Photographs as Historical Evidence: Early Texas Oil

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ARCHIVES AS REPOSITORIES OF WRITTEN RECORDS date from the ancient world, as Ernst Posner masterfully described.[1] Sometimes we get unexpected glimpses into the lives of the ancients as a result of a newly discovered artifact, potshard, or better still, clay tablet. The glimpses, however, depend on who does the discovering and interpreting. When such material comes into the hands of scholars, we are all enriched. But the attitude of a guide on the SAA-sponsored tour of archives of the ancient world would bring tears to the eyes of archivists and classicists alike. Speaking of clay tablets found at the palace of Knossos on Crete—generally thought of as the birthplace of Western civilization—she proclaimed: "We don't have the history of that period, because the clay tablets contain only information about what they did every day."[2] Perhaps she expected to find something like: "Theseus here at sunrise, looking for Minotaur in labyrinth. Ariadne gazed wistfully at Theseus, who told her to stick to her string, lest he leave her at Naxos on the voyage back to Attica."

From ancient days until fairly recent times, archives meant written records, whether they were inscribed on clay, papyrus, parchment, vellum, or paper. Then in 1839 Louis J. M. Daguerre invented a machine that would produce an exact likeness and thereby ushered in the era of photography. Although archivists did not immediately accession photographs as part of their records, they recognized that photographs could create a true pictorial account, whereas words could only approximate the reality a writer sought to capture. As photographs became established as popular visual records of people, places, and events, they naturally were sought by archivists, librarians, and museum curators, both as adjuncts to literary sources and for display. With the maturation of photography and the profusion of photographs coming from professionals and amateurs, archivists began to understand that these visual images constituted not just adjuncts to written evidence, but original sources themselves.

Historians, unfortunately, comprehended the documentary value of photographs rather slowly. For decades after abundant supplies of photographs became available for research, historians paid them little heed. When publishers suggested that photographs might enhance a book, historians more often than not left it up to the publisher to make the selections, most commercial publishers being in New York, also the location of many pictorial archives. University presses, until after World War II, were either so stodgy, stingy, unimaginative,

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or impecunious that they used few photographs in their books. Probably the strongest reason was that they feared being accused of pandering. The scholars constituting their readership doubtless reinforced such an attitude.

While attitudes change slowly, and while pinpointing the cause for change is to invite the charge of oversimplification, I will venture an opinion on why some scholars came to regard photographs seriously. During the Depression the U.S. Farm Security Administration engaged a corps of highly professional and artistic photographers to document the plight of dispossessed citizens. Notably, they recorded the exodus of rural Americans from the Dust Bowl to California. Among these photographers were Dorothea Lange, Ben Shahn, Walker Evans, and Russell Lee. When the FSA ceased its photographic activities during the war, many of its photographers joined the staff of the Office of War Information. Their work during the Depression and World War II constituted a brilliant pictorial record of two of America's most turbulent periods. When the FSA-OWI photographic files went to the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress, a collection of incredible richness awaited researchers.[3]

Another step toward photographic awareness among scholars came with the establishment of what is now the Still Pictures Branch in the National Archives. As we know, scholarly use of the National Archives was not heavy until after the war. By that time, researchers realized that another rich lode of photographs existed in Washington, merely awaiting their scholarly picks, shovels, and wash pans.

In addition to the availability of superb photographic collections, two volumes appeared that convinced scholars of the merits of documentary photographs. These books combined the talents of master photographers and literary artists. They were *You Have Seen Their Faces,* by Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men,* by James Agee and Walker Evans.[4] Each gave vivid and lasting impressions of the effects of the Depression on dispossessed rural Americans of the South and Southwest. These books pioneered in demonstrating that photographs, combined with illuminating and supportive texts, could explain human experience in ways that words alone could not. Because Bourke-White and Evans had the good fortune to team with such gifted writers as Caldwell and Agee, their photographs have had a lasting effect on the scholarly community. Of course, archivists and historians well know the dangers of singling out the beginning of any sequence of events. Certainly such precursor documentary photographers as Mathew Brady, William H. Jackson, Edward Weston, Edward Steichen, Alfred Stieglitz, Jacob Riis, Henri Cartier-Bresson, and Carl Van Vechten sensitized Americans to the power of the camera, but it remained for *You Have Seen Their Faces* and *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* to demonstrate that photographs and words could be combined to produce an effect stronger than either alone.[5]

With the rise of scientific history on the Continent in the nineteenth century, historians paid careful attention to the use of their written sources. Bernheim and Langlois and Seignobos wrote manuals giving precise instructions on the evaluation of literary evidence, and their tradition has been continued in this country by such authors as Hockett, Nevins, Gottschalk, and Barzun and Graff. The fledgling historian can find in their works as much as he could possibly

absorb about the process of historical research based on written records. What the tyro cannot find in this literature is systematic guidance on the use of photographs as historical evidence. Because of my own involvement in this area of research and because of the increasing volume and importance of photographs in archives, I would like to offer a few observations on the topic.

The old saw that a picture is worth more than ten thousand words is greatly overrated, but a few words about the worth of pictures as historical documents may substantiate my contentions. My exclusive concern here is with photographs, since they more nearly capture the reality of an instant than any other type of picture. Yet other forms of graphic representation obviously have research value and should therefore interest archivists and historians. These ideas about photographs as historical evidence apply, irrespective of the intended form of publication, whether they will be used in a book, in a photographic essay, or just to document occasional points in a text.

The approach to photographic research does not differ from that used with other forms of original sources. Ideally, the researcher should have immersed himself in the secondary literature so that he has a firm grasp on the dimensions of the particular problem he has identified. This immersion should provide an understanding of the types of things that one could expect to have documented photographically, as well as the basis for the conceptualization of the research project. The research design should provide sufficient flexibility to accommodate unexpected discoveries and consequent changes of direction.

A basic consideration in using photographs as historical documents is that each picture should offer some evidence that relates to the project. Photographs must be considered an integral part of the evidence, not just illustrations. To think of photographs as illustrations is to relegate them to a non-essential category, to make them an appendage or afterthought. When photographs are used evidentially, they have to carry the argument or reinforce the text. Since photographs are not usually self-explanatory, just as isolated facts gleaned from literary sources do not present a full statement, they must be identified by captions. The photograph with its caption can be likened to a paragraph, where sentences combine to present a complete thought. Where photographs, rather than the text, state the theme, their captions must be able to stand alone. The movement of ideas from image to image should be as clear and logical as the sequence of well-constructed paragraphs. An obvious temptation to a reader of a photographic history, human nature being what it is, is to look at the pictures and skip or skim the text. The photographs and their captions should therefore tell the basic story. This may necessitate some duplication between captions and the text, but it can be minimal.

In preparing a photographic history, one necessarily does the photographic research before writing the text. This research and its findings determine the shape of the project, just as written evidence determines the shape of a monograph. Logically, one begins looking in repositories with the largest collections. In 1975, when undertaking work on *Early Texas Oil: A Photographic History, 1866–1936,*[6] I began with the splendid photographic archives of the American Petroleum Institute, in Washington, D. C. Then I consulted the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress, the Still Pictures Branch of the

National Archives, and the photographic files of the Division of Manufacturing, of the Smithsonian's Museum of History and Technology.

Only at the National Archives did an archivist assure me that there was nothing in the files related to my project. Having had an office in the Archives for two years, and knowing something of the ways of archivists, I was undeterred by this confession of poverty. Besides, I had seen citations in published works to Texas oil photographs at the Archives. Strangely, we (by the time my search was over "we" included a more knowledgeable archivist than the original staff member assigned to help me) never found those photographs attributed to the Bureau of Mines files in the National Archives by a 1947 book. But we did locate over a dozen excellent pictures for *Early Texas Oil.* I was able to sidestep the original archivist's negative response by suggesting other approaches to the topic. If there were no oil photographs, how about some pictures of oil-producing regions, or how about aerial surveys? Both approaches produced the expected results. This experience, from an unexpected quarter—obviously my reputation had not preceded me to the Still Pictures Branch—contains a useful lesson for both archivists and researchers. If the first approach to finding required information does not succeed, try different avenues. Archivists should be loath to tell a researcher categorically that there is nothing on his topic, especially when they know of related materials in the files. Researchers must not assume that curators are being dyspeptic when they respond negatively to requests. The informed researcher should discuss his topic fully so that the custodian can perceive alternate ways to get at the data. In this instance I knew the National Archives had photographs related to my topic and I resolved to find them. My experiences searching in the World War II field records in the old Kansas City Records Center and Departmental Records Branch in Alexandria gave me a certain archival sense that proved valuable some twenty-two years later.

