in the oil industry. These men were "made" out of oil, and the dictates of petroleum as a material thing—how it was produced, stored, transported, refined, and consumed—placed stringent boundaries around their economic and political worldviews. The problems of the oil industry often dictated their choices as social actors, and those industrial problems were not simply rooted in conflicts between people, but also between the people who tried to produce oil and the unruly geochemical environments that petroleum could only be partially detached from. Thus, I mean to emphasize the material environment's role in shaping how oilmen acted in the public world. On the Progressive-era natural resource state, see Samuel P. Hays, *Conservation and the Gospel of Efficiency: The Progressive Conservation Movement, 1890–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959); Martin V. Melosi, *Coping with Abundance: Energy and Environment in Industrial America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985); Karen R. Merrill, "In Search of the 'Federal Presence' in the American West," *Western Historical Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (Winter, 1999): 449-73, accessed July 29, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/971422>; Bruce J. Schulman, "Governing Nature, Nurturing Government: Resource Management and the Development of the American State, 1900-1912," *Journal of Policy History* 17, no. 4 (2005): 375-403, accessed April 17, 2019, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/189747>; Ian Tyrrell, *Crisis of the Wasteful Nation: Empire and Conservation in Theodore Roosevelt's America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015); Williams, "Roosevelt's Populism."

### *Coping with Catastrophe*

The combination of the perils of overproduction and the politics of anti-monopoly became especially marked in the Healdton field in southern Oklahoma in the years immediately preceding World War I. Beginning in the 1870s, oil and other fossil fuels grew integral to the trust relationship between the United States government and the Choctaw and Chickasaw nations located in southern Indian Territory. In 1872, Robert Darden, a white investor from Missouri, collaborated with nineteen members of the Choctaw and Chickasaw nations to form the Chickasaw Oil Company. Darden and his Indian partners agreed to split ownership of any produced oil at the wellhead, while the Choctaw and Chickasaw investors paid for drilling and barreling any crude that Darden drilled. However, both F.A. Walker, the United States Commissioner of Indian Affairs at the time, and Columbus Delano, the Secretary of the Interior, adamantly opposed white intrusion into Indian Territory and voided Darden's right to drill for or transport oil in the territory. In 1897, the Choctaw, Chickasaw, and United States governments signed the Atoka Agreement, which made provisions for the allotment of Choctaw and Chickasaw lands and the sale of surplus lands to white settlers and developers. The agreement reserved lands bearing coal and asphalt from allotment and decreed that said lands would be sold or leased for the collective benefit of the two tribes. However, such agreements did not extend to the mining of oil and gas.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> The subheading of this section is a play on Martin Melosi, *Coping with Abundance: Energy and Environment in Industrial America* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1985). Melosi's book frames problems of energy, environment, and policy in the twentieth-century United States around the notion of resource abundance. However, the problems that racked the energy industry were ultimately problems of overproduction—the result of human choices made in the context of a human-dictated social and economic world—not overabundance—a state that is suggestive of environmental determinism but does not actually exist in nature, and refers rather to people's socioeconomic rationalization of the natural world. I also emphasize how overproduction played out as a perpetual battle between oilmen and unpredictable geochemical forces and resulted in a

In 1905, drillers first tapped oil sands in southwestern portions of the Chickasaw Nation, in what became Carter County in southcentral Oklahoma. By 1911, locals reported that petroleum flowed “down the ravines and gullies here like water after a hard spring rain.” Farmers and ranchers west of Ardmore, the region’s largest city, regretted the numerous oil seeps in the area. Their livestock and horses refused to drink tarry water, forcing their owners to haul the animals by wagon around the countryside to fresher creeks and ponds. The Healdton field opened in earnest in 1913. Although extensive production started only a year after the Cushing boom began, geological differences made production more affordable at Healdton. A typical well in the Cushing field cost between \$15,000 and \$20,000 to complete. However, at Healdton, successful wells often cost no more than four-thousand dollars, with flush production beginning in some cases within seven-hundred feet of the surface. Most wells at Cushing had to be drilled twice as deep. Because of these differences in drilling cost, Healdton became known as a “poor man’s field,” where undercapitalized drilling ventures and smaller oil companies retained relatively high prospects of success.<sup>54</sup>

One early Mid-Continent driller recalled that, during the early booms, “[a] man could dig a rat hole and likely find oil, or he could borrow a dollar and be rich in a year if things worked out right.” While exaggerated, the driller’s thoughts were not far from the mark. In part because Healdton was a “poor man’s field,” it became the site of deep fears about monopoly power disguised as natural market failure. The first largescale discoveries of petroleum resources in the

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long-term ecological catastrophe that, nevertheless, presented certain parties with opportunities to seize market power. See also, Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso, 2015); Glasscock, *Then Came Oil*, 113-15; Franks, *Ragtown: A History of the Greater Healdton-Hewitt Oil Field* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Heritage Association, 1986), 6-11; Franks, *The Rush Begins*, 5; Rister, *Oil!*, 125.

<sup>54</sup> *Oil City Derrick*, January 23, 1911; August 24, 1911; November 11, 1911; April 11, 1912; cited in Franks, *Ragtown*, 14-15, 20, 30.

Mid-Continent had coincided with a period of triumph for anti-monopolists, specifically those critics of Standard Oil. In 1904, the journalist Ida Tarbell—the daughter of an independent Pennsylvania oilman—published a series of investigative articles under the title *The History of the Standard Oil Company*, which delved into the business practices of John Rockefeller’s company, criticizing and questioning the legality of its domination of the petroleum industry in the Mid-Atlantic. Tarbell’s work proved integral to the birth of a larger genre of muckraking journalism, which helped inaugurate the Progressive Era as a period of moral and legal retribution aimed at highly concentrated industrial corporations. At the same time, independent oilmen in Kansas embraced Populist policy positions and organized against Standard’s control of pipelines and refining, promoting new laws that made pipelines common carriers, set maximum shipping rates on railroads and pipelines, ended discriminatory rebates, and even made plans for the construction of a state-owned refinery. In 1911, the United State Supreme Court ruled that Standard was in violation of antitrust legislation and ordered that the company be broken up into separate firms. But Standard’s breakup did not squelch the fears of independent oilmen. It was in this context that monopolies came to occupy the forefront of many small oil operators’ worries, which eventually led to federal investigations into the market relations between producers and pipelines in the Healdton field and elsewhere in the Mid-Continent.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Paul Lambert and Kenny Franks, eds., *Voices from the Oil Fields* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), 61; Ida M. Tarbell, *The History of the Standard Oil Company* (New York: McClure, Phillips and Co., 1904); Williams, “Roosevelt’s Populism,” 109-15; On Standard Oil and the Rockefellers, see Ron Chernow, *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007); Steve Weinberg, *Taking on the Trust: The Epic Battle of Ida Tarbell and John D. Rockefeller* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 2008); Peter B. Doran, *Breaking Rockefeller: The Incredible Story of the Ambitious Rivals Who Toppled an Oil Empire* (New York: Viking, 2016); Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2019).

The federal investigation into unfair monopolistic practices in the Healdton field was directly tied to the geochemical makeup of the crude oil extracted from Healdton's producing sands and its subsequent value on international markets. Between January and April of 1914, the Magnolia Pipeline Company (a predecessor to Mobil), a Texas corporation that acted as the only reasonable outlet for oil produced by the smalltime drillers who populated the Healdton field, lowered its crude purchasing price from \$1.05 per barrel to \$0.50. Producers in the Healdton field believed that this diminishment of price was an arbitrary decision made by company officials and a product of Magnolia's stranglehold on crude oil shipments out of the field. Others contended that a prolonged drought forced Magnolia to curtail pipeline operations, as rivers and creeks that provided water for coolant ran dry. Ultimately, the Department of Commerce ruled that the price changes had been made in good faith, that Magnolia officials had simply overestimated the quality of the field's crude oil for refining purposes. "Lighter" crudes that were more gaseous and more easily refined into gasoline were more valuable at market than "sour," sulfur-laden crudes. The latter proved much more expensive to refine into gasoline for automobiles, kerosene, and lubricants, and proved better used as a source of power for locomotives. Federal officials ruled that Magnolia had made a bona fide mistake in assessing Healdton crude as similar in chemical makeup to the lighter crudes that companies were extracting from the Cushing field at the time.<sup>56</sup>

However, geochemistry was subject to debate among government agents and oilmen, and therefore played into the politics of production and pipelines. The methods used to establish the petroleum's quality caused consternation among producers. Hydrometer measurements from individual wells, which industry and government officials used to establish the chemical makeup

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<sup>56</sup> Franks, *Ragtown*, 40-43; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of Corporations, *Conditions in the Healdton Oil Field* (Washington D.C., 1915), x-xii, 17.

of crude, proved highly variable and subject to a number of environmental and personnel factors that could lead to inaccurate gauges. Furthermore, the role played by sulfur content in dictating crude prices remained “a matter of dispute” in the eyes of the Department of Commerce. While some chemists who tested petroleum maintained that sulfur could be cheaply removed in the refining process, Magnolia argued that the particular “fixed form” of sulfur that occurred in Healdton crude demanded the propitious reduction in price. Magnolia also failed to construct storage and pipeline facilities that could adequately absorb the supply of crude oil coming from the field, a problem that independent producers demanded the Oklahoma Corporation Commission solve by ordering the company to build additional infrastructure. The heavy crude extracted from the Healdton field quickly broke down and lost its vitality when stored in tanks for more than several days, which exacerbated the need to siphon oil from well to purchaser as quickly as possible. While the Department of Commerce criticized Magnolia’s initial high prices for precipitating the oil glut, the company’s failure to accurately assess and communicate the geochemical makeup of the field’s crude was not against federal law.<sup>57</sup>

Racialized leasing rules that were the product of allotment also insinuated themselves into Magnolia’s sour-crude controversy. On two Native-owned leases overseen by the Indian Agency, the Magnolia purchased only three-thousand barrels of oil out of a total of over eleven-thousand barrels produced between January and March of 1914. In April, the regional superintendent of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) informed Magnolia that BIA inspectors discovered “serious oil waste” on a trio of Native allotments, which prompted the agency to order reductions in production by the lessees. The BIA desired confirmation that Magnolia was prorating its purchases, meaning

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<sup>57</sup> Bureau of Corporations, *Conditions in the Healdton Oil Field*, 45, 58, 65, 89-90; Williams, “Roosevelt’s Populism,” 105-07.

that the pipeline purchased oil from individual producers in proportion to their wells' maximum unrestricted flow. While neither the BIA nor the Department of Commerce concluded that Magnolia discriminated against certain producers when purchasing crude, federal officials concluded that "the number of obvious errors encountered by the Bureau in its examination of the Magnolia Pipe Line Co.'s records" and the "unreliability of existing records relating to production and the unsettled question as to what legally constitutes discrimination preclude a positive statement in regard to the subject." What these statements represented were admissions that federal petroleum regulators were subjected to a woefully incomplete portrait of the production and transport of oil. The private system of making oil flow from strata to refinery remained obscured behind individual market decisions and confidential corporate practices.<sup>58</sup>

White independent producers organized in response to what they viewed as unfair market relations in the Healdton field. Wirt Franklin, a prominent independent producer in the field, spearheaded the creation of the Ardmore Independent Oil Producers Association in 1914. It called for a short-term postponement of production in order to mitigate the glut of supply. Such small-scale action proved ineffectual, so Franklin worked to expand the producers' association, organizing a much larger group called the Independent Development League (IDL). The IDL called on Congress to place all interstate pipelines under the auspices of the Interstate Commerce Commission, prevent pipeline companies from owning drilling and refinery operations, set "fair" prices for oil at the wellhead, and create a Petroleum Bureau to oversee conflicts between producers and pipelines. The IDL's advocacy forced the Oklahoma Corporation Commission to order changes that went beyond any earlier action. The corporation commission required Magnolia to commit to a scheduled increase in wellhead purchases and to do so at a "reasonable" price. The

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<sup>58</sup> Bureau of Corporations, *Conditions in the Healdton Oil Field*, 75-77, 81, 89-90.



pipeline company was also ordered to build additional storage and pipeline capacity in the Healdton field. This and a similar order made for the Cushing field represented the United States' first proration rules designed to prevent discrimination in the oil fields. The IDL was the precursor to the Independent Petroleum Association of America (IPAA), a group that Franklin's name became synonymous with and which developed into (and continues to be today) a crucial lobbyist for independent oil and gas producers. Thus, the Mid-Continent maintained a crucial place in the political fights over petroleum. Originally heralded as a region of oil abundance free from the Standard-made shackles that stretched across the Mid-Atlantic and Midwest, independent oilmen became especially active in attempting to thwart monopoly power.<sup>59</sup>

What often went unspoken when petroleum's path from earth to market broke down was the fact that the "serious oil waste" that came with rule-of-capture drilling had long-term ecological effects upon the lands where overproduction occurred. On Indian allotments, the BIA's mandate to manage flows of oil only regarded the financial losses that Native estates risked when oil spewed onto earth and water. On non-Native leases, whatever weak laws existed to prevent overproduction often went unheeded. Rampant oil drilling exposed soils to saltwater, which occurred as a byproduct of drilling, as well as noxious chemicals that occurred as part of the crude. Aerial surveys of the Healdton field taken in the years following its boom revealed rings of salt present at the surface and bare soils where oil had inundated the landscape. Areas where petroleum had leached into the ground in heavy quantities became prone to gullying and erosion, even decades after the end of active drilling. Forest and crops often failed to grow in the Healdton-area soil

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<sup>59</sup> Franks, *Ragtown*, 40-43; Glasscock, *Then Came Oil*, 314; Franklin would lead the IPAA's fight for tariffs on imported oil through the 1930s, arguing that "American markets for crude oil should be kept for the American producer of crude oil." The IPAA grew into a bastion of Republican Party conservatism. George H.W. Bush served as the organization's president in the 1950s, gaining some of his earliest experience in national politics.

following the boom, despite such vegetation thriving in the years preceding oil's discovery. This rendered oil-dependent landowners, including Indian allottees, that much more reliant upon continued crude production, as their land deteriorated till it was no longer able to support any activity other than drilling. Tests run as late as the 1990s revealed the area's water to be unusually high in salinity and dissolved solids, often at levels that state and federal officials deemed unsafe and unsuitable for commercial or residential use.<sup>60</sup>

Overproduction in Healdton and similar Mid-Continent fields often resulted when the contractual obligations that drilling companies had towards lessors collided with oversaturated markets and inadequate storage and pipeline capacity. Charles Francis Colcord, one of Indian Territory and Oklahoma's wealthiest early oilmen and a major producer in the Glenn Pool, recalled a lease agreement that required him to drill ten wells, despite the fact that production from the first six wells completely filled his company's storage capacity. At the time, pipeline companies were only purchasing ten to twenty percent of produced oil, which meant there would be no place for subsequent production to go except into earthen storage. Colcord hired a team of workers to dam a hollow that he hoped would prove capable of containing the excess crude. He found that the greater part of the oil that fed the "great lake" was lost to seepage and evaporation. Colcord also recalled how the rule of capture demanded that producers keep pace with the drilling efforts of rivals who occupied neighboring leases, which led to flush production and widespread pollution. Petroleum's liquid and gaseous nature meant that crude and natural gas easily migrated long distances underground, especially once drillers had disturbed oil-bearing strata. As a result, "line fights" between neighboring operators commenced. Adjacent leaseholders matched one another

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<sup>60</sup> Sean Terry, "Surface Impacts and Landscape Change in the Healdton Oil Field, Oklahoma," PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 1995, 114-16, 129, 132.

by drilling a line of wells that covered the full length of their lease, hoping to ensure that oil located beneath their derricks did not seep across property lines and enter rivals' wellbores. Colcord recalled that the production that resulted from one half-mile-long line fight in the Glenn Pool created "the biggest lake of oil I ever saw."<sup>61</sup>

The overproduction of oil in the Mid-Continent subjected domestic and wild mammals and avian life to new threats. Colcord recalled that in the Glenn Pool field, rivers of lost crude ran "hub-deep" at times and that in the large earthen reservoirs that he and others constructed to hold such gluts of oil, birds drowned "by the thousands." Birds were often attracted to oil-sludge pits by trapped insects before becoming mired themselves. Tarry waste from both production and refinement first trapped they're feet, then their breasts, wings, and heads. Such pits also proved dangerous to mammals, both wild and domesticated. Cows, rabbits, and other creatures, mistaking spillage pits full of petroleum residue for watering holes, often became stuck and unable to escape. Even before Oklahoma statehood, boosters tasked with attracting white settlers to Indian Territory lamented the waste of oil and its ecological effects. One promoter wrote that, due to the

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<sup>61</sup> Charles Francis Colcord, *The Autobiography of Charles Francis Colcord* (Place unknown: C.C. Helmerich, 1970) 199-201. Colcord was the son of a slave-owning planter who moved from Kentucky to the New Orleans area during the Civil War. Colcord was highly critical of "carpetbagger" Northerners who promised land and civil rights to the freedmen. He celebrated the White League as a coalition of former Confederates and Yankee veterans who had settled in the South postwar. Through their armed defense of white supremacy, Colcord explained, they protected the South from "Ethiopian chaos." In Indian Territory and Oklahoma, he helped organize opposition to strikes by workers and in 1923 he led a coalition of businessmen and elected officials who ousted Governor Jack Walton from office after Walton declared martial law across the state in the wake of rampant attacks by Klansmen. In 1909, Colcord financed the construction of the twelve-story Colcord Building in downtown Oklahoma City, which was the first skyscraper in the city and one of the largest office buildings in the capital throughout the first half of the twentieth century. Today it is a luxury hotel. See Colcord, *Autobiography*, 1-15, 210-19; Linda D. Wilson, "Colcord, Charles Francis," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, accessed January 26, 2020, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=CO020>.

overproduction of oil, rivers in the Cherokee and Creek nations carried “a thick scum of oil to the Arkansas River,” to the detriment of fish, waterfowl, and people’s attempts to ford the region’s waterways.<sup>62</sup>

Much of the oil stored in earthen reservoirs seeped into the surrounding soil. Heavy rains caused reservoirs to overflow, spilling crude into local drainages and watersheds. Hot, dry weather caused significant amounts of uncovered oil to evaporate. By some estimates, twenty-five to fifty percent of oil stored in Healdton’s earthen tanks during the summer of 1914 was lost to evaporation. The Bureau of Mines observed that, in Oklahoma, it was common practice to allow oil residue—leftover from the emulsifying of petroleum, gas, and water—to accumulate in the soil and flow down gullies and into nearby streams. Local creeks flowed with so much oil that farmers ignited the tarry streams in order to prevent the ruination of their fields, filling the sky with plumes of black smoke. Even the oil that producers managed to properly store brought great risk. A tank-farm fire set off by a lightning storm in the Healdton field led to the loss of nearly four-hundred-thousand barrels of oil. In the course of the blaze, five 55,000-barrel tanks exploded and flames engulfed two earthen tanks holding a total of 120,000 barrels. The blaze destroyed numerous drilling rigs, small storage units, and pipelines and essentially shut down the field for several days.

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<sup>62</sup> Colcord, *The Autobiography of Charles Francis Colcord*, 199-200, cited in Frank Galbreath, *Glenn Pool, and a Little Oil Town of Yesteryear* (Self-published, 1978), 107-08; Edward L. Flickinger, “Wildlife Mortality at Petroleum Pits in Texas,” *Journal of Wildlife Management* 45, no. 2 (April, 1981): 560-64, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3807949>; while this source outlines studies undertaken in the 1980s, there is no reason to believe that the effects of open oil pits were any different in earlier periods; G.E. Condra, “Opening of the Indian Territory,” *Bulletin of the American Geographical Society* 39, no. 6 (1907): 339, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/198869>.

Most of the oil that did not burn was swept into nearby creeks by the storm's heavy rain. About five-hundred-thousand dollars-worth of oil and infrastructure was lost.<sup>63</sup>

Amid such conditions, enterprising individuals and companies reimagined the surface world as a petroleum reservoir to be tapped for profit. In the Cushing area, locals reported that oil flowed down Tiger Creek and other small waterways at depths of two or three feet. Numerous oilmen, farmers, owners of agricultural leases, and at least one Tulsa-area congressman invested in the construction of dams and traps on creeks and rivers, which collected oil from the water's surface and siphoned it to storage tanks and catchments. Oil "trappers" could collect thousands of barrels of crude in short periods of time. Between the opening of the Cushing field in 1912 and the spring of 1914, one set of trapping partners collected upwards of six thousand barrels of oil from a single creek. Like most of the oilmen at the time, they stored this crude in rudimentary and leaky earthen reservoirs. When a local driller sued the partners, alleging that the creek oil was rightfully his because it originated on his lease, the trappers successfully countered that their agricultural lease encompassing the section of water where the trap was set entitled them to the petroleum. If crude was not escaping into local watersheds in adequate amounts, trappers paid oil-field workers to drain tanks and ensure that the subsequent flow of oil entered the proper waterway.<sup>64</sup>

Delinquent flows of oil and gas also killed and maimed workers and oil-field residents and destroyed residential and non-oil commercial property. In Healdton, drilling extended into the

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<sup>63</sup> Franks, *Ragtown*, 40, 68-71; U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Mines, *Waste of Oil and Gas in the Mid-Continent Fields*, by Raymond Blatchley (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913), 24, accessed June 2, 2019, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.aa0009803628;view=1up;seq=3>; O.U. Bradley, "Losses of Crude Oil in Steel and Earthen Storage," *Society of Petroleum Engineers* 61, no. 1 (December, 1919), <https://doi.org/10.2118/919624-G>.

<sup>64</sup> *Oil and Gas Journal*, May 7, 1914, 14 and *The Daily Oklahoman*, September 19, 1915, cited in Ray Miles, *"King of the Wildcatters": The Life and Times of Tom Slick, 1883-1930* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1996), 43-44.

residential areas of boom towns such as Wirt (named for the champion of independent oilmen). Hastily built wooden and canvas structures quickly soaked up crude from surrounding wells and became fire traps. Subsequent blazes destroyed large sections of Wirt between 1914 and 1917, primarily due to the lack of building regulations, running water, and an adequate fire-fighting force. The worst oil disaster in state history occurred in the Healdton field in September of 1915, when a gasoline explosion and subsequent conflagration destroyed large portions of Ardmore and killed forty-three people. Over the span of several hours, gaseous vapors unwittingly spewed from a leaking tank car as it sat in a railyard near the city's downtown. The escaping gas infiltrated surrounding buildings and settled in low areas such as basements, before a spark from an unknown source set off the accumulated gas. The explosion destroyed the Santa Fe Railroad's loading depot and every structure within a six-block radius of the explosion was either demolished or deemed unsafe.<sup>65</sup>

Such destruction was not limited to southern Oklahoma. Nationally, between 1903 and 1918, losses due to oil fires amounted to over \$250 million per year, totaling nearly four billion dollars in lost fuel and infrastructure. Insurance companies considered rigs, derricks, storage tanks directly connected to pipelines, and storage tanks holding "new" oil (that which had been produced within the past year) the largest risks for fire, as agitated and recently drilled crude tended to emit the most volatile gasses. Federal officials tallied over four-thousand people who were killed by gasoline fires in 1913 alone. The Mid-Continent was the center of oil production in the United States and indeed for the world during this period, and portions of the region were constantly under the threat of inferno as a result. As one driller recalled:

...they'd bring in a gusher, and if there wasn't any market for it, they didn't care what the hell happened to it until the price went up. I remember in a couple of the

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<sup>65</sup> Franks, *Ragtown*, 71-75, 79-82.

Kansas fields they [*sic*] run so much oil down the creeks and let so much of it get away from the earthen reservoirs they had to store it in, that a couple of boom camps were burned up, completely wiped out. At Kiefer (in Oklahoma) there was always a big fire on someplace and oil running all over the countryside.

Spectacular oil-tank fires brought great risk to life and limb, and some residents lamented how oil booms destroyed parts of the local ecosystems they had grown up with. One oil-field worker recalled a Texas landowner who, despite becoming wealthy overnight due to the sinking of a ten-thousand-barrel well, anguished over the oil's consequences for living creatures found on his land. When a lack of storage forced the driller to turn the well's flow of crude into a nearby creek, the man "sat on the bank of the creek and cried because oil would kill all his fish. He was thinking of the old days when he enjoyed sitting on the banks of the creek and catching the little white perch. He knew those days were gone forever."<sup>66</sup>

However, oil-field residents also grew accustomed to and even nostalgic for the sensory experiences that accompanied drilling. Ruth Alexander, a boomtime resident of Oilton in the Cushing field, recalled how gas flaring at nighttime gave the countryside a "gala appearance." Belching oil and gas wells made their own peculiar sounds, like "a sighing or blowing noise, such as that of steam escaping in regular breaths." Alexander relayed how "the ring of steel-on-steel could be heard everywhere" as workers dressed the rig tools. The lazy, rhythmic sound of pumps was omnipresent and Oilton's residents "went to bed at night lulled by the sound of those motors." When a well went quiet for repairs, the silence "would keep us from sleeping until it started-up

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<sup>66</sup> "Oil Fire Rates Up? Insurance Men Hold Meeting and Discuss Boosts for Risks," *Petroleum Age* 5, no. 8 (September, 1918), 284; U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Mines, *Hazards in Handling Gasoline*, by George A. Burrell (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1915), 5, accessed June 5, 2019, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015077561382&view=1up&seq=1>; Lambert and Franks, eds., *Voices from the Oil Fields*, 61; John P. (Slim) Jones, *Borger: The Little Oklahoma* (Amarillo: Self-published, 1927), 80.

again.” Images and recollections such as these are suggestive of how early twentieth-century Mid-Continent residents understood oil production and its environments culturally. For most people, petroleum did not represent an existential threat to either human society or local ecosystems. At the same time, oil’s centrality to modern life was not ignored as it would come to be in the latter decades of the twentieth century, when consumers took for granted its cheap and effortless availability and when Americans in particular, dependent upon petroleum produced overseas, no longer experienced drilling firsthand. The noise, fumes, and fires that rampant production created often made ignoring oil an impossibility. More importantly, a “fossil unconscious”—as one historian has termed it—whereby the connection between oil abundance and social progress became largely unstated and unexamined, was not yet forged among Mid-Continent communities. Rather, petroleum occupied an important place in residents’ understanding of real estate, wage work, migration, local ecosystems, and the social emancipation that fossil-fuel wealth could both facilitate and undermine.<sup>67</sup>

### *Natural Gas and the Fledgling Hydrocarbon State*

The waste of oil and particularly natural gas in the Mid-Continent fields eventually prompted a more general federal intervention into the operations of oil producers, as agents with the Bureau of Mines began measuring and reporting on the frequency and intensity of fossil-fuel waste and methods for mitigating it. The numerous Indian allotments that harbored petroleum resources provided an opening for federal oversight, as the leasing of many of these lands remained

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<sup>67</sup> Ruth Clarice (Mansell) Alexander, “The Mid-Continent Oil Field-Creek County, Oklahoma,” *Creek County Archives*, accessed July 12, 2019, <http://files.usgarchives.net/ok/creek/history/alexander.txt>; Bob Johnson, *Mineral Rites: An Archaeology of the Fossil Economy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2019), 1-4.



subject to the authority of the BIA. The Bureau of Mines also did important work in shaping gas consumption through campaigns to influence the distribution of natural-gas use between domestic and manufacturing purchasers and to inflate natural-gas prices in order to encourage conservation. In an era before an integrated “energy industry” or “energy sector” was part of corporate, consumer, or government vocabulary, federal agencies such as the Bureau of Mines provided some of the earliest articulations of petroleum as one resource within a larger web of relationships that, broadly speaking, produced material power. However, the proliferation of gas into domestic spaces introduced Mid-Continent residents to new threats to life and property, as the excretion of gas from oil fields propagated conditions ideal for fire and explosion.

The Bureau of Mines, following congressional orders, first began investigating the waste of oil and gas in 1913. Gaugers found that, during peak periods of waste, the Cushing field lost five-hundred-million cubic feet of gas daily and that around two-hundred-fifty-billion cubic feet was lost between 1912 and 1915. The Bureau also estimated that Kansas oil producers had destroyed twenty-five-billion cubic feet of gas up to 1913, which based on the agency’s proposed minimum prices, had an overall value of six billion dollars. By 1912, wasted gas in the Mid-Continent amounted to 425-billion cubic feet, a volume that the Bureau estimated contained an energy potential equal to twenty-one-million tons of coal. Agents working in Cushing described the dangers that accumulated on the surface in such conditions: “In still weather the field was overhung with a haze of gas and oil vapors, and the amount of gas in the air was so great that no fires, open lights, or automobiles were allowed among the wells. Much damage was done and many lives were lost by the ignition of gas which had traveled many hundreds of feet from its source.” Another bureau investigation found that, considering the 425-billion cubic feet wasted across the Mid-Continent up to 1913, and given a daily market of one-hundred-million cubic feet

in the region, enough gas was lost to meet twelve years-worth of demand. The bureau concluded that “[t]he intrinsic value of this lost gas, if it had been saved, would doubtless exceed the value of the oil that has been produced from these fields.”<sup>68</sup>

The Bureau of Mines suggested several technical solutions designed to reduce the extreme waste of gas. Agents primarily suggested mud-laden drilling fluid as the solution to deadly wellhead explosions. As producers drilled into new strata and extracted oil and gas, changes in subterranean pressure created “stray sands”—pockets of highly volatile natural gas that could move through porous rock and migrate from lease to lease—which drillers could bore into unexpectedly, causing blown-out wells and uncontrollable fires. Mud-filled drilling bores trapped gas in its original strata, mitigating its wandering and conserving it for future production. Furthermore, during drilling, gas often escaped upwards through the space between the casing pipe and the walls of the wellbore. The addition of a simple mud solution that sealed leaky gaps helped prevent such problems. Because mud could help prevent waste, it too was mobilized into the political wars that overproduction generated. Some producers insisted that using mud to conserve gas placed excessive pressure on well casing and risked diminishing the production of oil. However, when independent producers such as Wirt Franklin pushed for comprehensive oil conservation laws and chided Oklahoma officials for mishandling drilling and transport, one of their demands often included the mandatory use of drilling mud. But drilling fluid was quite

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<sup>68</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Mines, *The Use of Mud-Laden Fluid in Oil and Gas Wells*, by James O. Lewis and William F. McMurray (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1916), 5-8, 24, accessed May 31, 2019, [https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc12338/m2/1/high\\_res\\_d/Bulletin0134.pdf](https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc12338/m2/1/high_res_d/Bulletin0134.pdf); U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Mines, *Waste of Oil and Gas in the Mid-Continent Fields*, by Raymond Blatchley (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1913), 20, 47, accessed June 2, 2019, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uc1.aa0009803628;view=1up;seq=3>.

literally a band-aid placed over the geochemical wounds that unmitigated drilling—a right protected by the rule of capture and a reality that was the function of policy—created.<sup>69</sup>

The Bureau of Mines also inserted itself into the realm of petroleum consumption, revealing how questions over the proper sale and use of natural gas during the period straddled a line between suggestions for efficient economic behavior and the advocacy of social policy. Numerous small manufacturers, including cement, glass, brick, and zinc plants, sprang up around the Mid-Continent's early gas fields, developments that the bureau viewed ambivalently. While these industries helped industrialize settler communities, gas producers often sold their energy resources at low prices and, as a result, the productivity of surrounding gas fields quickly fell. In the city of Okmulgee, in the Creek Nation, producers sold gas to domestic consumers at twenty-five cents per one-thousand cubic feet while manufacturers only paid three cents for the same volume. The bureau admonished producers for their “greedy exploitation of the field” and for selling gas to manufacturers at “ridiculous prices,” as low as one-and-a-half cents per one-thousand cubic feet, far below the bureau's suggested minimum price of twenty-five cents per thousand cubic feet. Federal officials not only viewed low prices critically, they also believed gas was best utilized in domestic settings because it was “the cleanest and best natural fuel known to man.” The valorization of gas as a clean source of fuel meshed well with Progressive-era concerns about the diminishment of public health and livability that resulted when coal-fired furnaces and factories polluted urban areas. Especially as white Americans identified growing industrial centers with

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<sup>69</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Mines, *Drilling Wells in Oklahoma by the Mud-Laden Fluid Method*, by A.G. Heggem and J.A. Pollard (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1914), 12, accessed June 5, 2019, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015077560939&view=1up&seq=1>; Bureau of Mines, *The Use of Mud-Laden Fluid in Oil and Gas Wells*, 9-10; Bureau of Mines, *Waste of Oil and Gas in the Mid-Continent Fields*, 6; Isaac F. Marcossen, *The Black Golconda: The Romance of Petroleum* (New York: Harper, 1923), 212-13.

people of color and immigrant life, boosters in the Mid-Continent seized upon the cleanliness of gas when emphasizing the racial and ethnic whiteness of their cities. One promoter from Tulsa advertised the city's favorability by stressing both its "spotlessly clean" gas-fueled buildings alongside its miniscule foreign-born population.<sup>70</sup>

Of course, the proliferation of gas into domestic settings produced novel environmental threats, as households began to tap into the explosive potential held by the region's hydrocarbons. One night in the winter of 1905, L.C. Perryman, a former principal chief of the Creek Nation, hosted his brother and young niece in his home. The two men did not notice that natural gas, which had recently been connected to Perryman's home via pipeline, was saturating the air inside the structure. His niece indicated that something was wrong when she suddenly fell to the floor unconscious. Perryman carried the girl outside into fresh air, where she eventually regained consciousness, narrowly escaping an untimely death. Others were not so fortunate. N.W. Julian was a young man living in Cromwell, Oklahoma during the Seminole boom in the mid-1920s. One night, as severe weather threatened, Julian, his mother, and his brother descended the stairs into the cellar of their home. N.W. carried a lantern. The basement instantly exploded when Julian entered it, the lantern having ignited air that was laden with natural gas from surrounding oil wells. Julian was badly burned and his mother was killed. So, while natural gas carried with it the hopes

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<sup>70</sup> Bureau of Mines, *Waste of Oil and Gas in the Mid-Continent Fields*, 5-14, 19, 42; Marvin Hurley, "Oklahoma Oil and Tulsa," Indian-Pioneer Papers, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma, <https://digital.libraries.ou.edu/cdm/ref/collection/indianpp/id/2352>; On white Americans' assumptions that pollution and urban decay were/are synonymous with non-white community, see Sylvia Hood Washington, *Packing Them In: An Archaeology of Environmental Racism in Chicago, 1865-1954* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2004); Carl A. Zimring, *Clean and White: A History of Environmental Racism in the United States* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); On bringing natural gas to urban areas, see Mark H. Rose, *Cities of Light and Heat: Domesticating Gas and Electricity in Urban America* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995).

of Progressive-era conservationists who desired a tonic for dirty coal, its ethereal nature produced terrible human costs whenever people failed to harness it correctly. And, more often than not, the relationship between Mid-Continent residents and natural gas was a toxic and constantly failing partnership.<sup>71</sup>

### *The Creation of a Carbon Democracy*

Federal experts filed reports on the overproduction of oil and gas and discussed how to mitigate the problem. However, authorities with the United States government had little control over who could drill when and where and with what consequences, especially in the Mid-Continent, where boosters and settlers had fought for the rapid privatization of Indian land and where very little acreage was managed by public-land agencies. White federal officials oversaw drilling operations on all Native allotments owned by landowners whom the BIA deemed unfit to freely lease or sell property. However, the number of properties that remained under such

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<sup>71</sup> Perryman came from a prominent Creek family and he sought justice for dispossessed Indians in the wake of allotment. He was elected principal chief in 1903 on the back of strong support from “full-blood” Creeks. By 1905, Perryman had positioned himself as a leading proponent of Indian emigration. Through the Mexican Colonization Corporation, a private company he helped establish, Perryman worked to secure land for five- to six-thousand Creek and Seminole citizens, all of whom were reportedly “full-blood” Natives or African-Indigenous. Perryman and the company’s backers hoped to reestablish pre-allotment Native life in a new place rich in game, fish, and fruit, where “the red man will be able to return to his former manner of living.” He was part of a delegation that traveled to Mexico City to negotiate with Mexico’s Indigenous dictator, Porfirio Diaz, for the purchase of land. “Editorial on L.C. Perryman,” *Weleetka American*, July 14, 1905, and “Editorial on Migration of Creeks,” *Mannsville News*, July 14, 1905, accessed July 3, 2019, <https://digital.libraries.ou.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/perrymanlc/id/30/rec/4>Legus, Perryman Collection, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma (Perryman forthwith); “Indians Hold Annual Dance,” *Chelsea Commercial*, July 21, 1905, accessed July 3, 2019, <https://digital.libraries.ou.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/perrymanlc/id/12/rec/1>, Perryman Collection; “Editorial on L.C. Perryman,” *Broken Arrow Ledger*, December 14, 1905, accessed July 3, 2019, <https://digital.libraries.ou.edu/cdm/singleitem/collection/perrymanlc/id/13/rec/2>, Perryman Collection; Louise Welsh, Willa Mae Townes, and John W. Morris, *A History of the Greater Seminole Oil Field* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Heritage Association, 1981), 25.

provisions was constantly falling, especially as white settlers acquired more and more Indigenous land. Instead, it was state government that first asserted authority in the realm of oil-and-gas production, revealing both the promises and limits of the burgeoning fossil-fuel state. At least on paper, the state directly flexed its institutional muscle, declaring the right to control the production of oil and gas through legislation that vested the Oklahoma Corporation Commission with broad powers over the process of petroleum extraction. Conservation seemingly remade the rules of the market and the very definitions of property ownership in the oil fields, rendering the geochemical worlds that drillers encountered a matter of public welfare and subject to collective action. However, legislators designed conservation largely as a means to ensure the private-property rights of independent producers vis-à-vis highly capitalized, vertically integrated corporations and, especially in the period before the 1930s, the state struggled to enforce its own laws.

