Introduction *by Bobby Weaver*

GERALD LYNCH has written a book describing his life as an oil-field worker. He began working on drilling rigs as a teenager at Corsicana in 1925. He followed that trade from boom to boom and progressed from floor hand to boiler man to derrickman to driller and finally to tool pusher. The thirty-three years he worked at his occupation provided a wealth of experience and observation that brings an air of reality to one of the most romanticized and publicized industries in the world.

I am honored to do the introduction for this book. The “oil-field trash” described in this volume are my people. One of the most vivid memories of my childhood is following my father into the Trolley Inn Diner at Second and Dixie in Odessa, Texas, before daylight one cold December morning. The place was crowded with men wearing rough work clothes, clamoring for breakfast and ordering “short lunches” to take on the job. I was a wonder-struck twelve-year-old visiting Dad, who had gone to the oil patch from our little farming community in Central Texas. The thing that most caught my imagination that morning, my first in the oil field, was the strong, acrid odor that permeated the air in the little diner. I soon discovered that the smell came from crude oil on the men’s work boots and clothing. The people and the activity that accompany that peculiar smell have continued to be a major part of my life since that day over forty years ago.

I lived in Odessa for twenty years. I became one of those oil-field hands and met scores of men who had made every boom from Smackover to Snyder. Their stories fascinated me, and I listened to them for hours at a time during those long years we worked together. Then one day, when I was thirty-two years old, I decided to go to college. I never figured out why; it just seemed to be the thing to do. After I got into college it became such a habit that I kept at it until they gave me a Ph.D. to get me out of the place.

In graduate school it began to dawn on me that most folk know very little about those oil-field hands and the work they do. During a 1975 history seminar the question was put to me as to why oil-field workers have such a rough reputation. I had never really thought about it before because they didn't seem particularly tough to me. But I was one of them, and from time to time outsiders have a tendency to be treated pretty badly by the "oil-field trash" fraternity. My answer, after I thought about it for a while, was that most of the oil-field hands were originally farm and ranch boys who had spent most of their lives at hard work for little pay. Back on the farm they got to go to town on Saturday night with a couple of dollars in their pockets and kick up their heels. When they left the farm for the oil patch the work wasn't a bit harder and they had plenty of money in their pockets. Thus every night became Saturday night. Nevertheless, those wild young men are the same people who became the backbone of the oil industry in their later and more settled years.

Since those days I have spent considerable time engaged in historical research concerning the oil and gas industry. Despite a life spent in close association with the oil-field hands, I have never been able to write adequately about the life style that I knew so well. Nor, until I was given Mr. Gerald Lynch's manuscript, had I ever read anything that captured the flavor of the working man's oil patch. His story comes straight off the rig floor and describes a way of life peculiar to the oil and gas industry.

The fact that usually escapes most people is that the Texas oil and gas industry is young. When Gerald Lynch began his oil-field career it was very, very young. Although a small oil field developed near Corsicana as early as 1894 and the state's first oil refinery was built in the vicinity, no significant production existed in the state prior to the turn of the century. Then on January 10, 1901, all that changed. On that date the Lucas gusher blew in at Spindletop near Beaumont on the Gulf Coast and twentieth-century Texas blew in with it.

Within three or four years most of the salt dome formations lying along the Gulf Coast were being successfully drilled. Booms developed at places like Sour Lake, Batson, and Humble. The unprecedented oil production of those new fields created a tremendous oil glut that drove prices down. At the same time, however, great personal wealth generated by the finds created instant fortunes for many, and an aura of romance and adventure surrounded the business as the theme of the Texas oil millionaire captured the imagination of the public.

An "oil fever" enveloped Texas when men with that "I'm going to be an oil millionaire" gleam in their eyes fanned out across the state. Between 1902 and 1907 they found another large field at Petrolia in Clay

County. By mid-1911 a boom developed at Electra, west of Wichita Falls, but nothing to match the massive Gulf Coast finds materialized. Then, on July 29, 1912, the discovery well was drilled at Burkburnett along the Red River on the northern border of Texas. That boom did indeed match the frenzied activity of the original discoveries.