Having collected photographs from the Washington repositories, I had a good understanding of the types of documentation available and knew areas that remained to be covered by research in Texas. My approach there mirrored what I had done in Washington; I started with the largest industrial collection, that of the Texas Mid-Continent Oil & Gas Association, and then toured repositories in the oil-producing regions, calling on university archives en route. These repositories included the Southwest Collection at Texas Tech University; the University of Texas Archives in Austin; the Lamar University library; public libraries in Corsicana and Houston; newspapers in Kilgore, San Angelo, Borger, Wichita Falls, and Fort Worth; the Permian Basin Petroleum Museum in Midland; the Panhandle-Plains Historical Museum in Canyon; and the Spindletop Museum. The last is the only repository that never filled my order; but it never sent a bill, either.

That museum illustrated one of the problems of our profession. It had splendid photographs, but they were completely unorganized, which is to say they were actually scattered all over the floor of a storage room. The affable young man in charge that sweltering July afternoon was glad for me to see what I could find on the floor of the unventilated, unairconditioned storage room. He turned out to be a summer employee, without training in archives or museum work, a man preparing to coach football at some village in the piney woods.[7] That was

the only occasion on which I have ever done research on both knees, but even that prayerful attitude did not result in the photographs I wanted. A further illustration of the amateurish administration of the museum was the care of its most valuable historical document. This was a letter from John D. Rockefeller to Pattillo Higgins, the indefatigable promoter of the Spindletop field, saying that he had been advised that Spindletop lacked sufficient promise for Standard Oil to lease land in the area. Had anyone wanted to purloin the letter, he could have easily lifted the plate glass covering it and absconded with the document. Such instances of the tragic neglect of America's invaluable historical records could doubtless be substantiated in all parts of the nation.

In addition to doing research in the repositories in the oil-producing regions of Texas, I found it valuable to visit the oil fields themselves. Ever since Francis Parkman, American historians have been well advised to cover the ground where events they are describing occurred. This knowledge of the terrain is especially important in photographic research, for it provides an understanding of the authenticity of photographs, as well as the erroneous labeling frequently encountered. For instance, it was essential to know the difference between the Big Lake field in Southwest Texas and the Borger field in the Panhandle. Both are in the arid portions of the state, but their topography varies considerably.

As in any other kind of research, the historian cannot go everywhere and see everything. Consequently, he should get an overview of the types of photographs that are likely to be available by visiting the large repositories first, and he must always keep his objectives firmly in mind, thus saving both time and money. The danger in beginning with small collections is that what might look worthwhile from a limited perspective and thus be ordered could easily be superseded by better photographs from larger repositories.

The problems of how and where one does photographic research are inseparable. From the researcher's glance at the first picture, regardless of the location and size of repository, he must have in mind a series of considerations that will affect his reaction to the document and hence the ultimate outcome of his project. Initially, he should know how this particular photograph relates to the body of published photographs on this topic. This implies full familiarity with photographic publications, in the same way that a researcher in written sources should have mastered the secondary literature so that he will understand whether the document before him has sufficient significance for him to take a note. No more reason exists to collect hackneyed photographs than notes from well-worked literary sources. A photographic history should be fresh and stimulating, just as we expect a monograph to offer either new information or a different approach to a historical problem.

Second, the researcher must be concerned with the historical quality of the photograph. Does it say something important? A photograph may be beautiful from the standpoints of composition and reproduction, but it may deal only marginally with the subject. In the case of the early Texas oil industry, do the people involved have names of note, are the wells important as the discovery wells in big fields, is there anything out of the ordinary in the picture, such as the igniting of a gusher or wells gushing simultaneously? In addition to the historicity of the photograph, it is far more meaningful if the scene shows some

life. If people are involved, they should be active participants in the scene, not just passive observers. Mug shots and studio poses are the limpest forms of photographs of historical figures.

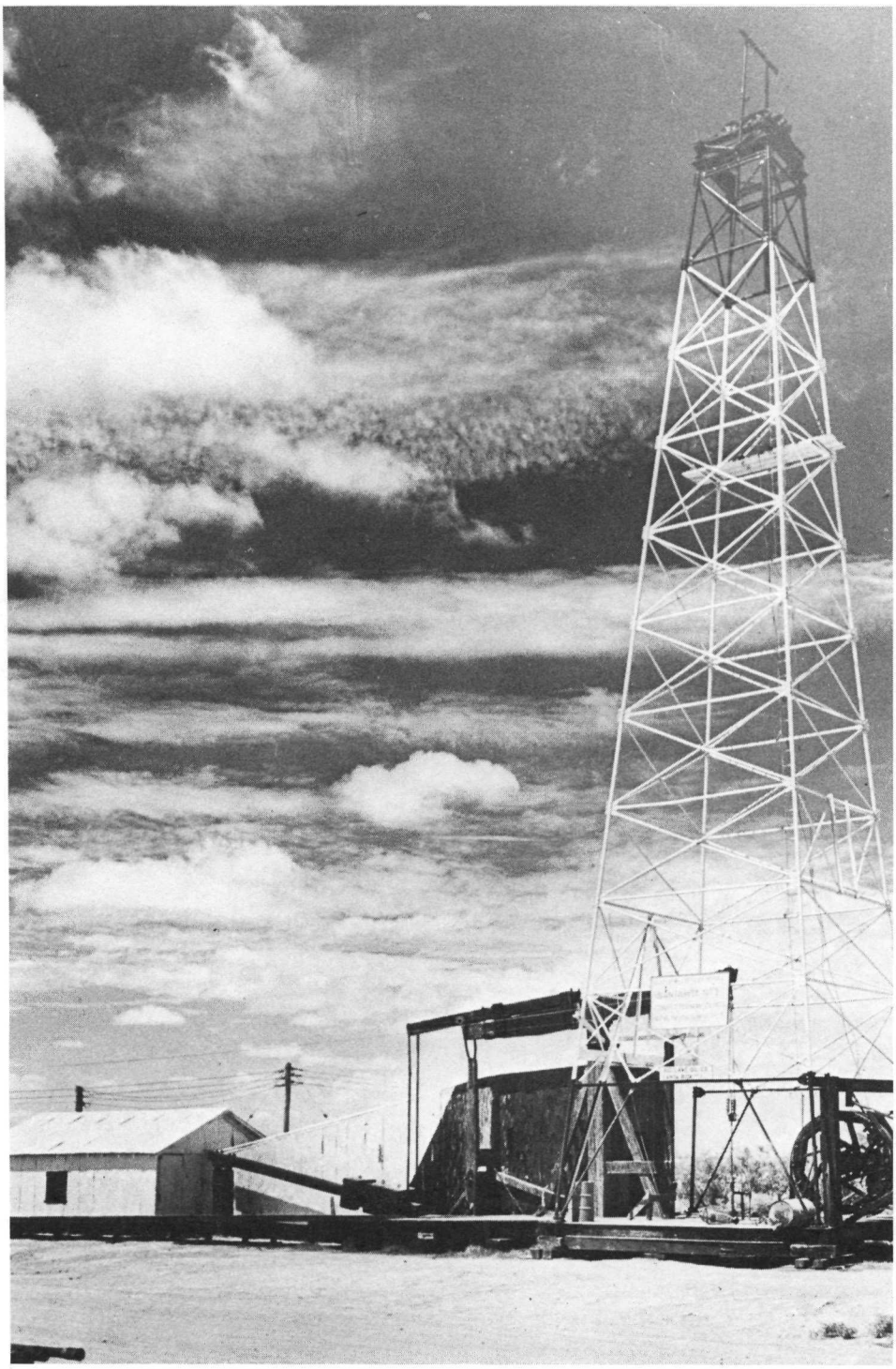
Researchers must be aware, however, that the camera is not a neutral observer of the historical scene. Optical distortions may cause a picture to misrepresent reality, and photographers can impose their artistic vision on the material. We think of the Farm Security Administration photographers, such as Dorothea Lange, Walker Evans, and Ben Shahn, as having documented the grim realities of the Dust Bowl, and they did. But to achieve their poignant, heart-rending results, they often "would take dozens of frontal pictures of one of their sharecropper subjects until satisfied that they had gotten just the right look on film—the precise expression on the subject's face that supported their own notions about poverty, light, dignity, texture, exploitation, and geometry."[8]

As examples of historically significant oil photographs, the following deserve a few comments.