The State of Oklahoma's power in the oil fields vis-à-vis Washington was not the result of disinterest or inaction from national authorities in matters of petroleum. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, the federal government claimed increasing authority over oil production, a development that coincided not only with the Progressive-era application of technocratic and scientific expertise to socioeconomic problems, but also with the United States' expanding and oil-thirsty overseas empire. Indeed, Progressive conservation was closely tied to the United States' imperial designs, which grew in part out of anxieties about the country's place in the global competition for industrial resources. The underpricing, overproduction, and waste of finite resources such as oil and gas drew the ire of conservationists, especially those allied with Theodore Roosevelt's presidency. In the same year that white businessmen in Indian Territory—driven by their disdain for federal restrictions on economic activity—achieved their goal of statehood, Roosevelt became the first president to remove oil-bearing federal lands from public

entry, a decision that was meant to ensure naval fuel reserves. This policy continued under his White House successor, William Howard Taft. Progressive-era proposals for the federal control of petroleum resources peaked around the outbreak of World War I, when Woodrow Wilson's Secretary of the Navy, Josephus Daniels, lobbied for the nationalization of oil wells, pipelines, and refineries in order to ensure future oil supplies for the navy. However, the outbreak of war and subsequent surges in demand for petroleum ultimately aided the individual rights of producers. Congress wanted full production for strategic purposes and provided incentive in the 1918 War Revenue Act, tying the federal depletion allowance to the value of producers' mineral properties, which in most cases far exceeded the actual cost of prospecting. The efficacy of such measures during wartime reflected a temporary policy consensus among oilmen and federal officials, and the war proved a boon for those in industry and government who desired tighter cooperation with the goal of achieving heightened efficiency and better conservation.<sup>72</sup>

Before the United States had entered the war, however, the State of Oklahoma pioneered legislation designed to prevent the waste of oil and gas and to limit production whenever prices fell too low, committing to a level of industrial authority that few semi-sovereign entities in the United States had claimed up to that time. This fit a pattern that transcended petroleum and stretched back to the transition from Indian Territory to statehood. The white men who established the State of Oklahoma had founded it upon the principles of anti-monopoly and a settler-friendly

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<sup>72</sup> Nash, *United States Oil Policy*, 18-20, 34-35; Ian Tyrrell, *Crisis of the Wasteful Nation: Empire and Conservation in Theodore Roosevelt's America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 1-18, 80-88; Oil-depletion allowances allowed producers tax deductions based on a percentage of what they extracted over the previous year, which was meant to act as a subsidy for the depletion of a nonrenewable resource. Conflicts between the state and the oil industry over the proper allowance code persisted after World War I and into the 1920s. See Peter Shulman, "The Making of a Tax Break: The Oil Depletion Allowance, Scientific Taxation, and Natural Resources Policy in the Early Twentieth Century," *The Journal of Policy History* 23, no. 3 (2011): 281-322, accessed June 10, 2019, doi:10.1017/S0898030611000121.

code of Progressivism, hoping that the right mix of policies and governing institutions would transform the beleaguered Indian states and their supposedly monopolized resources into a haven for Anglo-Saxon commoners. The state constitution, ratified in 1907, created a corporation commission designed to enforce anti-monopoly legislation and proactively addressed common anti-trust issues such as the lack of common purchasing and common carrying by pipelines and railroads. The state's founding institutions were the product of constitutional delegates who railed against powerful railroads and the monopolization of land as detrimental to the interests of white smallholders. These delegates vowed to create a state where largescale corporate consolidation was illegal.<sup>73</sup>

Prior to the passage of a landmark conservation law in February of 1915, Oklahoma had enacted similar legislation aimed at reducing the waste of oil and gas and discouraging monopoly practices among pipelines. A 1909 law required the plugging of wells that wastefully excreted natural gas, outlawed pipelines from knowingly leaking petroleum from their pipes, barred producers from allowing saltwater and other waste products to flow across the land and into stock ponds, and set rules that required the plugging of retired wells. A 1913 law defined as larceny any act of taking natural gas from beneath the surface of land upon which another party owned or held

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<sup>73</sup> *Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the Proposed State of Oklahoma*. Muskogee, OK: Muskogee Printing Company, 25, accessed November 5, 2019, <http://www.llmc.com/docDisplay5.aspx?set=61072&volume=0001&part=001>; Danney Goble, *Progressive Oklahoma: The Making of a New Kind of State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980); Oklahoma's establishment as a Jim Crow state fit this Progressive penchant for articulating social problems and attempting to legislate them away. White Oklahomans strove to apply a strict racial binary to the state's citizens, despite its legacy as Indian Territory. White and Black were the only racial identities signified in the state's early laws and Native Americans were considered legally white. This move reflected the desire of whites to institutionalize Indigenous assimilation into white society and was an acknowledgement of the many middle- and upper-class "mixed-blood" families whose patriarchs were often wary of revealing their Native heritage and who wanted to prove their whiteness.



a lease for the production of gas. Operators in a field were expected to only produce gas in proportion to the “natural flow” of their wells and to their rate of production relative to other producers in the field. However, the fact that subsequent laws were needed revealed how wantonly earlier legislation was ignored and violated. Indeed, the 1915 legislation required pipelines to submit to the corporation commission an explicit promise that they would follow the state’s common-carrier laws. Furthermore, the limits of petroleum geology and oil’s natural propensity to flow placed barriers on how broadly certain statutes could be enforced. For instance, there would have been no viable way for claimants or state officials to prove that natural gas had been “stolen” by a neighboring lessee, considering crude and gas routinely migrated underground. Such attempts to bound volatile environments with concrete rules and regulations proved untenable.<sup>74</sup>

The 1915 oil-and-gas bill promised to solve these shortcomings and was hotly debated within the legislature, among oilmen, and across the rest of the state. The proposed legislation banned drilling whenever the market price was below the “actual value” of the extracted resources. Lawmakers defined “actual value” as the average national retail price of petroleum products, so long as this rate ensured a “reasonable profit” for pipelines, railroads, refiners, and marketers. The legislature vested the corporation commission with the authority to establish the actual value of petroleum based on the standard provided. “Waste” entailed “economic waste, underground waste, surface waste, and waste incident to the production of crude or petroleum in excess of transportation or marketing facilities or reasonable market demands.” When waste conditions gripped an oil field, producers drilling from what the state defined as a “common source of supply”

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<sup>74</sup> U.S. Department of the Interior, Bureau of Mines, *Petroleum Laws of all America*, by J.W. Thompson (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1921), 212-16, 222-24, accessed January 28, 2020, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=nyp.33433062725258&view=1up&seq=7>.

had to adhere to a rate of production equal to the proportion of depletion they were responsible for when non-waste conditions prevailed in the field. Therefore, if under normal conditions, a theoretical producer's wells were responsible for one-hundred-thousand barrels of production from a field that yielded an overall production of one million barrels, then that producer could not extract more than fifty-thousand barrels were the state to reduce the overall allowed production in the field to five-hundred-thousand barrels. This was meant to prevent discrimination in the purchasing of crude by pipelines whenever supply escalated and prices fell. The corporation commission was tasked with employing personnel who would gauge wells in order to determine each producer's proper proportion. Any officer, agent, or employee found in violation of the act could be charged with a misdemeanor and fined up to \$5,000 or imprisoned for up to thirty days. Furthermore, violators could have their wells placed into receivership. The act's final clause declared an emergency and the immediate enforcement of the law "[f]or the preservation of the public peace, health and safety."<sup>75</sup>

On the surface, opposition to the proposed legislation centered on the authority it gave the state corporation commission to artificially set prices when crude markets became depressed and the power that the state claimed to define overproduction as unlawful "waste." One state senator declared that "this bill gives the corporation commission more power than that exercised by the czar of Russia or the emperor of Germany, and if the bill becomes a law no producer will have any individuality of his own." A prominent independent producer, some of whom even opposed ostensibly independent-friendly conservation measures, declared that the legislature might as well

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<sup>75</sup> State of Oklahoma, *Session Laws of 1915, Passed at the Regular Session of the Fifth Legislature of the State of Oklahoma* (Oklahoma City: State Printing and Pub. Co., 1915), 35-39; Oklahoma Statutes, Title 52, Oil and Gas, accessed January 28, 2020, <http://www.oklegislature.gov/osStatuesTitle.aspx>.

make the corporation commission the sole owner of all oil land in the state, considering that the proposed law “will absolutely destroy all individual effort and individual control of oil properties in Oklahoma.” Many opposed to the conservation legislation imagined petroleum and its producers as no different than agricultural commodities and farmers. For them, when the state claimed the right to directly regulate production, it was contradicting sacrosanct laws of supply and demand and undermining the inviolable liberties of producers. Some opposing legislators and oilmen insisted that the bill violated the property protections guaranteed in the due process clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. When Cushing producers were reportedly selling oil at the basement price of forty-cents a barrel, the *Tulsa Daily World* applauded their actions as proof that the independents were “doing just as they please, and...will continue to do just as they please,” despite the looming bill that “does away with the constitution of the United States.”<sup>76</sup>

Other opponents articulated their misgivings in more pragmatic terms, pointing out how the large players in the oil fields would only take advantage of the law. One opponent of conservation claimed that a seat on the corporation commission would be worth upwards of \$5 million given the power over the oil market that would come with the position. Standard was specifically cited as the company that would gain the most in such a circumstance. Senator John H. Burford opposed the bill, arguing that the term “conservation” was but a “subterfuge,” that the real aim of the legislation was to manipulate the price of oil. He questioned the state’s right to dictate price via legislation, insisting that the only legitimate way to inflate prices was for producers to build storage like the larger companies. However, unlike the market zealots, he

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<sup>76</sup> Glenn Condon, “Oil Conservation Law is Approved,” *Tulsa Daily World*, February 4, 1915, 1, 6; “Independent Oil Men Opposed Bill,” *Tulsa Daily World*, February 2, 1915, 8; “The New Bill!” *Tulsa Daily World*, February 5, 1915, 8; “The Price of Oil,” *Tulsa Daily World*, February 6, 1915, 8.

accepted that trusts were the ultimate dictators of price, stating, “if we were on the board of directors of the Standard Oil company we might have a vote on the price of oil, but as a member of the senate, I seriously question such a right.” Much like Franklin, a supporter of the bill, opponents tried to appeal to oil-field workers and what the law might mean for their livelihoods. One lawmaker circulated a protest that emphasized the number of workers who depended on the continuation of production and were paid not only to extract crude, but also to meet the demand for infrastructure and oil-well services. Perhaps twenty-thousand men would be put out of work in the Cushing field alone were the bill to become law, according to this legislator. “Is the attitude of the fifth legislature to conserve for the benefit of a few, the oil, or to conserve the lives of men, women and children who are dependent upon its production?”<sup>77</sup>

For supporters of the legislation, the state stood as the only institution that could protect small oil producers from the combination of overproduction, collapsing prices, and the infrastructural muscle flexed by vertically integrated corporations, all problems that peaked amid the combined booms in the Cushing and Healdton fields. Across the span of 1914, oil prices had fallen from \$1.05 a barrel to forty cents in both fields and independent producers estimated that there were five sellers for every pipeline company that purchased petroleum in the state. Overall, producing companies made less money on the one-hundred-million barrels they drilled in 1914 than they had made on the sixty-three million barrels produced in 1913. Pro-conservation independents and their supporters aimed much of their resentment regarding these conditions towards Standard and its subsidiaries, the Prairie Pipe Line and Prairie Oil and Gas companies.

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<sup>77</sup> Glenn Condon, “Conservation Bill through Lower House,” *Tulsa Daily World*, February 5, 1915, 1, 6; Condon, “Oil Conservation Law is Approved,” 1, 6; “Oil Bill Comes Up in Senate Today,” *Tulsa Daily World*, February 6, 1915, 6.

One commentator wondered if a conservation law would finally force cooperation among producers, pointing out that independents had never before in the history of the industry successfully organized, developed, and stuck to a conservation plan. “The battle has always been that of the trained army, Standard Oil, against the unorganized and uncohesive [sic] mob, the producers.” When responding to a more doubting legislator’s questions about the bill, one of its authors, the Tulsa-area representative Wash Hudson, declared, that it was “the only measure that has ever been proposed in any legislature that will have the effect of putting Standard Oil, the octopus of this country, on its knees to us.” An incessant focus on Standard made sense politically, as the recently dissolved trust represented a recognizable and plausible scapegoat for the problems of overproduction. However, this ignored the fact that independents continued to willingly compete with one another, and their drilling efforts left the industry at the mercy of volatile geochemical environments that often spewed forth excessive oil beyond easy human control. Furthermore, companies other than Standard made up the web of pipelines that moved oil from wellhead to refinery and smaller refiners in the Mid-Continent risked losing their modest but still vertically integrated operations if they were forced to act as common purchasers.<sup>78</sup>

Other supporters of the bill focused less on Standard itself and more on the structural aspects of the industry that facilitated uncompetitive concentrations of capital. Roy Johnson, a prominent independent from Ardmore and president of the Crystal Oil Company, understood the bill as a means to empower the state corporation commission to end practices that had led to the

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<sup>78</sup> “Go to War—Train an Army,” *The Daily Ardmoreite*, February 21, 1915, Condon, 12; “Oil Conservation Law is Approved,” 6; “Oil and Gas News,” *The Daily Ardmoreite*, February 9, 1915, 8. All newspaper articles come from the Oklahoma Historical Society’s “Oklahoma Digital Newspaper Program,” <https://gateway.okhistory.org/explore/collections/ODNP/>. The State of Oklahoma does not keep records of legislative intent. Because of this, newspapers represent the best source of historical information on legislative debates between lawmakers, oilmen, and the general public.

collapse of oil prices nationwide. By giving the corporation commission the power to outlaw overproduction and set prices when markets became depressed, the proposed legislation would rightfully place Oklahoma's oil fields "in the same position as if they were owned by one man." Ultimately, Johnson believed such legislation would allow small operators to produce at the same profit as larger companies, which could afford to build storage for surplus oil when conditions of overproduction took hold. Because storage ensured potent market power—for example, Standard-affiliated companies stored over forty-million barrels of crude in the Cushing field at the time, ensuring profits by agreeing to futures contracts with purchasers—he hoped legislation would outlaw the construction and use of large tank farms. Johnson tried to dispel the critiques of his peers, stating, "Those who object to the bill as something new and impossible should remember that ten years or more ago the same thing was said regarding the government's ability to regulate and control the railroads." He and others understood the proposed legislation as part of a larger Progressive mobilization of state power, with principles that hearkened to the Populists of the late-nineteenth century, arrayed against an increasingly consolidated, corporatized economy.<sup>79</sup>

Independents who supported the bill understood their place at the intersection of anti-monopolism and conservation. Wirt Franklin was an important proponent of the bill and, like his partner Johnson, supported the proposed law's aim of giving the corporation commission "absolute power" to prevent the waste of oil and gas. For Franklin, conservation legislation would bar "the rich and powerful" from using their "superior financial ability" to build steel storage and continue drilling whenever prices collapsed, draining petroleum from beneath the lands of their less fortunate neighbors. Franklin also voiced his concerns about overproduction in the Progressive-

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<sup>79</sup> "Oil and Gas News," *The Daily Ardmoreite*, February 8, 1915, 8; "Facts about Cushing," *The Daily Ardmoreite*, February 18, 1915, 8; For the connections between anti-monopolist oilmen in the Mid-Continent and the Populist tradition, see Williams, "Roosevelt's Populism."

conservationist rhetoric of his day. He acknowledged that, unlike cotton or corn, petroleum could not be reproduced year after year, and “once taken from the depository, where nature has placed it, is gone forever.” These “fluctuating and spasmodic conditions” that gripped the oil industry meant a producer could be wealthy one day and “a pauper” the next, and that oil-field workers could make high wages for several weeks or months and then suddenly face extended periods of unemployment whenever prices collapsed. Thus, Franklin believed the new law would result in “steady profits to the producer of oil, steady employment for the men engaged in its production, and by the elimination of waste it should result in cheaper refined products to the consumer.”<sup>80</sup>

Despite the misgivings of some producers and legislators, the bill became law. On paper, the 1915 conservation code was quite radical. Defining an oil or gas field as a “common source of supply” implicitly militated against the most liberal notions of the rule of capture and pushed back against the leasing system that had long been the mechanism for reconciling the rights of landowners with those of oil producers. In the wake of the conservation law’s passage, *The Daily Ardmoreite* echoed the cooperation and state power that this and other aspects of the legislation authorized. The Healdton-field paper urged loyalty toward the corporation commission and support for its intended goal of closely controlling production among the state’s oilmen, as well as a more general spirit of cooperation among landowners and oilmen. Oil development “deserves the earnest cooperation of every man” in Oklahoma. This acknowledgement of the individualism of independents, acceptance of the economic power of Standard and other large companies, and demand for loyalty toward a state recently founded on the principles of white-settler self-rule neatly reflected the Mid-Continent’s tenuous carbon democracy on the eve of World War I. Amid battles over price collapses and wasted oil, lawmakers occasionally invoked the concerns of

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<sup>80</sup> “Oil and Gas News,” *The Daily Ardmoreite*, February 8, 1915, 8.

workers and consumers. However, the conflicts surrounding the political economy of oil at the time revolved around the rights, privileges, and revenues of oil producers. While the 1915 law created tools for a more collective approach to petroleum production, the state proved reluctant to fully seize control of extraction during subsequent periods of overproduction. The 1915 law proved to be more of a rhetorical salvo aimed at Standard by some independents and their representatives. As we will see, the lack of enforcement of production rules would become untenable in the 1930s, when overproduction prompted the declaration of martial law. In the meantime, the growing demand for petroleum driven by the war in Europe alleviated the problem of oversupply in the Mid-Continent, especially after 1917, when the United States began mobilizing its own armed forces.<sup>81</sup>

Finally, even with the successful creation of a robust conservation bill, one of its authors personified how, for many white men, the realization of “local” settler sovereignty over oil and everything else in the former Indian Territory was seemingly never secured. Wash Hudson, who had helped write the conservation bill, would in time become a founder and leader of the Tulsa branch of the Ku Klux Klan. Subsequent chapters will deal with that organization’s presence in both the oil fields and the latter city, whose white residents would destroy “Black Wall Street” and simultaneously tout their town as the “Oil Capital of the World.” Here, it is worth noting Hudson as the embodiment of the brand of racial capitalism that many oilmen hoped to forge. In their vision, the state government would subsidize and support certain market actors, specifically wildcatters who met the dictates of white provincialism and could wield the moral authority that came with shrewd, proprietary enterprising. In the words of the time, the state should construct the

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<sup>81</sup> “Loyalty to the Corporation Commission,” *The Daily Ardmoreite*, February 21, 1915, 6; “Oil and Gas News,” *The Daily Ardmoreite*, February 15, 1915, 8.



market to favor the “local” and the “little guy.” In the white-supremacist culture that undergirded settler life in Indian Territory and Oklahoma, legislators and oilmen inevitably imagined all small-scale proprietors as white men. Furthermore, these businessmen met a standard of whiteness that multinational corporations, which appeared un beholden to any definable racial community (let alone Oklahoma’s oil towns), could not. Thus, while Wash Hudson and his contemporaries rarely linked their anti-monopolism to their commitments to white supremacy, the two beliefs went hand-in-hand in a world where white-settler producerism appeared under perpetual “outside” threat.<sup>82</sup>

What remains of the early twentieth-century booms in the Mid-Continent fields are physical testaments to the political-ecological drama of bringing oil and gas to capitalist markets: artifacts of the transformation of an explosive, ever-moving set of liquids and vapors, formed over millennia thousands of feet underground, into rationalized commodities. In the Healdton field, tank farms originally built during the boom were torn down long ago, but many left behind indentations in the landscape that today are clearly visible in satellite imagery. While soil in certain parts of the field remains ruined due to the surface runoff of oil waste, many of the berms left behind by the massive oil tanks support healthy grasses and timber. In some places, tank berms have acted as catchments and created ponds that help water livestock. Aerial surveys done in 1939, two decades after peak production in the field, showed former slush ponds—where producers kept drilling waste, saltwater, and petroleum produced beyond storage capacity—ringed with salt and dead vegetation. Over the ensuing years, the ecosystems in and around these slush ponds largely

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<sup>82</sup> Steve Gerkin, “The White Knight Vigilantes: Exposing the Founders of Tulsa’s KKK,” *The Frontier*, May 8, 2016, accessed February 5, 2020, <https://www.readfrontier.org/stories/the-white-knight-vigilantes-exposing-the-founders-of-tulas-kkk/>; Danney Goble, *Tulsa! Biography of the American City* (Tulsa, OK: Council Oak Books, 1997), 129.

recovered, and the ponds themselves are today used as watering holes for livestock. By the 1990s, they harbored healthy populations of algae, frogs, and turtles, and the cattails rimming the ponds provided habitat for multiple species of bird.<sup>83</sup>

This recovery points to the resilience of the species that makeup Healdton's localized ecosystems, not to the harmlessness of unmitigated drilling and wanton wastefulness. The large amounts of spilled oil that inundated parts of the field, especially before the implementation of heightened conservation measures, could still be found clumped together with deposits of soil over seventy years after peak production. Crude did not kill the soil's capacity to nurture vegetation, but it did alter the types of species capable of thriving. Where it saturated the ground in large amounts, oil sapped the soil's ability to host crosstimbers, Bermuda grass, bluestem grasses, and other native species. In their place, mesquite trees (*Prosopis glandulosa*), ragweed, and broomweed thrived. Healdton's contemporary ecology is in part the echo of a historically specific regime of oil production. It is a relic of a certain matrix of geochemical circumstance, technology, human migrations, people's labor, and a way of harnessing the natural world under a set of legal relations we know as property.<sup>84</sup>

The legacy of oil tanks in Cushing is also the product of this matrix, but one that harbors different results. Although the booming production years are long gone and the town of Cushing is home to only about 8,000 residents, hundreds of active storage tanks still dot the landscape. Owing to its central location and its large concentration of oil-transport infrastructure, Cushing grew into North America's primary pipeline hub during the mid- and late-twentieth century. Beginning in the 1980s, the New York Mercantile Exchange began using the volume of crude

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<sup>83</sup> Terry, "Surface Impacts and Landscape Change," 84, 98-99, 132-33.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 136-40.

stored in Cushing's tank farms to establish the value of oil-futures contracts that were traded on its market. From this point onward, Cushing became a vital node in a growing web of global financial commodities and a physical place that stands as a reminder of the material origins of seemingly abstract streams of value. By 2019, the array of storage tanks in Cushing had a capacity of 77 million barrels. This, in a sense, represented the triumph of the large pipeline companies and their offshoots, whose power in the early twentieth-century arose from their ability to store oil at greater rates than competitors, and who innovated the first long-term delivery contracts as a means to making money amid surpluses. However, Cushing's glut of petroleum was also in part the result of import and export restrictions that kept crude from funneling into port cities such as Houston and Beaumont, Texas. Independents had once championed the preservation of American oil for American producers and consumers, and Cushing's rise as North American oil's gathering place seemed to partially vindicate their past political struggles.<sup>85</sup>

Cushing's continued place at the center of oil's global commoditization has, like in earlier years, resulted in growing ecological risks. In November of 2016, a 5.0-magnitude earthquake struck near the oil-tank terminal, damaging numerous buildings and homes in the town and causing schools and other public institutions to temporarily close. While there was no reported damage to petroleum infrastructure, the occurrence of moderate seismic activity so close to one of the world's largest oil-storage hubs drew widespread attention. It also highlighted how human dependencies upon petroleum continued to metastasize into new threats to communities and ecosystems. The

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<sup>85</sup> Sheela Tobben, "Building Boom Shows Biggest U.S. Oil Hub Hasn't Lost its Allure," *Bloomberg*, June 4, 2019, accessed February 18, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-06-04/building-boom-shows-biggest-u-s-oil-hub-hasn-t-lost-its-allure>; Devika Krishna Kumar, "Cushing's Oil Market Clout Wanes amid U.S. Export Boom," *Reuters*, April 11, 2018, accessed February 18, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-oil-record-cushing-analysis/cushings-oil-market-clout-wanes-amid-u-s-export-boom-idUSKBN1HI0GE>.

earthquake was part of a series of tremors that scientists attributed to the oil-and-gas industry's disposal of wastewater in underground wells, a practice that placed novel pressures on geologic faults and has caused central Oklahoma—an area that historically has experienced very few earthquakes—to become as seismically active as parts of California. Cushing's water-injection earthquakes mirror the volatile partnerships that people and petroleum forged a century earlier when the former began pulling liquids and gasses from the earth. The development of surface places such as Cushing occurred relationally, through the interaction of people and foreign geologic environments; however, in tapping into and transforming subterranean geologies, oil producers then and now risked unleashing both economic and ecological forces that could destroy as quickly as they enriched. It was through these processes of extraction and commodification that mostly hidden and seemingly simplistic technologies such as pipelines and storage tanks became, and remain, political objects central to the construction of carbon democracies.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Rebecca Hersher, "Earthquake Shakes Oklahoma Oil Storage Hub," *NPR*, November 7, 2016, accessed February 18, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/sections/two-way/2016/11/07/500998673/earthquake-shakes-oklahoma-oil-storage-hub>; Joe Wertz, "Cushing Residents Seek Class-Action Lawsuit against Oil Companies over Earthquakes," *State Impact Oklahoma*, accessed February 18, 2020, <https://stateimpact.npr.org/oklahoma/2016/12/06/cushing-residents-seek-class-action-lawsuit-against-oil-companies-over-earthquakes/>.

## Chapter 3

### White Workers and “Black Gold”: Race, Class, and Workscapes in the Mid-Continent

Labor in the Mid-Continent’s oil fields often presented workers, oil companies, and the residents of the region with a set of interrelated conflicts that proved difficult to square amid the rush for production. One tension that consistently vexed workers was their relationship with the unpredictable and uncompromising subterranean environments they labored to harness and exploit. Successful oil production required experienced drilling operators able to “read” geologic formations through the feel of their tools. Because of this, certain oil-field workers, such as drillers, demanded high wages, and many earned enough to become independent operators themselves. However, the work of petroleum production exposed drillers and their colleagues—whether they labored on the rigs, along pipeline routes, or in refineries—to considerable dangers, including collapsing derricks, tumbling lengths of steel pipe, toxic fumes, and explosions. In this case, the tension was, in a sense, one of colliding scales of time. The underground natures that drilling crews tapped into could release energy built up over millennia in a matter of seconds. Indeed, the production of cheap fuel was predicated on doing so, as producers relied on the free energy of built-up gas pressure to lift crude to the surface. But finding a balance between production and destruction ultimately proved impossible, and workers’ bodies inevitably broke down—either over the course of years or in the blink of an eye.

In this sense, the politics of labor could never be fully disconnected from the environments that both fostered oil booms and emerged around the relationships of production. Those politics were, on the balance, more conservative than of other extractive workers in the North American West. Petroleum “workscapes,” a term used by the historian Thomas Andrews to describe how coal miners forged collective power through their control of dynamic working environments, often

played a role in *diminishing* labor solidarity in the oil fields. First, those who labored to produce oil did not enjoy the spatial or technological autonomy that came with underground mining and other work in the West. Oil workers labored aboveground and there were no permanent mines or seasonal harvests that offered the opportunity of largescale organizing or choke points where oil workers could easily cripple petroleum markets. Petroleum work further differed from other extractive operations in that workers were primarily American-born, drawn from oil fields located in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and West Virginia. This petroleum workforce was almost entirely white and the industry preserved racial and ethnic homogeneity when the center of production moved westward into the Mid-Continent.<sup>87</sup>

The Mid-Continent oil industry offered some of the region's most lucrative blue-collar jobs, and the white farmers and farm workers who dominated the oil-field work force were no strangers to grueling physical labor undertaken in adverse conditions. The relatively high wages that petroleum work provided subsidized many of the beleaguered tenant farmers who predominated from the Ozarks to the Southern Plains, even as oil booms accelerated the consolidation of rural landownership in the hands of a wealthy few. Furthermore, boomtowns attracted scores of workers who labored outside of the oil industry, and whose work was a necessary part of the social reproduction of those who produced oil and gas. The "cheap" (that is, undercompensated) service labor of women and people of color proved integral to producing oil at prices that maintained a growing mass market in petroleum products. The influx of jobs and workers that booms brought on also created a flood of cash that inflated local markets and attracted professional criminals from across the region. While oil historians have often situated these oil-

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<sup>87</sup> Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America's Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 122-25.

field criminals as the last remnants of a romanticized wild West, thieves and bank robbers were, in reality, products of the socio-economic tensions produced when petroleum booms collided with longstanding rural poverty. Claiming a stake in the oil bonanza—regardless of that stake’s legality—often required enterprise and ingenuity. Bootleggers, sex workers, and fraudsters were oilmen and oilwomen in their own right, forging novel avenues toward economic independence through petroleum’s windfalls.<sup>88</sup>

The high wages and influxes of working-class migrants who accompanied each boom produced rampant fears among many white residents of the breakdown of racial and class hierarchy. Locals often labeled newcomers who were attracted to a boom “oil-field trash.” This class-based term of abuse aimed at migrants stood adjacent to the more familiar and racial “white trash,” which was also used to deride oil workers and their families. As the historians Gunther Peck and Matthew Frye Jacobson demonstrate, early twentieth-century white Americans went to great pains to try and define who was truly a white person or who constituted the “right kind” of white person, especially amid influxes of European immigrants. What was distinct to this prejudiced process in the Mid-Continent was that oil workers were almost all native-born Anglo-

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<sup>88</sup> On “cheap” labor’s role in producing “cheap” resources, see Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital* (London: Verso Books, 2015); Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore, *A History of the World in Seven Cheap Things: A Guide to Capitalism, Nature, and the Future of the Planet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017).

Oil’s hagiographers, most of whom wrote between the 1940s and 1980s, often situate boomtown crime in sentimental, at times mythical terms. See Kenny A. Franks, *The Oklahoma Petroleum Industry* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Heritage Association, 1980); Franks, *Ragtown: A History of the Greater Healdton-Hewitt Oil Field* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Heritage Association, 1986); Franks, *The Rush Begins* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Heritage Association, 1984); C.B. Glasscock, *Then Came Oil: The Story of the Last Frontier* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1938); Carl Coke Rister, *Oil! Titan of the Southwest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1949); Louise Welsh, Willa Mae Townes, and John W. Morris, *A History of the Greater Seminole Oil Field* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Heritage Association, 1981).

Americans. Nevertheless, their status as unattached, young outsiders rendered them threats in many people's eyes. White people in the Mid-Continent mobilized to thwart such threats through organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, which grew especially active in the region's oil fields from World War I onward. White supremacy was also woven into oil extraction in less formalized, more implicit ways. White workers used slang terms and told tall tales that affirmed common-sense notions of racial difference and stratification. White laborers also carried out ad hoc attacks against people of color who appeared to threaten the privileged access to oil work that white men demanded. Finally, oil companies established company towns that exclusively housed the families of white workers, reinforcing the assumption that petroleum, while holding the potential to threaten white hegemony in the Southwest, could be properly directed towards the realization of segregation on white people's terms. Thus, while oil workers led significant reform movements and revolutionary insurrections in Russia, Mexico, Iran, and elsewhere during the twentieth century, no such thing occurred in the United States, where racial segregation and the cultivation of a shared identity of "oilmen" tied together the lowest-paid white workers with the wealthiest Euro-American executives.<sup>89</sup>

While white supremacy within the oil industry often went hand-in-hand with opposition to labor organizing, resistance among workers still flourished from time to time in the Mid-Continent. Worker mobilization took various forms. The relatively conservative labor movements that proved

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<sup>89</sup> Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigration and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) and Gunther Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor: Padrones and Immigrant Workers in the North American West, 1880-1930* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Kaveh Ehsani, "Disappearing the Workers: How Labor in the Oil Complex has been Made Invisible," 13-26, in Touraj Atabaki, Elisabetta Bini, and Kaveh Ehsani, eds., *Working for Oil: Comparative Social Histories of Labor in the Global Oil Industry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Geoff Mann, *Our Daily Bread: Wages, Workers, and the Political Economy of the American West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007).



most successful in the oil industry often embraced racial and class-based hierarchy. However, the Mid-Continent was also a center of political radicalism during the first decades of the twentieth century. The oil industry and its workers inevitably became embroiled in the socialist movements that grew popular in the rural Southwest amid the first petroleum booms, and radical organizers illustrated new ways of imagining carbon democracy. Furthermore, exploited workers practiced agency through practices that transcended well-defined ideological movements. Workers who battled underemployment and chronic injuries used their knowledge of oil infrastructures to steal petroleum from the very companies that relied upon their labor. The clandestine actions that workers took to secure contraband oil for their own benefit highlighted how the networks of wells, storage tanks, pipelines, and refineries that crosshatched oil fields and refinery centers brimmed with possibilities, from ecological destruction to a semblance of power for the working class.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Western historians who have focused on labor have tended to emphasize transnational transient workers and/or union organizing. There is an especially heavy thread of more radically minded historians who have written extensively about the International Workers of the World in the region. Very few non-American, non-white workers labored in the direct production of oil, and while oil workers tapped into the networks of IWW organizers in the region from time to time, organized radicalism was rare in the oil fields. Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1987); Joanna Dyl, "Transience, Labor, and Nature: Itinerant Workers in the American West," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, no. 85 (Spring 2014): 97-117, accessed August 19, 2020, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/43302750>; Greg Hall, *Harvest Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World and Agricultural Laborers in the American West, 1905-1930* (Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 2001); Nick Johnson, "Workers' Weed: Cannabis, Sugar Beets, and Landscapes of Labor in the American West, 1900-1946," *Agricultural History* 91, no. 3 (Summer 2017): 320-341, accessed August 19, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3098/ah.2017.091.3.320>; Peck, *Reinventing Free Labor*; Carlos Schwantes, "The Concept of the Wobblies' Frontier: A Framework for Future Research," *Western Historical Quarterly* 18, no. 1 (1987): 39-55; Nigel Anthony Sellars, *Oil, Wheat, and Wobblies: The Industrial Workers of the World in Oklahoma, 1905-1930* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998).