The Burkburnett phenomenon was repeated in 1917 at the little West Central Texas towns of Ranger and Desdemona. Within a year of those discoveries, and in the same general area, a spectacular boom developed at Breckenridge. Those finds seemed to confirm in the minds of the general public that Texas floated on a sea of oil that simply awaited someone to come along and tap the wealth.

The 1920s witnessed an increase in the tempo of Texas petroleum activity. The decade began with major finds near Mexia. The Mexia boom developed along an interesting geologic phenomenon known as the Mexia fault line. This subsurface structure ran for a great distance across the Texas landscape, and the wells were drilled for many miles along its length. The resulting oil field was called the "Golden Lane" because its less than one-half-mile width was covered with closely packed wells, many of which produced as much as twenty thousand barrels per day. In 1922, much farther south along the same fault line, a large field was developed at Luling. The following year production was found near Powell on the northern end of the fault line. In this general area, in 1925, Gerald Lynch began working in the oil patch among a group of men who had been involved in the industry practically since it had begun.

Meanwhile, the western portions of Texas were also experiencing a considerable amount of oil development. Between 1918 and 1926, discoveries in the Panhandle opened the largest gas field in the world. As the Panhandle oil and gas reserves were coming to light, finds surfaced in other parts of West Texas. Beginning in 1920 with a small well near Colorado City, the vast reserves of the Permian Basin, which covered 76,000 square miles and eventually produced ten major fields, gradually came to light. Numerous towns, including Big Lake, Odessa, Midland, and Hobbs, New Mexico, were transformed by the influx of oil-field workers who overloaded the meager means of the towns to cope with the rapid growth that oil wealth brought. It was in this massive oil-producing region that Lynch spent the last years of his oil-drilling career.

By 1930 it seemed that Texas had exhausted its ability to astound the world with spectacular oil and gas discoveries. But that was not the case. Late that year the No. 3 Daisy Bradford came in near Overton in East Texas. That discovery ushered in the greatest oil boom Texas had experienced. Thousands of men rushed to the discovery, Gerald Lynch among them, and they all witnessed what was, perhaps, the last great

uncontrolled oil boom to dominate the Texas industry. It was because of the massive production and resulting price fall caused by the great East Texas boom that serious oil and gas conservation efforts began in the state.

The discovery and development of the East Texas field marked the end of the gigantic early Texas oil booms. Although many fields were brought in afterward, none had the unbridled speculative characteristics of the times between 1901 and World War II. The period of Gerald Lynch's active career, which lasted from 1925 until 1958, spanned the time from the last of the great booms until well into the period of stabilization following World War II. Thus, his observations on changing times in the industry have considerable relevance.

The literature spawned by the Texas oil and gas industry has reached into the hundreds of volumes. Perhaps the most comprehensive study of the subject is Carl Coke Rister, *Oil! Titan of the Southwest* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1949). That scholarly volume traces the history of oil and gas in Texas and surrounding states of the southwestern United States. Its method is the traditional "bare bones" approach of first discoveries, significant developments, and other basically economic aspects of the industry. A nice supplement to the pioneering Rister work is Walter Rundell, Jr., *Early Texas Oil* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1977) which, although it is primarily a pictorial study, presents a fairly comprehensive history of the industry as well as giving some of the flavor of the life style.

Naturally, such a significant industry has produced a whole raft of company histories and biographies of the great men who made those companies important. These include such monumental works as Henrietta M. Larson and Kenneth W. Porter, *History of Humble Oil and Refining Company* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1959), and Kendall Beaton, *Enterprise in Oil: A History of Shell in the United States* (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1957). Although these types of presentations provide valuable insight into the history of the industry, they give little information concerning the life style and work done by the oil-field hands.

The type of literary work that can best present the point of view of the oil-field workers has to emanate from the hands themselves. Despite the colorful nature of the business, very few reliable firsthand workers' accounts have been written. Most of those that exist are sensationalist publications with titles revolving around the theme "I made this, that, or the other boom and life was tough." These usually involve individuals who were in a boom-town environment for a relatively short time and usually were not even involved in actual oil-field work. Typical of this genre of book are those written by journalist Boyce

House. His publications include *Were You in Ranger?* (Dallas: Tardy Publishing Company, 1935); *Oil Boom* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton Printers, 1941); and *Roaring Ranger: The World's Biggest Boom* (San Antonio: Naylor Company, 1951). These books always present oil booms as places where the main occupations seem to be murder, vice, and assorted types of mayhem. Considering the large numbers of men that I personally knew who lived through those adventurous times, it has always been somewhat of a mystery to me how so many survived if indeed the conditions were as dangerous as so much of the literature makes it seem.