Texas Mid-Continent Oil & Gas Association

This scene of Dad Joiner shaking hands with the corpulent A. D. ("Doc") Lloyd in front of Daisy Bradford #3 involves the two principal men in the discovery of the giant East Texas oil field. Joiner was the dauntless wildcatter, and Lloyd was his field-trained geologist. Together they brought in the biggest field in this country. The irony is that most of the major oil companies had had their university-trained geologists in the area for years, each reporting negatively on the prospects. Although this image has been printed widely, I had no choice but to use it, for it is the only scene showing the triumphant principals in this venture. Because of the ultimate significance of the East Texas field, the identification of other figures in the picture has become a matter of hot controversy. Some have claimed that the second figure from the right was Ed C. Laster, head driller. But those who knew Laster well said that it could not have been he, because he would not have been in a group where Lloyd shared the limelight. More interesting was the assertion of H. L. Hunt that the third figure from the right, the man with the cigar and boater hat, was Hunt himself. This claim has been repeated often with publication of the picture in newspapers and books. Despite the fact that Hunt later bought the lion's share of Joiner's leases, there is only Hunt's highly dubious testimony that he was at the well when the photographer took this picture. Others who were there have vigorously denied Hunt's presence. The Hunt claim was just a matter of wanting credit for a slice of the action. Ironically, after my careful research established that the man was not Hunt, a reviewer referred to my use of this picture of Joiner, Lloyd, and Hunt.[9] Readers of the review who had not read the book would naturally think I was perpetuating the time-honored error. I am glad to have this opportunity to correct the record—and for once the author has the last word!

In this picture we see Santa Rita #1, the discovery well in the Big Lake field that changed the face of higher education in Texas. Located on university-owned land, this well tapped a vast field that is producing yet. The oil has added hundreds of millions of dollars to the university's permanent fund, enabling it to acquire manuscripts of vast importance, such as the papers of George Bernard Shaw, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, Dylan Thomas, Oscar Wilde, Ezra Pound, T. H. White, Ellery Queen, J. Frank Dobie, Walter Prescott Webb, and the Alfred A. Knopf library. The fund also enabled the university to buy the incomparable Gernsheim, as well as the Goldbeck, Smithers, and Adkins photographic collections; all of this because of the university's extensive holdings in the Permian Basin—symbolized by Santa Rita #1, still lazily pumping away. What irony that Frank T. Pickrell named this discovery well for the patron saint of the impossible. Just to keep the historical record entirely accurate, I should add that the equipment in this scene is largely a replacement for the original rig, which was moved to the campus of the university at Austin as an outdoor museum. The campus thus has a visible reminder of whence its blessings flow.



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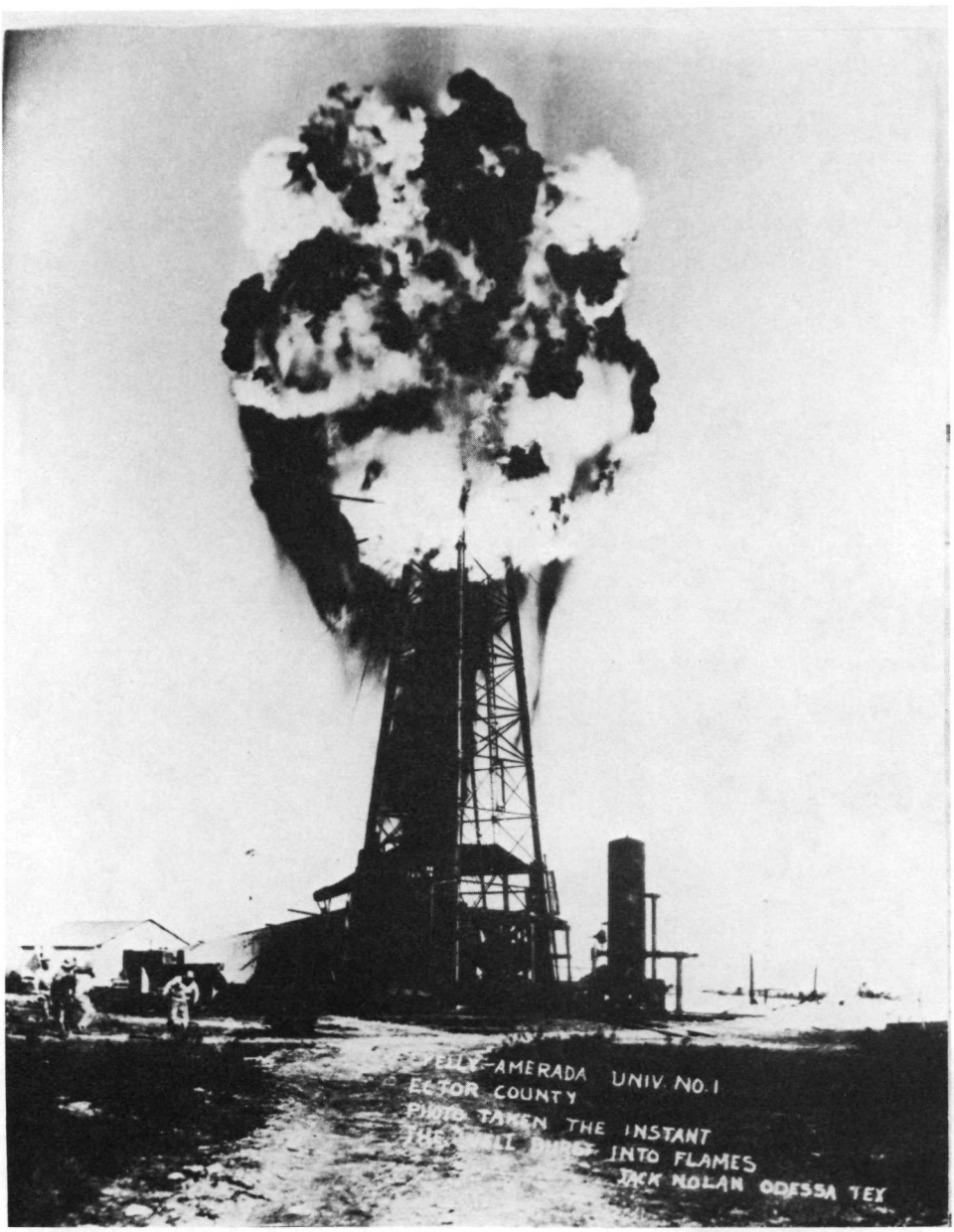
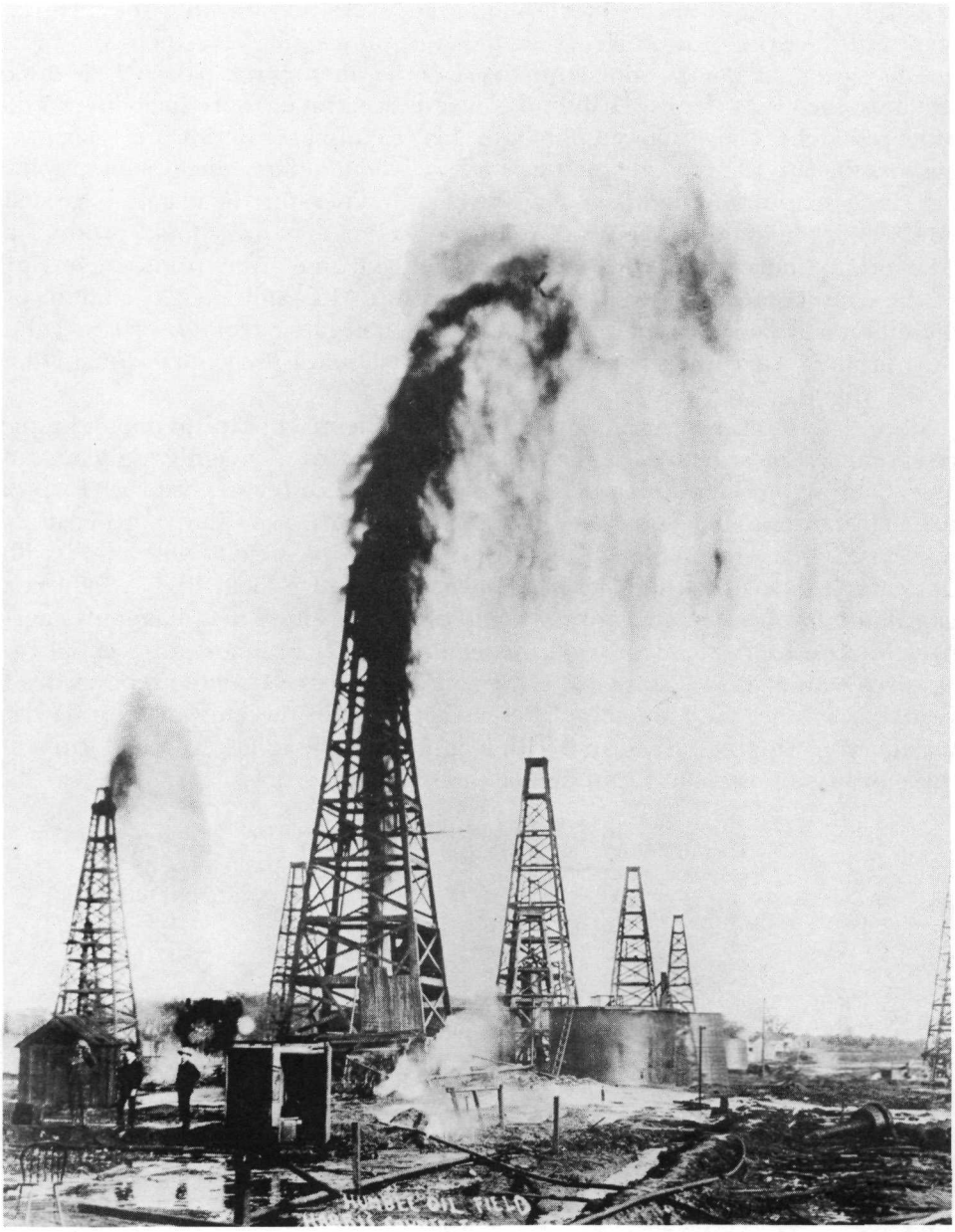


Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University

The greatest danger in oil fields, from the days of Colonel Edwin Drake to the present, has been fire. Many pictures exist showing wells or tanks afire, but this one of the Skelly-Amerada University #1 at the instant of ignition, is spectacular. The running workers in the left foreground accentuate the immediacy of the danger. The picture is also significant historically, since it is rare for a photographer to be ready at the precise moment of disaster.



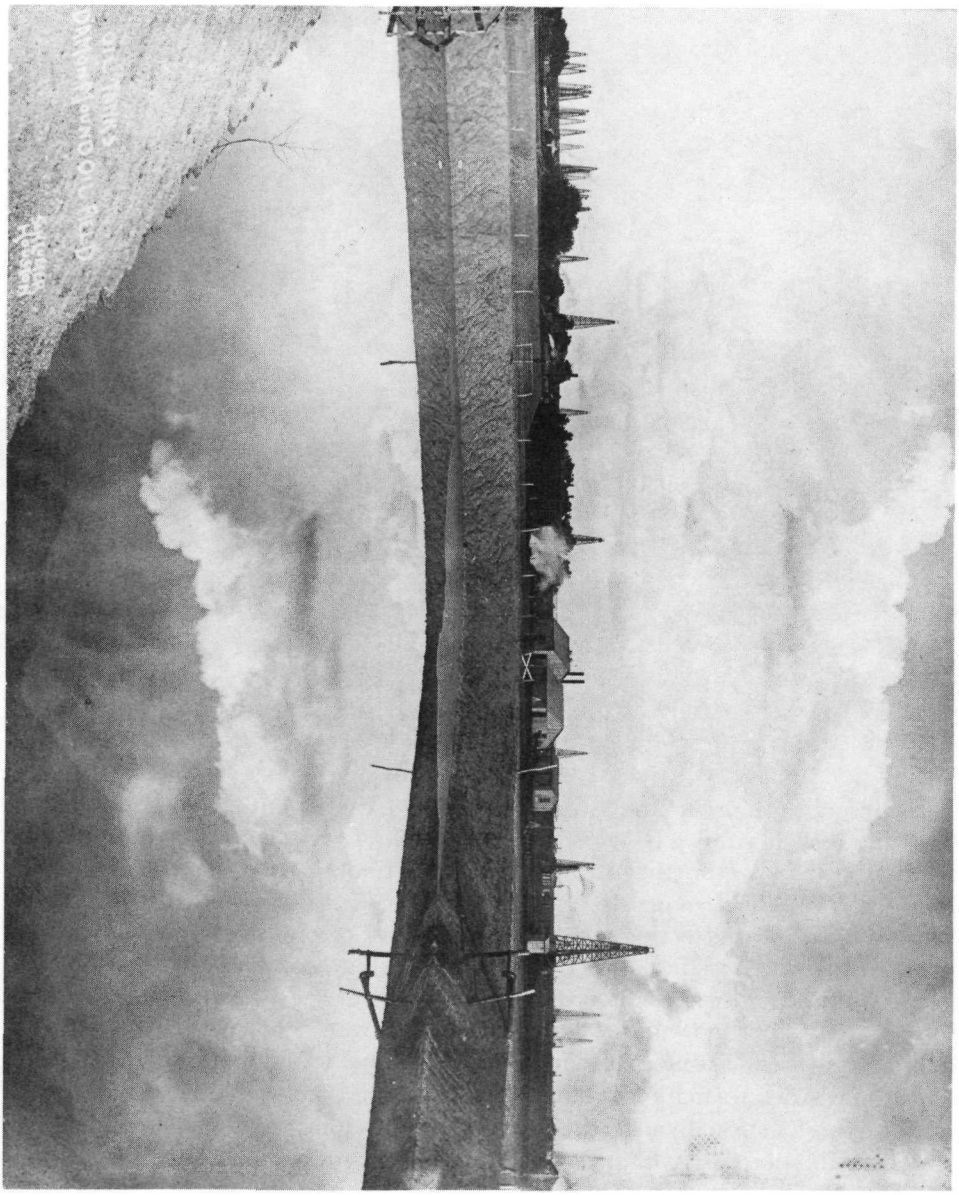
Exxon Corporation

Before conservation became a national watchword, oilmen loved to see a gusher blow in. They mistakenly assumed that wells needed to rid themselves of gas so that the oil would flow smoothly, and they thought, perhaps correctly, that gushers were great advertising for leases in the area. One gusher was enough to make any driller's day, but to have two come in together, as shown in this photograph from the Humble field, constituted a rare—and historic—delight.