### *Harmonizing Labor and Geology*

Profitable drilling was predicated on an often-unstable web of technology, human labor, and environmental circumstances. Drillers were skilled workers who learned how to “read” the subterranean landscape through their feel for their tools, the composition of drilling cuttings, and the gaseous and liquid irruptions that wells emitted. When the balance between bodily labor and geologic forces broke down, humans often lost. The strata that lay beneath the feet of workers was alive with forces capable of destroying eighty-foot-tall derricks in a matter of seconds, bringing thousands of pounds of equipment crashing down upon laborers. Those same forces, once exposed to oxygen and ignition at the surface, could explode into conflagrations that burned for days on end before being extinguished. Bodies buckled and quite literally burst—in the form of an epidemic of hernias, or “ruptures,” that afflicted oil-field workers—under the weight of the wood and steel that laborers erected to harness oil and gas. And the noxious fumes, sulfur, and salt water that spewed forth from oil wells festered wounds and poisoned bodies. Workers trained their muscles and minds to try and mediate these dangerous energies. While great physical suffering was often the result of this effort, labor solidarity in the oil fields rested upon masculine workplace cultures that celebrated the mastery of nature despite the risk to life and limb. Especially before the 1930s, oil companies were happy to cultivate oil-field masculinity, which glorified speed and strength on the job in the name of industrial progress.

Drillers in the Mid-Continent’s earliest oil fields indicated a well’s progress based on changes in drilling speed, variations in their feel for the drill bit, the exhaust levels of steam pumps, and changes in the composition of discharged drilling mud. In the nineteenth-century Mid-Atlantic fields and in the early Mid-Continent, drillers primarily relied upon cable-tool rigs, which bore

wells using steam-powered engines that raised and lowered a heavy drill bit over and over, gradually sinking hundreds of feet below the surface for weeks at a time in hopes that oil would be struck. During the first decades of the twentieth century, producers increasingly turned to rotary rigs, which proved much faster and capable of drilling to greater depths, but at a considerable increase in cost to companies. The inexperienced workers who struck oil at Spindletop near Beaumont, Texas in 1901 relied upon an early rotary rig and the initial well's crew allegedly devised the first drilling mud, which became indispensable to successful extraction efforts throughout the Mid-Continent fields. Realizing that water—which was continuously pumped into the well as a lubricant—could not prevent the Gulf Coast's sandy geologic formations from collapsing around the ever-sinking drill bit, the crew decided to pump mud into the hole, hoping it would act as a sealant. The mud's consistency proved capable of cementing the sand around the bit, allowing it to continue its descent. Drilling mud not only allowed for sturdier well bores, but also gave drillers the opportunity to more easily read the subterranean landscape that layered beneath their rigs. This method of reading geologies on the job proved important to the invention of new scientific fields such as petroleum geology. Skilled drillers became adept at reading the rock cuttings that were deposited with the mud as it cycled to the surface, correlating bits of geologic formation with the depth of the well, and thus better predicting where and when known oil-bearing “sands” would likely be struck. In the first decades of the twentieth century, companies did not require drillers to keep well logs that tracked the geologic formations they encountered, a fact that dismayed many early petroleum geologists. One of these geologists recognized that “geologic data of tremendous importance have been uncovered, but through carelessness and ignorance regarding the value of these facts most of them have been destroyed.” Indeed, into the 1930s, the geologist's task of understanding and illustrating the subsurface terrain of an oil field

hinged upon the labor of oil-field workers, who recorded the encountered formations as their drills deposited bits and pieces of strata at the surface.<sup>91</sup>

As oil-field workers helped build new scientific knowledge through their encounters with subterranean environments, those same geologies burned, maimed, and poisoned their bodies. John “Slim” Jones, a driller who worked in oil fields across Oklahoma, Texas, and Arkansas during the 1910s and 1920s, quite literally embodied the physical dangers of the oil patch. At one point, Jones worked on a five-man crew for a Standard Oil subsidiary in the Healdton field, and recalled being one of only two men on the crew who survived their time working in the field. His surviving coworker did not leave the oil patch unscathed, losing an eye in an accident that killed another man, while Jones himself ended up on crutches due to injuries suffered in Healdton. The unpredictable subterranean environments that Slim and his colleagues were tasked with harnessing often proved to be their undoing. In southern Arkansas, Jones encountered unstable geologic formations so laden with natural gas that, in some areas, drilling efforts formed sinkholes, resulting in massive craters up to five-hundred feet in diameter capable of swallowing rigs, derricks, and boilers. Jones recalled that the only way workers knew that a crater was about to form was “by the derrick floor starting down, then you make a run for your life.” Jones’ work as a driller in Arkansas proved especially harmful. He injured his spine on the job, which left him unable to move his lower body and forced him to lay in a single position for several weeks in the hospital. He remembered his neighbors in the hospital, one of whom had his hips crushed when caught between a vehicle and a warehouse platform, another who “suffered a great deal of pain” after sustaining

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<sup>91</sup> Bobby D. Weaver, *Oilfield Trash: Life and Labor in the Oil Patch* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2010), 2-4, 24, 28-31, 69; J.E. Brantly, *History of Oil Well Drilling* (Houston: Gulf Publishing Co., 1971), 238-39, 259; Frank Buttram, *The Cushing Oil and Gas Field, Oklahoma* (Norman: Oklahoma Geological Survey, 1914), 16-17.

serious burns all over his body. “I could see all the crippled oil field workers brought in,” he wrote. “Several times during my stay on the first floor, I saw the hall full of stretchers with injured men on them. Some were broken up and some were burned and all waiting their turn for the operating table.” Jones was clear about why he endured such conditions. In a Texas boomtown representative of his many places of work, tool dressers and drillers made \$15 to \$24 for twelve hours of work, and drilling teams often “made three days in one.” Slim even made enough to open his own wash house, blurring the lines between worker and entrepreneur in ways more difficult to achieve outside of boomtown settings.<sup>92</sup>

While drillers such as Jones could make more than \$15 a day in the 1920s, the roughnecks and roustabouts who assisted them often made around \$6. And for all oil-field workers, especially those laboring in the producing fields, steady work was difficult to find, as the cycles of boom and bust shuffled jobs and wages around the continent at a rapid pace, from Oklahoma, to Texas, to California, to Mexico and Venezuela, and back again. Laborers were lucky to find a full week’s work at a time and, in any case, had to live in isolated rural areas and boomtowns, where the cost of living proved exorbitant. Added to this were constant threats to life and limb and employers reticent to compensate injured workers. When one unnamed pipeline builder lost a thumb and smashed two fingers on a job in Oklahoma, company insurance paid just \$14 a week while he recuperated and he did not begin receiving compensation until two weeks following the accident. The same pipeliner witnessed a superintendent insist that a worker whose chest had been crushed by a stray piece of pipe be driven thirty-miles distant to a hospital in Oklahoma City, where the pipeline company’s charge accounts were set up, despite there being another hospital located only

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<sup>92</sup> John P. Jones, *Borger: The Little Oklahoma* (Amarillo: Self-published, 1927), 68-69, 72, 112-22, 143-47, 158, Zc52 927jp, Beinecke Library, Yale University.

seven miles from the worksite. On another job, a pipeliner and his crew worked for forty hours to seal a leaking pipeline, which forced the men to constantly bail crude oil from the muddy trench that held the pipe. “We just about lived in oil while we was [sic] fixing that leak,” the pipeliner recalled. “I got it everyplace, even in my mouth. I had scratches all over my hands like I always do, and by the time we’d wound up the job my hands was [sic] already swelling up. That oil poisoned me till I couldn’t even hold a knife to eat with or anything else...the sores kept getting bigger and bigger and if I even barely touched them against anything they’d break and the pus would start new sores.” Forced to make another claim, insurance agents deemed that the pipeliner’s frequent injuries were deliberate and the company blacklisted him from future business.<sup>93</sup>

The injuries that oil workers suffered reflected the environments that petroleum companies created in the pursuit of commodity production. Laborers tasked with constructing oil infrastructure, including pipeline, rig, and tank builders, frequently suffered debilitating hernias due to the stress of lifting large pieces of wood and steel. “Mummy” Rivers, a Sac-and-Fox and Creek man who built storage tanks in the Oklahoma fields, recalled that his brother-in-law was permanently forced out of work at age nineteen when he “tore his guts loose” lifting a piece of steel on the job. One rig builder, while being treated for burns suffered from steam-boiler exhaust, was told by a doctor that all rig builders suffered from a “rupture” of one degree or another. Another doctor relayed to the same worker that eighty-five percent of rig builders had at least a semi-rupture; “they might not even know they’re ruptured, but all...got piles, and some of them pretty bad.” Oftentimes, workers were left to treat their own injuries. One worker recalled

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<sup>93</sup> Harvey O’Connor, *History of the Oil Workers Intl. Union (CIO)* (Denver: Oil Workers Intl. Union, 1950), 20; “The Pipeliner,” Works Progress Administration Historic Sites and Federal Writers’ Project Collection, Records, 1937-1941, “Oil in Oklahoma,” Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma (forthwith “WPA-WHC”), box 42, folder 23.

prohibition-era colleagues who purposefully drank in public, hoping to be arrested and sent to jail where they could receive treatment for hernias and other ailments free of charge. Rig builders were required to build large derricks by hand, and prided themselves on constructing seventy- to eighty-foot-tall structures in the span of twenty-four hours. Under such conditions, fatigue only heightened the threat of injury. Charlie Storms, who worked in Oklahoma, Texas, and California, recalled, "I've seen rig builders piss while they was [sic] working; they didn't have time to take out to the brush, and they was so damned tired they just couldn't control themselves anyway." Such conditions existed due to the demands of oil producers amid the rush of construction and drilling that booms necessitated. However, workplace dangers were worsened by the masculine ideologies that metastasized across the oil fields. One long-time oil-field worker remembered rig builders as "a very special breed of men" who "prided themselves on being stronger, tougher, faster, and meaner than anybody." When a rig builder would fall to his death, "[h]is friends would grieve, wonder what happened, go to his funeral, then go out the next day and build another derrick."<sup>94</sup>

As early as World War I, the U.S. Department of Commerce began keeping track of workplace accidents in the petroleum industry. Its industry-wide tally illustrated how increasing demands for production spurred on rises in worker injuries in Oklahoma in particular. Between 1915 and 1919, when, as one British statesman declared, the United States and its allies "floated to victory upon a wave of oil," injuries reported in Oklahoma's petroleum industry rose from 2,406 per annum to over 5,000. Between 1915 and 1921, oil workers claimed over 33,000 injuries and

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<sup>94</sup> "I'm Just Gittin' Started," WPA-WHC, box 44, folder 4; "Rig Builder #2," WPA-WHC, box 42, folder 13; Paul F. Lambert and Kenny A. Franks, eds., *Voices from the Oil Fields* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984), 25, 30-37; Gerald Lynch, *Roughnecks, Drillers, and Tool Pushers: Thirty-Three Years in the Oil Fields* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 10-11; WPA-WHC, box 43, folder 29.

at least 253 were killed on the job. The annual injuries continued to rise after 1921, topping 12,000 in 1923-1924, the final year covered in the survey. In each year of the period covered, the petroleum industry represented over a quarter of compensable accidents in all of the state's industrial workplaces, a proportion that peaked at over thirty-eight percent in 1918-1919. An even higher proportion of the state's work-related permanent injuries were attributed to the oil industry, with a peak of over forty-seven percent in 1920-1921. Across the period covered by the report, around ten-percent of oil-industry accidents resulted in permanent disability. The Department of Commerce urged both companies and workers to embrace medical exams at the time of hiring, because "the derrick floor, pump station, or refinery inclosure [sic] is not a place for those physically unfit or mentally sluggish." The author surmised that some workers refused medical exams on the grounds of infringement upon their personal liberties, but "the endeavors of society are too interrelated for this idea to prevail." While the agency suggested that workers were at fault for their own lack of safety and admitted to measuring the cost-benefit of worker injuries in "a cold and matter-of-fact way," it also pointed to oil companies as the ultimate source of the problem, summing up employer attitudes with a quote from one petroleum executive: "I am for safety—if it doesn't cost anything."<sup>95</sup>

### *Cash amid Squalor: Poverty, Crime, and Entrepreneurship in the Boomtowns*

Oil booms fostered large populations of working-class men and women of diverse racial, ethnic, regional, and national backgrounds. The floods of migrants into developing oil fields reflected rural Mid-Continent residents' acute need for cash wages, as well as petroleum's ties to

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<sup>95</sup> H.C. Fowler, *Accidents in the Petroleum Industry of Oklahoma, 1915-1924* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, 1926), 7-8, 14-18, 23.



a network of international migration routes that followed natural-resource bonanzas. The mix of legitimate and illegal money-making schemes that flourished in boomtowns highlighted both the creativity and the desperation of often unmoored laborers, who either worked in the oil patch or provided services for those who did. Boomtowns were communities constantly on the brink, built in a matter of days to welcome workers who may only have reason to stay for a few weeks. The circumscribed timelines that marked the birth, life, and death of boomtowns contrasted with other Mid-Continent geographies, such as the centuries-old, town-based governing structures that Creeks reestablished in Indian Territory following their forced removal from the American Southeast. The difference suggested contrasting logics of time and space that oil's energetic properties helped realize and which petroleum's role as a commodity within capitalist markets demanded. Organic matter stored up and transformed into crude over millennia was suddenly sucked from the earth and, if not refined and burned as fuel, might be quickly lost altogether to evaporation or run-off. Simultaneously, peoples from a multitude of backgrounds rushed into the region in search of work.

The experiences of working-class peoples in the Mid-Continent oil fields were closely tied to the region's agricultural regime. Destitute farmers often left their fields or sent their sons away to work in oil production during off seasons, while still others worried about the agroecological costs of drilling for oil. When the original Spindletop gusher inundated farmland outside of Beaumont in 1901, local farmers did not see "black gold" flowing from the earth. Instead, many were irate that the shower of crude threatened their crops. Just a boy at the time, Charles Berly witnessed the torrent of oil and remembered that, "people were pretty disturbed by all that mess that was all over the face of the earth out there...They worried about the fact that it was going to kill all the fish in the creeks and interfere with agriculture." Still, many more rural workers and

tenants turned to the oil industry for wages and other social opportunities. Some oil workers recalled making as little as a dollar a week as teenagers laboring in cotton fields, while at least one tank cleaner, who had been orphaned as a small child when his tenant-farming parents died, was adopted into a landowner's family primarily to perform labor in the fields. These and scores of other minors passed as adults or found employers willing to turn a blind eye to their age and became low-wage workers in the oil industry. Furthermore, farm hands discovered that many unmarried women were much more interested in the high-earning oil workers than in poor farm boys, another inducement for young men to leave the fields and pursue oil labor. The impoverished backgrounds of these workers were commonplace in Oklahoma in particular. In 1910, fifty-five percent of the state's farmers were tenants, and in Creek, Seminole, Carter, and Osage counties—each the location of substantial oil production between 1912 and 1930—the tenancy rate exceeded seventy-five percent. In these and similar regions, it was commonplace for rural families to suffer from malnourishment and resulting ailments such as pellagra and hookworm. Oil—both as property and a source of labor—seemed to offer an escape from such destitution.<sup>96</sup>

While oil work offered relatively high wages, the influx of wealth that entered oil regions during a boom was always more likely to enrich largescale landowners. Landownership conferred the power to better negotiate leases with oil companies. Furthermore, small landowners were often indebted to wealthier neighbors and absentee farmers, who cancelled debts in exchange for

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<sup>96</sup> *Beaumont Journal*, January 10, 1969, quoted in Judith Walker Linsley, Ellen Walker Rienstra, and Jo Ann Stiles, *Giant under the Hill: A History of the Spindletop Oil Discovery in Beaumont, Texas, 1901* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2002), 114; "The Pipeliner," WPA-WHC, box 42, folder 23; "I'll be for the Union for as long as I Live," WPA-WHC, box 43, folder 33; Drue Lemuel DeBerry, "The Ethos of the Oklahoma Oil Boom Frontier, 1905-1929," M.A. thesis, University of Oklahoma, 1970, 23-25; "The Rig-Builder," WPA-WHC, box 42, folder 12; Jim Bisset, *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904-1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 10-12.

lucrative mineral rights. In the midst of oil booms, creditors called in loans in hopes of forcing debtors off of their land and seizing oil-rich property for themselves. Lawyers who represented poor landowners claimed rights to royalties whenever they won disputes over petroleum land. Those who grew wealthy from oil discoveries often sank their profits into land purchases and recruited tenant farmers to work the soil, expanding rural inequalities amid a petroleum-extraction regime that destroyed cultivable land and encouraged urban growth, which of course meant fewer and fewer acres available to modest farmers.<sup>97</sup>

However much the arrival of the oil industry in the Mid-Continent exacerbated socioeconomic inequality, it also encouraged a bevy of legitimate, quasi-legal, and blatantly criminal enterprises that often proved more racially and gender-inclusive than direct employment in the oil fields. Petroleum boomtowns remained geographically and jurisdictionally fluid, and to one degree or another, remained momentarily free from the hard lines of sexual, racial, and class-based hierarchies that defined more-established Southwestern communities. Such places created opportunities for poor, non-white, non-male, and itinerant peoples to start private enterprises and find work in locales that, quite literally overnight, went from largely uninhabited to flush with people and cash. For instance, Sadie Duggett was a cook who followed successive booms across Texas and Oklahoma, opening and operating a café at each stop. She displayed a kind of oil-field feminism, declaring that the “smart punks” who did not believe women should be present in boomtowns “can go to hell as far as I’m concerned,” while also reflecting many of the gendered assumptions regarding oil-field workers and their families that emanated from both working- and

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<sup>97</sup> Wallace Scot McFarlane, “Oil on the Farm: The East Texas Oil Boom and the Origins of an Energy Economy,” *Journal of Southern History* 83, no. 4 (November 2017): 860-61; Gerald Forbes, “Oklahoma Oil and Indian Land Tenure,” *Agricultural History* 15, no. 4 (Oct., 1941): 189, accessed December 10, 2018, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3739783>.

middle-class peoples throughout the region. In Duggett's experience, the wives of oil workers were incapable of properly caring for their husbands, because "[n]o man a-living can do a real day's work on the same things a woman will fix for herself; there just ain't [sic] enough to it." She was also hesitant to hire women to work in her cafes, as she felt they were "always egging the men on." Duggett's identity as an entrepreneur further encouraged her streak of conservatism; during the early 1930s, she resented the Works Progress Administration, a product of the New Deal, for paying wages that her bare-bones enterprise could not compete with.<sup>98</sup>

If the influx of workers and cash wages that followed an oil boom allowed women such as Sadie Duggett the opportunity to own and operate their own legitimate businesses, the same conditions encouraged bootlegging, bank robbing, and a host of other illegal activities. Some of the Mid-Continent's oil-rush criminals, who cycled through towns throughout the region over several years, gained national fame. Charley "Pretty Boy" Floyd and George Birdwell were from Earlsboro, a town located southeast of Oklahoma City near the Greater Seminole oil field, which was one of the world's most productive during the second half of the 1920s. Before Floyd ascended to the top of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's most-wanted list in 1934, he and Birdwell stole from the oil producers, workers, and sight-seers who flocked to Seminole. Many Okies viewed the two robbers as Robin Hoods, especially during the Great Depression. The Seminole area produced other lesser-known professional criminals who typified race- and class-based revolt against the prevailing order. Among them were "Spanish Blacky," a Mexican man who operated a bootleg joint and stole automobiles, and the Kimeses, a poor, white farm family who were notorious criminal participants in and around Seminole. Ed McCabe, the personnel director for the Indian Territory Illuminating Oil Company during the Seminole boom, regularly drank "choc beer" with

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<sup>98</sup> "The Oil-Field Cook," WPA-WHC, box 43, folder 10.

well-known bank robbers George and Matt Kimes on the family's leases, and recalled that the entire Kimes family "were all outlaws." Numerous fugitives who were on the run in the region found refuge in the home of Nellie Kimes, Matt and George's sister. Although McCabe remembered a large number of outlaws living in the Seminole field, he experienced very little violence. Even more tellingly, he clearly recollected the desperate conditions in which many who flocked to the booming oil field lived. "We had pellagra, we had every disease under the sun out there," McCabe said. Diseases hit ad hoc worker camps hard, where there was no electricity and few amenities. McCabe described "hundreds" perishing and that conditions in the field were "the worst thing I ever saw." Given such conditions, it is worth considering that the illegal activities that flourished in and around boomtowns were not simply the result of a few pathological individuals with unquenchable desires to commit crime. While many of the oil industry's hagiographers have wistfully recalled these criminals as proof that the Mid-Continent's oil booms represented the last remnants of a wild western frontier, these outlaws are better understood as products of the oil fields' social and economic contradictions. Black markets in illicit goods and grand theft offered short-term solutions to crushing poverty in places flush with money but still brimming with inequities.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Louise Welsh, Willa Mae Townes, and John W. Morris, *A History of the Greater Seminole Oil Field* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Heritage Association, 1981), 31-32, 40-42; Ed McCabe interview, Indian Territory Illuminating Oil Company collection, Living Legends Oral Histories, Oklahoma Historical Society; criminal solutions to ongoing rural poverty in Oklahoma was also prevalent in the years leading up to World War I, and was connected to the socialist and other left-wing movements that found purchase among tenant farmers. See Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, 330-44.

*Policing: Vigilantes, Company Towns, and White-Worker Solidarity*

Newcomer workers to oil fields, long-time residents of surrounding areas, and oil companies all articulated and policed racial difference through a number of avenues. Some of these methods were quotidian and seemingly created ad hoc, such as the slang terms that oil-field workers and their families used on the job and at home, some wore the guise of economic and industrial efficiency, such as the establishment of all-white company towns, and still others stood out as deliberately violent, taking the form of organized vigilante action that was explicitly white-supremacist in nature. The various forms of race-making and race-policing that marked the oil fields grew out of not only the Jim Crow cultures that encompassed much of the Mid-Continent region, but also from a longstanding regime of company-ordered industrial discipline and from the ethnic and religious fears that many white Protestants felt towards non-Protestant immigrants who hailed from across the globe. If, for those who benefited from it, oil appeared especially suited to the labor and the progressive desires of white Protestant Americans when compared to other extractive industries, this was all the more reason to preserve a racial-caste system within the industry's labor regime and among the communities where oil flowed.

The language that oil workers adopted and the myths that spread from field to field in the industry's early years reflected the whiteness of the workforce. White oil workers used racial slurs to modify terms for common pieces of oil-field equipment and to caricature types of people one might encounter during a boom, reinforcing the dehumanization of people of color through an exclusive workplace vernacular. On its own, the term *nigger* was a common word for an improvised lever used on the job. A *nigger boy* was an automatic firing control on a boiler, a *nigger head* a steam conductor on top of a boiler or a post used as leverage for a winch line, and *nigger wool* a substance used as packing to shut off water in a borehole, named for its resemblance to

kinky hair. The term *nigger rich* described anyone who made enough money during a boom to participate in high-stakes gambling. Beyond a shared workplace vernacular, oil workers also forged bonds between each other while living uprooted, highly mobile lives through the telling and retelling of myths, which often intertwined labor, masculinity, and in some instances, racial hierarchy. One story representative of the genre came from Gib Morgan, a driller who grew famous among oil-field workers as a storyteller and folklorist. Gib relayed a tall tale from his time working as a foreman on a ditch-digging gang that labored on a pipeline project. The ditch diggers were all Black men, one of whom proved recalcitrant to Morgan's orders. As the story went, the two men eventually began to brawl, rolling into a river where they battled beneath the water, whittling each other with knives. The mythical interracial fracas drew an imaginary crowd in the thousands.

Gathering workers and spectators bet tens of thousands of dollars on the fight:

The only way the spectators had of knowing how the battle was going was by watching for the pieces of flesh that came to the surface of the water. When there were more pieces of white-skinned flesh than black-skinned flesh coming up, the odds were in favor of the black man. When there were more pieces of black-skinned flesh than white-skinned flesh coming up, the odds were in favor of Gib.

After two weeks of underwater fighting, Gib and the Black worker surfaced to sharpen their knives. However, both men were so hungry that each ate a beefsteak four inches thick and, satisfied by the meal, agreed to a truce. While whimsical and fashioned to draw laughs, Morgan's tale was rooted in the racial hierarchy of oil work. The fight started when the anonymous Black worker, laboring in the "unskilled" job of ditch digging, defied Morgan, the white boss. The story also exhibited the shared manhood of all oil workers, which in this case proved capable of transcending racial difference, at least for the duration of a meal. However, this does not disprove the fact that white people defended white manhood and womanhood against racial "amalgamation" with

purpose and vigor amid the oil booms. Formal organizations that were explicitly white-supremacist often saw to this.<sup>100</sup>

The Ku Klux Klan was prevalent throughout the Mid-Continent region from World War I until the mid-1920s. The organization carried out numerous terrorist actions against Black people, non-Anglo whites, Mexican workers, and Indians, and exercised considerable political power in Oklahoma in particular. In 1923, Oklahoma governor Jack Walton, a Progressive Democrat, declared martial law in Tulsa and Okmulgee counties and, soon after, across the entire state, due to the prevalence and audacity of Klan activities. One historian estimates that 68 of the state's 125 legislators were affiliated with the organization at the time. These lawmakers and their citizen allies led the successful effort to impeach Walton and remove him from office. Leon Hirsh was the assistant attorney general who led the state's impeachment case against Walton, but even he believed that Walton's declaration of martial law was justified. "In many areas of the state civil war was about to emerge," he recalled years later. Klansmen and Anti-Klan groups "roved around looking for opponents." Tulsa saw weekly tarrings of citizens by Klansmen and in Oklahoma City, a prominent preacher's son was castrated and dumped on his father's porch by members of the organization. When Walton ran for the United States Senate in 1924, his Republican opponent, an oil executive named William B. Pine, won on the back of Klan endorsements.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>100</sup> Lalia Phipps Boone, *The Petroleum Dictionary* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952), 186, 207; Gib Morgan story from Lawrence P. Klintworth, *Oil Hill: The Town That Cities Service Built* (El Dorado, KS: Butler County Historical Society, 1977), 39-45, in Cities Service Collection, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma (Cities Service forthwith), box 30, folder 9.

<sup>101</sup> Carter Blue Clark, "A History of the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma," PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 1976, 178-82, 187-88, 207; Interview with Leon Hirsh, April 25, 1974, CBC, box 1, folder 4.



Klansmen and other white supremacists in Oklahoma, as well as in Arkansas, Kansas, and Texas, often identified petroleum fields as the center of racial, sexual, ethno-national, and class-based threats to white, native-born hegemony. The Klan was active throughout the region's oil fields between World War I and the mid-1920s as oil towns and other mining areas proved ripe territory for migrant laborers, union activities, and the perception among middle-class whites of rampant crime and vice. One historian of the Cushing field suggests that in the boomtown of Quay, located near Sarah Rector's allotment, upwards of fifty percent of the 5,000 residents were members of the Klan. A Klan member from Muskogee, Oklahoma complained to his congressman that the surrounding oil towns were filled with "no counts" who harassed women and girls and made a mockery of middle-class, white values. Klansmen paid the unwelcome migrants "one 'visit' and the town is almost a Sunday-school class." He stated that the presence of the Klan "certainly was born of great necessity in this oil country." The Klan's presence in the oil fields reflected the anxieties that white residents felt towards the great influx of working-class outsiders that oil booms attracted. Such animosities would have only increased when whites missed out on oil wealth while Black and Native individuals enjoyed tremendous windfalls, all due to an arbitrary system of allotment and invisible, subterranean deposits of crude oil.<sup>102</sup>

Klan rhetoric at the time especially exalted the "home" as a sacred place to be protected from "alien" influences. A preacher and Klansman from Texas wrote in 1926, "The Klan prizes the home above all institutions and stands for its defense, the purity of womanhood, the sanctity of the marriage vows and the development of character. No true Klansman will ever wreck a home,

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<sup>102</sup> George O. Carney, "Cushing Oil Field: Historic Preservation Survey," Stillwater: Department of Geography, Oklahoma State University, 1981, 13; U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Rules, KKK, 67th Congress, 1st session, 1921, pg. 6, cited in Clark, "A History of the Ku Klux Klan," 59.

despoil womanhood, break his solemn marriage vow or desecrate such a holy union.” The chorus of one Klan song sung at meetings during the 1920s went, “Home, home, country and home / Klansmen we’ll live and die / For our country and home.” Given the obsession with the preservation of stable, racially homogenous homes, oil boomtowns especially vexed Klansmen and middle-class whites in general. Boomtowns not only attracted men and women of color and immigrants from outside of the United States, but also unwed working-class women, who, in the eyes of many of the men and women of the Klan, represented the ultimate danger to the maintenance of stable, nuclear families. “Home” as the Klan defined it was nearly impossible to establish in a boomtown, in both its abstract, social and cultural form as well as in a physical state. Many oil-field workers migrated to and from booms with their families; however, the political-economies of boomtowns often forced families to construct improvised housing from discarded carbide cans, empty oil barrels, and whatever other scraps of wood and metal could be salvaged. The lucky ones erected canvas tents and dealt with the ensuing infestations of dust, rats, and mosquitoes. Rents were exorbitant in boomtowns, especially for family dwellings. In many places, boarding houses rented a single bed to two or three workers who slept in staggered shifts and bars leased pool tables and chairs to drowsy boomers overnight. Such conditions often made it impossible for families to stick together in the oil fields. Workers understood what this meant in terms of the racial and class perceptions of those around them. Charlie Storms, the animated rig builder, detested his inability to keep a home in one place, lamenting how “[a] man rents a house here like I done, buys his furniture and begins trying to live like most white folks do, and he’ll have to pull up and follow the oil. Either that, or leave his family there and go hisself [sic] and maybe not see ‘em for months at a time.” Storms’ anger over struggling, as a working man, to “live like most white folks do” animated how race, class, and gender combined in the oil fields,

creating impossible expectations of working-class migrants that, in turn, encouraged white-supremacist policing of social standards.<sup>103</sup>

The Klan further insinuated themselves into oil country by magnifying environmental anxieties over resource depletion and declaring the need to combat monopolies through local, racially homogenous commercial collaboration. This rhetoric placed the Klan within the realm of Progressive-Era logics regarding the proper management of nature and markets. In 1925, the Klan's national leader, Hiram W. Evans, touted the organization as the protector of racial and economic progress, claiming that "philosophy, or the understanding of life, and...science, or the understanding of nature," were historically the product of the "northern races." Evans further insisted that without the efforts of white supremacists to secure American society against non-white, non-Protestant outsiders, Americans would lose "natural resources and riches" that they inherited "beyond all others." Evans' rhetoric echoed the sentiments of white-supremacist contemporaries such as Madison Grant and the United States' eminent forester, Gifford Pinchot, who heralded eugenics as a means to preventing the "waste" of natural resources by non-white peoples, whom educated whites viewed as ill-informed, unproductive, and reticent to adopt market relationships. Many Progressive conservationists feared the overproduction and waste of oil and natural gas at the same moment when the Klan exhibited racist fears over the exhaustion of the natural world. Klansmen also aligned with the concerns of many independent oil men by implying

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<sup>103</sup> W.C. Wright, *Religious and Patriotic Ideals of the Ku Klux Klan* (Waco, TX: Grove Printing Company, 1926), 38, in the Carter Blue Clark Collection, box 1, folder 6, Western History Collections (forthwith "CBC"); *Kloran: Knights of the Ku Klux Klan* (Atlanta: Knights of the Ku Klux Klan), 13, CBC, box 1, folder 5; for the intersections of race and gender and the Second Ku Klux Klan, see Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1994); Roger M. Olien and Diana Davids Olien, *Life in the Oil Fields* (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1986), 28-31, 65-67, 98-99; Lambert and Franks, *Voices from the Oil Fields*, 37.

that faceless monopolies represented racially and nationally ambiguous outside forces. Oklahoma's Grand Dragon called on Klansmen to practice "vocational Klannishness," urging members "to always favor a Klansman in the commercial world, whether it be in buying, selling, advertising, employment, political, social or in any way wherein a Klansman is affected." This was a "sacred duty;" otherwise, the Klan "shall feel the yoke of utter dissension in our own ranks brought about through our inability to compete in a commercial way with great corporations owned and controlled by men who do not hold their allegiance to one flag and government."<sup>104</sup>

However, the precarity that was distinctive to boomtowns at times allowed for peculiar arrangements that accepted some non-whites onto Klan property. The town of Oilton, located less than ten miles from numerous Creek allotments that enriched the Cushing Field, attracted migrants from both within and beyond the borders of the United States. One white resident recalled that "a great many Syrian merchants established businesses in the town." One of the buildings erected in the town was the Ku Klux Klan Hall, which became a de facto community meeting center and the home to several klaverns in northeast Oklahoma. This Klan headquarters also housed the Naifeh Grocery, a Lebanese store started by immigrants who moved to the area during the oil boom. The non-Anglo-Saxon grocery was likely welcomed in the Klan hall because the Naifehs were business

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<sup>104</sup> H.W. Evans, "The Klan's Mission—Americanism," *Kourier Magazine* 1, no. 12 (November, 1925), 4-6, in CBC, box 1, folder 1; Ian Tyrrell, *Crisis of the Wasteful Nation: Empire and Conservation in Theodore Roosevelt's America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 16, 21-22, 35, 80-97; Progressive-era rhetoric on race and the environment was situated within a long history of conservation and preservation built on white-supremacist goals, bookended by a mid-nineteenth-century movement that touted northern Europeans as the proper domesticators of American ecosystems, and a post-WWII movement that linked white-, middle-class-led wilderness preservation to population control, see Miles A. Powell, *Vanishing America: Species Extinction, Racial Peril, and the Origins of Conservation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016); "The Definition of Klankraft and How to Disseminate It," (written by Grand Dragon of the Realm of Oklahoma) *Imperial Nighthawk* 1, no. 32 (November 7, 1923), 3, CBC, box 1, folder 2.

owners and Christians who practiced a practical and necessary trade, and thus met the respectable class standards that the Second Klan championed.<sup>105</sup>