An outstanding contribution to the understanding of who those oil-field hands are and what they have done lies with the work of folklorist Mody Boatright. Selected interviews with oil-field workers were published by him and William A. Owens in *Tales From the Derrick Floor: A People's History of the Oil Industry* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982). This reprint of their original 1972 book presents vignettes of life in the oil patch, as told by the participants, from the time of the Spindletop discovery through the period of all the great early booms. Despite its authenticity and appeal, the book does not present a well-ordered chronological story as a biography can do so well.

It is difficult, if not impossible, to find a biographical work from the pen of an oil-field worker. The only publications approaching this type of presentation are a couple produced in the 1920s and 1930s which only detail experiences over a relatively short time span. Several autobiographical works exist by individuals engaged in white-collar oil-field occupations. Clarence Pope, *An Oil Scout in the Permian Basin* (El Paso: Permian Press, 1972), is typical of these, but they were not written by one of the hands. The reminiscences of Gerald Lynch are the first I have seen that document what it was to live and work in the oil patch from the early booms through the later, more settled times.

Lynch makes a number of points in his presentation. For example, he makes a good case for the place of origin of most of the oil-field workers. Using numerous incidents from his long experience in the business, he clearly demonstrates that, for the most part, the oil-field hands in Texas are products of changing times in the state. They are overwhelmingly economically displaced agricultural or small-town workers who gravitate to the expanding petroleum industry as their traditional source of economic livelihood begins to dry up.

This theme of the place of origin of the workers is not given in a lecture sort of presentation. It, like so many other subjects covered in the narration, builds up gradually as Lynch chronicles his life style over the decades he was in the business. Beginning with the early days, one learns what it was like to live in a "bowl and pitcher" hotel or in a

boarding house in a boom town and work twelve-hour tours on a rig. Numerous episodes illustrate how the new hands came to the job and what eventually happened to most of them. Later, after Lynch married and moved to the Permian Basin, the life style changed somewhat when trailer houses replaced hotels and boarding houses as places for the mobile oil-field population to live. But the young hands, straight off the farm, continued to arrive to work on the rigs. Some of them stayed and became permanent members of the "oil-field trash" fraternity and some of them traveled on, but they all had some kind of story to relate and Lynch manages to tell a number of those tales.

Naturally, a man who is telling his life story in an industry is describing a social phenomenon. The things he saw and the things he experienced combine to present a way of life. He was not an outsider there for a short time to report on an exotic experience. He was the exotic experience and it didn't seem so exotic to him. It was a world of hard work, hard play, and relatively good pay for a man of his background. There is a lot of skill in the work he did, and that work is the source of his pride. The pride comes from the fact that few people can do what the oil-field hands do. They feel they are a cut above ordinary folk as they wander across the face of the world, proving it over and over again each time they bring in a new well.

Perhaps one of the most important aspects of Lynch's book is his explanation of the technical aspects of drilling oil wells. He has the ability to describe extremely technical procedures in an understandable manner. Not only that, he describes the activities of a day long gone by, and then, as his story progresses, he gives explanations of solving similar problems using more modern equipment. Those observations on the changing technology of the oil field over a long period of time, and particularly how that technology was applied by the hands, provide exceptionally important information. Of course the evolution of oil-field technology has been chronicled by several writers. The classic work of J. E. Brantley, *History of Oil Well Drilling* (Houston: Gulf Publishing Co., 1971), is the premier example. However, it is a rare case when we have the opportunity to understand the application of that technology from the point of view of the worker.

I am obviously prejudiced in favor of "oil-field trash." Oil-field workers admittedly have a bad reputation. The young hands drink and carouse and run off with the local girls and are generally looked upon as less than desirable company. But they go places and do things that ordinary folk would never attempt. They provide the world with the energy that keeps it productive. They are not the millionaires that sit around the petroleum clubs. They are the people Gerald Lynch tells about so well.

Roughnecks, Drillers, and Tool Pushers

Thirty-three Years in the Oil Fields