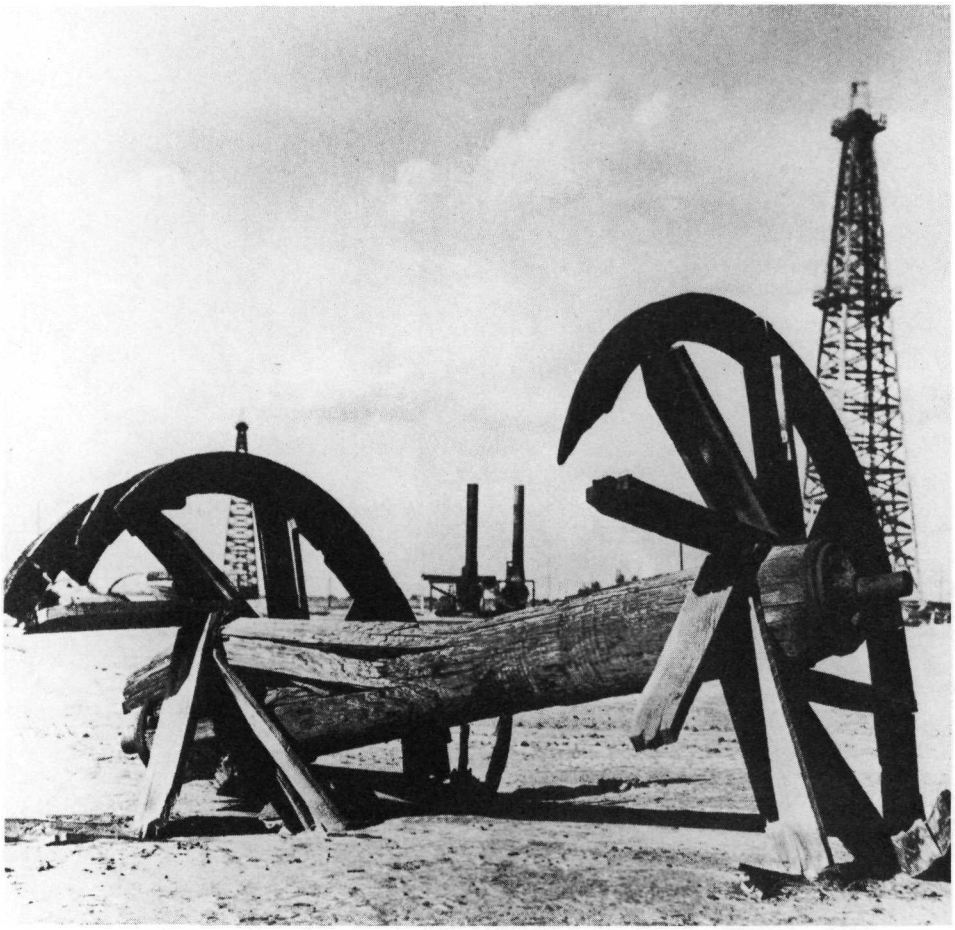
A third problem connected with photographic research involves the pictorial quality of the print or negative. Is the photograph pleasing on esthetic grounds, does it have good compositional qualities? If the photograph passes these tests, one must then consider its clarity and contrasts in terms of reproducibility.[10] Too often researchers have allowed photographers to foist off inferior prints, assuming that the latter have made their best effort, when, in fact, much photographic printing is sloppy and mindless. A researcher, by checking the negative, can tell how well a photograph should reproduce. A clear negative should produce a clear print. Similarly, if a copy must be made from an existing print, the quality of the copy relates directly to that of the print. Although a slight amount of definition may be lost in the process of making a negative from the original and then printing the copy, the clarity of the copy should closely approximate that of the original, given careful printing.

Since close scrutiny of prints and negatives is essential to careful photographic research, it is most helpful to have proper equipment. A magnifying glass can quickly bring out identifying detail in a picture. Since few repositories furnish these, the foresighted researcher can easily carry his own. Studying negatives presents a different problem. Often it is next to impossible to determine, with the natural or artificial light available, what a negative looks like. A light box elucidates this process immeasurably, and every repository that maintains negatives for research should provide this equipment. It is almost as essential for research with negatives as a table is for written records. Of all the repositories I visited, only one, the Humanities Research Center of the University of Texas, facilitated photographic research with a light box. The following will document these propositions about pictorial qualities of prints.

The salt domes of the coastal plain of Texas have yielded vast quantities of crude petroleum from the days of Spindletop to the present. Along with the famous fields, there have been many minor fields whose names have slipped from common memory. Yet their individual wells could hold their own with most of those at Sour Lake, Batson, Goose Creek, or West Columbia. At one such small field, Damon Mound, forty miles southwest of Houston, the producers chose to store oil in earthen tanks or sumps. Despite the wastefulness and danger of this method of storage, it was, in the short run, the cheapest and easiest way to impound the crude, and as this picture shows, by far the most photogenic. On this calm day, the smooth surface of oil mirrored perfectly the cloudy sky and retaining wall.



Houston Public Library

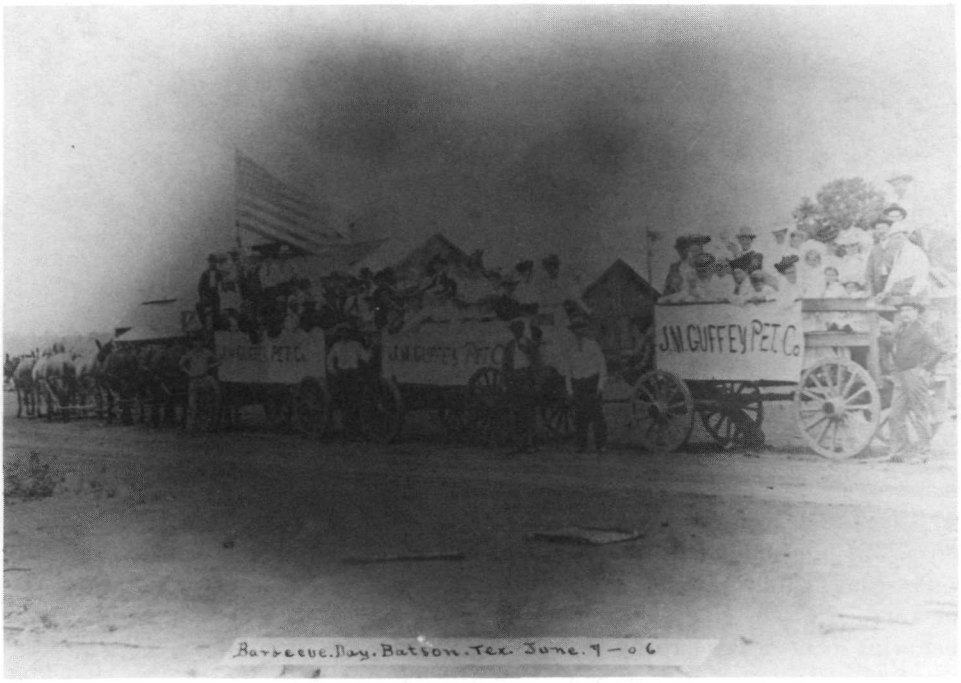


American Petroleum Institute

The photographer who took this picture of a decaying bull wheel shared mankind's interest in ruins. As W. S. Gilbert said in *The Mikado,* "There's a fascination frantic in a ruin that's romantic." The amount of romance in this picture of a bull wheel depends on the viewer, but most would agree that its composition is most effective, symbolizing as it does technological exhaustion in the quest for quick riches. Had the bull wheel stood, or crumpled, alone, the mood would have been desolate. But with the boilers and derricks in the background, the viewer gets the notion that the venerable bull wheel had done its work. This work was a most important part of cable tool drilling, the type used in most hard-rock formations. (The other principal type of drilling for oil is the rotary method, especially effective in sandy formations.) Cable tool drilling depended on the percussive impact of the bit as it was successively lowered into the hole and raised.

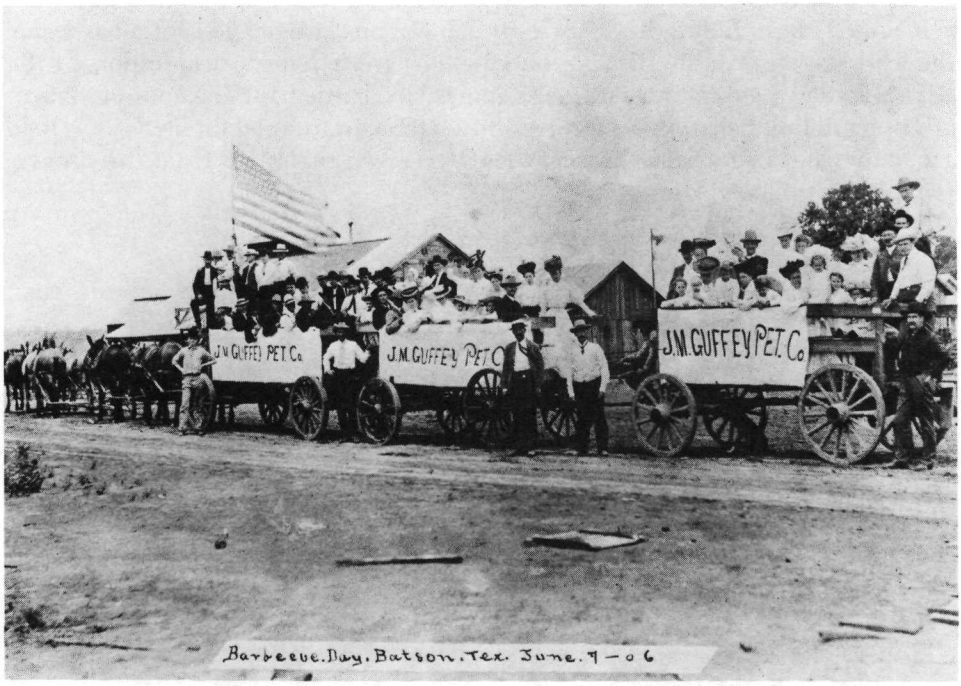
The bull wheel was the huge spool around which the cable was wound when the bit was drawn out of the hole. This photograph's incontestable artistic quality proved the obvious inspiration for E. M. Schiwetz's lithograph entitled "The Old Bull Wheel." A comparison of the bull wheel in each reveals the photographic model, although the artist used license in rearranging the background.[11]