In many instances, the mobilization of formal white-supremacist groups was not necessary, as white workers banded together to protect their favored access to the highest-paying oil work. Efforts by white workers to preserve a segregated workforce showed how the industry's high wages became intertwined with racial animus. Oil-field wages were not simply the product of an economic calculus between workers and employers, but also part of white-supremacist political demands that were wrapped up in white workers' desire to maintain their racially coded sense of masculinity. In Southeast Texas in the early twentieth century, segregation in the oil fields reflected the racial caste system of the sawmill industry, which had dominated the region before the Spindletop boom. Black workers were banned from working on rigs, which provided the highest wages, and were especially unlikely to become drillers, a job that required extensive training and was thus labeled "skilled labor." Definitions of worker skill in the oil fields both helped constitute and were constitutive of racial hierarchy. Low-paying jobs that were considered "undesirable" by white workers and their employers—such as digging ditches for pipelines, excavating earthen storage tanks, hauling equipment, and driving cattle through mud to churn up

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<sup>105</sup> Ruth Clarice (Mansell) Alexander, "The Mid-Continent Oil Field-Creek County, Oklahoma," Creek County Archives, accessed July 12, 2019, <http://files.usgwarchives.net/ok/creek/history/alexander.txt>; Carney, *Cushing Oil Field*, 40-41; Raymond Habiby, "Middle Easterners," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, accessed October 10, 2019, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=MI007>; U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Rules, KKK, 67th Congress, 1st session, 1921, pg. 6, cited in Clark, "A History of the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma," 59; for the Second Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma and elsewhere, see Charles C. Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1965); Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017); Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1994).

slush pits—remained open to Black workers. This division of labor, which was rhetorically based on “skill” but was, in reality, rooted in race, served to reinforce hierarchy on the job site. When this hierarchy appeared under threat, white oil workers rebelled. In 1902, whites from Beaumont raided the city’s Black neighborhood, known as “South Africa,” due to the presence of Black workers who were employed by tank-building firms on a jobsite that white workers believed should be reserved for them. A shootout commenced, with one white man wounded as a result. Entire towns in the Spindletop area, such as Saratoga, were segregated during the oil boom, and black residents were told not to be caught in white parts of Beaumont after dark. In the Big Thicket fields in southeast Texas, white workers physically drove Black construction workers from the area, based on the belief that the wages Black men labored for were too low.<sup>106</sup>

By the 1920s, oil companies had devised a new means of both promoting a uniformly white workforce and disciplining that workforce on capital’s terms: the company town. Between 1900 and World War I, oil-company towns remained relatively rare compared to other extractive industries, such as coal. Producers found it difficult to maintain even small communities of workers and their families, a reality that grew from the ever-intertwined hybrid environments and property regimes of petroleum production. Drillers did not really know where oil would be found, which compelled many small-scale producers to enter the fray. A multitude of prospectors would buy up individual leases in a booming field, creating a patchwork of lessees who needed to stay mobile, willing to abandon an unfavorable plot of land within a matter of weeks. These producers relied on locals and migrating service workers to help socially reproduce their workforce, which was—to the advantage of employers—highly mobile itself. The technological and spatial changes

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<sup>106</sup> Mann, *Our Daily Bread*, 1-12, 81-85; Linsley, et al., *Giant under the Hill*, 168-73; Steven A. Reich, “The Making of a Southern Sawmill World: Race, Class, and Rural Transformation in the Piney Woods of East Texas, 1830-1930,” PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1998, 198-202.

that petroleum energized helped facilitate this mobility. Oil workers invested in automobiles earlier than other working-class Americans, because, as one explained, “if he’s got a job, it’s probably ten miles out in the country from where he’s staying, and if he don’t have a job, he’s got to go all over hell’s half acre to find one.” Despite these conditions, from World War I onward, labor organizing grew increasingly prevalent in the oil fields of the Mid-Continent. At the same time, producers increasingly wanted to fight overproduction through the unitization of oil fields, which necessitated the higher consolidation of individual leases under one or a handful of cooperating companies. These factors helped increase the desire for and feasibility of company towns. Establishers of worker camps and company towns often baked racial homogeneity and industrial discipline into the model, offering another avenue through which the social relations that produced oil also helped produce and reinforce racial difference.<sup>107</sup>

Large oil companies, including Gulf, Humble, and Phillips, began to establish worker camps and semi-permanent towns around World War I in the Burkburnett and Ranger fields in north Texas and during the early 1920s in the Panhandle of Texas. In the Seminole field in Oklahoma, the Indian Territory Illuminating Oil Company (ITIO) established the Walker Camp in 1927. The camp was built in hopes that the company could avoid “outrageous” prices for food and

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<sup>107</sup> Thomas Andrews, *Killing for Coal: America’s Deadliest Labor War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 187-99; Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2019), 227; Sellars, *Oil, Wheat, and Wobblies*; For company towns in the oil industry and other extractive enterprises, see Linda Carlson, *Company Towns of the Pacific Northwest* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2003), John S. Garner, ed., *The Company Town: Architecture and Society in the Early Industrial Age* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1992), David Robertson, *Hard as the Rock Itself: Place and Identity in the American Mining Town* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2006), Myrna Santiago, *The Ecology of Oil: Environment, Labor, and the Mexican Revolution, 1900-1938* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), Carlos A. Schwantes, ed., *Bisbee: Urban Outpost on the Frontier* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1992), William Wyckoff, *How to Read the American West: A Field Guide* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2014); Lambert and Franks, *Voices from the Oil Fields*, 86.

housing and the transportation of men and materiel on highly congested and often impassable roads. The company hoped to “accommodate and care for the men directly concerned with the general operation” in the camp. Before Walker Camp, ITIO housed offices, employees, and equipment in a disconnected array of rented rooms and garages located in boarding houses, local residences, and on the leases where production occurred. Walker Camp was primarily meant to house employees whose work was not tied to any one lease, while workers laboring at individual well sites continued to live on the properties where they worked. The camp was completed at a cost of \$273,300 and consisted of offices, bunk houses, two garages, dining hall, recreation hall, hospital, sewage system, water lines, blacksmith shop, fire house, ice plant, tennis courts, a playground, and a movie theatre. The ITIO reported that the camp not only centralized operations but also maintained “high-class personnel in the field by making comfortable living conditions available to its men.” Living quarters built for executives were “appointed and furnished with modern conveniences rivalling those of a first-class club or hotel, no detail having been overlooked for the comfort and convenience of the men living there.” Around 250 people lived at the camp at its peak population.<sup>108</sup>

Other companies established larger, more elaborate, and more paternalistic towns in the oil fields. One of the first company towns in the Mid-Continent was Oil Hill, a Cities Service company town located in southern Kansas. Located northeast of Wichita, in the heart of the El Dorado oil field, Oil Hill was established to house Cities Service workers and their families. The field proved to be a massive producer and was coined “the oil field that won World War I.” There was some truth to that assertion, as the production at El Dorado represented six-percent of the United States’

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<sup>108</sup> *A History of the Indian Territory Illuminating Company in Seminole* (Indian Territory Illuminating Oil Company, c. 1930), 20-21, unprocessed, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma.



total oil output in 1918. By June of that year, Cities Service was extracting seventy-thousand barrels a day from the field. Oil Hill was also distinctive for hosting a working-class community established upon the paternalism and principles of the company's founder and president, Henry Doherty. Doherty was an eclectic man and an immensely powerful, if largely forgotten, business leader during the first decades of the twentieth century. He began working for a Columbus, Ohio gas utility at the age of 12, allegedly logging sixty-hour work weeks. A self-trained engineer, Doherty founded an eponymous utilities consulting company before starting Cities Service, which grew into a powerful energy and utilities holding company. Cities Service branched into the oil and gas industry in 1910, when Doherty founded the Bartlesville, Oklahoma-based Cities Service Oil Company, better known today as Citgo. By the summer of 1918, Doherty's companies reported controlling stakes in the majority of utilities in the Midwest and West and one-fifth of the United States' gasoline supply.<sup>109</sup>

Doherty founded Oil Hill upon the principles of his political work, which touted personal thrift and discipline in opposition to collectivist movements such as labor unions. In a 1920 article printed in the *New York Tribune*, Doherty insisted that the greatest cause of inequality, crime, and working-class antagonism toward the rich was a lack of thrift. "Everyone working for better morals, better citizenship, better conditions of charity subjects, can perhaps attain the desired end more quickly by working to make thrift universal." Doherty called people who complained about working conditions and social inequities "mollycoddles" who were "bred from a puny, sickly breed of men." He suggested that the distinct conditions that came with oil work could cure recalcitrant working-class people, arguing that the oil field was the ideal place to send the "Reds"

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<sup>109</sup> *The Empire* 1, no. 10 (July 25, 1918), Cities Service, box 30, folder 9; Henry L. Doherty, *Principles and Ideas for Doherty Men*, Vol. V, (1923), 235-37, Cities Service, box 46.

and others he characterized as anarchists; far removed from civil authority, they would learn of “the necessity for government” and be compelled to “with reverence kiss the flag.” Various company-sponsored organizations acted as vehicles through which Doherty’s philosophy was communicated to workers. In 1918, the Doherty Men’s Fraternity was established, its mantra being, “Study and promotion of the principles upon which our country is founded. Perpetuation of the business policies and business philosophy of Henry L. Doherty.” Workers and managers were expected to “destroy disloyalty” towards American values as the company, and more specifically, Doherty, defined them. One historian of Kansas’ oil industry writes that “practically every male employee of the company belonged.” Additionally, there was a women’s auxiliary group that, among other policies, led the fight for prohibition in the company town.<sup>110</sup>

The corporate power that came with oil extraction, combined with the often isolated, rural areas in which drilling was centered, made curtailing the rights of and opportunities for workers that much easier. Auxiliary organizations tied to Empire Oil Company, a Cities Service subsidiary, helped lead war-savings stamps and liberty bonds campaigns in Oil Hill. These groups singled out “War Savings slackers” for ridicule and punishment. Executives declared publicly that “every man and woman in the Empire employ would buy to the full extent of his or her ability.” The Empire companies even established a card index system that recorded employees’ personal information and tracked their contributions towards liberty loans, war savings, and humanitarian aid. Corporate power in boomtowns also replaced public services. In February of 1924, Oil Hill’s newspaper, the *Doherty News*, explained that, “Oil Hill people say they couldn’t use a police force if they had one. No one misbehaves. The people there don’t know what crime is, only what they read in the papers

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<sup>110</sup> Doherty, *Principles and Ideas for Doherty Men*, Vol. V, (1923), 201-09, Cities Service, box 46; Klintworth, *Oil Hill*, 13.

about other towns and cities in the United States.” The company publication shed light on how its private police force used the threat of unemployment to discourage bad behavior, even among children. “If the small boy misbehaves, his father is called onto the carpet by the local director of the Empire companies, and he is told to look after the child. If he is called to account the second time, he is warned that his job is in jeopardy if he does not pay more attention to the care of his children. No one is employed by the Empire companies in this district whose character is not above reproach. These are the excuses for not having a police force in Oil Hill.”<sup>111</sup>

The often heavy-handed, paternalistic methods that Cities Service and its subsidiaries practiced in Oil Hill precluded the vigilante violence that was prevalent in other oil fields. However, this did not mean that the Klan was not present throughout Butler County, where the El Dorado field was located. A Klan klavern was founded in the city of El Dorado in 1918 and reported a membership of four thousand. One unnamed resident recalled that, at times, “white-robed figures seemed be everywhere,” burning crosses on a hill west of Oil Hill at night. The Klan’s ideologies on race, ethnicity, and class were echoed by white citizens in the area. One long-time resident of Oil Hill, a doctor who had treated injured workers and their families, proudly proclaimed that “the population of Oil Hill is one-hundred percent American.” Every employee of the Empire company was white and “none speak a foreign language and all are native born Americans.” The doctor insisted that little to no class animosity existed in the racially uniform company town and that the highest official and lowest wage earner lived side-by-side in houses of the same size and design. These sentiments pointed to the desirability of company towns from the

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<sup>111</sup> *The Empire* 1, no. 6 (June 27, 1918), Cities Service, box 30, folder 10; Klintworth, *Oil Hill*, 35, 39.

perspective of oil men. Companies marshaled racial homogeneity in service of mitigating class animosities and instilling discipline in workers.<sup>112</sup>

*Resistance and its Limits: Union Incorporation, Radicalism, and Black-Market Oil*

The oil industry's commitment to racial segregation and its preservation of the highest-paying jobs for white men went a long way in establishing peace between laborers and capitalists in the oil fields. However, the very existence of company towns that ensured housing, utilities, and food for workers and their families pointed to the fears that oil companies maintained regarding working-class unrest. Workers first undertook serious efforts to unionize the oil-fields during World War I. Organizers struggled to form strong unions in the Mid-Continent, running up against structural forces inherent to the production of petroleum as well as the efforts of employers to prevent worker mobilization. Unionization proved most effective during the 1930s, in the wake of the Great Depression and New Deal legislation that elevated the rights of labor. However, organizing ebbed and flowed alongside other kinds of worker power. The conditions of mobility that undermined unions also provided workers with a semblance of autonomy that they utilized when work conditions grew unacceptable. Others embraced radical and collectivist movements, seeking fundamental social and political changes that differed from mainstream union drives. And still others resisted wage work's control over their lives by participating in lucrative black markets in oil, using their expertise as oil-field workers to steal from the petroleum industry's web of above- and below-ground crude-carrying infrastructures.

During World War I, oil-field workers used the leverage of high prices and a limited labor market to begin organizing in the Mid-Continent and in the oil fields of California. In the fall of

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<sup>112</sup> Klintworth, *Oil Hill*, 63-64, 72.

1917, ten-thousand workers struck along the Gulf Coast, demanding wage hikes and the eight-hour day. In California, workers fought for the “union triangle”: the eight-hour day, five-dollar minimum wage, and union recognition. Union leaders hoped to appeal to President Woodrow Wilson’s administration by presenting it with a threat of a strike, forcing it to mediate an agreement between workers and producers. These wartime efforts were partly successful, as oil workers won the eight-hour day and a fifty-cent-a-day increase in wages, but not industry recognition of the union. Nevertheless, in June of 1918, the American Federation of Labor welcomed the Oil Field, Gas Well, and Refinery Workers of America under its banner. In November, the union held their first national convention in El Paso, where delegates successfully established the union’s commitment to the nationalization of petroleum and of other major energy resources, including coal, hydropower, and electricity. However, these ambitious demands for fundamental changes to the relationships between energy and property quickly ran up against the essential problems of organizing, mainly the struggle to convince enough workers that the union was a worthwhile commitment, especially following employer acceptance of initial wage and hour demands. Indeed, as the 1920s began, the power of the union’s locals waned while a decade of corporate paternalism commenced. The vast spaces of the region and the highly migratory lives forced upon workers made organizing in the Mid-Continent especially difficult. While the union survived, it made little headway in improving the plight of oil workers, and its power shrank from its early heights during World War I.<sup>113</sup>

The New Deal and the movements that empowered non-craft workers in the wake of the Great Depression reinvigorated organizing among oil workers. The national union was in disarray

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<sup>113</sup> Harvey O’Connor, *History of the Oil Workers Intl. Union (CIO)* (Denver: Oil Workers Intl. Union, 1950), 5-7, 10-11, 13-17, 20-27.

when the National Industrial Recovery Act (NIRA) was passed in 1933. As a result, when the federal government met with the representative of the oil companies, the American Petroleum Institute (API), to devise new labor codes under the National Recovery Administration (NRA), the API refused to recognize the union as the legitimate voice of oil-field workers in negotiations. The API devised an oil code under the NRA that omitted Section 7(a) of NIRA, which guaranteed workers the right to unionize and collectively bargain. Despite this, federal mediators sided with the oil workers, who managed to negotiate an improved pay scale and a 36-hour week. In Oklahoma, the Seminole local grew especially prominent following the passage of NIRA. It was the first “powerful field local” in the industry, according to one labor historian, and the workers there negotiated pay, hours, and working conditions on the Sinclair Oil Company’s leases in the Seminole field, which eventually led to the union’s first and only national contract. Locals in Oklahoma City, Tulsa, and Cushing also thrived during the early years of Franklin Roosevelt’s first administration. Nationally, the spring of 1934 proved to be the peak of organizing. The union granted thirty-three new charters to locals during March and April, capping an eleven-month period in which it conferred 125 new charters. Following the Supreme Court’s striking down of the NRA, organization efforts dwindled. Even so, Cities Service in Ponca City, its subsidiary ITIO, and companies owned by Wirt Franklin, a prominent independent oil man in Oklahoma, all came under union contracts. Following the upholding of the Wagner Act, which legalized collective bargaining once and for all, union activity again flourished. The oil workers helped create the Congress of Industrial Organizations, which welcomed a much larger group of workers than the AFL, many of whom labored in low-paying jobs that were considered unskilled. By the 1937

convention, the union had reorganized under a new name, the Oil Workers International Union (OWIU), and claimed 27,000 members.<sup>114</sup>

The toxic conditions that many oil-field jobs entailed encouraged unionization, especially among the industry's lowest-paid workers. Sherman, the son of Missouri tenant farmers who started working as a tank cleaner for Tulsa's Mid-Continent Refining Company embodied how the experience of bodily harm on the job and the ecological fallout that oil production created drove workers toward unionism. Tank cleaners wore long underwear, two denim jumpers, heavy overalls, leather gloves, and wooden-soled shoes, equipment that offered some protection from the heat and toxins inside the refinery's tanks. On some instances, workers cleaned out tanks that had been full of hot oil only minutes prior. In Sherman's words, "The fumes left in there would...catch on fire; and there was always lots of gas and fumes left that'd knock you silly if you didn't watch out." Workers were not provided gas masks and only a few minutes inside a fume-laden tank could prove deadly. "Burns wasn't nothing; we had them all over us," Sherman recalled. This kind of work only drew around \$250 a month. Sherman remembered many destitute workers who turned to subsistence living when they were put out of work during the depression. Many fished in the Arkansas River in close proximity to the refineries that wantonly dumped waste into the river on a daily basis. Sherman asked one former colleague what he was fishing for and the man said nothing, because "oil in the water done [sic] killed all the fish years ago." During the depression, refineries slowly rehired workers but classified the tank cleaners as private contractors, paying first \$25 per cleaned tank, which soon fell to \$10 and finally \$5. "You think we weren't ready for us

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<sup>114</sup> O'Connor, *History of the Oil Workers Intl. Union (CIO)*, 30-32, 34-36, 40.

an organization!” Sherman exclaimed. “Goddamn, when we found out the Government okayed us joining a union, we piled in one.”<sup>115</sup>

Solidarity with fellow workers and participation in the OWIU also offered laborers the opportunity to fulfill the demands of working-class masculinity, even when it meant creating tension among intimates. Throughout the 1920s, Charlie Storms continuously traveled between fields in Oklahoma, Texas, and California, where he informally secured employment and wage agreements as a rig builder. Storms discussed refusing to work if he believed his employer was exploiting him, even when his wife resented him for making such decisions when the family was in dire financial straits. She was especially angry when she and Charlie were down to \$1.50 in cash and he refused a job in Oklahoma City at ten dollars per day, based on his insistence that twelve dollars was the actual going rate. “I told her that if I’d taken the job, I’d of [sic] made me about fifteen enemies; that in the end it would have cut the wages of every damned rig builder in the city. She didn’t like it, but she took it.” Storms’ gendered understanding of work and the obligations of labor solidarity crept up again when discussing his time as a unionized rig builder during the 1930s. “I could go out and scab on the boys, but that’d hurt me as or more’n [sic] it would them. Women don’t quite understand that idea (I know my wife don’t) but I think most men do.” Just as white, male workers contested employers over wages as a means of securing white supremacy in the labor market, they also understood the politics of work and pay as a referendum upon their manhood and as part of a masculine identity that affirmed their assumptions of women as ignorant and unprincipled.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>115</sup> “I’ll be for the Union as Long as I Live,” WPA-WHC, box 43, folder 33.

<sup>116</sup> Lambert and Franks, *Voices from the Oil Fields*, 30-37.



Although there were many enthusiastic OWIU members such as Sherman and Storms, the oil industry always proved difficult to organize relative to other extractive and manufacturing industries of the era, and the union never wielded the power that groups such as the United Mine Workers achieved. However, it is important to understand workers' agency in the oil fields outside of the OWIU's failures and successes. Worker recalcitrance also drew upon the radical agrarian movements that flourished on the Southern Plains during the first decades of the twentieth century. The efforts that went into producing a pliant working class in the oil fields occurred despite the Mid-Continent region's relative embrace of socialism. The existence of a small but potent movement of left-wing radicals represented a threat to the political economy of land and property that petroleum was embedded in, and socialists and labor organizers with unions such as the International Workers of the World (IWW) and the Working Class Union (WCU) encouraged mobilizations of oil-field hands.

Radical resistance toward both business and government flourished in parts of the rural Mid-Continent during World War I in particular. In August of 1917, opposition to the military draft among a few hundred white, Black, and Indigenous tenants in Seminole County resulted in the Green Corn Rebellion. Several hundred Creek, Seminole, African American, African-Indigenous, and white farmers organized and planned to march from eastern Oklahoma to Washington D.C., subsisting on the late summer's green corn and recruiting allies along the way, in hopes of forcing an end to the war. The rebels understood the conflict as one that they had no real stake in and feared that conscription would unjustly force them off of their meager plots of land. On August 2, a handful of raiding parties cut telephone wires, burned railroad bridges, and ambushed two policemen. The next day, a few hundred armed men affiliated with the radical Working Class Union gathered on a farm near Sasakwa, Oklahoma. After a brief exchange of fire

left one man dead, the insurgents broke up and fled. A subsequent flood of lawmen and armed citizens converged upon Seminole, Pontotoc, and Hughes counties, rounding up and arresting suspected participants and quelling any further mobilizations of workers and tenant farmers.<sup>117</sup>

Just months after the Green Corn Rebellion, authorities targeted suspected radical labor organizers in the oil fields in Kansas, including areas around Oil Hill. On November 20, 1917, federal agents arrested thirty-five oil-field workers who were suspected of having ties to the IWW-affiliated Oil Workers Industrial Union, which the federal government accused of threatening the national interest by restraining wartime production of petroleum. The incarcerated workers were still confined in prison without a trial date a year and a half following their arrest. One of them, C.W. Anderson, described deplorable conditions in the cells that he and his fellow union members were held in. “If there ever was an iron heel used, it has been applied to us most vigorously. Many of the defendants are physically weak, one died last fall, three are mentally unbalanced, and a few have contracted symptoms of tuberculosis.” One of the imprisoned workers was a refinery worker who moved to Kansas from Philadelphia and eventually joined the Oil Workers’ Industrial Union. He attempted suicide while in prison, slitting his own throat. His life was saved but he was returned to jail, where he languished for months before being admitted to an asylum. Another Wobbly died of influenza while awaiting trial. The imprisoned oil workers who survived used their time in jail to read various tracts on history, sociology, and economics, including Marx’s *Capital*. One Wobbly told his attorney, “Don’t bother about getting me out yet, for the first time in my life I have the

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<sup>117</sup> “1,000 Possemen Plan Daybreak Drive on Dodgers,” *The Daily Oklahoman*, August 4, 1917, accessed July 15, 2019, <https://ia600808.us.archive.org/26/items/Oklahoma1917Aug4/Oklahoma-1917Aug4-corrected.png>; “Seven New Arrests Today,” *Ada Weekly*, August 9, 1917, accessed July 16, 2019, <http://libcom.org/forums/history/green-corn-rebellion-13092007>; Garin Burbank, *When Farmers Voted Red: The Gospel of Socialism in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1910-1924* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), 134-45; Chang, *The Color of the Land*, 176-89.

time to read along scientific lines and I don't want to go back on the slave market until I have finished the course of reading I have set myself to do."<sup>118</sup>

Whether they were white farmers born and raised in Indian Territory and Oklahoma, Creek Indians forced to take up farming and manual labor post-allotment, or working-class migrants drawn to the Mid-Continent oil fields' high wages, this more radical set of workers represented the culmination of years of agitation led by the WCU, the Wobblies, the Farmers' Union, and other socialist organizers in the region. While radicals tended to primarily focus on the stark inequalities and abuses of tenant farming in the region, their actions against the ruling class were inevitably wrapped up in the politics of land and labor, which the oil industry was inextricably tied to as well. Tenant farmers necessarily had to seek out seasonal work in the oil fields when their rented farms, which were often owned by oil executives or wealthy royalty owners, failed to provide enough for subsistence and debt-service payments. Tenants in Hughes, Pontotoc, and Seminole counties were charged some of the highest interest rates in the country. Personal loans often garnered creditors twenty-percent interest while mortgages on land could run at a rate of up to two-hundred percent. Simultaneously, the soils of southeastern Oklahoma yielded much poorer cotton crops per acre than plantations in Mississippi and Louisiana, meaning tenants were forced to spend more time working on the land than their counterparts in the Deep South. Conditions that demanded so much from impoverished tenants made the state's anti-usury laws effectively useless, as debtors could

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<sup>118</sup> "What Kind of Boys Do They Jail in Kansas?" *Worker's World*, June 27, 1919, accessed July 15, 2019, <http://www.weneverforget.org/hellraisers-journal-from-the-workers-world-what-kind-of-boys-do-they-jail-in-kansas-19-months-without-trial/>; C.W. Anderson, "Wichita Defendants Go back to Dungeons," *The Rebel Worker* 2, no. 6 (April 15, 1919), accessed July 15, 2019, <http://www.weneverforget.org/hellraisers-journal-from-the-new-york-rebel-worker-wichita-defendants-go-back-to-dungeons-by-fw-c-w-anderson/>; "Lives Used as Pawns," *Worker's World*, June 27, 1919, <http://www.weneverforget.org/hellraisers-journal-kansas-class-war-prisoners-held-nineteen-months-without-trial-oil-trust-is-real-prosecutor/>.

not risk the time and expense that legal proceedings demanded and could not risk blacklisting by lenders or oil companies.<sup>119</sup>

While labor organizing on both radical and more conservative (but still divisive) terms proved attractive to some workers in the Mid-Continent and beyond, laborers also supplemented wages and fought off the problems of underemployment by starting their own illicit oil enterprises. During the winter months, especially amid the Great Depression, unemployed workers, and anyone else looking to make a quick dollar, often collected condensed gasoline from above-ground pipelines for sale to impoverished buyers. “Drip gas” accumulated on pipes and tanks in cold weather and enterprising individuals gathered it in barrels at night, selling the condensate to trash haulers and other small operators who struggled to afford legitimately marketed gasoline. One man and his partner reportedly gathered up to sixty barrels a night during “the bread-line days” in 1934. They sold the fuel only to buyers they could trust and earned fifteen cents per gallon. One “dripper,” demoralized by unemployment and the death of his infant child, turned to drip gas as a source of income for his family. He contended that the stolen gasoline was wasted by the oil companies, who preferred to “pour [it] down the creeks so nobody can use it.” As he told a prosecuting judge following his arrest for the practice, “I don’t know what you’re going to do with me. If you fine me, I’ll have to borrow the money or stay in jail. You’re just taking the bread out of my children’s mouths. If I could work and make enough money to feed my family, I wouldn’t be out stealing that drip gas.” Drip gas offered one route to making ends meet in the short term,

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<sup>119</sup> Nigel Anthony Sellars, “Treasonous Tenant Farmers and Seditious Sharecroppers: The 1917 Green Corn Rebellion Trials,” *Oklahoma City University Law Review* 27 (2002): 1112-16, accessed December 26, 2019, [http://www.nationalaglawcenter.org/assets/bibarticles/sellars\\_treasonous.pdf](http://www.nationalaglawcenter.org/assets/bibarticles/sellars_treasonous.pdf). See also Green, *Grass-Roots Socialism*, 244-45, 330-44; Jim Bissett, *Agrarian Socialism in America: Marx, Jefferson, and Jesus in the Oklahoma Countryside, 1904-1920* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 90-104.

but it came with great risk: drippers stored the stolen gasoline in their homes, out of sight from authorities but primed to ignite and destroy both property and life.<sup>120</sup>

Individuals pilfered petroleum through other means, as well. When weather conditions prevented the accumulation of gasoline-rich condensation, thieves broke into tank farms at night and lowered buckets directly into storage tanks, stealing oil that way. Others utilized their expertise of oil-field infrastructure and local environments by unearthing and tapping into subterranean pipelines. This practice was especially prevalent during the years of “hot oil,” the term for petroleum illegally produced in excess of state-mandated conservation quotas. During the early 1930s, the national oil industry was gripped by some its worst bouts of overproduction. In East Texas and the booming Oklahoma City field, state officials declared martial law in 1931 in a bid to stop rampant drilling, reduce supply, and improve prices, which had fallen below the cost of production. Against these efforts, companies laid hundreds of miles of secret pipeline and pumped thousands of barrels of illegal oil, insisting upon stripping wells of crude and selling it on black markets as quickly as possible, instead of risking the loss of untapped oil to neighboring lessees.<sup>121</sup>

Producing and transporting hot oil offered opportunities for underemployed, unemployed, and injured workers who could not find steady wages amid the depression. One unnamed driller, who was forced to take lower-paying jobs when a swinging drill bit crushed three vertebrae, made money by “skimming” oil from creeks and rivers. State law in Oklahoma held that oil floating on rivers and creeks could be collected and sold free of title or a bill of sale. This ostensibly offered a means for farmers and ranchers to benefit from overproduction, considering their livelihoods were threatened by oil that entered fields and the bodies of livestock through contaminated

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<sup>120</sup> “I’m Still Getting Drip Gas,” WHC-WPA, box 43, folder 30.

<sup>121</sup> Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991), 250, 256-57.

waterways. However, it also gave companies and enterprising individuals an avenue through which oil could be “produced” behind the backs of those authorities who enforced quotas. One company paid workers to break open their own tanks and empty crude oil into creeks. The company dammed the creeks downstream, siphoned its own spilled oil into a ditch, pumped it, and sold it free of the hindrances of proration rules. “They didn’t lose more than a hundred barrels out of five thousand, they worked it so smooth,” one collaborator recalled. The debilitated driller who labored in the hot-oil market estimated that at least a hundred men like him skimmed oil for their own benefit in the Oklahoma City field. He used his knowledge of pipeline systems along the Canadian River to make his own hot oil in secret:

When I’d dug back to the [pipe]line itself I bored a quarter-inch hole in it, and then run the quarter-inch line from it on out to the river and sunk that end about two feet in the water, close to the bank. When I got all set, I fixed a trap about fifty feet down the river and opened the valve I had on my quarter-inch line. I run it night and day, from the time I got up in the morning till I couldn’t stay awake, and I drained plenty of oil. About once a month I’d lift my trap and let some of the boys down the river get a little to keep them from snitching on me.

Pipeline-owning companies sent out men to keep vigil up and down the river in hopes of catching skimmers in the act of siphoning oil. However, the companies could not involve the authorities because they were also skimming hot oil and likely building and operating illegal pipelines. Such lawlessness both exacerbated the inequities of the oil industry while simultaneously offering its most exploited workers a means to short-term income.<sup>122</sup>

By the end of the 1930s, oil workers had forged and secured new sources of institutional power through the AFL-CIO-backed Oil Workers International Union. The union, with crucial support from the New Deal-era federal government, garnered workers high pay and a semblance

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<sup>122</sup> “Hot Oil,” WHC-WPA, box 43, folder 1.

of physical protection on the job, as well as an organization that, in tandem with other industrial unions, wielded considerable political power. In fact, by the end of World War II, oil workers were the highest-paid manufacturing workers in the United States, in terms of both hourly wages and weekly earnings. However, some of those laborers who had clung to a more radical and transformative vision of worker power in earlier years continued to languish. Walter Strong was one of these workers. Strong, a white man who was a veteran of the Green Corn Rebellion, explained to a Works Progress Administration interviewer in the late 1930s that, for years, “[e]very time the Ku Kluxers had a meeting or when the town boys got drunk and didn’t have anything else to do they’d come out and beat up on me.” Strong, who described himself as “a red-card Socialist all my life,” had long been prepared for “rough stuff” on account of his public opposition to conscription during World War I. Still, he became a “punching bag” for locals who ostracized his actions against American participation in the war and his ongoing poverty. While Strong had opposed one world war, he insisted that he would do whatever was required if the United States became mired in another global conflict because he had nothing to lose, few sources of income, and a family to support.

Strong ended his interview by highlighting how working-class concerns—and the concerns of the powerful over the identities and behavior of workers—were tied to race. “You go to church and the preachers will say we’re all brothers; then what the hell have we got a Jim Crow law in the state for?” Strong questioned. “And men out of work? And women and kids with not enough to eat, men too? Whyn’t [sic] they do a little real church work instead of trying to build a bigger church than the other boys down the street?” For Strong, power was actively abused in the Mid-Continent, with workers and people of color suffering at the wrong end of a double-edged sword. Racism and classism worked in tandem in the oil fields, securing “black gold” for white workers

and their Anglo-Saxon employers. While oil workers had won much in the years between the industry's initial rise in the Mid-Continent region and the beginning of World War II, their formal incorporation into the United States' growing industrial democracy meant the more ambitious and transformative visions that Walter Strong and others had once hoped to realize lost any influence upon how industrial citizenship and oil-dependency would coevolve in subsequent decades.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Mann, *Our Daily Bread*, 58; "What's the Latest from Europe?" WHC-WPA, box 43, folder 28.



## Chapter 4

### Oil at the “White Man’s Price”: Color, Crude, and the Tulsa Race Massacre

The confluence of white supremacy and extractive capitalism—marked by the urgency of white settlers to acquire Indian land while attempting to exclude Black land seekers from the same enterprise—was perhaps most pronounced in Indian Territory and Oklahoma in and around the city of Tulsa. In the 1830s, Creeks from the towns of Lockapoka and Tallasi in present-day Alabama established a ceremonial ground along the banks of the Arkansas River. The subsequent town of Tulsa became an important gathering place, especially for “full-blood” “conservative” Creeks and Black people, enslaved and free, who often shared kinship ties with each other. Following the Civil War, numerous African Creeks established all-Black communities in the valleys of the Arkansas and Verdigris rivers around Tulsa, and throughout the 1880s, the area emerged as a stronghold of anti-allotment Indians led by Isparhecher, who was elected principal chief of the Creek Nation in 1883 amid growing influxes of white merchants and businessmen. During the final years of the nineteenth century, white Americans valued Tulsa as a minor stopover on the region’s cattle trails. The city did not become a permanent center of white business growth until the discovery of oil along the Arkansas in 1901. Within 25 years of that find, the city’s population grew from 1,300 to over 100,000. The historian Angie Debo understood Tulsa better than most. Despite adhering to a problematic teleology, she fittingly stated in 1943 that, in Tulsa, “The successive stages through which the country as a whole has passed during three hundred years of history—Indian occupation, ranching, pioneering, industrial development, and finally disillusionment and the recasting of objectives—have been telescoped within the single lifetime of some of the older Tulsans.” More accurately, these “stages” of history all unfolded (and continue

to unfold) simultaneously, leading to the empowerment of white settlers, but never fully eliminating the more marginalized from their claims to the city.<sup>124</sup>

The historical confluences Debo recognized laid the groundwork for a reckoning. In the period between 1901 and the end of the 1920s, Tulsa struggled with the contradictions between its oil abundance and its multiracial citizenry, between its status as “Oil Capital of the World” (and the often unspoken allegiance to whiteness it implied), the home of “Black Wall Street,” and a city of Indigenous vitality. What the city’s white population chose was a fidelity between white oilmen and largely “mixed-blood,” “progressive Indians” (tribal citizens who largely embraced Euro-American culture), to the detriment of “full-blood” Natives, Black Indians, and African American settlers. White prospectors centered in and around Tulsa situated their search for crude as a means to which Indian allottees could secure land and wealth vis-à-vis monopolistic “outsiders.” As part of this venture, white oilmen found important allies in the white men who married into tribal nations and the sons and daughters born of these multiracial unions. At the same time, petroleum’s advance could be couched as one of the inevitable “stages” of history that justified white ascendance and the alleged disappearance of Indigenous peoples from the territory and state. In this way, oil was not only powering engines and greasing factory gears; its presence demanded Indigenous assimilation, so that white capital could be introduced to Indian land. Crude’s value to white oilmen and Native landowners presented the opportunity to forge new economic and social relationships that required collaboration and primed Indigenous peoples for integration into white people’s worlds. This enterprise changed the city’s cultural face. As a 1938 Works Progress Administration history explained, “Tulsa’s ‘Indians’ today, unless they are of more than a quarter

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<sup>124</sup> Angie Debo, *Tulsa: From Creek Town to Oil Capital* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1943), vii, 13-15, 44, 58-60.

blood, are not easily identified. Their dress, manners, pursuits, and attainments are identical with those of the Nordics.”<sup>125</sup>

African American settlers and a handful of Black Indians envisioned petroleum as a source of social deliverance in their own right, but in terms that white Oklahomans refused to accept. Black-owned oil companies emerged amid the territory and state’s oil booms. Oftentimes the Black capitalists who backed these ventures were adherents to the business-based projects of racial uplift espoused by Booker T. Washington. They sought to direct their petroleum enterprises towards the employment of Black workers and to use oil as a means of uniting Black investors, all while hoping to redirect profits towards their larger Black communities. At the same time, a handful of Black landowners, especially those of African-Indigenous descent, grew wealthy as holders of oil-rich property. These peoples faced graft and violence at the hands of white parties who lacked said petroleum wealth but knew that neither law nor custom would stand in the way of dispossessing Black individuals of their riches. Both the opportunities and threats that Black oil wealth produced coalesced in Tulsa. It was in Tulsa that Black wealth accumulated on the back of

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<sup>125</sup> *Tulsa: A Guide to the Oil Capital*, Workers of the Federal Writers’ Project of the Works Progress Administration, 1938, 11. For the history of the construction of race around the identities of “full-blood” and “mixed-blood” within the Five Tribes of Oklahoma, see David A. Chang, *The Color of the Land: Race, Nation, and the Politics of Landownership in Oklahoma, 1832-1929* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2010); Kendra Taira Field, *Growing up with the Country: Family, Race, and Nation after the Civil War* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); Rose Stremlau, *Sustaining the Cherokee Family: Kinship and the Allotment of an Indigenous Nation* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Circe Sturm, *Blood Politics: Race, Culture, and Identity in the Cherokee Nation of Oklahoma* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002). I place quotations around “full-blood” and “mixed-blood” to emphasize that these are constructions that do not inherently indicate an individual’s racial descent. Rather, these identities are better understood as political. “full-blood” Indians were also often referred to as “conservatives,” given their rejection of white cultural and demographic intrusion into Indian Territory. “Mixed-bloods” were known as “progressive Indians.”

the larger region's oil booms, where Black affluence became concentrated near the city's center in the segregated neighborhood of Greenwood, which Washington had coined "Black Wall Street."

In the late spring of 1921, white mobs destroyed Greenwood. Rioters killed hundreds of Black Tulsans and robbed the neighborhood of millions of dollars in personal property. At one level, the Tulsa race massacre was an outburst of violence aimed at oil-rich Black people, one that occurred during a downturn in Tulsa's petroleum economy and amid the broader economic precarity of the post-World War I period. But the massacre was more than that. It also provided the opportunity for white Tulsans to grab hold of real estate in Greenwood in hopes of expanding the city's industrial capability and securing Tulsa's place atop the petroleum economy. In the aftermath of the massacre, the desire of white Tulsans and their oilmen allies to re-inscribe their control over the city's urban space culminated in the establishment of the International Petroleum Exposition, which became one of the global petroleum industry's largest promotional events. The exposition not only gave white Tulsans the opportunity to host oilmen from the world over, it also allowed the city to broadcast the narrative of white-Indian collaboration and Black inferiority for an international industry audience. Tulsa would be made white again through oilmen's racialized, progress-tinged marketing of "black gold."

### *White Wildcatters, "Mixed-Blood" Land, and Tulsa's Oil-Based Growth*

The white and "mixed-blood" Creek men who made the first significant oil discoveries near Tulsa began prospecting in a deliberate attempt to expand settler control of land and petroleum. In 1901, Fred S. Clinton, a "mixed-blood" Creek man, and J.C.W. Bland, a white physician from Iowa who was married to a Creek woman, began drilling exploratory wells at Red

Fork, a town located five miles south of Tulsa on the opposite side of the Arkansas River. They did so for several reasons. First, the location was situated along a large bend in the Arkansas, and the unscientific “creekology” of the time held that bodies of water flowed around mineral-bearing geologic formations, making land along river bends ideal for prospecting. Second, the St. Louis-San Francisco Railroad passed through the area and was capable of connecting Red Fork to distant refining centers. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, Clinton and Bland stated that their choice to drill “was based upon our faith in the development of resources of the Indian Territory, the industrial activity and oil interests in Kansas and Texas, the allotment of Indian land and the establishing of the legal right of ownership of property.” Fred Clinton elaborated that he and Bland hoped to undermine ongoing lease negotiations between the federal government and a set of outside investors who were not known in the Creek Nation. In Clinton’s words, “citizens of the Creek nation had enough carpetbagger rule and did not want an absentee landlord substituted.” He hoped that, if oil could be found and claimed by Creek allottees, the subsequent publicity would help the Indian claimant secure title to the land from the Department of the Interior and bring about private landownership among the Creeks, instead of enriching outside landlords or leaseholders. In short, drilling at Red Fork represented an explicit attempt to act on settler prerogatives and deepen white and “mixed-blood” Creek control of Indigenous land.<sup>126</sup>

It’s important to understand that Clinton’s conception of “citizens of the Creek nation” was seemingly limited to those Creeks, such as himself, who were of white racial heritage and embraced full assimilation into white society. This brand of assimilationist “mixed-blood” identity, anti-monopolism, and thinly veiled racist opposition to “carpetbagger” rule would become central

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<sup>126</sup> Fred S. Clinton, “The Beginning of the International Petroleum Exposition and Congress,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 24, no. 4 (Winter, 1948-1949), 479; Fred S. Clinton, “First Oil and Gas Well in Tulsa County,” *Chronicles of Oklahoma* 30, (1954) 312.

to Tulsa's identity as an oil capital and indeed to the white-supremacist politics of the soon-to-be State of Oklahoma. As one Democratic Party slogan of the period stated, "Democracy = White Man and Indian Against Negro and Carpetbagger." This meant that the rights of white-owned extractive businesses to engage with property owners and obtain pieces of real estate on favorable terms could only be secured alongside the rights of Native Americans to own land as individuals. The co-constitution of these liberties was especially relevant to men and women whose families consisted of whites and Indians, which included Clinton and Bland. Discovering oil gave the two prospectors the opportunity to give legal form to the land where crude had been tapped and to thus further its integration into Anglo-American institutions. Immediately after confirming that a major well had been established, Clinton raced fifty miles southeast to the federal center of Muskogee and informed the secretary of the Dawes Commission, Allison Aylesworth, of the find. Clinton carried with him a notarized letter signed by Bland's Creek wife, Sue Bland, giving him permission to claim the land where the well was located as her allotment. The Dawes Commission acknowledged the claim and within three days of the establishment of Sue Bland's allotment, federal officials were reporting to the commission the initial well's flow of oil and gas.<sup>127</sup>

White settlers, progressive Indians, and federal officials pursued oil production around Tulsa within the context of private landownership not only due to a desire to meet the ideological goals of allotment. They also stood in opposition to attempts made by African Creeks to pursue oil leases on collectivist terms. At the same time that Bland and Clinton sought the allotment of newly discovered oil land at Red Fork, Thomas Jefferson Adams, a Black Creek man and acting principal chief of the Creek Nation at the time, signed a lease on behalf of the tribe with a pair of

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<sup>127</sup> Gary Zellar, *African Creeks: Estelvste and the Creek Nation* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2007), 242; Clinton, "First Oil and Gas Well," 315, 322.

white drillers from Pennsylvania. While the Department of the Interior supported Bland and Clinton's allotment-based prospecting, it rejected Adams' lease, which would have paid out royalties to all Creek citizens, not just those whose land happened to bear crude. Federal officials refused to acknowledge the Creeks' right to establish commercial contracts as a sovereign nation. Adams was one of numerous African Indians who were active businessmen and entrepreneurs in Indian Territory. He was trained as a lawyer and in 1895 he had established the Adams and Sapulpa Mining Company. However, the Department of the Interior would not accept the leasing of territory on terms that positioned the Creeks' land and mineral base as collectively owned, no matter the considerable business acumen of those Creeks who sought such deals.<sup>128</sup>

The discoveries at Red Fork caught the attention of oil companies that had long operated in the northeastern and midwestern United States, independent operations that had grown out of the 1901 oil boom in Spindletop, Texas, as well as white investors who had settled in Indian Territory. These latter oilmen who began wildcatting around Tulsa further exemplified the unreconstructed Southern whiteness that Clinton's carpetbag comment reflected. One of these, Robert Galbreath, obtained a lease on Creek land following the Clinton-Bland discovery and began drilling without federal approval. In Galbreath's eyes, "There was never any doubt about the color of the tape used in Washington—it was all red." His anti-government sentiments only strengthened when, following his first drilling efforts, "along came the Indian police, departmental sleuths, carpetbag scouts and uniformed bands of brass collars, forbidding and warning against further drilling...It looked like the penitentiary for us." For him and many others, federal restrictions meant to protect Indian landowners from white intruders were only cumbersome and illegitimate

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<sup>128</sup> Darnella Davis, *Untangling a Red, White, and Black Heritage: A Personal History of the Allotment Era* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2018), 65-68.

barriers to white business that echoed the opportunistic corruption that had sullied white Southern honor during Reconstruction. In his case, Galbreath's wildcat venture was saved by another instance of collaboration between progressive Indians and white entrepreneurs. The principal chief of the Creek Nation, Pleasant Porter, intervened and ensured that Galbreath's leases were approved because the landowner in question, a Creek man named John Yargee, was Porter's brother-in-law. Pressure from oilmen such as Galbreath brought about a relaxation of federal leasing rules in 1902, further opening the Creek Nation to oil development.<sup>129</sup>

The Red Fork discovery created an incentive for towns and cities to invest in services that would be valuable in the burgeoning oil hinterland and stimulated prospecting in both the Indian and Oklahoma territories. These moves led to Tulsa's explosive growth during the first two decades of the century. In 1901, Tulsa was a town of 1,300 residents that was primarily a small node on the network of cattle trails that traversed Texas, Indian Territory, and Kansas. In the aftermath of the initial oil discovery, private citizens raised \$50,000 to construct a toll bridge across the Arkansas River, the first permanent road connecting Tulsa to the Red Fork area. Soon after, white oilmen opened new fields near the city in Oklahoma Territory in 1904 and again on Muscogee Creek land in the Tulsa area in 1905. These findings, known respectively as the Cleveland oil field and Glenn Pool, funneled prospectors northward from Texas and precipitated the arrival of major pipeline companies, which marked the beginning of largescale oil prospecting and production in what would become the State of Oklahoma. During this period, the concerted boosterism of Tulsa's prominent white and "mixed-blood" residents helped cement the city's rise

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<sup>129</sup> Frank Galbreath, *Glenn Pool, and a Little Oil Town of Yesteryear* (Self-published, 1978), 6-7; Kenny A. Franks, *The Rush Begins* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Heritage Association, 1984), 22, 25-26; Carl Coke Rister, *Oil! Titan of the Southwest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1949), 81-82, 88.



as an oil capital. In 1905 and 1908, Tulsans sponsored nationwide promotion tours that garnered significant attention in eastern and midwestern cities and helped secure both migrant capital and migrant laborers. Tulsa's commercial club successfully convinced several railroads to reroute planned construction through the city, including the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe (Santa Fe), which could carry significant amounts of crude oil into the city and refined products out of it. Furthermore, the St. Louis-San Francisco Railroad (Frisco) constructed the "Coal Oil Johnny," a special train that transported workers between Tulsa and the surrounding oil fields, offering service to the nearby communities of Sapulpa, Okmulgee, and Kiefer. By 1907, the city hosted four railroads that carried twenty trains a day, most either directly or indirectly involved in the oil trade. Furthermore, in 1910, Harry Sinclair (founder of the Sinclair Oil Company), Robert McFarlin, and a handful of other Tulsa oilmen established the Exchange National Bank. With a capitalization of \$400,000, it was the first major lender that operated in the oil fields and offered independent companies a local source of capital. Importantly, the bank claimed that it could free Oklahoma oilmen of their dependence on New Yorkers and other "outside" capitalists. On the back of these oil-based developments, the city's population grew more than ten times in the span of a decade, exceeding 18,000 by 1910.<sup>130</sup>

Much like residents of smaller boomtowns, white Tulsans grew anxious over the changes to the racial, class, and gender makeup of the city amid its petroleum-driven growth. As oil

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<sup>130</sup> Franks, *The Rush Begins*, 1, 118-19; James S. Hirsch, *Riot and Remembrance: The Tulsa Race War and Its Legacy* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 13-18; Debo, *Tulsa*, 87-89. On cities as centers of energy production and finance, see Kathleen A. Brosnan, *Uniting Mountain and Plain: Cities, Law, and Environmental Change along the Front Range* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002) and Joseph A. Pratt, Martin V. Melosi, and Kathleen A. Brosnan, eds., *Energy Capitals: Local Impact, Global Influence* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014). These books borrow the city-hinterland lens developed in *William Cronon, Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1991).

refining, banking, oil-field service companies, and the presence of oil workers all grew in Tulsa, so did attempts by law enforcement and private citizens to rein in inappropriate behavior and expel unwanted residents and visitors. Tulsans formed the Law Enforcement Club, which between 1905 and 1914 supported the campaigns of officials who vowed to take a tough approach on crime and established the *Daily Independent*, a newspaper that called out local citizens suspected of breaking the law or being guilty of corruption. These Tulsans were especially critical of the “under-world characters” who migrated from predominantly multi-racial cities such as Muskogee. During this same period, a local reformer and sheriff, John Oliphant, attacked what he and other white, middle-class Tulsans saw as inappropriate behavior by ordering that housekeepers, cooks, and other unmarried women stop living with oilfield workers, many of whom were assumed to be acting unfaithfully towards families they had left back east.<sup>131</sup>

Tulsa’s early oilmen also feared that major oil companies would dominate the business of extraction in the fields surrounding the city. Standard Oil’s monopolistic business methods were fresh on the minds of Mid-Continent oilmen and politicians during the first decade of the twentieth century. In June of 1905, Standard completed a 460-mile eight-inch pipeline connecting its storage facilities in the Kansas oil fields to its Chicago-area refinery in Whiting, Indiana. At a cost of \$16 million, Standard greatly reduced its largest refinery’s dependency upon sulfur-rich “sour” crudes from Indiana and Ohio, which were expensive to refine, and gained new access to lighter, “sweeter” Mid-Continent crudes that could be cheaply transformed into valuable byproducts such as gasoline and kerosene. This was a major shift in the United States oil market, as consumers in the Midwest and on the Eastern Seaboard were now tapped into the growing oil fields in the Mid-Continent. Standard’s new links between Kansas and the east spelled disaster for Mid-Continent

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<sup>131</sup> Franks, *The Rush Begins*, 112-14.

independents. Standard refused to run oil through its pipelines during periods of flush production, which meant that when overproduction occurred, there was no corresponding fall in supply and thus no reduction in consumer prices, making it exceedingly difficult to drill for oil profitably. The Kansas legislature responded in 1905 by passing laws that planned for the construction of a state-owned refinery, declared that pipeline companies must act as common carriers, and regulated railroad and pipeline rates. While courts struck down the state-owned refinery, the other provisions became law. Furthermore, overtures from Kansas oil producers led to a federal investigation of Standard by the Commissioner of Corporations, which precipitated the expansion of the Interstate Commerce Commission's power over pipelines and railroads and the eventual dissolution of the Standard monopoly in 1911.<sup>132</sup>

Oil development around Tulsa initially offered new companies the opportunity to break into the national pipeline and refinery market that Standard dominated. In 1907, the well-known Pittsburgh-based industrialists, the Mellon family, collaborated with the Gulf Refining Company of Texas to form the Gulf Oil Corporation. Gulf Oil and the Texas Fuel Company (better known today as Texaco) had both emerged during the 1901 Spindletop boom and offered an alternative to Standard in the realm of refining and transport. A primary impetus behind the merger that formed Gulf was the desire of the concerned parties to construct a major pipeline connecting the Glenn Pool to Gulf's refinery in Port Arthur, Texas. This 480-mile pipeline could carry over 13,000 barrels a day, enough to run the refinery on nothing but Indian Territory crude. The pipeline's construction highlighted the valuable geochemical composition of Tulsa-area petroleum, which

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<sup>132</sup> Arthur Menzies Johnson, *Petroleum Pipelines and Public Policy, 1906-1959* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 18-24. See also Kyle Williams, "Roosevelt's Populism: The Kansas Oil War of 1905 and the Making of Corporate Capitalism," *Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era* 19, no. 1 (January 2020): 96-121, accessed January 28, 2020, doi:10.1017/S1537781419000446.

was rich in gasoline and kerosene and thus especially demanded by refiners. The Texas Company's refinery managers discovered that their operations could derive five times as much gasoline from Indian Territory crude as they did from oil drilled along the Gulf Coast of Texas. These companies were able to profitably purchase crude at lower prices than Standard's subsidiary, Prairie. For the first time, Standard was facing serious challengers.<sup>133</sup>

Nevertheless, while non-Standard pipeline owners and refiners lacked the notoriety of the Rockefellers, they still controlled vital oil bottlenecks and their power scared Tulsa-based oilmen. One episode illustrates how anxieties over monopolies and race intertwined in the city's early bouts with prospective oil businesses. At a Tulsa Commercial Club meeting in early 1906, H.H. Tucker, secretary of the Kansas-based Uncle Sam Refinery Company, proposed the construction of a refinery in west Tulsa. He declared to the audience that his company was not for sale to Standard and that if it was, he hoped Tulsans would acquire a "good, big, strong rope" and hang every one of the Uncle Sam's officers. Tucker added that the city's commercial club should negotiate the terms of the refinery's location, not the region's oil producers, otherwise Standard's "secret service system" would ensure that the latter would be cut off from refinery markets. Tucker ended by saying, "If you permit us to throw a free market in here, every man in this town will profit by it and we will give you a white man's price for oil." Tucker's speech promoted the idea that only true white men would purchase crude oil at a "free market" price and implied that those who created and maintained trusts did not meet the standards of real manliness or whiteness, that such individuals in fact deserved to suffer at the hands of a lynch mob. Tucker's speech evidently struck a positive chord, as the Uncle Sam completed construction of the city's first refinery that same year. Much like in the realm of oil-field labor, whiteness and manliness were reified through

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 36-38, 40.

real economic relations, in this case between oil producers and refiners. The dominance of Standard and other “outside” interests only intensified the need for a well-policed marketplace, a task never far removed from notions of race and gender.<sup>134</sup>

### *Oil, African Indians, and Black Settlers*

White and “mixed-blood” Indigenous men in and around Tulsa were not the only parties that hoped for deliverance by way of crude. For many African Americans, Indian Territory and eventually the state of Oklahoma represented a promised land that offered an escape from the legacies of plantation slavery and the most heinous abuses of Jim Crow. The oil booms only intensified these dreams. In the years before statehood, Black settlers in Indian Territory helped establish dozens of all-Black towns in hopes of spearheading racial uplift through Black-led communities and Black-owned businesses. Of the 32 all-Black townships established in the United States following the Civil War, 28 were located in the Indian and Oklahoma territories. African Americans migrating out of the southeastern United States into Indian Territory entered a region where African-Indigenous peoples already held considerable power within some of the Five Tribes. This was especially the case in the Creek Nation, where Tulsa was located and where about a third of the roughly 15,000 Creek citizens recognized by the federal government during the allotment process were Black. African Creeks, despite their origins in enslavement, served in the Creek Nation government and could claim much of the same rights to land and political power that “full-blood” and “mixed-blood” Creeks did between the Civil War and the end of the nineteenth

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<sup>134</sup> Galbreath, *Glenn Pool*, 104-06; “First Refinery in Tulsa County,” McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa, International Petroleum Exposition Collection (“IPE” forthcoming), series 1, box 1, folder 5.

century. Despite the persistence of racism against Black Creeks within the tribe itself, on the eve of allotment, the Creek Nation spent more money per capita on the education of Black children than any surrounding state and Black Creeks had higher literacy rates than Black students elsewhere in the Southwest. This was the case despite the fact that English was a second language for many African Creeks. Thus, the oil regions of Indian Territory and eastern Oklahoma were home to numerous Black landowners (both tribal citizens and migrants whom Black Indians termed “state Negroes”), Black business owners, and all-Black communities eager and able to prospect for oil.<sup>135</sup>

Both Black settlers and progressive African Indians viewed the region’s oil booms as a source of wealth that could be directly committed towards the goals of racial uplift. These hopes took multiple forms in the first decades of the twentieth century, appearing within a national African American cultural discourse as well as in on-the-ground efforts at boosterism and entrepreneurship. Films produced by studios that catered to Black audiences nationwide in the 1920s tapped into the broad interest in oil. *Black Gold*, a “stirring epic of the oil fields,” depicted the real all-Black town of Tatums, Oklahoma engulfed by fictional gushers, fires, vice, adventure, and everything else that came with each oil boom. Another Black film, titled *The Symbol of the Unconquered* (1920), depicted a Black man tasked with defending his oil-rich property from his white neighbors; first from local grifters and eventually from hooded Klansmen on horseback. Boosters for all-Black towns such as Red Bird, Indian Territory (now Redbird, Oklahoma) advertised their locations in the so-called oil-and-gas “belt” of northeast Indian Territory as reason for “men of [the African-American] race who have money and want to do some business” to

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<sup>135</sup> J. Kavin Ross, “A Conspiracy of Silence,” *This Land*, September, 2011; Zellar, *African Creeks*, 210, 215.

migrate to the territory. Nearly two decades later, similar language continued to appear in an advertisement published in one of Oklahoma's leading Black newspapers, which lauded the town of Slick, Oklahoma as an ideal migration destination for African Americans, especially those with money to invest. "Oil is bound to make this town one of the industrial centers of Oklahoma. The man who gets in on the ground floor will reap a golden harvest." In this way, "Black gold" had a double meaning for peoples of African descent in oil country: crude was a burgeoning resource that could be harnessed by Black-owned companies and its windfall utilized toward the betterment of Black communities.<sup>136</sup>

The dream of using petroleum to uplift Black Oklahomans at a collective level was rooted in the ideas of Booker T. Washington, who saw in industry and agriculture the seeds of racial "improvement." Indeed, Washington saw special promise for Black deliverance in Indian Territory and was especially enamored with the region's numerous Black towns. Within the petroleum industry, Washington's ideology was perhaps most clearly reflected in the Ardmore Lubricating Oil Company. Based in Oklahoma City, the Black-owned company sought to build a vertically integrated oil operation centered in the Healdton field near the aforementioned all-Black town of Tatums. In the wake of World War I, the company reported ownership of several producing leases in southern Oklahoma and planned to build a refinery in Tatums to rival the white oilmen of the area who were centered in the city of Ardmore. Ardmore Lubricating Oil's Black stockholders hoped to produce lubricant, gasoline, and emollient for skin problems using the oil it refined, and it reported that Black landowners in and around Tatums were enthusiastic supporters of the

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<sup>136</sup> While the film itself has been lost, a promotional poster for *Black Gold* is located in the Beinecke Library at Yale University. Felix Harcourt, *Ku Klux Kulture: America and the Klan in the 1920s* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 112; "Red Bird, I.T.," *Muskogee Cimeter*, February 15, 1906, 1; "Slick, Opportunity for Black Man," *Black Dispatch*, December 24, 1920.

enterprise, eager to donate land and become directly involved in work and investment. The owners of the venture couched the company as the “Great Race Enterprise” and were committed to a larger goal of social uplift, touting the business as “the first oil refinery ever erected by Negroes, to be operated by members of his own race.” They urged “the positive and absolute support of every Negro in America” and insisted that “This is a colored company from bottom to top and deserves the patronage of all colored men who are interested in oil. Let the colored men of the state unite themselves and make this one of the largest oil companies regardless [of] color.” At least in the eyes of Ardmore Lubricating Oil’s principle shareholders, crude would play a vital role in Black deliverance from Jim Crow Oklahoma.<sup>137</sup>

On the ground, the Ardmore Lubricating Oil Company’s clearest contributions to Black communities appeared in Oklahoma City, far from the center of its drilling and refining ventures in southern Oklahoma. The company owned an office building on 2nd Street in Oklahoma City and envisioned the facility as a source of Black power in the marketplace. By the end of 1920, the building was home to a Black-owned grocery, established so that residents would no longer “feel the want and need of a grocery company, owned and controlled by the race and a company big and strong enough to meet competition through its purchasing power.” In addition to the grocery and the oil company’s offices, the building was also home to a physician, tailor, and hat maker. Its headquarters acted as a community center where philanthropic efforts such as free holiday meals were hosted. Ardmore Lubricating Oil saw itself as an engine for “co-operative efforts” among Black people in the city and state and its long-term goals included the establishment of Black

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<sup>137</sup> Zellar, *African Creeks*, 243-44; “Baker Makes Good,” *Black Dispatch*, August 30, 1918, 4; “Baker Makes Good,” *Black Dispatch*, September 6, 1918, 4; “Rev. J.W. Perkins Visits the Ardmore Lubricating Oil Co.,” *Black Dispatch*, November 15, 1918, 8; “Some of the Best Talent in the State Secured by the Ardmore Lubricating Oil Company to Work in Its Laboratory—Great Race Enterprise,” *Black Dispatch*, October 24, 1919, 5.



banking institutions. In short, the company situated itself as a foothold for Black communities in the deliberately white realm of extractive capitalism.<sup>138</sup>

One of Ardmore Lubricating Oil's primary shareholders, the African Creek oilman James Coody Johnson, further reflected the racial shifts and entrepreneurial efforts that were central to transforming Indian Territory into Oklahoma. As outlined in chapter 1, Johnson's Black Panther Oil Company was a successful independent operator in the Cushing field and, as part of its enterprises there, came in conflict with Native royalty owners from time to time. Even as his company was seemingly guilty of mistreating Indigenous landowners, Johnson himself was an important force in the confluence of African American and African Indian politics and business. Johnson was born into a politically powerful African Creek and Seminole family in the 1860s and parlayed his familial privileges into a college education. In the 1880s, his bilingual skills and family connections garnered him a job as an interpreter for the federal district court in western Arkansas, which at the time oversaw all of Indian Territory. Johnson became known for defending traditional Indigenous rights in the courtroom. He also used his time working for the court to learn the law, which allowed him to pass the bar and become a lawyer. Johnson served in some of the final sessions of the Creek Nation's legislature and was well-known for frequent trips to Washington D.C., where he advocated for the rights of both Creeks and Seminoles. His role as an intermediary between white and Black Americans, Black Indians, and mixed- and "full-blood" Natives set Johnson up with the abilities needed to not only represent those peoples but also to

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<sup>138</sup> "Ardmore Lubricating Oil Co. to Give Free Thanksgiving Dinner," *Black Dispatch*, November 19, 1920, 1, 6.

succeed as an entrepreneur amid allotment and the dissolution of Indian Territory and the Creek government.<sup>139</sup>

Johnson's business success amid the wider dispossession of Indigenous and Black-Indigenous peoples and the curtailment of his own political rights helps explain why Black-owned enterprises such as Ardmore Lubricating Oil situated themselves as not only for-profit businesses but as engines of communal uplift. Before he entered the oil business, Coody Johnson was a founding partner of the Creek Citizens Bank in Muskogee, one of two Black-owned banks in the city. He was also active within the Republican Party, acting in his capacity as both a party member and a Creek statesman, traveling to Washington D.C. to appeal for the continuation of restrictions on the sale of "full-blood" and African-Creek surplus allotments. Despite his economic and civic successes, Johnson could do little as he witnessed the largescale robbery that the lack of land-sale restrictions wrought among Creek Freedmen and watched his own political influence collapse under the weight of Jim Crow. In 1904 Congress passed an amendment to the Indian appropriations bill that opened surplus allotments—land allotted in addition to basic homesteads—owned by African Creeks and intermarried whites to sale. Johnson estimated that, within a week, grafters had obtained two-thirds of the African Creeks' surplus land, usually at prices far below their actual value.<sup>140</sup>

The accumulation of land by white settlers and corporations that Johnson and others witnessed was often achieved through corrupt means. Fraudulent land companies forged Freedmen signatures onto land deeds and conveyed them to third-party individuals who would arrive at the property in person and demand possession, threatening to sue the landowner otherwise.

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<sup>139</sup> Zellar, *African Creeks*, 172-73, 244-45.

<sup>140</sup> Zellar, *African Creeks*, 235-36.

Oftentimes, Black landowners would then consult attorneys who might demand half of the land as the price for winning a lawsuit in their favor. The third-party settler who had gained the land by paying the usually non-existent land company could claim protections if he or she was sued by a Black landowner, while the land company simply destroyed the fraudulent deed before it could ever appear in court. Given these circumstances, Black landowners often settled with the third-party claimant for a pittance and moved off of their land. Buck Colbert Franklin, a Black attorney of Choctaw and Chickasaw descent, recalled that any Black landowner whose allotment or property was considered favorable for oil “would probably have a thousand clouds over it before he knew it” and would have to commit to a “costly and long drawn out” legal suit before he or she could reclaim title to their land. Franklin’s own brother, Tom, lost title to his oil-rich allotment through such misdeeds. As Franklin recalled, “Instead of being a millionaire, [Tom] died a pauper.”<sup>141</sup>

Buck Franklin’s experiences as a booster for the all-Black town of Rentiesville further revealed the limitations of Black-owned business ventures that sought the larger goal of community improvement. When Franklin hoped to raise capital for the Rentiesville Improvement Company, he recruited oil-wealthy donors, including a “full-blood” Creek, Eastman Richards, and a Freedwoman, Queenie Jackson, to invest in the enterprise. However, these efforts to develop Rentiesville were thwarted by the racial capitalism that came with allotment and Jim Crow. As a “full-blood” Creek citizen, Richards was unable to invest any of his money without the approval of white authorities, who immediately refused to contribute to the venture. Meanwhile, Jackson balked at supporting the company because, according to Franklin, she had little of her own business

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<sup>141</sup> Buck Colbert Franklin, *My Life and an Era: The Autobiography of Buck Colbert Franklin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 148-49, 267-68. Franklin was the father of John Hope Franklin, the eminent mid-twentieth-century historian of Black America.

sense and was likely influenced by white advisors who refused to believe that a Black-owned improvement company was worth investing in. Whether through law or custom, the hands that guided the movement of capital from investor to business were so often white. On top of financial and real-estate dispossession, whites stripped J. Coody Johnson, Buck Franklin, and other prominent Black Oklahomans of their political influence and rights during the statehood era. For instance, white settlers barred Johnson and other Black Republicans from participating in statehood organizing meetings that began in 1905, making it clear that the coming state would adhere to the racist political structures of the Jim Crow South. Nevertheless, Johnson, Franklin, and others managed to carve out profitable niches within the settler world of resource extraction, using their skills as lawyers and their ever-threatened connections to the land that allotment had initially provided to grab hold of marginal but still valuable pieces of the oil economy. This dissidence surely shaped Black oil investors' efforts to utilize their business ventures as larger enterprises aimed at communal uplift in a world where, before their eyes, white supremacy closed its grip upon access to political sovereignty and civil and economic rights.<sup>142</sup>

### *The Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921*

The marginal but still lucrative opportunities that a handful of Africa American and African Indian entrepreneurs forged out of the Tulsa area's oil booms were in large part funneled into the city itself, especially into the Black neighborhood of Greenwood. In the wake of the initial oil booms that occurred around the time of statehood, O.W. Gurley, a wealthy Black real estate owner, purchased forty acres in Tulsa with the explicit goal of creating a Black neighborhood. This area,

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<sup>142</sup> Franklin, *My Life and an Era*, 254.

which became Greenwood, was bordered by Pine Street to the north, the Frisco railroad tracks to the south, Lansing Avenue to the east, and Cincinnati Avenue to the west. By 1910, ten percent of Tulsa's population of 18,000 was Black. By 1920 the number of Black Tulsans had grown to 11,000. Greenwood became home to both numerous Black-owned businesses and Tulsa's Black working class. Black businessmen such as J. Coody Johnson maintained contacts and investments throughout eastern Oklahoma, including in Tulsa, while Buck Franklin and other Black attorneys started offices in the city, providing services to Black and Indigenous clients, including numerous oil-royalty owners. Black workers labored as domestic and service laborers in white Tulsa—many in the homes of prominent oilmen—but otherwise were not welcome south of the Frisco Railroad. “Deep Greenwood”—the two blocks north of the corner of Archer and Greenwood—was the heart of Black Tulsa and was the specific area that was known as Black Wall Street, where Black-owned hotels, cinemas, restaurants, and bars flourished.<sup>143</sup>

On May 31 and June 1, 1921, white mobs destroyed Greenwood, killing hundreds of Black Tulsans and robbing the city's Black residents of millions of dollars in cash and property. The pogrom began when a Black man, Dick Rowland, was falsely accused of assaulting a young white woman inside of an elevator. A white lynch mob gathered around the jail where Rowland was held and demanded that authorities hand over the alleged perpetrator. The massacre commenced when an armed group of Black Tulsans, many of whom were World War I veterans, rallied to protect Rowland and confronted the would-be lynch mob. What ensued was a militarized attack on Greenwood that must have reminded combat veterans of their past wartime experiences. White and Black Tulsans traded gunfire as white mobs began to loot and burn the neighborhood. Aircraft

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<sup>143</sup> Ross, “A Conspiracy of Silence,” 23-24; Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 14-16; Franklin, *My Life and an Era*, 214-15, 231-32.

piloted by local whites dropped explosives on Black Wall Street, or “Little Africa,” as it was derisively known among white Tulsans. Whites destroyed several Black-owned grocery stores, hotels, the African Methodist Episcopal church, and the Second Baptist church, the latter valued at \$485,000. Some Black Tulsans defended their homes and businesses to the death. Many more surrendered before the much larger white mobs and were gathered into concentration camps where they were held at gunpoint for the duration of the massacre. White oil workers driving trucks emblazoned with their petroleum company’s name ferried the dead and wounded and held Black residents as prisoners. Many Black residents, who were now homeless due to the widespread fires and effectively imprisoned, were compelled by hurriedly created municipal laws to work on cleanup crews or else be arrested as vagrants. No definitive death count was ever compiled. However, the overall toll almost certainly reached into the hundreds and was perhaps as high as three hundred. The vast majority of victims were Black, while the dozens of white Tulsans who died—including at least one oil-field tool dresser and the manager of a petroleum firm—were either felled by gunfire from those defending Greenwood or were killed by the blazes that whites had set.<sup>144</sup>

The event itself was a cataclysmic irruption of racist violence that perhaps has no equal in United States history. However, in many ways it was but the culmination of the larger growth of oil extraction and white supremacy in and around Tulsa in the years preceding Greenwood’s destruction. The volatile mix of an always-uncertain oil economy and white residents’ anti-Black racism collided to create the greater social brew that the race massacre emerged out of. White Tulsans’ attraction to extralegal political violence was on display in the years before 1921. In

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<sup>144</sup> “\$2,500,000 of Negro Property is Destroyed,” *Black Dispatch*, June 3, 1921, 1; Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 105; Ross, “A Conspiracy of Silence.”