In my research for *Early Texas Oil*, I discovered a photograph at the University of Texas Archives that made a clear statement about the quality of life in Batson, famous as one of the wildest boom towns in the first decade of this century. This photograph shows a family outing for the employees of the J. M. Guffey Petroleum Company. Husbands, wives, and children, all decked out in their Sunday best, filling three horse-drawn wagons, are headed for a barbecue. The lead wagon proudly flies the national ensign. The historical import of the picture is that it shows that, however much vice battled for the soul of Batson with its gambling halls, whorehouses, and saloons, traditional family virtues held firm. You can imagine my dismay when I received this print from the university's photoduplication service.



University of Texas Archives

On a subsequent trip to Austin, I returned to the archives and checked the negative, which turned out to be virtually faultless. When I ordered a print from another photographer, this was the happy result. The former print would have



University of Texas Archives

been unusable in the book, thus depriving me of the opportunity to make an important point about the social history of Batson. But with the clear image, I could show graphically the contest between good and evil in the boom town. On the verso page the reader could see the family outing, while observing on the recto this scene at the Crosby House. We see here the Monday morning gathering of arrested gamblers and whores on the balcony of the hotel. The justice of the peace set fines sufficiently large to furnish income for him, the sheriff, and the arresting officer. The JP then exhibited the women on the balcony so that the expectant men gathered below could get a good view. Each woman's fine was announced, and the speediest man to reach the court and pay her fine could keep her for twenty-four hours.

University of Texas Archives

The fourth problem confronting most photographic researchers is the plethora of documents. One could almost believe that this nation of shutterbugs has enthusiastically subscribed to Susan Sontag's definition of photography as "a heroic copulation with the material world."[12] Unless a research project is highly delimited, one is likely to find far more photographs than he can possibly use. But this redundancy has something in its favor, because it corroborates the truthfulness of the image, much as the repetition of scientific experiments confirms original findings. The large collections I examined had numerous pictures of the same oil fields, refineries, and pipelines. The researcher is challenged to select the best for his purposes, and the cost of prints makes rigorous selection imperative from the outset. The researcher may find many photographs that are good individually but that do not harmonize with and complement others or that do not fit the general theme. As an example, all gushers can look alike, so the photograph must contribute something new, different, and identifiable. If a statement is made in one scene, such as a muddy street in a boom town, a similar photograph of another boom town may have to be foregone. One of the great difficulties of photographic research is having to select the best print for your purposes from different repositories at different times, or even from different Hollinger boxes in the same archives when you are allowed only one box at a time and need to compare prints from several boxes. The photographic researcher is forced to carry a great deal in his head and probably has to have a clearer conceptualization of his project from the outset than the researcher with a project based upon written documents. To make a comparison, in my research on Walter Prescott Webb I can count on a specific original source being in one precise location such as the Texas State Archives, while I might find similar photographs of drilling operations in Desdemona as far apart as Washington and Midland. How is one to know in Washington what he may find elsewhere? Manifestly he cannot, and he inevitably will take some notes in the form of photographs that he cannot use. The photographic researcher must, nevertheless, be very deliberate from the outset of his quest.

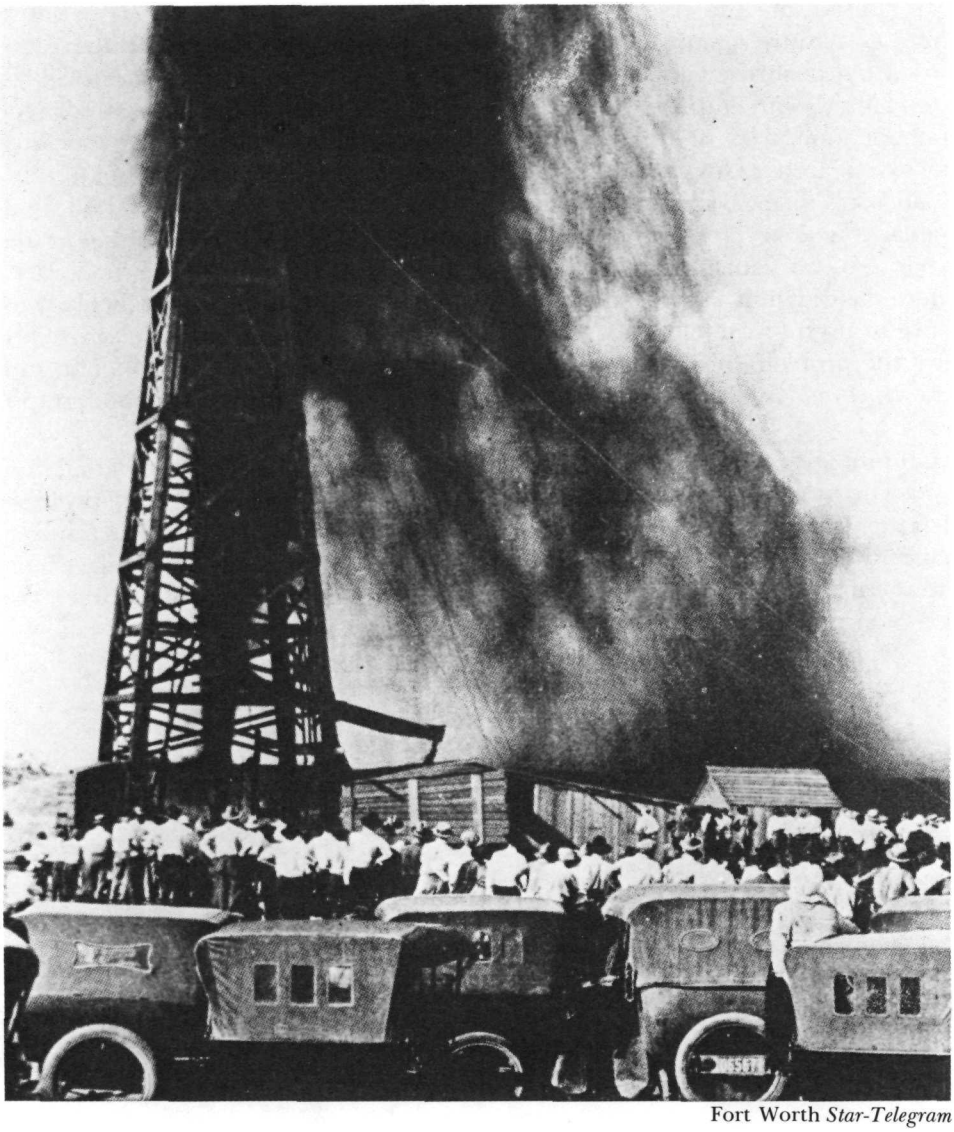
A related problem involves the unsystematic collection patterns of many repositories. During my research I continually found photographs in unexpected places and did not find them where they logically should have been. The Corsicana Public Library, for instance, had little on that first commercially successful oil field in the state. Yet it had fine holdings on Sour Lake, Batson, and other southeast Texas fields. This characteristic seems common among photographic collections.