October of 1917, unknown assailants bombed the Tulsa home of the prominent Pennsylvania oilman, J. Edgar Pew, who headed the Carter Oil Company and whose family had founded the large independent Sun Oil Company (Sunoco). While no one was harmed in the bombing, Tulsa's business class and its defenders wasted no time in declaring war on the suspected perpetrators. Immediately, the *Tulsa Daily World* began a media campaign alleging that the International Workers of the World (IWW) was responsible and that the bombing of the Pew home was part of a larger plot to attack Mid-Continent oilmen and their assets. An editorial in the paper stated, "If the IWW or its twin brother, the Oil Workers Union, gets busy in your neighborhood, kindly take occasion to decrease the supply of hemp...The first step in the whipping of Germany is to strangle the IWWs. Kill 'em just as you would kill any other kind of snake." The same editorial stated that "The unrestricted production of petroleum is as necessary to the winning of the war as the unrestricted production of gunpowder" and that anyone who tried to reduce the supply of oil "for one-hundredth of a second is a traitor and ought to be shot!"<sup>145</sup>

The anti-radical furor grew to a fever pitch within days of the bombing. Seventeen members of the IWW who were arrested for the crime by Tulsa authorities were turned over by the police to a hooded vigilante group known as the Knights of Liberty. In the dead of night, with newspaper reporters in tow, the Knights drove the alleged perpetrators to a ravine on the outskirts of Tulsa where they whipped, tarred, and feathered each alleged Wobbly and ordered them to never return to the city, lest they suffer a worse fate. The incident was still celebrated by white Tulsans in the runup to the Greenwood pogrom. On May 29, 1921, just two days before the massacre commenced, the *Daily World* published an article that touted Tulsa as "civilized and refined" and

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<sup>145</sup> *Tulsa Daily World*, November 9, 1917, 3-4, cited in Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land*, 29, 124; Clark, "A History of the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma," 25.

bragged that the city was a place “where IWW’s anarchists are tarred and feathered whenever they become obstreperous.” There is no doubt that the extralegal violence that white Tulsans exercised during World War I was spearheaded by the city’s white business elite, many of whom were oilmen. The Tulsa Chamber of Commerce acted as the city’s branch of the Councils of Defense during the war. The chamber reported on seditious activity and antiwar sentiment and encouraged the extralegal policing of those deemed radical threats to businesses amid the war effort. The city’s white business owners were likely even more virulently anti-radical than most during the war, given the allies’ dependence upon oil and Tulsa’s role as a major financier and staging ground for the production of petroleum.<sup>146</sup>

On top of this potent history of vigilante violence, in 1921 white Tulsans experienced fluctuating oil markets and an ongoing agricultural depression. Oil prices in Oklahoma hit a record high of \$3.50 a barrel in March of 1920. However, the price of Mid-Continent crude fell precipitously over the next year, bottoming out at a dollar a barrel during the weeks following the race massacre, the lowest price seen since 1916. New booms in Southern California beginning in 1920 had turned the international oil industry’s attention to the Pacific Coast, reducing prospecting and drilling in the Mid-Continent. Thus, even as supply gluts emerged around the country, Oklahoma was left out of the production-based boomtime frenzies that at least brought influxes of people and cash. Numerous oil companies experienced layoffs and wage cuts in the months before the massacre due to falling oil prices and the lack of new production in eastern Oklahoma. George Getty and his son J. Paul—owners and operators of the Minnehoma Oil Company—reportedly cut the salaries of their Tulsa-based workers by twenty percent in the spring of 1921. Reductions in

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<sup>146</sup> Lee Roy Chapman, “The Nightmare of Dreamland,” *This Land*, September 2011; Alfred L. Brophy, “Tate Brady, the Magic City, and the Dreamland,” *This Land*, September, 2011; Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil*, 184-93.



employment within the oil industry led to uprisings of white workers elsewhere in the Mid-Continent. White drillers and roughnecks in Baytown, Texas mounted an unsuccessful “charge” against the Humble Oil Company’s refinery in protest of the firm’s employment of numerous Black and Tejano workers, while white union workers at the Magnolia Oil Company’s plant in Beaumont, Texas called for a reduction in the number of Black workers. The considerable declines in the oil economy were exacerbated by a broader economic downturn that gripped the state of Oklahoma in the wake of World War I. Bank failures were frequent in 1920-1921 and the state’s bank-guaranty fund failed altogether. In 1920, the American National Bank of Tulsa went under and was no longer able to pay its depositors. A riot was only averted when the Exchange National—the major lender to oilmen in the city—agreed to honor the crashed bank’s obligations.<sup>147</sup>

Added to the anxieties of an ongoing economic downturn was the continued success of a handful of Black families and businesses that operated in and around Tulsa. Because of the hard lines of segregation that white oilmen maintained, few Black Oklahomans were directly involved in petroleum production. However, in the aftermath of the massacre, journalists and activists sympathetic to the cause of Black civil rights pointed to African American successes within the oil industry as a primary spark in initiating the white attack on Greenwood. One of these voices was that of James Weldon Johnson, the then-executive secretary of the NAACP. He illustrated the wider anger and resentment that whites displayed towards Black Tulsans by citing instances of Black landowners around the city who discovered rich oil reserves on their properties and,

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<sup>147</sup> Nordhauser, *The Quest for Stability*, 6-8, 10-12; “Crude Price a Dollar a Barrel,” *Black Dispatch*, June 24, 1921, 4; Outline Calendar of the Rise and Fall of Gov. J.C. (Jack) Walton, Carter Blue Clark Collection, WHC, box 1, folder 4; J. Paul Getty, *The History of the Oil Business of George F. and J. Paul Getty, 1903-1939* (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty, 1941), 57; Diana D. Olien and Roger Olien, *Oil in Texas*, 134-35.

“because no white man would bore for them,” were forced to sell their land “at the white man’s price.” John Haynes Holmes, a white man who helped found both the NAACP and the ACLU, relayed the story of a Black family from Clearview, a community outside of Tulsa, who refused to sell their oil-rich farm despite the demands of their white neighbors. Soon after, the family of five was killed when an unknown arsonist burned down their home. As these stories indicated, many Black Americans and their white supporters, eager to assess the causes of the massacre, believed petroleum had helped precipitate Greenwood’s destruction.<sup>148</sup>

The jealousies that white Tulsans held towards their Black neighbors and the belief that the latter were upending the unimpeachable racial hierarchy that governed their oil-drenched world extended to the land upon which Greenwood stood. In the immediate aftermath of the massacre, Black Oklahomans understood the attack as not just a sudden outburst of racist outrage, but a calculated attempt to dispossess Black Tulsans of real estate that was especially valuable to the burgeoning but presently beleaguered oil industry. Tulsa’s oil booms had expanded the demand for industrial development, especially the expansion of the city’s railroad capacity. Before the massacre, white industrial developers had increasingly encroached on the Black districts that had once laid in lowlands on the northeastern outskirts of Tulsa and they desired the more centralized land where Greenwood was located. In the years and months before the massacre, railroads attempted to purchase sections of Black Tulsa; however, residents and landowners refused to sell. As Oklahoma’s premier Black newspaper, the *Black Dispatch*, reported ten days after the

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<sup>148</sup> John Haynes Holmes, “Tulsa!” *Unity* 87, no. 1 (1921): 245-48. In terms of contemporary sources, oil’s connections to the massacre are clearly made in Allison Keyes, “A Long-Lost Manuscript Contains a Searing Eye-Witness Account of the Tulsa Race Massacre of 1921,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, May 27, 2016, accessed Feb. 20, 2020, [www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/long-lost-manuscript-contains-searing-eyewitness-account-tulsa-race-massacre-1921-180959251/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smithsonian-institution/long-lost-manuscript-contains-searing-eyewitness-account-tulsa-race-massacre-1921-180959251/).

massacre, “In fact, the inhabitants of this most prosperous Black community each year proceeded to get a firmer hold upon this much coveted section, by the erection of permanent brick structures, and the increase in landholdings.” A week after Greenwood’s destruction, the city expanded its fire code to include thirty-five blocks of the burned-out sections of the city. Many Black Tulsans and Oklahomans concluded that this action would require the establishment of new Black neighborhoods far removed from the city’s business district. This would ease the conversion of residential and commercial areas into oil-based industrial real estate and “shows plainly that Tulsa coveted also the very land upon which Black men dwelt.” Indeed, soon after the attack on Greenwood, an all-white appraisal board working for the city’s reconstruction committee offered Black owners of property buyouts at the heightened valuations that industrial real estate garnered. Most landowners refused to sell.<sup>149</sup>

Black Tulsans and their white allies denounced these attempts to permanently remove the Black population from the city’s center. The African American press asserted that insurance claims would cover most of the rebuilding costs in Greenwood, and that the resurrection of the neighborhood would be a monument to the resolve of Black citizens and a disappointment to the white grafters who were already planning to expand railroads through the burnt-out neighborhood. Black oilmen stepped up to provide relief. The Ardmore Lubricating Oil Company invited the president of the NAACP, A.B. Whitby, to speak at its July shareholder meeting and the company pledged to disburse extra stock to shareholders who had lost everything in the massacre. However, white Tulsans would not relent. Portions of the white press in the city insisted that the destruction of Greenwood had been a necessity, carried out by honorable “heroes” who had answered “the call

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<sup>149</sup> “Loot, Arson, Murder!” *Black Dispatch*, June 10, 1921, 1; “Negroes Withdraw Millions from Tulsa Banks,” *Black Dispatch*, June 24, 1921, 1.

to service” to protect white families and property. Three months after the pogrom, the city defied court orders and reestablished the fire-code ordinances that threatened to price out Greenwood’s Black population. On top of this, insurance companies refused to reimburse Black property owners and banks refused to acknowledge the accounts of Black businesses whose accounting ledgers were destroyed in the fires. Despite these attempts to dispossess Black Tulsans of their neighborhood, the community managed to hold onto Greenwood. It remained segregated in the aftermath of the massacre, continuing to harbor both the dreams and violence that came with Black life in Jim Crow Oklahoma.<sup>150</sup>

*From “Black Wall Street” to the “Oil Capital of the World”: White Tulsa and the International Petroleum Exposition*

In the years immediately following the massacre, the Ku Klux Klan flourished in Tulsa and across Oklahoma. At the same time, white oilmen—some of whom were publicly known as Klansmen—sought to reassert their control of the city and its image as the “Oil Capital of the World” by making Tulsa home to the global oil industry’s largest gathering of men and materiel: The International Petroleum Exposition (IPE). The city’s business leaders first organized and hosted the IPE in 1923, just two years removed from Greenwood’s devastation and within blocks of the destroyed section of town. The exposition offered a space for oil companies to display new drilling, transport, and refining techniques and to market new technologies to prospective buyers. Furthermore, the IPE attracted both private and public officials who participated in petroleum

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<sup>150</sup> “Negroes Withdraw Millions from Tulsa Banks,” 1; “Dick Rowland in South Omaha, No Trace of Girl,” *Black Dispatch*, June 17, 1921, 1; “Stockholders’ Grand Session,” *Black Dispatch*, June 24, 1921, 1; “Loot, Arson, Murder!” 1; “Re-Pass Tulsa Ordinance,” *Black Dispatch*, September 1, 1921, 1.

production from the world over. It turned into a decades-long success, as the city hosted the event semi-annually from 1923 to 1979. In addition to its more pragmatic commercial goals, the early iterations of the IPE included banquets, demonstrations, and parades that celebrated Tulsa's roots in settler-colonial triumphalism and white supremacy. Oil and race intermingled within these displays, championing Tulsa as a vital node within an international industry that relied heavily on colonial seizures of land and resources while suggesting from a more local perspective that the "Oil Capital of the World" was to white Tulsans what "Black Wall Street" had been to their Black neighbors.

A white Tulsa businessman named Earl Sneed first conceived of the idea for the IPE in 1922. His hope was for the exposition to "give thrills to the young people, knowledge to the oil fraternity, opportunity to make world-wide acquaintance, renew friendships, and firmly establish Tulsa for all time to come as the oil center of the entire world." Sneed's hopes of starting a "world's fair" for the petroleum industry quickly came to fruition, as both oilmen and non-oil elites in Tulsa incorporated the International Petroleum Exposition and began raising funds for the inaugural event, recruiting local oil executives to serve on the organization's board and inviting oilmen from across the United States and the world to their city. The IPE grew in size and prominence throughout the 1920s. Between the first three events held from 1923 to 1925, the number of exhibitors increased from twenty-seven to 102, while attendance at the week-long exposition grew from 14,200 to over 38,500. Alongside their counterparts from Oklahoma, Texas, California, and the rest of the United States, delegates from Japan, China, Romania, France, Germany, Peru, Mexico, Guatemala, Ecuador, and Venezuela attended the IPE in the 1920s. By the end of the decade, the exposition emphasized scientific and technical advances in the industry—from drilling practices, to conservation techniques, to emergency first aid among workers—focused on

welcoming the many foreign delegates to Tulsa, who eventually represented over thirty foreign companies and governments, and exhibited \$10 million of equipment that was especially geared towards geophysicists, petroleum engineers, and paleontologists, all of whom were rapidly growing in prominence within the industry. One petroleum-engineering publication summed up the exposition's value to the industry, describing it as a "post-graduate course in the mechanics and technique of the petroleum industry." The event also played an important role in attempts to heal the fissures that hounded the industry's goal of achieving better conservation practices. Independents exhibited alongside and mingled among the major firms and their representatives, while national organizations such as the still-fledgling American Petroleum Institute (founded in 1919) used the exposition as an occasion to direct the industry-wide movement towards standardized equipment, with hopes that such developments would greatly improve the implementation of coordinated conservation practices.<sup>151</sup>

Tulsa's ability to successfully host the IPE was bolstered by the city's recent success holding largescale public gatherings. In 1918, the city hosted the national convention for the Sons of Confederate Veterans, drawing 40,000 attendees to the Lost Cause celebration. Prominent oilmen had helped organize the event (they invited guests of their city on tours of the surrounding oil fields). Other forms of white-supremacist organizing flourished at the same moment Earl Sneed first envisioned the IPE. In January of 1922, five prominent white Tulsans formed the Tulsa Benevolent Association, an organization that acted as a front for the Tulsa branch of the Klan. Among its five founders were Wash Hudson, a local attorney who, as a member of the state

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<sup>151</sup> Donald Meyer Barnum, "International Petroleum Exposition, 1923-1940," M.A. thesis, University of Tulsa, 1968, 30, 84; "With Greatest Oil Exposition in History Set for Oct. 20-29, Trek to Tulsa Gets under Way," *Petroleum World*, October, 1928; William Gretzinger, "The Pageant of Oil Field Progress," *Oil Field Engineering* 4, no. 5 (November 1, 1928); "New A.P.I. Division is Busy Vitalizing Standardization," *Tulsa Daily World*, October 25, 1928.

legislature, had written the 1915 pro-independent proration law; Alf Heggem, a petroleum engineer based in the city who had grown wealthy through his work in the Cushing field, held multiple patents on conservation technologies, and would soon serve as a director of the IPE; and William “Shelly” Rogers, general counsel for the McMan Oil Company. The Tulsa Benevolent Association quickly erected plans to build a Klan headquarters located near Standpipe Hill, just on the edge of Greenwood. It cost \$200,000 to build and seated up to 3,000 people. The building was constructed within sight of hundreds of Black Tulsans who lived in makeshift housing and tents in their devastated neighborhood. The Klan held its first major rally in the city in April of 1922, less than a year after the massacre, drawing 1,700 participants who marched through the streets in full regalia. Tulsa’s growing connections to the Klan and the broader movement for white supremacy in the 1920s found a natural fit within the triumphalist narratives of white conquest and ingenuity that oilmen built around their industry.<sup>152</sup>

Amid this outpouring of white-supremacist mobilization, the IPE acted as more than just an exhibition of oil-field and refinery equipment. It was also a staging ground for display of the racial and colonial cultures that marked both Tulsa and international petroleum. This was especially the case in the years immediately following the race massacre. As part of the fanfare surrounding the first IPE, organizers staged a parade through downtown Tulsa, replete with floats and a pageant meant to crown a king and queen of oil. Fred Clinton, discoverer of oil in the Tulsa area, introduced “King Petroleum” to the expo crowd by welcoming him to “the Kingdom of Tulsa,

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<sup>152</sup> Clinton, “The Beginning of the International Petroleum Exposition and Congress,” 480; Chapman, “The Nightmare of Dreamland”; Steve Gerkin, “The White Knight Vigilantes: Exposing the Founders of Tulsa’s KKK,” *Frontier*, May 8, 2016, accessed February 5, 2020, <https://www.readfrontier.org/stories/the-white-knight-vigilantes-exposing-the-founders-of-tulas-kkk/>; Steve Gerkin, “Beno Hall,” *This Land*, September, 2011; “Tulsa Klan’s New \$200,000 Klavern will Accommodate 3,000 Klansmen,” *Imperial Nighthawk* 1, no. 9 (May 30, 1923).

my native home,” a “magic and matchless city” that had built “the most magnificent metropolis of the oil world.” A 79-year-old white lawyer named S.H. King played the role of petroleum’s patriarch. Fittingly, King was not in fact an oilman, but had instead worked as one of the first attorneys and federal judges in the Osage Nation, where largescale oil discoveries had been made throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century. As a former government official who helped oversee the entry of oil companies into the Osage reservation, King represented the marriage of public power and private extractive might that funneled Indian Country’s mineral wealth into cities such as Tulsa. During the IPE’s opening ceremony, he exalted the city’s “towering office buildings” and its “wide and well-kept streets and thoroughfares” and “the air of hospitality” displayed by the residents he encountered. He predicted that “my reign over Tulsa will be a happy and pleasant one.” Meanwhile, high school students portrayed slaves on the floats that passed through the city, depicting the ways in which ancient Middle Eastern peoples supposedly utilized petroleum seeps, and white Tulsans gawked at Native Americans who walked the streets amid a sea of flags and bunting. A new streetlight system known as “White Way” was inaugurated in downtown that night, with the opening ceremonies ending when Dorothy Vensel was crowned “Queen Petroleum.” Vensel was the future wife of Robert D. Hudson, the son of Wash and, like his father, a proud Klansman.<sup>153</sup>

Two years later, the Hudsons, Alf Heggem, who led the development of the exposition’s science and technology exhibits, and their fellow white-robed Ku Kluxers marched through Tulsa’s streets to mark the end of the 1925 IPE. Klansmen from Oklahoma, Kansas, Arkansas, and Texas formed a procession through the city, the first public gathering of the Klan in Tulsa since

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<sup>153</sup> Barnum, “International Petroleum Exposition,” 16-17, 24, 27-29, 52; Clinton, “The Beginning of the International Petroleum Exposition and Congress,” 483-84; “History of Tulsa Oil Show, 1923-1958,” IPE, series 1, box 1, folder 1.



1922. The group hoped to attract new members to the organization as an audience of four thousand looked on, enjoying fireworks and a pageant entitled “The Dawn of Freedom.” The procession marched from Main Street to McNulty Park—where, four years earlier, whites had imprisoned hundreds of Black Tulsans during the race massacre. The rally reflected the public-facing tactics that the Second Ku Klux Klan implemented nationally during the early 1920s, a strategy that was all the more powerful in Tulsa, where the Klan could memorialize the very streets and city blocks where its members had waged war against the Black community. White supremacy within the IPE stretched beyond public displays that marked Tulsa’s streets as white spaces and into the industry-wide welfare initiatives that the exposition facilitated and promoted. The general manager of the exposition throughout the 1920s, J. Burr Gibbons, positioned the IPE as host to the Order of the Knights of the Derrick, a fraternal organization of former oilers founded just before the first IPE. The Knights advocated for the material support of retired oilmen who struggled with expenses, as well as the establishment of a permanent oil museum in Tulsa. Gibbons hoped that exposition profits could be directed towards a fund for “these pioneers of the industry” to ensure that they received proper housing, medical attention, and financial aid. He believed a “benevolent program” for the industry’s old timers would develop into a “fine humanitarian service among the members of the fraternity.” Through the IPE and groups such as the Knights of the Derrick, white oilmen in Tulsa could support social and material solidarity among one another in the shadow of the wanton destruction and dispossession of Black Tulsa. Perhaps unsurprisingly given its similarity to other white-supremacist fraternal orders, critics alleged that the Knights of the Derrick were tied to the Klan.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>154</sup> Barnum, “International Petroleum Exposition,” 78, 97; J. Burr Gibbons, general manager, to W.G. Skelly, November 7, 1928, IPE, series 3, box 1, folder 1. On the Klan in the United States in the 1920s see, Charles C. Alexander, *The Ku Klux Klan in the Southwest* (Lexington:

Even more prevalent than the Klan were displays of Native American cultures organized by the white oilmen who hosted the IPE. These demonstrations attempted to illustrate for guests that Tulsa's ties to Indigenous peoples were exotic and exciting, but ultimately a harmless relic of the past that stood in contrast to their city's oil-fueled modernity. In 1923, the IPE directors recruited Billie Brown, a Euchee chief, to bring a cadre of Indian dancers from the Creek, Cheyenne, Arapahoe, and Sac-and-Fox nations to the exposition. Event organizers also invited a white man named Gordon Lillie—who was better known by his stage name, “Pawnee Bill”—and a delegation of Indians who worked on Lillie's Oklahoma ranch to the exposition. The Native men and women who accompanied Brown and Pawnee Bill danced before crowds of onlookers at the IPE. Pawnee Bill, like his friend Buffalo Bill Cody, was a mainstay in American West variety shows, which employed white, Black, and Mexican cowboys, Native Americans, and other veterans of westward expansion to act out an often sensationalized version of the United States' conquest of the region, one that used Indian actors to assert that Native Americans were rapidly vanishing before white “civilization.” However, white Tulsans were also cognizant of the city's mixed-race history and, at times, positioned Indians as lesser partners in the quest for crude. For instance, the parade during the 1924 exposition featured a float that portrayed a white man and an Indian standing side-by-side, searching for oil together.<sup>155</sup>

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University Press of Kentucky, 1965); Kenneth T. Jackson, *The Ku Klux Klan in the City, 1915-1930* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1967); Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1994); Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition* (New York: Liveright, 2017).

<sup>155</sup> Barnum, “International Petroleum Exposition,” 17, 52; J. Burr Gibbons, general manager, to W.G. Skelly, November 7, 1928, IPE, series 3, box 1, folder 1. For more on race, empire, and Western showmanship, see Louis S. Warren, *Buffalo Bill's America: William Cody and The Wild West Show* (New York: Vintage, 2006) and Richard White, “Frederick Jackson Turner and Buffalo Bill,” in *The Frontier in American Culture*, edited by Richard White, Patricia Nelson Limerick, and James R. Grossman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

By 1928, the IPE insisted that it had purged itself of all pageants and parades and was focused on hosting a purely “business show for the very busy businessman.” This made sense, given the exposition had quickly grown into a global, multi-industry affair. In addition to petroleum firms, representatives of railroads, steel companies, manufacturers of farm machinery and automobiles, and other enterprises that maintained ties to oil increasingly organized exhibits. However, event organizers still insisted on hiring Native dancers to perform before audiences. In 1928, the exposition chose citizens of the Osage, Quapaw, Creek, Sac-and-Fox, and numerous other Indigenous nations based upon their “voices and dancing ability” to perform for the exposition’s guests. The Indian exhibition was meant to highlight “the primitive life, habits, customs and tribal ceremonies of these original Americans.” The IPE planned to construct a “village setting” that included Indian women and children and that would remain open at all times so guests could “see the war dances and hear the native languages spoken” at any time. The white organizers hoped to “instruct while entertaining” through the employment of these Indigenous performers, situating Native peoples as exhibitors of a conquered culture, to be studied and romanticized by global visitors whose experience in extractive industries had likely brought them into contact with Indigenous peoples outside of Oklahoma and North America. It was not just Tulsans who took the opportunity to showcase the connections between oil and empire. In 1930, the Venezuelan delegation to the IPE not only exhibited the country’s growing oil industry, but also displayed photographs of and artifacts from Venezuela’s Indigenous peoples. These confluences were part of a larger story that the IPE attempted to convey to visitors, which wedded together narratives of scientific and settler-colonial progress; as one correspondent noted during a

subsequent exposition, the technological and managerial advances that the IPE facilitated would cause problems such as overproduction and explosive wells “to vanish even as the Indians did.”<sup>156</sup>

The ties between the IPE and white supremacists suggest that, for many white Tulsans, oil and whiteness went hand-in-hand, and the elevation of both through the city’s identity as the “Oil Capital of the World” would secure their futures in the wake of the Greenwood pogrom. Despite the exposition’s eventual efforts to distance itself from the racial politics of petroleum-based empire and “progress,” it was clear that white Tulsans continued to view the IPE through the lenses of anti-Black racism and settler triumph. J. Baxter Gardner was one adherent to this narrative. A columnist for the *Daily World*, Gardner took the occasion of the 1928 IPE to celebrate Tulsa’s progress and outline its seemingly harmonious racial divisions. He implored residents to climb Reservoir Hill at dusk one day, to witness the “skyscrapers filling up the space formerly occupied by the lazy smoke of a hundred camp fires,” the “blinking of a million lights coming on,” and “a blue haze rising from a refinery.” His portrait of industrial progress in Tulsa gestured to the oil exposition, “its derricks faintly suggesting the great power it has grown to be.” Gardner contrasted the modernity of the city’s center with the appearance of a “brightly robed squaw waddling along—the only reminder of Tulsa’s cradle days,” while his ode to the city concluded with a description of Tulsa’s Black section, what Gardner referred to as “Darkytown.” Gardner invoked various stereotypes of African Americans, describing Black Tulsa as a “bit of Alabama,” complete with a “quaint darky barber shop” and a “mammy” carrying a clothes basket on her head while dealing with “a squalling pickaninny, two skimpy pig tails jutting from either side of her head.”

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<sup>156</sup> “‘War Dances’ for Oil Show,” *Tulsa Daily World*, September 20, 1928; “Oklahoma Boy, Caught by the Wanderlust 10 Years Ago, back as Expo Venezuelan Delegate,” *Tulsa Daily World*, c. October, 1930, in IPE, Scrapbook, 1930; “Exposition Aids Oil Industry in Making Progress,” *Tulsa Oil Expositor* (November, 1939), 2, in IPE, series 4, box 14, folder 6.

The reliance upon racist stereotypes in Gardner's description speaks to the control white Tulsans felt they held over Black Tulsa in the wake of the massacre. No longer viewed as an existential threat to white Tulsans' racial supremacy, the city's Black residents could be referred to comically, rhetorically subdued beneath dehumanizing caricatures.<sup>157</sup>

The early IPE and the events and rhetoric that surrounded it tied together oil and white supremacy in both explicit and implicit terms. Throughout Tulsa's early history, the white men who coaxed crude out of the ground embraced certain relationships with "mixed-blood" Indigenous peoples, specifically relations that more closely tied white settlers to the land and bettered their own claims of nativism, their own narratives of worthy attachment to soil that bubbled up "black gold." These white-Indian relationships were almost always patronizing in nature, dependent upon Indigenous acquiescence to white people's assimilationist demands. This dynamic was on display at the IPE, where whites sometimes positioned Indians as junior partners in their settler-oil enterprise, but were more inclined to court Indigenous involvement for reasons entertaining imperial nostalgia. The stark absence of Black peoples as participants in the petroleum culture on display at the IPE spoke just as loudly to their place in white oilmen's conception of the ideal world of oil. That is, for white oilmen, Black people had no role to play. Rather, as the race massacre had so clearly demonstrated, Black Oklahomans represented an existential threat that whites would subdue at the latter's own discretion. Much like the "full-blood" Indigenous peoples of the region, Black peoples would more than likely pay the "white man's price"—whether in

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<sup>157</sup> "The 4th International Petroleum Exposition," IPE, series 4, box 14, folder 5; "Railroads Favor Oil Exposition," *Tulsa Daily World*, July 13, 1930, in IPE, Scrapbook, 1930; J. Baxter Gardner, "Rambles in Oildom," *Tulsa Daily World*, October 14, 1928, in IPE, Scrapbook, 1928.

money or blood—whenever crude and its economic windfall flowed beneath their land and through their communities.

Although the exclusively white oilmen who organized the IPE and the public-facing white supremacists who felt welcome in their company may have believed otherwise, the race massacre had not eliminated Black activism or enterprise, including within the oil industry. With this in mind, I end this chapter by returning to Buck Colbert Franklin. After witnessing Black Wall Street’s destruction firsthand, Franklin successfully defended several Black Tulsa property owners in court, protecting their real estate from the white parties who sought to remake Greenwood into an industrial corridor following the massacre. In 1925, as Klansmen marched through Tulsa’s oil exposition, Franklin opened a law office in Wewoka, located south of Tulsa in the Greater Seminole oil field. Native and Freedmen landowners had urged him to locate a practice in town and represent them and their neighbors amid the oil boom, which, like elsewhere, attracted a rapid influx of white grafters who sought to dispossess people of color of land and royalties. Franklin recalled that, in the Seminole field, competitors for land titles had no scruples about forging deeds and partaking in other fraudulent actions in order to obtain Indian- and Black-owned land. Franklin’s legal work in Wewoka was a great success in his eyes. His firm won four lawsuits and dozens more in out-of-court settlements. He wagered that no one in oil-rich Oklahoma had been as successful as he and his colleagues at “putting money in the pockets of Negroes and Indians.”<sup>158</sup>

Franklin’s partner in Wewoka, a young Black attorney from Howard University named R.P. Boulding, invested a large amount of the money he made during the Seminole boom in oil

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<sup>158</sup> Franklin, *My Life and an Era*, 203-05.

and gas wells. Franklin would have too if he and his wife had not had their four children's college educations to pay for. One of those children was John Hope Franklin. Subsidized in part by his father's oil-based enterprise, John attended Fisk University in Nashville before earning a doctorate in history from Harvard in 1941. In 1956, he was hired as the chair of Brooklyn College's history department, becoming the first Black historian to hold such a position at a predominantly white university. He later taught at the University of Chicago and Duke and, in 1976, was awarded the Jefferson Lecture by the National Endowment for the Humanities, one of the highest national honors in the humanities. John Hope Franklin's scholarship was explicitly antiracist. He focused his career on faithfully placing Black Americans into the narrative of the United States' past while lending his expertise to civil rights litigation in the present.<sup>159</sup>

While the Franklins successfully navigated the depths of racism in Jim Crow Oklahoma, their achievements were an exception. Buck Franklin understood this, writing that the "Negro wealth" in oil that went "into the building of Oklahoma" was "exceeded only by the worth of the sweat, toil, and tears of American slaves' free labor." He knew that much of this wealth had been stolen from Black landowners by whites. Importantly, unlike their Black counterparts, white property owners maintained access to the local- and state-level sources of power that offered the closest control over oil production and the protection of property-holders and royalty-owners. The next chapter conveys how local control of the oil industry was married to the white-supremacist and anti-monopolistic politics of settler-era Indian Territory and Oklahoma. During the Great Depression-era oil boom in Oklahoma City and through the figure of Governor William H. Murray, the state provided a municipal model for easing white landowners' access to petroleum

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid, 219.

revenues while elevating state governments as the ultimate arbiters of the industry's caprices vis-à-vis federal authority.<sup>160</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Ibid, 209.



## Chapter 5

### For Property and State: Settler Self-Rule and Interstate Oil Conservation in the New Deal Era

The 1920s and 1930s proved to be an era of prodigious oil discoveries. To Oklahoma's south, the booming East Texas oil field of the early 1930s became one of the most momentous petroleum finds in the history of global crude production. The field was massive, encompassing 134,000 acres and stretching across five counties in northeastern Texas. By the end of World War II, East Texas was producing over 300 million barrels a year and overall production would top five billion barrels by the end of the century. In the five years between 1926 and 1931, American oil producers added 10 billion barrels of crude to the national supply. Much like in 1915, this massive flood of oil that drillers first brought to the surface amid a deepening global economic depression represented a crisis to the oil industry. With prices falling as low as fifteen cents a barrel, many oilmen began to indicate that they wanted some kind of federal intervention to prevent a catastrophic market collapse. The oil and energy historiography tends to emphasize this turn towards federal controls in the context of the early New Deal-era East Texas boom, especially highlighting Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes' role as petroleum administrator, or "oil czar." However, the oil crises of the late 1920s and 1930s were first and foremost rooted in two Oklahoma booms that predated the East Texas field. Furthermore, the responses to these booms reinvigorated calls for the self-rule of property owners and the continued sovereignty of state governments to manage oil production within their borders, a continuity that stretched back to the calls by oilmen to open Indian Territory to wildcat prospectors. Ultimately, the codification of this longer thread of settler self-government—not direct federal oversight of petroleum markets—marked the 1930s

period of government-oil relations, an era with consequences that echoed across the rest of the twentieth century.<sup>161</sup>

The focus on oil's rise as a federal/national concern is certainly important, but the scale at which that story is told tends to overlook the subnational political fights and social costs that the period's oil booms brought about. Before the East Texas boom, which coincided with the early New Deal's focus on federal controls in the realm of resource extraction, overproduction in Seminole and Oklahoma City convinced both oilmen and government officials in the United States' most productive petroleum region that collective action taken to establish conservation was long past due. However, as it turned out, oil production in the United States would not be governed under a system of federal quotas, despite the desires of some New Deal officials such as Ickes. Instead, by the mid-1930s state governments had teamed up with the petroleum industry to devise a largely informal interstate system of production controls that preserved the sovereign power of states to oversee crude production within their individual borders. I argue that this subnational solution to the recurring problem of market collapse—a solution that undergirded a much steadier price system from the 1940s to the 1970s—was closely tied to the politics of settler self-rule that

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<sup>161</sup> Roger M. Olien and Diana Davids Olien, *Oil and Ideology: The Cultural Creation of the American Petroleum Industry* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 188; Northcutt Ely, "The Conservation of Oil," *Harvard Law Review* 51, no. 7 (May, 1938): 1212, accessed June 16, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1334104>; On federal intervention and the East Texas field, see Megan Black, *The Global Interior: Mineral Frontiers and American Power* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018); Donald R. Brandt, "Corporatism, the NRA, and the Oil Industry," *Political Science Quarterly* 98, No. 1 (Spring, 1983): 99-118, accessed February 24, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2150207>; William R. Childs, "The Transformation of the Railroad Commission of Texas, 1917-1940: Business- Government Relations and the Importance of Personality, Agency Culture, and Regional Difference," *Business History Review* 65 (Summer 1991): 285-344; Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2019); Gerald D. Nash, *United States Oil Policy, 1890-1964: Business and Government in Twentieth Century America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968); Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

in part emerged in two separate but related forms during the Oklahoma City boom. As municipal property owners and as citizens of a semi-sovereign settler state, Oklahomans demanded control over oil on terms that were rooted in a deeper tradition of settler land claims and an aversion to “foreign” and “outside” corporations that threatened settler authority over oil markets.<sup>162</sup>

First, the Oklahoma City boom exhibited the political power of white residential property owners. Many of these urban property owners desired to become royalty owners no matter the cost to their residential property values, while others demanded a more conservative drilling regime that protected residential property values. Whether they fell into the pro-drilling or anti-drilling camps, their declarations represented an affirmation of settler self-rule whereby decisions on drilling would be made neighborhood-by-neighborhood, allowing residents to decide for themselves if they preferred to risk the odds of getting rich on oil or extract future value from their residential properties. These property owners believed their municipal government should uphold their producerist demands, which echoed the rhetoric of small-scale independent oilmen who had long demanded that local and state officials both liberalize the rules of production and encase oil

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<sup>162</sup> The language of “settler self-rule” is indebted to Aziz Rana, *The Two Faces of American Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 100-03. Rana suggests that this vision of proactive, popular, decentralized government was lost by the twentieth century, stating that later populist fears over “monopoly” power taking over government garnered calls for a “self-regulating commercial society,” which morphed into contemporary conservative anti-statism. However, the belief in “local producerist democracies” and paranoia over monopolies capturing government operated side-by-side amid Oklahoma’s oil booms, especially under William Murray’s governorship. This chapter’s focus on subnational state power and its role in shaping markets is rooted in the scholarship of Noam Maggor and Stefan Link. See Noam Maggor, “‘To Coddle and Caress These Great Capitalists’: Eastern Money, Frontier Populism, and the Politics of Market-Making in the American West,” *American Historical Review* 122, no. 1 (February, 2017): 55-84, accessed June 1, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ahr/122.1.55> and Stefan Link and Noam Maggor, “The United States as a Developing Nation: Revisiting the Peculiarities of American History,” *Past and Present* (December 2019): 1-39, accessed January 8, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pastj/gtz032>.

markets against price collapses as means to protecting the “little guy.” Furthermore, homeowner demands primarily came from white residents, even as oil production grew predominant in the city’s segregated Black neighborhoods. The demands for local self-rule that white residents displayed through both pro- and anti-drilling petitions contrasted with the lack of individualist demands made by Black residents, whose voices seldom appear in city archives despite the fact that oil companies and city officials subjected their neighborhoods to extensive oil development.