With this kind of research, the prints become your notes, as do the jottings on cards when you research written sources. We always admonish graduate students to be highly selective in taking notes, lest they bog down entirely in their research. Photographic researchers must be even more judicious in their selections. Luckily, 4 × 6 cards are considerably cheaper than prints, so extensive note-taking is costly only in time and in the possibility of becoming overwhelmed with details. Unless the photographic researcher is more disciplined in taking these graphic notes than most historians are in making written notes, he will face a staggering bill. At $12.50 per print (the cost at the Houston Public Library), one proceeds cautiously.[13]

In considering the vast quantity of photographic documentation, one must guard constantly against enthusiasts who may lead you down unproductive byways if not primrose paths. The amateurs who populate local historical societies often vibrate with enthusiasm, but their narrow perspectives can cause their recommendations to be of limited value to professional researchers. While traveling in Texas searching for oil pictures, I received many suggestions to go out to Mrs. So-and-So's farm, because she knew more about the history of a local oil field than anyone else. The trouble was that a morning spent with her would be at the expense of an equal amount of time at the local newspaper office or library, where the diggings were invariably richer. Private collections are rarely likely to prove as useful as public ones, and even when you locate a valuable print you have the problem of its reproduction. Few individuals are willing to let an unknown, though perhaps trustworthy, researcher take a treasured photograph away.[14]

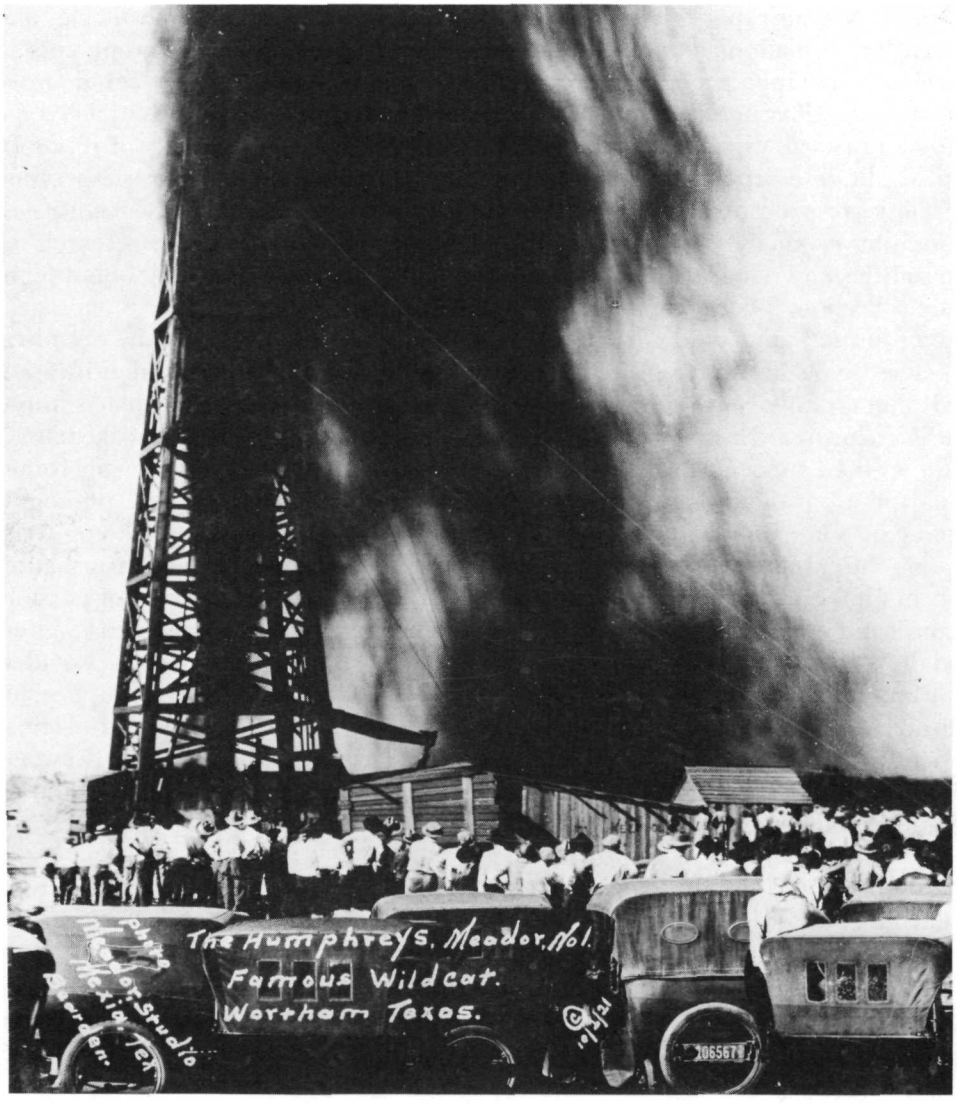
On one inescapable occasion, I journeyed to the home of an individual and saw a worthwhile photograph that he was willing for me to borrow upon promise of return. Although I had his address, he informed me that the return information was on the back of the print. Turning it over, I read the stamp, which had the man's name and address, plus this query: "Where will you spend eternity?" "Only in Texas," I sighed silently.

A fifth problem related to the availability of a vast quantity of photographs is the duplication of prints from one archives to another. When the researcher sees thousands of photographs in a limited time and in various locations, it is difficult to remember exactly what he has examined. As a result, he will sometimes identify an important picture and order it, perhaps forgetting he had ordered it elsewhere. The guiding principle has been that the photograph was essential to the research. When casting the net widely, one inevitably gets some duplicates.



Fort Worth *Star-Telegram*

But this can be constructive. For instance, when I assembled all my gleanings, I found that I had three different identifications of the discovery well in Mexia, L. W. Rogers #1. In such cases, the evaluation of the source becomes imperative. From these two prints, you can see that the photographs are identical; yet you can also observe the different descriptions. The constructive aspect of such instances is in making the researcher skeptical about all captions and attributions and forcing whatever independent corroboration is possible. Sometimes one must act on faith that the photographer or caption writer was correct, as one must sometimes assume that, after all the tests of internal criticism, a written source is reliable. Another constructive aspect of having duplicate prints is that they enable the researcher to select the best for reproduction.



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Photographic research in which orders are filled weeks and sometimes months after you have examined the pictures, is unlike research with written documents, since with the latter you always have the record, in the form of notes, of what you have seen. Such a catalog of all photographs examined would be impossibly cumbersome. One must therefore cultivate the memory of what one has seen. Even though one cannot have a visual catalog of examined photographs, one should take notes on pictures selected for reproduction. The note can describe the general content, caption, or some specific identifying information. Without such notes, you cannot be sure the repository has filled the order properly and you cannot avoid duplication from one repository to another. More satisfactory than such written notes would be electrostatic copies of the photographs se-

lected. Not all repositories have the required machines handily available, and security regulations may complicate or prevent quick copying. The process of trying to compile a photocopied catalog of ordered photographs could prove costly, as well as unhandy. Such a procedure would probably be too cumbersome to be practical, especially with research conducted in a wide variety of repositories. The researcher's ingenuity will be further tested by public libraries with no facilities or procedures for him to secure photographic prints. These institutions often have valuable resources, but they do not consider themselves research repositories and hence make no provision for a patron to do anything but observe the collection. The researcher could solve such problems if he were a photographer himself and could get the repository's permission to copy on the premises.

The final substantive problem in this type of research involves identification of photographs. Since the initial uses of photographs are rarely scholarly, those who furnished the original identifications may not have considered factual accuracy their supreme goal. The information identifying prints is normally found in captions at the bottom, scribblings on the back, or in markings the photographer or some subsequent printer made on the negative. When photographs come into archives, the repositories sometimes add to the store of information through their indexes, registers, or catalogs. Since a researcher cannot possibly command a detailed knowledge of every scene, person, or instance represented in the photographs he examines, he relies basically on the information provided with the photograph. The alert investigator, of course, maintains a skeptical attitude toward all the data he encounters; because of the casualness of original identifications of photographs, he must be especially chary about the accuracy of these data. The information must be checked against every possible source, both original and secondary. Familiarity with the terrain constitutes an essential element in photograph identification.

One of the biggest problems relates to photographers' markings on negatives. The chief aim of photographers was to sell pictures, so commercial values took precedence over accuracy. The level of learning exhibited by some of these markings is astounding: reversed letters such as backward "n's" and "s's," misspellings, and amateurish scrawls. Yet when no contradictory evidence exists, the researcher is usually obliged to accept such information at face value. Fortunately, in one case, such negating evidence existed.