Finally, the latter part of this chapter centers Governor William H. Murray as the embodiment of the long-life of white supremacy and anti-monopolism amid the Oklahoma City boom. The Oklahoma City and East Texas booms coincided with one another and created a market crisis unlike any in the oil industry’s history. Before his counterpart in Texas took similar actions, Murray ordered producers to shut down their wells and deployed the national guard to secure his demands. While his conservation orders contradicted the desires of many city residents, it emerged from the same urge to achieve local, majoritarian self-rule, this time at the level of the state government. Murray’s role in the early life of the Interstate Oil Compact Commission echoed as much. Even as the New Deal national state emerged, Southwestern Democrats such as Murray built an interstate oil compact that established state governments as the ultimate authorities over petroleum production in the United States. This initial subnational movement toward oil conservation was a response to both the immediate problems of flush drilling in an urban area and the much more sprawling economic dangers of the transnational oil industry. This movement towards state-mandated production quotas, which originated in Oklahoma before moving to Texas and elsewhere, incorporated the larger ideological threads of white-settler sovereignty that had always defined Indian Territory and Oklahoma, connections that were quickly obscured as the

American oil industry held up the interstate oil compact as nothing more than the triumph of scientific planning and rationale within the oil industry.<sup>163</sup>

### *The Seminole Boom and the Return of Market Collapse*

The latter half of the 1920s proved to be vital decades in the evolution of the oil industry in the United States, as new conditions arose surrounding property, technology, and conservation. In the mid-1920s, Oklahoma experienced its first major boom in years when producers brought in the Greater Seminole oil field. The Greater Seminole oil region became the most intensive production region up to that point in the industry's history, as the field produced 600,000 barrels daily within a year of initial intensive drilling. As its name indicated, the oil field was primarily located in the Seminole Nation, sixty miles east of Oklahoma City in Seminole and Pontotoc counties. Like earlier oil fields located in Indian Territory, drillers sank numerous high-yielding wells in the Seminole field on Indigenous-owned land. Most Native property holders owned small allotments, which not only reduced the number of wells a Native allottee could claim royalties from, but also made largescale leasing a difficult proposition for producers. Leasing companies were legally obligated to keep producing in order to continue royalty payments to landowners and

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<sup>163</sup> The only other historian who has connected the ICC to the racial and settler states' rights politics of the South and Southwest is William R. Childs, "The Transformation of the Railroad Commission of Texas, 1917-1940: Business- Government Relations and the Importance of Personality, Agency Culture, and Regional Difference," *Business History Review* 65 (Summer 1991): 285-344 and "Texas, the Interstate Oil Compact Commission, and State Control of Oil Production: Regionalism, States' Rights, and Federalism during World War II," *Pacific Historical Review* 64, no. 4 (Nov., 1995): 567-98, accessed May 17, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3640558>. Murray's calls for an interstate compact and his declaration of martial law during an oil boom predated similar declarations made by Texans.

establishing informal agreements to forego such rules and cut production in order to sustain prices proved impossible given the disparate patchwork of drilling companies and property owners.<sup>164</sup>

The Seminole field also exhibited the new technologies that were revolutionizing oil production. Steel derricks and electric rotary rigs increasingly replaced their wooden and steam-powered cable-tool counterparts. Rotary rigs used a rotating bit to chew through soil and rock at a much faster rate than the typical gravity-assisted cable-tool rig. One rig hand estimated that a hole that took six months to drill with cable tools could be completed in thirty or forty days using a rotary. Steel derricks increasingly replaced their wooden counterparts, providing sturdier support for the more powerful drilling rigs. While Indian Territory and Oklahoma's earlier fields had been comprised of many cheaply drilled shallow wells, the Seminole field was comprised of primarily deep, expensive, high-producing wells. The average Seminole well reportedly cost around \$65,000 to drill and producers estimated that drilling one well in Seminole in 1927 cost the same as drilling twenty average wells elsewhere in Oklahoma fifteen years earlier. These conditions aided the wealthiest independent companies and large, vertically integrated oil corporations, who could afford the upfront costs that deep drilling demanded. Alongside the new drilling implements,

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<sup>164</sup> Louise Welsh, Willa Mae Townes, and John W. Morris, *A History of the Greater Seminole Oil Field* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Heritage Association, 1981), 38, 54-55; C.B. Glasscock, *Then Came Oil: The Story of the Last Frontier* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1938), 258; Carl Coke Rister, *Oil! Titan of the Southwest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1949), 233, 244-45. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Seminole and Pontotoc counties were some of the poorest in Oklahoma. Landlords had a history of charging tenants some of the highest interest rates in the country. Personal loans often garnered creditors twenty-percent interest while mortgages on land could run at a rate of up to two-hundred percent. Widespread tenancy and rural poverty made the Seminole area a hotspot of Socialist support. In 1912, 1914, and 1916, the two counties cast votes for the Socialist Party at similar rates, around 16, 35, and 25 percent in the respective elections. The region was also home to the Green Corn rebels. See Nigel Anthony Sellars, "Treasonous Tenant Farmers and Seditious Sharecroppers: The 1917 Green Corn Rebellion Trials," *Oklahoma City University Law Review* 27 (2002): 1112-16, accessed December 26, 2019, [http://www.nationalaglawcenter.org/assets/bibarticles/sellars\\_treasonous.pdf](http://www.nationalaglawcenter.org/assets/bibarticles/sellars_treasonous.pdf).

producing companies were growing increasingly adept at managing extraction on rational terms. “A big well nowadays is not the sight it used to be,” an employee of the Indian Territory Illuminating Oil Company (ITIO) wrote. “There is no oil on the ground nor on the derrick; apparently not a drop has been wasted.” Such technological change appeared to hold the keys to locking volatile petroleum geologies in a human-engineered cage.<sup>165</sup>

In reality, the 1926-1927 Seminole boom demoralized the industry. It was the specter of overproduction that once again bedeviled oil producers who were active in the Seminole field. By midsummer of 1927, Seminole was producing 430,000 barrels of oil per day, making it the largest field in the United States at the time. Leasing companies began to collaborate on voluntary conservation measures. Producers agreed to only drill in locations offset from individual discovery wells and promised that all but the first successful well drilled on each lease would have its flow reduced to 100 barrels a day. The Oklahoma Corporation Commission sanctioned these agreements and appointed an umpire to oversee them. However, there was still an estimated 11,000 barrels of crude spilled onto and into Seminole’s land and waters due to overproduction. Attempts to proration were undermined by royalty owners who demanded that wells be drilled on their land, as well as the weak enforcement of conservation agreements that oilmen feared were in violation of anti-trust law. Geology also thwarted conservation efforts, as the Greater Seminole’s most productive oil sands tended to rapidly drain once tapped. By the beginning of 1930, prices had fallen to fifteen cents per barrel and the industry produced hundreds of thousands of barrels per

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<sup>165</sup> “The Old Hand,” Works Progress Administration Historic Sites and Federal Writers’ Project Collection, Records, 1937-1941, “Oil in Oklahoma,” Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma (forthwith “WPA-WHC”), box 43, folder 6; Charles E. Bowles, “Oil Optimism,” *My Oklahoma* 1, no. 2 (May, 1927), 55; Glasscock, *Then Came Oil*, 251; *A History of the Indian Territory Illuminating Company in Seminole*, c. 1930, 12-13, unprocessed item at the Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma.

day beyond the capacity of markets to absorb. In the wake of Seminole, the vast majority of oil operators began to support some form of government regulation to curb overproduction. Some independents continued to oppose any direct regulation of production as it “socializes the petroleum industry.” However, even the most successful independent wildcatters of the era began to call for uniform 160-acre leases and a five well limit per lease as a strategy for curbing overproduction.<sup>166</sup>

### *White Property Owners and Self-Rule in the Oklahoma City Boom*

On the heels of the oil boom in Seminole came the opening of the Oklahoma City field in December of 1928. While much of the energy history literature focuses on the early 1930s boom in East Texas as the impetus for closer federal control over the United States’ oil supplies, the misgivings about oil production within the borders of Oklahoma’s capital city were rooted in neighborhood-level conflicts over the prospect of oil production in residential areas, debates that more often involved municipal authorities and the governor’s office, not the U.S. Department of the Interior. How residents of the city articulated their arguments both for and against the expansion of oil production revealed much about how residential real estate and extractive industry could be balanced in the eyes of urban property owners, and how many rights-bearing citizens within the city saw oil as a natural endowment that was theirs to exploit. Whether they demanded liberal drilling rules or a cessation of production efforts in the city, residents espoused the settler

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<sup>166</sup> *A History of the Indian Territory Illuminating Company in Seminole*, 13; Olien and Olien, *Oil and Ideology*, 184-87; Gerald D. Nash, *United States Oil Policy, 1890-1964: Business and Government in Twentieth Century America* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1968), 96-97; Norman E. Nordhauser, *The Quest for Stability: Domestic Oil Regulation, 1917-1935* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1979), 30; Welsh, Townes, and Morris, *A History of the Greater Seminole Oil Field*, 8-9, 100.



imperatives of local control over land-use policy, petitioning the city to act on a neighborhood-by-neighborhood basis.

For the oil producers in Oklahoma City, the field's geological challenges quickly grew legendary and contributed much to the problems and fanfare that surrounded the capital city's boom. Similar to Seminole, the producing wells in Oklahoma City had to be sunk to much deeper levels than most previous oil fields. The downside for those who could afford to drill in Oklahoma City was the tremendous gas pressure and explosive potential that these deep wells exhibited. Deep wells in the city field—many sunk past a depth of 5,000 feet—often blew out at high pressures up to 2,000 pounds per square inch, enough force to destroy steel oil rigs and lead to wild wells capable of blowing hundreds of thousands of barrels of oil across the surrounding landscape, destroying crops and other vegetation and creating considerable risk of fire and explosion. Early wells drilled by the ITIO, the Standard subsidiary Prairie Oil and Gas, and Morgan Petroleum all gushed wildly for days on end, soaking thousands of residences and extensive acres of farm- and ranchland in oil. One gusher inundated the North Canadian River in enough oil to cause significant fires atop the water. An employee of one of the producing companies recalled negotiating numerous damage claims, sometimes on properties located up to twenty miles from a wild well, “for land, for automobiles being sprayed, for laundry on the line being sprayed.” One geologist described the amount of natural gas wasted in the field as “almost unbelievable,” at a volume that “would have furnished Oklahoma City with fuel until the end of time, almost.” Blowouts and fires were so numerous that the producing companies in the field organized a private fire department that centralized the field's phone lines and laid special high-pressure water pipes across the urban oil field. Although producers clearly did not have close control of central Oklahoma's volatile geologies, this did not stop the oil industry's hagiographers from creating a triumphant positivist

narrative of the oil field's development as a "victory of science and practical geology over the forces of Nature." At the time, industry authors likened the hundreds of derricks that sprang from the earth around Oklahoma City to the alien invaders from H.G. Wells' *War of the Worlds*, with the clarification that "this army brings Earth-denzens upon whom it casts its shadow prosperity and happiness rather than death and devastation." By November of 1930, the oil field consisted of 613 wells capable of producing 2.8 million barrels a day, with an additional 145 wells in the process of drilling.<sup>167</sup>

Not all residents agreed that this flood of oil brought nothing but "prosperity and happiness." However, those wary of oil production vied with neighbors who were hellbent on instilling a liberal regime of drilling in hopes of getting rich via royalties. The conflicts surrounding drilling in and around the city revolved around different visions of land use and disagreements over the rights of residential landowners to lease their properties. Whether they supported or opposed the extension of drilling into the city, Oklahoma City residents invoked their status as homeowners, taxpayers, and voters when petitioning city officials. The City of Oklahoma City responded to the encroachment of the oil field in the late 1920s and the early 1930s by devising an ever-evolving drilling zone inside of which oil production was permitted. The changing borders of

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<sup>167</sup> Rister, *Oil! Titan of the Southwest*, 258-61; Interview with C.J. Kerwin, OHS Living Legends; Evan Just, *Geologist: Engineering and Mining Journal, Marshall Plan, Cyprus Mines Corporation, and Stanford University, 1922-1980* (Berkeley: University of California, 1990), accessed March 10, 2020, <https://archive.org/details/engineeringmining00justrich/page/n14/mode/1up>; Claude Barrow, "Wild Wells, Gold Gushers Mark City Oil Start," *Daily Oklahoman*, undated (c. 1961); *The Oklahoma City Oil Field in Pictures* (Oklahoma City: Jack Lance, Inc., 1931), preface, 11, 30, William H. Murray Collection, Carl Albert Center, University of Oklahoma (Murray Collection forthwith), box 3, folder 57.

this drilling zone and the social cost of the drilling activities that occurred inside of it became the impetus for political conflicts that emerged at a neighborhood-by-neighborhood level.

Many property owners expected the city to continuously expand the drilling zone as oil prospects shifted. These property owners argued before the city council that a failure to expand drilling would be a form of discrimination against property holders. Many petitioning owners claimed that they would willingly sacrifice their property values in exchange for the opportunity to lease land to oil producers and hopefully earn lucrative royalties, even if it meant the destruction of their home neighborhoods. In 1933, property owners in the Capital Courts section of the city called for the addition to be made an unrestricted drilling zone. They made two arguments that were representative of other pro-drilling perspectives in the city. First, residents feared that existing wells that bordered the neighborhood were already draining the oil and gas located beneath Capital Courts properties. Landowners would be deprived of royalties as a result if they could not lease their own properties to oil producers. Furthermore, the petitioners accepted the fact that drilling activities were bound to devalue their properties. They urged the city to allow landowners to at least profit off of the destruction of the section's real estate value.<sup>168</sup> At a more abstract level, the period's critics of conservation wondered why the language of permanence and the urge to save resources for unborn generations could be morally squared with the financial needs and wants of the living. As one oil-boom chronicler wrote in the early 1930s:

...is consideration for a generation yet unborn as important as consideration of the rights and comforts of the generation now living? If an individual Oklahoma farmer, for example, has been struggling for years to wrest a living from a rocky quarter section of land, and suddenly discovers that there is oil beneath that land,

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<sup>168</sup> Petition to Make Capital Courts Addition an Unrestricted Drilling Zone, October, 1933, City Clerk of Oklahoma City, Miscellaneous Council Actions (MCA forthwith), box 4, folder 19.

who is to say that he must not profit regardless of any adverse effect upon a generation unborn?<sup>169</sup>

These pro-drilling voices garnered opposition from their neighbors, who also petitioned the city and lobbied for the formation of formal citizen oversight of drilling activities. Anti-drilling residents feared for the city's future as oil production spread closer to major commercial and residential sections. In December of 1931, the city appointed a citizens' committee to assess the conditions. The committee, which was apparently created following a mass meeting of angry residents, declared that the "public health, safety, morals and the general welfare" of the city faced a "great crisis" due to the activities of oil companies in the southern portions of Oklahoma City, where oil production was centered. These city residents feared that petroleum producers were "wending their way into the residential and public section of our City." It was of the committee's opinion that any further expansion of the drilling zone would make it legally impossible to prevent drilling "in all parts of the City." Citizens were especially concerned with the possibility of a wild well saturating the main business district and surrounding residences with oil. By late 1931, drilling was ongoing within seven blocks of the downtown intersection of Broadway and Main, and the committee believed that in the result of a gusher and subsequent fire, "there is very little doubt in our minds but that our city would be destroyed." Many city homeowners were also incensed at rising insurance rates in proximity to the drilling zone. Committee members drew upon interviews with residents of the city who lived in and around the existing drilling zone, finding that "all property has been damaged greatly" wherever drilling occurred. One owner of a brick dwelling originally valued at \$7,000 claimed that vibration from drilling had caused cracks in the walls of his home and had damaged the plaster in almost every room. The homeowner claimed

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<sup>169</sup> Glasscock, *Then Came Oil*, 311.

that the value of his property had decreased more than fifty percent, despite the oil well in question being located over a thousand feet from the residence.<sup>170</sup>

These kinds of threats that drilling posed to the city's real estate market especially frightened Oklahoma Citizens. One set of petitioners included the following statement in their correspondence with city officials and on petition forms:

We feel proud of the fact that we are HOME OWNERS, and have taken pride in building our homes and helping make our City the greatest in the State. We resent the action of those who would destroy our homes by making an oil field out of the residence sections in order that they may gain material benefit, and we appeal to you, our legally constituted representatives, to vote and work against any movement that will render our homes uninhabitable, force us to move from them, and cause us to lose the savings of a lifetime in the depreciation and ruination of our homes.

The aforementioned citizens' committee insisted that "if this zone is extended further, the people and concerns who are purchasing loans and mortgages on residential property will refrain from making any further loans within the city," and that properties within the proposed extension would become "worthless." Because drilling would "seriously handicap" the financing of additional loans, owners would be unable to invest in improvements or repairs and would eventually be forced to abandon their residences. Such conditions would sow "entire ruination" for the city's long-term economic prospects. Other residents demanded protection from fire and explosion, which they believed was only possible if drilling was banned in residential areas. The opponents of drilling even made themselves known to oil-field workers. One trucker spoke about arriving at city leases with drilling equipment and drawing the ire of worrisome residents, who in the trucker's eyes

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<sup>170</sup> Citizens' Committee, appointed December 10, 1931, letter to city council, MCA, box 4, folder 15.

“thought we didn’t have a thing to do but get hold of the truck and drive out there to run over a goddamned petunia.”<sup>171</sup>

Many of the anti-drilling citizens who made their voices heard included populist rhetoric in their appeals for self-rule, resenting the power that both mortgagers and oil companies seemed to wield amid the oil boom. Howard Henley, a homeowner in the eastside Culbertson Heights addition, urged the city to stop the drilling-zone extensions. Referring to his \$10,000 home, Henley stated, “I bought this place as a home to live in for years to come,” and he feared that the establishment of an oil field in his neighborhood would render it worthless. Henley believed he would be unable to give his house away to the mortgage owner, as “they want their money,” not a structure robbed of its value. If the drilling zone was extended to his neighborhood, Henley’s lender “would get judgement to hang over my head for years to come.” He concluded by asking, “Are we going to be ‘sold down the river’—or will our representatives, the councilmen, protect us in saving our homes?” Matilda Simler, a homeowner in the Stiles Park area who opposed drilling extension, stated, “We have put our life’s savings in Oklahoma City property and have kept it in such condition that it is a credit to any residence section of the City and we do not now wish it turned into an oil field to the detriment of the home owner and the benefit of the Oil Companies.” These types of letters were often part of deliberate collective mobilizations of homeowners. At least one other property owner used the same quote as Simler, word-for-word, in an appeal to the city against the extension of the drilling zone. Oil abundance and attempts to extract crude in Oklahoma City transformed “homeowners” into a political constituency that, despite its urban and

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<sup>171</sup> Petition to Mayor and City Council, undated City Clerk of Oklahoma City, Petitions (Miscellaneous) (“Petitions” forthwith), box 3, folder 18; Ibid; Report of Zoning Committee, March 29, 1932, MCA, box 4, folder 16; “The Truck Driver,” WPA-WHC, box 42, folder 25.

suburban context, chose to couch its opposition to drilling at least in part in the language of class-based animosity that had long marked rural Populist rhetoric in the region.<sup>172</sup>

The bulk of petitions that appear in city records were in favor of the expansion of the city's drilling zone. As was the case throughout the Mid-Continent, many Oklahoma Citians believed they would accrue great wealth through minimal labor if only their public officials got out of the way and opened new lands to drilling. This attitude was backed by a handful of individuals and families who did become suddenly wealthy when a gusher was brought in on their modest property. The most famous was the Sudiks, a modest Czech farming family that grew internationally famous when their homestead on the outskirts of the city proved to be oil-rich. But theirs was just part of the pattern of affluence narratives that encouraged unabandoned drilling efforts. In most cases, Oklahoma City's planning commission rejected citizen requests to extend the drilling zone. When the city's planning committee rejected one 1930 petition for a drilling-zone extension, it explained to the petitioners that, in this case and others, the expansion of drilling "would be a public nuisance and would create a serious danger from fire and explosion and would materially interfere with the peaceful enjoyment of the homes" located in the middle-class, white sections of the capital. The city also balked at liberal drilling extensions that "would further interfere with...future orderly expansion and development." Like many residents, city officials feared for Oklahoma City's future development as oil extraction intensified.<sup>173</sup>

The tensions between oil production and municipal rule grew even more when petroleum geology and production crossed the geographic boundaries of racial segregation in Oklahoma City.

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<sup>172</sup> Howard Henley to M. Peshek, City Clerk, January 17, 1936, Matilda Simler to Mayor and City Council, January 29, 1936, and Birdie Cook to Mayor and City Council, January 29, 1936, Petitions, box 3, folder 24.

<sup>173</sup> City Planning Commission to the Mayor and Council, June 21, 1930, MCA, box 4, folder 9.

However, the flood of official neighborhood petitions that revealed white residents' demands for home rule was not repeated in Black sections of the city, revealing the racial limitations placed upon popular mobilization. The initial oil boom was centered in the southern portions of the city, around neighborhoods that were predominantly inhabited by Black residents and businesses. Much of the land where oil production occurred in this area of the city was likely owned by white landlords, while other portions of the Black neighborhoods of Oklahoma City where crude was extracted were municipal properties. One of these latter locations was Booker T. Washington Park, a segregated park in the southeastern corner of the city, tucked between 4<sup>th</sup> Street and the North Canadian River (where much of the crude and drilling mud that cascaded from producing leases ended up).

In 1937, members of the Oklahoma City Negro Business League demanded that the city provide adequate park space for Black residents, pointing out that Washington Park had been "completely ruined" due to oil production. Black petitioners urged the city to maintain the "gentlemen's agreement" whereby revenue from the Washington Park oil leases would be used to purchase and establish a new park for Black residents outside of city limits. The letter writers protested that, although the city had made over \$100,000 from oil production in Washington Park, Black residents had yet to be granted access to the new park that was supposed to replace it. The protests about oil and park space were accompanied by calls for the city to employ more Black police officers, fire fighters, nurses, health inspectors, and municipal workers. In short, Black Oklahoma Citians wanted equal access to the distribution of municipal benefits in the form of employment and recreation that were readily obtained by white residents of the city. Predictably, white oilmen and workers seemingly did not care to grasp the problems that they brought with them to these neighborhoods. A geologist named Evan Just recalled that, much like the



underemployed white oil workers described in chapter three, impoverished Black residents of Oklahoma City tapped into the gas lines of petroleum producers for their own personal use. In reminiscing about his time in the Oklahoma City field, Just described these residents as “parasites” and only cared about the risks of fire and explosion that their actions posed.<sup>174</sup>

The inequities that the Negro Business League criticized were baked into Oklahoma City’s urban planning. In 1931, a consultant to the city planning commission produced a report on Black Oklahoma City and its future development amid the oil boom, and its conclusions greatly differed from those made by the Negro Business League six years later. The city consultant contended that “negroes are generally less interested in the scenic value of parks, and more interested in facilities for amusement which can be concentrated into comparatively small space.” Thus, there was no need to provide Black residents with park space equal to what whites enjoyed. In the same paragraph, the consultant insisted that oil development in Washington Park “will probably not reduce [the park’s] efficiency more than fifty percent, and this loss will be temporary.” Black Oklahoma Citians would come to much different conclusions as oil development in and around the park continued throughout the decade. Their push for an answer eventually led to the establishment of a new city-owned park in 1937. Black petitioners and the city agreed that an area known as Forest Park, which was already being informally utilized as a Black park, would be purchased by the city to provide a municipal park for Black residents of the city’s east side.<sup>175</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> Negro Business League to the Mayor and City Council, May 7, 1937, MCA, box 5, no folder number indicated; Just, *Geologist*, 37.

<sup>175</sup> S. Herbert Hare, City Planning Consultant to City Planning Commission, May 9, 1931, 2-3, 9, MCA, box 4, folder 12; Petition in re to a Negro Park, Negro Tax Payers and Voters Protective Association, June 6, 1937, MCA, box 5, no folder number indicated.

In Jim Crow Oklahoma, Black residents lacked the same access to grassroots democracy that white citizens demanded and expected. This became especially important within the context of the city's oil field after city residents produced a successful initiative petition calling for a citywide election whenever an extension of the drilling zone was proposed. The supporters of these elections tapped into the popular oil politics that were at least ostensibly rooted in petroleum geology. They argued that, given the length of time that often stood between the filing of petitions for drilling-zone extensions and the next general election, and the ongoing draining of oil sands that lay beneath the proposed extension zones, prompt decisions were needed whenever a new petition was submitted, otherwise existing oil wells would drain the petitioners' properties of crude.<sup>176</sup> By the middle of the 1930s, the city had devised a neighborhood-by-neighborhood election provision for deciding whether or not to extend the drilling zone into new areas. In residential areas, oil companies would need the community's agreement before the commencement of drilling efforts. Importantly, in neighborhoods where a majority of property owners agreed to begin drilling, those neighbors in opposition could not earn royalties from the community lease, which only incentivized even wary residents to accept liberal production rules. Nevertheless, such direct-democracy solutions to the problem of an urban oil field reflected the expectations of white settlers reaching back to before statehood: that they would directly control the contours of resource exploitation and market building, even as officials at the state and federal level demanded closer control over oil production and especially as Black residents disproportionately bore the downsides of drilling.<sup>177</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> F.J. Jackson et al., Request for Extension of U-7 Drilling Zone, February 12, 1936, Petitions, box 3, folder 14; Notice of Hearing Protests on Initiative Petition No. 4 and Protest, Capp Jefferson, March 16, 1937, Petitions, box 3, folder 12.

<sup>177</sup> "Oil in the Back Yard" *The Atlantic* 161 (April 1938), 46; WPA, Oklahoma, A Guide to the Sooner State, 171; "Oil Will Find A Way" *Collier's* (August 1, 1936), 45.

*“Alfalfa” Bill Murray and the Triumph of State Sovereignty*

The neighborhood-by-neighborhood municipal conflicts that largely hinged on questions surrounding real estate values, well pressures, royalties, and migrating crude deposits were also of concern to state officials who felt a responsibility to protect the petroleum industry in moments of overproduction. This resulted in Governor William H. Murray’s deployment of the national guard in 1931 to shut down Oklahoma City’s oil field until prices rebounded. Murray’s declaration of martial law in the oil field is often remembered as an exhibition of the irreverent governor’s swashbuckling authoritarianism. While Murray certainly strove to create a cult of personality and resembled the illiberal strongmen who flourished elsewhere in the world amid the global depression, his response to the oil crisis was deeply rooted in specific fears that he shared with both the homeowners of Oklahoma City and the proprietary capitalists who owned and operated independent oil companies across the United States. At the scale of the city, its particular neighborhoods, and its oil field, Murray was responding to the threat that explosive crude and gas represented to the capital and its residential and commercial properties. At the same time, at the global scale of the oil industry itself, Murray’s order represented an attempt to reestablish the power of independent producers vis-à-vis the major multinational companies through state mandate.

Murray conceived a method of governing fossil fuels that proved amenable to Southwestern oil states, whereby the power to control petroleum production in contexts that were both minutely local and international in nature would be ensconced in entities that operated at the state level. This vision culminated in 1935 with the creation of the Interstate Oil Compact Commission (ICC), the first formal organization established by oil-producing states to coordinate

production at the national level. The seemingly scientific and technocratic achievement of coordinating oil production in the New Deal-era United States was, at least in part, originally rooted in Murray's Jim Crow-related appeals to states' rights and his overtures against monopolies, which echoed Oklahoma Citizens' politics of settler self-rule, albeit at a different scale of governance. When considered in combination with the competing visions of white homeownership that drove Oklahoma Citizens' calls for both expanding and mitigating oil production, one can see a clear thread that connected Murray's long career as a vociferous racist and celebrant of the white settlement of Indigenous lands with his anti-federal and anti-monopolist support of state-led oil conservation. For Murray, the sovereignty of modest white property owners and their duly elected white state governments was always under threat, and the overproduction of petroleum represented a momentous exacerbation of that danger. An interstate conservation compact promised a solution to that hazard.

Murray's early business and political career embodied the ways in which, for white men in Indian Territory and Oklahoma, power was constructed through establishing advantageous intimate relationships with Indigenous power brokers. Born in the improbably named Toadsuck, Texas in 1869, Murray grew up in a modest farming family before training to become a school teacher. He eventually obtained a law degree and moved to southern Indian Territory, where he married a Choctaw woman and worked as a lawyer securing land titles for citizens of the Choctaw Nation. Land owned by Murray's mixed-blood wife and her family allegedly garnered him upwards of \$200,000 and he obtained further acreage by earning portions of the allotments that he won for his Indigenous clients in court. Murray's first foray into politics came in the first decade of the twentieth century, as a member of the "progressive" wing of the Farmers Union. While the Farmers Union and rural cooperatives like it sought to overcome the power of monopolistic

railroads and retailers, Murray's faction welcomed larger-scale landowners like himself and actively opposed the more radical cooperative demands of poorer "dirt farmers," many of whom were members of the Socialist Party in the years before World War I.<sup>178</sup>

As a Democrat, Murray served as president of Oklahoma's 1906 constitutional convention, where he bellowed against monopolies, absentee landlords, and any suggestions of equality between Black people and white people. Indeed, the convention offered Murray the opportunity to articulate how white collaboration with Native people on assimilationist terms, combined with the subjugation of Black people, would create an ideal setting for widespread white property ownership. In opening the constitutional convention, Murray stated, "I appreciate the old-time ex-slave, the old darky—and they are the salt of their race—who comes to me talking softly in that humble spirit which should characterize their action and dealings with white men, and when they thus come they can expect any favor from me." Building on this conception of socially necessary Black inferiority, Murray insisted that Black people could not possibly occupy the same class position as whites, and therefore should only be educated in line with stereotypical Black professions, as porters, bootblacks, and barbers. If the state's Black community would be dealt with as such, "the less will be the number of dope fiends, crap shooters, and irresponsible hordes of worthless negroes around our cities and towns." A full platform of Jim Crow provisions designed to disenfranchise Black citizens was only left out of the original state constitution because President Theodore Roosevelt declared his intention to reject the document if it was included. In response, Murray declared that the first general election in Oklahoma would focus on protecting the newly minted constitution from "Corporations, Carpetbaggers, and Coons." Indeed, among the

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<sup>178</sup> "'Alfalfa Bill' Will Carry His Lunch if He Goes to Work in White House," No publication title, August 21, 1931, Murray Collection, box 5, folder 64.

earliest laws passed by the first Oklahoma legislature, which Murray served in, was the segregation of public transport.<sup>179</sup>

At the same time, Murray celebrated the amalgamation of white American settlers with the Five Tribes of Indian Territory, so long as it occurred on the basis of Indigenous assimilation into white society. He noted that three of the five nations (he did not identify which three) “were never savages” and that the five “are the most advanced and civilized Indians on earth,” whose “courage, intelligence and diplomacy” helped lay the bedrock for statehood’s success. The largely unspoken but clearly implied “success” that statehood promised were the final transfers of Indigenous land into white hands. This was the treasure that ensured white people’s commitment to the rhetoric of white-Native collaboration, a set of terms made all the easier to accept by the prevalence of mixed-race marriages such as Murray’s. Murray further explained how, in his view, monopolistic landowners and corporations that operated in Indian Territory would undermine the goal of widespread white homeownership. He warned that the rapid repeal of restrictions on the alienation of Native lands would empower land agents who would act as “representative of some alien or foreigner or some foreign corporation with the sole desire of increased rental.” Alien landlords “might place by the side of the Indian citizen or white home-owner, a Dago or a John Chinaman” because these landlords would have no interest in supporting a “good citizen.” Murray called on the delegates to make foreign ownership of land unconstitutional, a proposition that was met with applause. In the intervening years between his role as president of the constitutional convention and his election to the governor’s office, Murray attempted to establish a free state of white

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<sup>179</sup> *Proceedings of the Oklahoma Constitutional Convention* (Guthrie: Leader Printing Company, 1907), 16-18, 32-33, latter quote cited in Danney Goble, *Progressive Oklahoma: The Making of a New Kind of State* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1980), 143-44, 190-93, 219-23; Harold Mueller, “Secret is Out; Bill Murray has One Appointee Chosen,” *Oklahoma Times*, November 8, 1930, Murray Collection, box 5, folder 61.