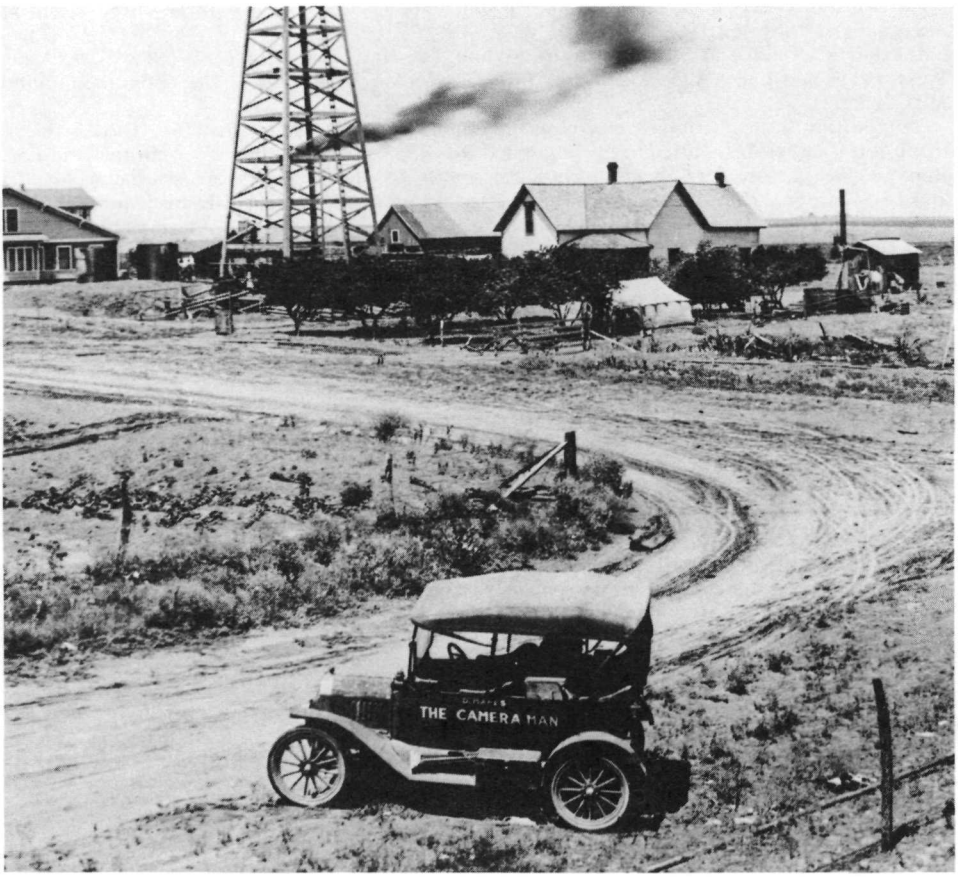
Figure 12. Texas State Historical Association

When I came across this print at the Texas State Historical Association, I was astounded. Here we have two 55,000-gallon oil tanks afire in Beaumont in 1896. I knew, of course, that Spindletop roared in on January 10, 1901, but I had no idea there was sufficient oil in Beaumont four years earlier to fill one such tank, much less two. Actually I had doubts from the first, so I went back and reread all the available secondary literature; and sure enough, Spindletop was the first well in the entire area. I can just imagine the consequences, however, had I accepted the information on this particular photograph and published it in my book. Here is a prime example of the researcher's need for skepticism.

In another instance, I had no reason for such skepticism, but still fell into error. At the Southwest Collection at Texas Tech University, I found a print identified only as spudding in Mexia's J. K. Hughes #1 in the early 1920s. Since I knew that Hughes was an active driller, I assumed that he was turning the first shovelful of dirt for the well that bore his name, and so captioned the photograph. Soon after the appearance of *Early Texas Oil,* a letter arrived from Houston saying that the author had been in Mexia at the time and knew Hughes personally and that he was not holding the shovel. The shoveler, in fact, was General John J. Pershing, there on a promotional tour at the invitation of Colonel Albert E. Humphreys, developer of the field. Humphreys is the tall man over Pershing's left shoulder. The man to Pershing's immediate right was Pete Urschel, chief driller for Humphreys.[15] So, through ignorance, I had chosen a photograph that had far more historical value than I had assumed, since this is the only picture of Humphrey and Urschel that I encountered. Had I been more alert, I might have identified Pershing as the shovel holder. But there was no reason to expect any connection between the general and the Texas oil industry. As far as I know, this promotional tour was his only connection, which even Frank Vandiver did not know about until I consulted him on this picture. One does not examine thousands of Texas oil photographs, looking for Pershing or any other notable whose presence is illogical. Luckily, in the second printing of the book, I have been able to correct this error, as well as a few others that slipped in.

Southwest Collection, Texas Tech University

The photographic record of the American petroleum industry is immense, as is doubtless that of comparable aspects of our national experience. In most cases, those who bequeathed us this legacy are unknown, but some outstanding photographers have left vivid impressions of early Texas oil. Among them are Trost, who photographed the Spindletop area; Schlueter, the Houston region; Meador, the Mexia area; and Stephenson of Wichita Falls, who covered the Red River Uplift. Symbolizing those all-but-forgotten recorders of the past was D. Mapes, who on his Model T proudly identified himself as The Camera Man. Here he was at work in the Burkburnett field.



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Archivists and historians know that, contrary to Marshall McLuhan, the printed word is not passé. We still depend on the written language as the basic means of transmitting our learning and explaining the past. Well before the day of the photograph, skillful writers, having cultivated the art of description, could conjure up scenes of the past. James Fenimore Cooper in the Leatherstocking Tales and Francis Parkman in his seven-volume *France and England in North America* drew compelling word pictures of the great forests of the northeastern portions of this continent. After the advent of the camera, however,

everyone could have a first- rather than second-hand impression of the world about him through photographs. Quickly photographs became a common means of conveying experience; but scholars only slowly perceived their informational importance. Surely no longer should reservations exist about the use of photographs as historical evidence. The challenge now is to exploit them skillfully.

NOTES

[1] Ernst Posner, *Archives in the Western World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972).

[2] Greek tour guide, Heraklion Museum, Crete, August 13, 1976.

[3] I used this collection for photographic documentation of "Steinbeck's Image of the West," *The American West* 1 (Spring 1964): 4–17, 79.

[4] Erskine Caldwell and Margaret Bourke-White, *You Have Seen Their Faces* (New York: Viking Press, 1937); and James Agee and Walker Evans, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1941).

[5] Supporting this contention concerning the importance of *You Have Seen Their Faces* is the fact that it is the earliest book listed in the Suggested Reading section of Robert A. Weinstein and Larry Booth, *Collection, Use, and Care of Historical Photographs* (Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1977). It is curious that the section omits the Agee and Evans volume.

[6] Walter Rundell, Jr., *Early Texas Oil: A Photographic History, 1866–1936* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1977).

[7] Interview with Karl S. Baltz, July 24, 1975.

[8] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1977), p. 16.

[9] James Presley, *Southwestern Historical Quarterly* 81 (January 1978): 356.

[10] While a photograph should contain contrasts that clearly differentiate between light and dark tones, a photograph with the high contrasts needed for exhibition purposes will not reproduce optimally as a halftone print in a book or magazine (Weinstein and Booth, *Collection, Use, and Care of Historical Photographs*, p. 50). These contrasts are needed for newspaper reproduction (DeWitt C. Reddick, *Modern Feature Writing* [New York: Harper, 1949], p. 367; and Milton Feinberg *Techniques of Photo-Journalism* [New York: Wiley-Interscience, 1970], p. 41).

[11] E. M. "Buck" Schiwetz, *The Schiwetz Legacy: An Artist's Tribute to Texas, 1910–1971* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1972), p. 54—plate #22.

[12] Sontag, *On Photography*, p. 30.

[13] The *Dallas Morning News* fee of $25 per print was sufficiently exhorbitant to discourage my use of its collection. The fees of other newspapers were entirely reasonable.

[14] For some projects, private collections may prove to be of more value than public ones. When Pete Daniel did research for *Deep'n as It Come: The 1927 Mississippi River Flood* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), he found some of his best photographic evidence from family albums. Many "official" flood photographs lacked the immediacy of a snapshot taken by a victim. Daniel, who carried photographic equipment with him, made many copies in private homes. Other owners gave him their original prints when they found out his purpose.

[15] Robert A. Shepherd to Texas A & M University Press, August 1, 1977. Copy in author's files.