American settlers in Bolivia. This second attempt at spearheading the settlement of white landowners within a largely non-white and Indigenous society ended when the Bolivian government seized Murray's land in 1929 and he was forced to return to the United States. On his return to Oklahoma, Murray decided to run for governor and won the Democratic Party nomination for the 1930 election.<sup>180</sup>

Murray's personal-political history resonates here because, while the 1930s oil crises brought out his virulent anti-monopolism, these conflicts were not immediately racial, and thus omitted the full context of Murray's ideological grievances. What the above reveals is that the racism exhibited by Murray and his contemporaries was immediately linked to the need for white settlers to establish a social claim to property ownership, especially landownership. "Outside" and "foreign" corporations (as Murray termed them) not only represented unfair concentrations of economic power, their foreignness rendered them racially ambiguous and uncommitted to the ethno-centric localism that Murray supported. Murray doubled down on his downhome vulgarity and anti-corporate, anti-carpenter, anti-Black politics in his campaign for governor. He believed that corporations organized an "invisible government" that sought to undermine elected officials and make pawns out of everyday citizens. Thus, his anti-corporate, anti-corruption rhetoric was ideally suited for the concerns of proprietary producers—such as independent oilmen—and specifically white business owners who competed with "the trusts." Murray

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<sup>180</sup> *Proceedings of the Constitutional Convention of the Proposed State of Oklahoma* (Muskogee, OK: Muskogee Printing Company), 16-25, accessed November 5, 2019, <http://www.llmc.com/docDisplay5.aspx?set=61072&volume=0001&part=001>.

promised to defend these latter parties against the political corruption and economic domination of “outside” corporations.<sup>181</sup>

In August of 1931, less than a year into his term as governor, Murray declared martial law in the Oklahoma City oil field, organizing the national guard (under the leadership of his cousin, Cicero Murray) to enforce proration rules and to shut down production in the field until the legislature devised new provisions for regulating production. Specifically, Murray and his supporters rallied around the cry of “A Dollar a Barrel” before military rule would be rescinded. A confluence of conditions that led to prices falling to as low as fifteen cents a barrel had emerged in the country’s oil states. Oil companies had implemented more efficient drilling technologies in a series of flush, new oil fields, leading to massive rates of production. At the same time, refiners were producing petroleum products more efficiently, meaning they required less crude than before. Refinery yields of gasoline per volume of crude had increased from around 34 percent in 1918 to 57 percent in 1929. On top of this stood decreases in demand brought on by the deepening depression. Scholars of energy history have pointed to these price collapses as the impetus for Murray’s declaration of martial law, which was soon followed by similar military-rule orders in Texas.<sup>182</sup> While these historians are correct that the crisis of oil price was central to oil states’ declarations of martial law, the scale of these analyses is too broad to consider other important

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<sup>181</sup> “‘Alfalfa Bill’ Will Carry His Lunch if He Goes to Work in White House,” unnamed publication, August 21, 1931 and “Flays Rule by Corporations,” unnamed publication, August 24, 1931, Murray Collection, box 5, folder 64.

<sup>182</sup> Yergin, *The Prize*, 250; Welsh, Townes, and Morris, *A History of the Greater Seminole Oil Field*, 8-9; Kenny A. Lambert, Paul F. Lambert, and Carl N. Tyson. *Early Oklahoma Oil: A Photographic History, 1859-1936* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1981), 204-07; Edward C. Petty, *Developments in the Petroleum Industry as Related to Overproduction of Crude Oil* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1932), 16-17; Matthew T. Huber, “Enforcing Scarcity: Oil, Violence, and the Making of the Market,” *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 101, no. 4 (July 2011): 816-826, accessed April 2, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/27980229>.



factors in the history of overproduction in the Mid-Continent in the 1930s. Murray's commitment to protecting white homeowners in Oklahoma City, his interest in preserving the power of the state's public institutions, and his virulent opposition towards "foreign" corporations—convictions he first articulated at the constitutional convention a quarter-century before—also shaped his responses to the overproduction crisis in Oklahoma City and the broader Mid-Continent.

As governor, Murray articulated a populist rhetoric that was aimed directly at the corporate oil interests that operated in the state and revealed the political concerns beyond oil prices that shaped his decision to shut down the Oklahoma City field. He acknowledged the importance of the oil industry in Oklahoma and the surrounding region but cultivated himself as a leader who would not bend to the power of oilmen or letdown the masses of common white folk who he touted as his loyal supporters. Following his inauguration in January of 1931, Governor Murray declared that only "malefactors and enemies of the state" would defy the majority will that had gotten him elected, and he instructed legislators that "the final solution and authority" over the state's problems "rest with the governor." Murray declared that he would not speak on the oil question until he was assured that the state's oilmen would work with his administration honestly. Many of them, in his view, seemed "unwilling to acquiesce in the will of the majority," even though the industry was caught in a self-inflicted crisis "born of selfishness and greed." He made it clear that his interest in solving the oil crisis was because of its effect on working-class people and the state itself, not necessarily due to the plight of oilmen. In the immediate future, he doubted that the major oil companies would relinquish their "controlling power, personal interest, and selfishness" before public servants, "who have no interest except the public interest."<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>183</sup> "Gives First Message to Legislature," Murray Collection, box 5, folder 62.

Murray's political convictions regarding the oil industry revealed how the many different and unequal stakeholders within the world of petroleum allowed for Mid-Continent politicians to situate such a wealthy industry as the friend of common white people, so long as Murray's brand of populist, state-based corporate controls ruled the day. Amid the New Deal, Murray railed against what he saw as the excessive taxation of the oil industry, criticizing it from the perspective of small-scale investors and oil workers: "When you think of oil, the Tax-eating Bureaucrats want you to think of 'millionaires' instead of the million small stockholders, half of them living in small towns and one-fourth of them women. They don't want you to think of another million employees and oil workers. These stockholders and workers—two million of them—are hardworking, thrifty people just like you. Keep these two million families in mind! They with you, pay the taxes." Murray insulted "bureaucrats" as "intellectuals" with "shirt collars too white" to climb derricks or handle nitroglycerin as roughnecks had long done. He asked, rhetorically, "Do these Tax-eating Bureaucrats work like the men in the filling stations, or the workers in the drilling rigs?" Murray saw such bureaucratic schemes as existential threats to the liberties, sovereignty, and self-government that was central to what he called "our Father's Republic."<sup>184</sup> Furthermore, in declaring martial law, Murray believed that the State of Oklahoma was obligated to protect its citizens from the actions of oil companies on terms that were both gendered and generational. The governor's administration argued that due to the collapse of oil markets, the lack of profitable production on the state's school properties meant the possibility that the "legacy to the school children is filched." Murray suggested that the state was obligated to protect the interests of its future school children by preserving oil reserves located on school lands until prices were restored

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<sup>184</sup> "Tax-Eaters 'Grease Their Palms' with Oil Taxes," c. 1936, Murray Collection, box 1, folder 6.

and he feared that conditions in the city “might, at any time, result in the loss of life of women and children, who would become helpless to save themselves from such destruction.”<sup>185</sup>

Murray’s order was simultaneously a backlash against the transnational contours of the oil industry and part of a larger campaign against multinational oil companies that imported foreign crude. In November of 1930, a parade of at least two-hundred vehicles and floats organized by the Independent Petroleum Association of Oklahoma advanced through Oklahoma City in support of tariffs on imported oil. Governor-elect Murray and other officials participated alongside the state’s leading independent oil men, railing against large corporations that allegedly kept prices low. This particular parade came on the heels of Wirt Franklin and the IPAA’s failures to convince the U.S. Congress to include duties on oil imports in the 1931 Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act. Murray proposed his own policies for combating multinational corporations. Speaking at a governors’ conference of southwestern oil states in the spring of 1931, he proposed that states ban corporations that refused to end oil imports and that violators be punished with receivership and the seizure of property as contraband by the state. He explicitly pointed to the Standard and Mellon interests as targets of the proposal. Furthermore, Murray wanted rules that would require foreign corporations chartered in Oklahoma to publish the names of stockholders. This meeting and subsequent collaborations came on the heels of Murray’s attempt to form the Oil States Advisory Committee, which would have set interstate production quotas. It was invalidated by federal courts. However, Murray was laying the groundwork for what would become the ICC.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> “Executive Order, Calling Out the National Guards, etc.,” August 4, 1931, Murray Collection, box 2, folder 31, 1, 3; Executive Order, May 5, 1932, Murray Collection, box 2, folder 31; Letter from Murray to Hayes, Richardson, Shartel, Gilliland, and Jordan, March 9, 1933, Murray Collection, box 2, folder 10.

<sup>186</sup> “Official Join Tariff Parade in City Today,” *Daily Oklahoman*, November 8, 1930, and “Oil Importers’ Wares to be [Treated] as Contraband,” *Daily Ardmoreite*, March 8, 1931, Murray

A committee of oilmen appointed by Murray to discuss the overproduction problem clearly showed how, for a problem that was by large degree rooted in the soil, geologies, and residential properties of central Oklahoma, these oil crises were in fact global, placing Oklahoma within a transnational extractive geography that presented worrying problems for the independents. The committee, made up of nine oilmen, including the nationally prominent champions of the independents, Franklin and Roy M. Johnson, formed in 1931 and proposed solutions to the state's overproduction crisis. Chairman C.A. Owens wrote that the "constant flood of letters" from Oklahomans whose everyday lives were closely dictated by the oil industry compelled Governor Murray to appoint an investigative committee, which found widespread "dissatisfaction and lost confidence" among the nation's oilmen. Chairman Owens believed that "Foreign and domestic factors both economic and political" had pushed Mid-Continent oil producers "farther and farther into the valley of uncertainty." The transnational problems, as these Mid-Continent oilmen saw them, were open markets and the migration of prospectors into foreign oil fields. Tensions over conservation orders had led oil-field suppliers to increasingly dismantle Oklahoma rigs and ship them to fields in foreign countries such as Venezuela, leaving behind abandoned wells that were possibly irreparably damaged and leaving Oklahoma roughnecks unemployed. E.B. Reeser, a refinery owner, complained that in years leading up to 1930, consumer markets in the Midwest had gradually turned away from Mid-Continent oil in exchange for cheaper Venezuelan oil that was shipped westward from the Atlantic Coast. Especially for the independent zealots such as Franklin and Johnson, open borders in the oil industry were tantamount to a conspiracy carried out

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Collection, box 5, folder 61; Nordhauser, *The Quest for Stability*, 50-56; "Murray Would Bar Companies from Oil States," *Daily Ardmoreite*, March 1, 1931, Murray Collection, box 5, folder 63; Gary D. Libecap, "The Political Economy of Crude Oil Cartelization in the United States, 1933-1972," *Journal of Economic History* 49, no. 4 (Dec., 1989), 837, accessed June 29, 2020, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/2122740>.

by the monopolies to destroy the “little guy.” They pointed out that major companies (Standard/Prairie and Royal Dutch Shell, in particular) advocated for proration, opposed tariffs on imported oil, and simultaneously shipped their drilling equipment out of Oklahoma to oil fields in Venezuela, where they enjoyed *carte blanche*. In short, they displayed no obligation towards local white workers, oil-field service providers, or the larger communities that were sustained by Oklahoma’s oil fields.<sup>187</sup>

However, Murray’s deployment of military power in the Oklahoma City field did seem to offer a solution to the most immediate crisis. Martial law proved effective at raising prices. Similar measures were enacted in the East Texas field by the governor of Texas soon after Murray’s order. Within months of Murray’s initial measures, prices per barrel rebounded to over a dollar. When federal courts declared the martial orders in Texas unconstitutional in 1932, production exploded and oil prices again plummeted. Through the use of military force, Governor Murray seemed to have found the most effective means of raising oil prices and protecting both independent producers and those urban property owners who opposed drilling. While subsequent conservation agreements would not require the mobilization of the national guard to prevent price collapses, they would confirm that individual states were the legitimate police powers in their respective oil fields. Thus, the interstate oil compact that was developed out of this moment was not a dramatic departure from Murray’s martial orders. Rather, it built on the commitment to settler sovereignty

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<sup>187</sup> “Transcript of Proceedings of Committee Appointed by His Excellency, William H. Murray, Governor of the State of Oklahoma, For the Purpose of Making an Investigation into the Petroleum Industry in the State of Oklahoma, and a Report and Recommendation Thereon,” Oklahoma City, 1931, Oklahoma State Archives, Oklahoma City, William Murray Collection, box 3, folder 1, 3-7, 65-66, 81, 90, 217-20.

relative to “outside” corporate powers and the federal government that Murray espoused and that had long defined the petroleum politics of Indian Territory and Oklahoma.<sup>188</sup>

### *Proprietary Self-Government and the Interstate Oil Compact*

A set of policies rooted in white localism—the declaration of martial law against “outside” antagonists and state-mandated anti-monopolism—defined Oklahoma’s response to overproduction in the 1930s. The State of Texas introduced similar policies in the East Texas field. It was these state-based responses to oil crises that set the stage for the establishment of the Interstate Oil Compact Commission (ICC) in 1935, the interstate agreement that continues to shape national production quotas. Calls for establishing an interstate compact among petroleum-producing states had been made since the mid-1920s, especially following the establishment of the Federal Oil Conservation Board. No such interstate compact came to be during the twenties. However, the depression and the New Deal response beckoned some system of national coordination in the oil industry. The National Industrial Recovery Administration (NIRA) devised a code for the petroleum industry predicated on collaboration between federal officials and individual state regulatory bodies pursuant to the prevention of dangerous bouts of overproduction. However, when the supreme court invalidated NIRA, the major oil-producing states returned their focus to creating an interstate compact. While no formal system of interstate governance of oil production was created before his governorship ended, Murray was integral to laying the groundwork for the interstate compact by helping organize meetings of petroleum-state governors in Fort Worth and Texarkana in 1931 amid the growing oil crisis. While these meetings established

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<sup>188</sup> Huber, “Enforcing Scarcity,” 821.

little formal authority in the states to govern oil production directly, they allowed oil states to collaborate on ideas and organize for the first time in a coherent attempt to address the problem of overproduction.<sup>189</sup>

In his 1932 platform presented before the Oklahoma Democratic Party's state convention, Murray again stated his support for an interstate oil compact. While the desire for an interstate agreement had originally emanated from the business-friendly Republican administrations of the 1920s, it also meshed with the states' rights politics of Murray and other Southern Democrats, a set of ideologies Alfalfa Bill termed in the same platform the "democracy of Jefferson" combined with the "nationalism of Jackson," preserved through a belief "in a perpetual union of independent sovereign states and in local self-government." Murray's statement in support of interstate compacts aimed at resource conservation came as part of a larger declaration wherein he called for protecting the livelihoods of independent manufacturers, modest extractive businesses, and small-acreage farm owners in the face of corporate domination. In Murray's eyes, protecting these constituencies through resource conservation organized on an interstate model was integral to the reproduction of ideal white homes. He stated that every law should strive for "the fortification of the home, the protection of the family, the security of wife and mother, so that they may develop and train up healthy children." This combination of social and natural-resource conservation was, in Murray's view, "the only sure guarantee of the perpetuity of the Republic." There was no need for Murray to explain that the farm families and independent extractive businesses (namely the small oil operators) he invoked were white, given Oklahoma's status as a Jim Crow state.

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<sup>189</sup> Nordhauser, *The Quest for Stability*, 50-56; "Oil Importers' Wares to be [Treated] as Contraband," *Daily Ardmoreite*, March 8, 1931.

Regardless, Murray had said as much in explicit terms when he sat as president of the constitutional convention years earlier.<sup>190</sup>

In 1953, William Murray's son and Oklahoma's governor, Johnston Murray, spoke before the American Petroleum Institute in recognition of the success of the Interstate Oil Compact Commission. The original interstate oil compact created a governing system whereby state representatives agreed to promote "maximum ultimate recovery" of oil and prevent physical waste by ensuring the creation of adequate state conservation laws. The states had used the compact to track federal forecasts of national gasoline demand and collaborate in regulating extraction whenever overproduction threatened. With few exceptions, the oil-producing states agreed to production quotas that prevented the unsustainable supply gluts, waste, and basement prices that marked the late 1920s and early 1930s, all while preserving "the sovereign rights of the States" (as the compact itself put it) in matters of policing resource extraction. Johnston Murray's ode to the ICC celebrated the rise of the practitioners of modern petroleum science in the industry and the benefits that the conservation system reaped for consumers. This narrative of the compact's history sowed the seeds of a softer story of oil conservation, one that was, on its face, largely apolitical and that exulted an image of consumer-friendly scientists solving technical problems. However, Johnston Murray also paid homage to the states' rights convictions that had marked his father's support for interstate cooperation. The younger Murray praised his father for organizing the 1931 precursors to the compact, which had culminated in the creation of an advisory board of oil-state governors and had offered an interstate alternative to the federal control that entities such as NIRA seemed to promise. Echoing his father's belief in local self-rule, the ICC had been the proper

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<sup>190</sup> William H. Murray, *Memoirs of Governor Murray and the True History of Oklahoma* (Boston, 1945), 680-85.



counter to “the desire manifested by the federal government to encroach upon the rights of the states to regulate the production of oil and gas.”<sup>191</sup>

Thus, Johnston Murray’s brief history of the ICC and its merits gestured towards the racial-capitalist and settler-colonial politics that had driven his father’s and many white Oklahomans’ embrace of resource conservation, as a protection against “outsiders,” “foreigners,” and the bigness of the federal government. Through William H. Murray, we can see the connections between the often racist right-wing populism of the early twentieth century, replete with its aversion to Southern redemption-tinged states’ rights rhetoric and the sanctity of proprietary capitalism, and the creation of one of the twentieth-century world’s more important subnational economic governing bodies, the Interstate Oil Compact Commission.

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<sup>191</sup> Johnston Murray, “Conservation through Cooperation,” speech before American Petroleum Institute meeting, November 11, 1953, Murray Collection, box 5, folder 14; Edwin Duerbeck, “Economic Control by Interstate Compact,” *Social Forces* 15, No. 1 (Oct., 1936): 104-11, accessed June 12, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2570476>.

## Conclusion

As the problems surrounding oil production in Oklahoma City revealed, by the end of the 1930s, white settlers had grown increasingly ambivalent about the occurrence of crude beneath their land. Visions of “black gold” continued to paint the dreams of many white landowners, but a growing number were also frightened of petroleum abundance, fearful of the destruction it might bring upon other forms of valuable property. What white Oklahomans were sure of was their right to self-rule amid the vagaries of oil’s booms and busts, and of the authority of state and local government to guide petroleum capitalism towards some semblance of stability. Wrapped up in these appeals to white-settler sovereignty were the processes through which oil production helped formulate racial subjectivities. The very existence of “Indian Territory”—a jurisdiction invented by nineteenth-century white Americans for the resettlement of the Southeast’s Indigenous peoples—had pointed to the United States’ desire to carry out, as one historian puts it, “the forcible transformation of sovereign nations into racial subjects.” The pursuit of petroleum by white settlers and governments only magnified these transformations, as whites stamped themselves as the rightful owners of the land, minerals, and productive capacities that underwrote extractive capitalism, declared their oil-rich world unfit for even the remnants of Native sovereignty that persisted at the turn of the twentieth century, and, ever poised to undermine non-white affluence, confronted Black citizens with white-supremacist violence.<sup>192</sup>

The oil industry’s role in shaping these contours of racial citizenship in Oklahoma, the Mid-Continent, and the broader United States underwent significant transformation during the 1940s and the immediate post-World War II years. While the war was a blessing for the United

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<sup>192</sup> Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), 30.

States' oil industry writ large, wartime boosts in demand tended to benefit large, integrated petroleum corporations. Furthermore, the war and its aftermath accelerated American dependencies on overseas and offshore supplies of crude. Branches of the former Standard trust partnered with the United States government and its allies to claim a monopoly on Middle Eastern crude, while mainly highly capitalized corporations shouldered the large expense of drilling undersea in new oil zones such as the Gulf of Mexico. The relative power of independent firms and the state legislatures that protected their visions of white-settler self-rule in the oil fields waned as a result. Nevertheless, as the semi-centennial of profitable oil production in Indian Territory approached, many Oklahomans positioned the oil industry as a harbinger of settler civilization, celebrating how the allotment of Native land and the discovery of crude combined to create a supposedly seamless transition from Indian collectivism and federal property restrictions to white private enterprise and state-and-local governance. Furthermore, as the Mid-Continent's early oilmen grew old, they increasingly gifted their fortunes to public institutions. These philanthropic efforts made it that much easier for Oklahoma's settler citizenry to imagine petroleum as a public good and to continue ignoring its dispossessive history. However, a handful of voices did speak honestly to that latter history, despite the personal and professional consequences of doing so, offering an anti-racist counternarrative of fossil-fuel development that only grows more and more relevant in the present.

The political-economic relations that undergirded the production of oil in the Mid-Continent and throughout the world underwent important changes with the onset of World War II. While the Interstate Oil Compact Commission (ICC) maintained states' rights to govern production, the federal government grew increasingly interested in petroleum during the war and seized closer control over important sectors of the industry. An executive order by President

Franklin Roosevelt created the Petroleum Administration for War (PAW) at the outset of the United States' direct involvement in the conflict. PAW claimed broad powers over the transportation and distribution of crude oil as well as the domestic consumption of refined petroleum products. There was an urgent need to do so because World War II was unequivocally an oil war. The United States and its allies had "floated to victory upon a wave of oil" in World War I. In World War II, the global powers not only relied on petroleum to fuel their war machines, the conflict itself was in many ways a fight over crude. Both Axis and Allies jockeyed for control of emerging oil reserves in North Africa and the Middle East, refineries and tank farms became important bombing targets in Europe and the Pacific, and the United States' embargo on oil exports to Japan played a significant role in promoting that empire's bellicosity. On the home front, PAW brought about lasting changes to the American oil industry. The administration divided the United States into defense districts in order to better control distributions of petroleum supplies. This device, which illustrated the federal government's growing military-minded interest in oil-supply management, outlasted the war and is still in place today. Furthermore, PAW played crucial roles in managing the transport of crude and petroleum products, most notably through the construction of long-distance pipelines. The most famous of these were the "Big Inch" and "Little Inch" pipelines, which each stretched over 1,200 miles from East Texas to New Jersey. These were the largest long-distance pipelines built up to that time, increasing the East Coast's daily supply of pipeline-shipped oil from 50,000 barrels to 754,000 barrels.<sup>193</sup>

The construction of the "Big Inch" and "Little Inch" pipelines appeared to harbor bad news for the undercapitalized and vertically disintegrated independents. The pipelines were government-

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<sup>193</sup> John W. Frey and H. Chandler Ide, *A History of the Petroleum Administration for War, 1941-1945* (Washington D.C.: Governing Printing Office, 1946), 100-01.

owned and, much like the bulk of the United States' wartime economy, were constructed through a private-public partnership that disproportionately favored large corporations. Furthermore, for Oklahoma oilmen, the pipelines' origination in the East Texas field represented the growing southward shift in the domestic production market. While fields such as Seminole and Oklahoma City remained productive through the 1940s, prospectors made fewer major oil discoveries in the state between the 1930s and 1970s than they had during the first four decades of the twentieth century. Across the country, new oil fields increasingly required the drilling of expensive wells that priced out small firms. Before the 1920s, it was rare for Mid-Continent oil wells to surpass 5,000 feet in depth. However, by the 1940s, 10,000-foot wells were growing common across the region. Some of the Mid-Continent's early drilling outfits could find profitable amounts of oil at 1,500 feet for a cost of less than \$5,000. But by the end of the 1930s the average well in some of the region's major fields cost \$100,000 to complete. Furthermore, the postwar period inaugurated an important shift towards offshore and international prospecting. Offshore drilling proved to be inherently more costly than onshore drilling and was spearheaded by large multinational corporations such as the Shell Oil Company. Meanwhile, overseas production centered on the United States government's special relationship with King Ibn Saud of Arabia, a collaboration that ultimately crowned pieces of the Standard behemoth as the sole American oil producer in Saudi Arabia. Independents would seek their fortunes in other corners of the globe, but never with the relative successes enjoyed by "Big Oil" following World War II.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Gerald Forbes, "The Passing of the Small Oil Man," *Southern Economic Journal* 7, no. 2 (Oct., 1940): 204-215, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1053084>. For the beginnings of offshore oil production, see Jason P. Theriot, *American Energy, Imperiled Coast: Oil and Gas Development in Louisiana's Wetlands* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014) and Tyler Priest, *The Offshore Imperative. Shell Oil's Search for Petroleum in Postwar America* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2007). For the American oil industry in Saudi Arabia, see Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil* and Robert Vitalis,

These changes in the oil industry brought about the end to what energy historians call the “Gusher Age” in the Mid-Continent, as a broad movement towards professionalization that had been ongoing since at least the 1920s triumphed in the years surrounding World War II. By the 1950s, developments such as the ICC, the growing presence of university-trained engineers and geologists, and new technologies that all but eradicated explosive “wild wells” seemed to indicate fundamental shifts within the industry. While important changes were indeed afoot, much remained the same. Oil companies in the Southwest, both big and small, remained more or less lily white. As of 1940, less than one percent of Mid-Continent oil’s managerial staff was Black. Six percent of refinery workers in the South were Black, but almost no one who worked in the realm of drilling was. Acquiring these latter jobs was especially dependent upon personal networking and the full privileges of free mobility (including access to accommodations such as hotels, restaurants, and housing), advantages that remained reserved for whites-only in the segregated Southwest. Furthermore, the turn towards professionalization did not mean novel groups of “outside” workers and managers entered the oil industry. Mid-Continent oil proved to be disproportionately insular, its workforce occupied from top to bottom by white men who had grown up in oil-producing regions, often in families that moved from boom to boom. Thus, the industry embraced the expertise of university-educated engineers and scientists, but the practitioners of those beliefs, as one industry historian writes, “came from within, from sons who spoke in familiar accents, shared the same values, the same background and experiences, the same culture.” This insularity was not reserved for independent firms or for companies that only operated in the Mid-Continent, either. The four major corporations that made up the Saudi Aramco

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*America’s Kingdom: Mythmaking on the Saudi Oil Frontier* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007).

venture in the Middle East—Texaco, Mobil, Exxon, and Chevron—erected Jim Crow-style camps, where white Americans disciplined Arab workers through racial segregation, practices that originated in the oil fields of Oklahoma, Texas, and neighboring Southern states.<sup>195</sup>

Meanwhile, as Oklahoma's semi-centennial approached, many people in the state reflected on what was, in their eyes, the unquestionable good brought about by fifty years of petroleum extraction. In March of 1948, industry supporters met in Bartlesville to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary of Indian Territory's first commercial oil well. Speakers and spectators gathered around the Nellie Johnstone No. 1 well (which was still producing oil) to commemorate the opening of a park at the well site. The land, part of the Cherokee Nation, had been allotted to Johnstone, a tribal citizen and the daughter of a white man named William Johnstone, who had married a Cherokee woman and had been among the first Indian Territory settlers to invest in oil prospecting. Now the property would return to public ownership, although under the auspices of the city of Bartlesville, not the Cherokee Nation.

At the event, speakers took the opportunity to situate petroleum enterprise as the primary source of economic progress during Oklahoma's first half century, pushing rhetoric that sanctified settler-made carbon democracy. Since 1897 oilmen had produced five billion barrels valued at over \$7 billion, supporting a web of commercial relationships between private citizens as well as government revenues that benefitted "every line of endeavor in every community where oil field operations have been carried on." Royalties and bonuses from oil leases had bankrolled the state's landowners and the windfall from this "mainspring of progress" could be measured by "the homes,

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<sup>195</sup> Carl B. King and Howard W. Risher, Jr., *The Negro in the Petroleum Industry* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969), 25-26; Edward W. Constant, "Science in Society: Petroleum Engineers and the Oil Fraternity in Texas, 1925-65," *Social Studies of Science* 19, no. 3 (Aug., 1989): 454-55, accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/285082>; Vitalis, *America's Kingdom*.

the schools, the churches, the public safety and health and sanitation services, the highways, the steadily improved rural conditions, and the clean, bright, modern towns and cities.” One speaker heralded the attendees who stood before Nellie Johnstone’s oil well as the sons and daughters of the “rugged and self-sufficient” pioneers who first drilled for crude. Noting with trepidation the United States’ growing reliance on Middle Eastern crude, he predicted that the descendants of Indian Territory’s white settlers would play a vital role in achieving American energy independence.<sup>196</sup>

The celebration of petroleum’s past and future was further buoyed by the growing philanthropic endeavors of a handful of Mid-Continent oilmen. In 1942, the “mixed-blood” Creek oilman Thomas Gilcrease established the Thomas Gilcrease Foundation. Originally, the organization was meant to establish a school that would educate Indian children alongside “boys and girls of the White race.” The Gilcrease Foundation hoped to achieve this in part through the purchase, preservation, and exhibition of Native American artwork and cultural artifacts. In 1922, Gilcrease—wealthy from oil found on his allotment—had started an eponymous petroleum company that proved to be a successful independent producing firm. He developed an interest in art collecting and increasingly funneled his fortune into art purchases. By the 1950s, Gilcrease was mired in debt and in search of a means to keep his renowned collection of Western and Native American art intact. In 1955 the City of Tulsa, subsidized by a bond measure and oil land donated

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<sup>196</sup> “Nellie Johnstone No. 1,” National Register of Historic Places, accessed September 24, 2020, <https://npgallery.nps.gov/NRHP/AssetDetail/c7d11e43-1500-49a1-8dff-44ae06e135f7>; “Historical Information on some of Oklahoma’s Principle Oil Fields,” “April 15th Marks the 50th Anniversary of Commercial Crude Oil Production in Oklahoma,” and H.A. Cowden, Cooperative Refinery Association, “Address at Presentation of Oklahoma’s First Commercial Oil Well to the City of Bartlesville, Oklahoma,” March 12, 1948, in McFarlin Library, University of Tulsa, International Petroleum Exposition Collection, Historical Papers, Series 1, Box 1, Folder 6.



by Gilcrease, purchased his collection and opened the Gilcrease Museum. Other oilmen established similar gifts focused on American art, history, and literature, including Everette DeGolyer, a University of Oklahoma-trained engineer who helped create the field of petroleum geophysics, served as president of the American Petroleum Institute, and upon his death divvied up his massive personal library to the University of Oklahoma, the University of Texas, and Southern Methodist University. The Phillips family, creators of the Phillips 66 brand, established the Western History Collections, an archive housed at the University of Oklahoma with holdings focused on Indian Territory and Oklahoma during the period of white settlement.<sup>197</sup>

However, there were also dissenting voices that were critical of how the state's oil wealth had been created. In 1940, Princeton University Press published Angie Debo's book *And Still the Waters Run*, a detailed account of the dispossession of Native peoples at the hands of Oklahoma's white settlers and the federal government. Debo had earned her doctorate in history from the University of Oklahoma in the 1930s and was awarded the John H. Dunning Prize by the American Historical Association in 1934 for her first book, *The Rise and Fall of the Choctaw Republic*. Despite this accomplishment, she could not secure a tenure-track job as a historian in the patriarchal world of academia, and her work on the recent history of Indians in Oklahoma alienated white leadership in her home state. Among other things, Debo illuminated how the occurrence of oil wealth on the Five Tribes' land had encouraged oilmen to become directly involved in state

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<sup>197</sup> David Randolph Milsten, *Thomas Gilcrease* (San Antonio: Naylor Company, 1969), 84-89; Burl E. Self, "Gilcrease, William Thomas," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, accessed September 25, 2020, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=GI005>; Sarah Erwin, "Gilcrease Museum," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, accessed September 25, 2020, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=GI004>; Bobby D. Weaver, "DeGolyer, Everette Lee," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, accessed September 25, 2020, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=DE007>.

politics, as they worked to secure offices for local judges who would assign Native allottees industry-friendly white guardians. Debo originally hoped to publish *And Still the Waters Run* with the University of Oklahoma Press. However, several of the individuals and settler families whom she named in the book threatened to sue the press for libel, prompting its publication with Princeton. While Debo's book was and remains broadly read, it had little direct effect on the white settlers and federal officials whose efforts at dispossession were depicted. But it did reveal that the narrative of unquestionable progress that surrounded petroleum at mid-century was never the lone perspective in the Mid-Continent.<sup>198</sup>

Those dissenting voices have only grown in the twenty-first century, as the reality of climate change has fueled grassroots uprisings against the petroleum industry around the world. In the United States, such popular protests have often been spearheaded by Indigenous people. Perhaps the most widely publicized of those movements culminated in 2016 on the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation, where members of the Great Sioux Nation and other Native activists from across the Americas mobilized to block the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline, which was planned to connect the Bakken oil field located in the Dakotas to refineries in southern Illinois. State legislatures across the United States reacted to the protest against the Dakota Access Pipeline by proposing "critical infrastructure" laws that would punish protesters who target petroleum facilities with onerous fines and prison sentences. These laws have been proposed and implemented even as it becomes increasingly clear that oil producers are guilty of environmental racism across the United States and the world, whether those injustices crop up in the form of "Cancer Alley," located in the refining centers on the Gulf Coast of the United States, in the

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<sup>198</sup> Debo, *And Still the Waters Run*, 287, 304-08, 318-21; Patricia Loughlin, "Debo, Angie Elbertha," *The Encyclopedia of Oklahoma History and Culture*, accessed September 26, 2020, <https://www.okhistory.org/publications/enc/entry.php?entry=DE002>.

destroyed ecosystems and corrupted governments of oil-rich parts of the Global South, or in the disproportionate harm inflicted on impoverished peoples of color by global warming.<sup>199</sup>

Even as oil's friends in government seek to further cement petroleum dependencies through industry protections and subsidies, crude's days as the predominant raw material in the global economy appear numbered. Petroleum prices have collapsed amid a combination of falling demand due to the COVID-19 pandemic and worldwide calls for divestiture from the fossil-fuel industry, which have significantly reshaped energy investment trends away from oil and towards renewables. However, even if the beginning of the end of the world's fossil-fueled energy system has begun, it is clear that the consequences of oil dependency will not soon leave the earth. It is September of 2020 and for several weeks I've watched pinkish-orange alien sunsets, discolored by smoke from wildfires that burn 2,000 miles away, quarantined in my apartment amid the worst infectious-disease pandemic in a century. A few hundred miles to the southeast, one of the most active hurricane seasons in recorded history persists. The origins of each of these ecological crises can be substantially found in the long-term intensive use of oil to fuel economies around the world. What comes after oil must not only mitigate these disastrous long-term environmental

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<sup>199</sup> Nick Estes, *Our History Is the Future: Standing Rock Versus the Dakota Access Pipeline, and the Long Tradition of Indigenous Resistance* (London: Verso Books, 2019); Joe Wertz, "Oklahoma Bill to Protect 'Critical Infrastructure' Could Curb Public Protest, Critics Say," *State Impact Oklahoma*, March 2, 2017, accessed September 30, 2020, <https://stateimpact.npr.org/oklahoma/2017/03/02/oklahoma-bill-to-protect-critical-infrastructure-could-curb-public-protest-critics-say/>. For scholarly work on the history of oil production in places such as Nigeria, Ecuador, and Colombia, see Macarena Gómez-Barris, *The Extractive Zone: Social Ecologies and Decolonial Perspectives* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017); Suzana Sawyer, *Crude Chronicles: Indigenous Politics, Multinational Oil, and Neoliberalism in Ecuador* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004); Michael Watts and Nancy Lee Peluso, eds., *Violent Environments* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001). On petrochemicals and pollution in the United States, see Barbara L. Allen, *Uneasy Alchemy, Citizens and Experts in Louisiana's Chemical Corridor Disputes* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003).

consequences, but also the racial injustice and calculated dispossession that underwrote petroleum from the beginning.

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