

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Don Woodard. *Black Diamonds! Black Gold!: The Saga of Texas Pacific Coal and Oil Company.* Lubbock: Texas Tech University Press, 1998. xii + 322 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-89672-379-5.

Reviewed by Jason Manning (Department of History, Southern Illinois University)
Published on H-Business (January, 1999)



The Wheels of Progress

In *Black Diamonds! Black Gold!*, author Dan Woodard tells the story of the Texas Pacific Coal & Oil Company (TP) from its modest beginnings in 1888 as a coal-mining concern through its extraordinary expansion into one of the most influential corporations in Texas. Using a blend of archival sources, newspaper accounts, and oral history, Woodard has produced something more than a company history. This work provides insights into the volatile disputes between management and early organized labor, and it addresses the influence of industry captains on Texas politics during the first half of the twentieth century. In addition, this book offers an interesting glimpse into the role of companies like TP in the economic growth of Texas.

Written in a style amenable to the layman, *Black Diamonds! Black Gold!* is interspersed with frequent diversions from the principal topic—the saga of Texas Pacific—in order to give the reader tantalizing glimpses into the private lives of company presidents and immigrant miners. Woodard tells his tale against the backdrop of national events, pausing the main narrative to insert such historical highlights as the flight of The Spirit of St. Louis and the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. While the author usually makes some connection between such landmark events and the fate of Texas Pacific, they are sometimes rather tenuous ones. For example, the reader is left with the impression (largely unsubstantiated) that TP president Edgar J. Marston was inspired by Charles Lindbergh's visit to Fort Worth to launch the company's excursion into gasoline marketing, resulting in a prolifera-

tion of TP Aero filling stations in North Texas and Oklahoma. Scholars may find some of these detours of little practical value and perhaps even disconcerting on occasion. The last thirty-five pages of the book are, in fact, a biographical sketch of TP's last chairman, H. B. Fuqua, recounting his activities following the acquisition of the company by the liquor distilling firm of Joseph E. Seagram & Sons.

In the opinion of this reviewer, Woodard's work is of particular interest when it addresses labor disputes. In its early days TP—then the Texas & Pacific Coal Company—clashed several times with the Knights of Labor. Reaching the zenith of its power in the mid-1880s, the union sought to repeat in Texas the success it had enjoyed elsewhere, but it found this goal elusive in right-to-work Texas where well-connected companies like TP could summon steely-eyed Texas Rangers to keep the peace while scabs were imported to work the idle mines. TP remained non-union until the United Mine Workers (UMW) came to Texas in 1903 and infiltrated union organizers into the ranks of the TP miners. Every miner in the company payroll walked off the job. When TP attempted to bring in scabs, UMW men met the trains and dissuaded the new workers from proceeding to the mines. Texas Pacific eventually capitulated to union demands. Woodard's handling of this topic is balanced and fair, and those interested in American labor history are likely to cull useful information from the pages of his book.

Of equal interest is the focus on Thurber, TP's company town in north central Texas. Woodard describes Thurber as a melting pot that, by the turn of the century, was composed of about two thousand native-born Americans and eight thousand of other nationalities, chiefly Italians, Poles, and Mexicans. The company "owned" Thurber in every sense of the word. It built homes and schools and churches for its workers. The town boasted its own opera house and the first public library in the region. It was also the first community in the state to have AC and DC electrical wiring in every residence. TP's attempt to prevent Thurberites from shopping anywhere besides in company stores was ultimately foiled by the advent of mail order catalogs. The author paints an absorbing word portrait of life in a company town that, by 1913, was the largest community between Fort Worth and El Paso. And yet by the mid-1930s Thurber was a ghost town; TP had closed the last of its coal mines, having turned its attention to oil production.

In 1917 the first gusher at TP's Ranger Field blew in, a watershed event not only for the company but also Fort Worth, a sleepy town that blossomed virtually overnight into a booming oil capital thanks to its Texas & Pacific Railway connection with the highly productive TP oil leases. With its own fields, pipelines, and refining, the company reaped huge profits when the automotive industry came into its own in the 1920s. Though it suffered hard times during the Great Depression, the company survived thanks in large part to astute management, and it continued to play a prominent role in Texas postwar

politics, using its connections to fend off a 1956 buyout bid by Sinclair Oil Corporation. But, as oil became more expensive to produce, corporate consolidations continued apace, and in 1963 Texas Pacific was absorbed into the Frankfort Oil Company subsidiary of Seagram.

Woodard's study illustrates the crucial role that companies like Texas Pacific played in the social and economic development of Texas. Clearly the author believes that role was a vital one, as well he should. But one must look elsewhere in order to put the TP saga into perspective. The petrochemical industry—the largest industry in the state by the mid-twentieth century—enriched Texas by bringing in a torrent of outside money and providing a major new source of tax revenue. As historian T. R. Fehrenbach points out, oil concentrated money in the hands of developers and landowners and contributed to the conservative tradition of Texas politics. It was the engine that turned the wheels of progress in the state. Certainly, by importing workers of many nationalities, TP is due some credit for contributing to the rich diversity of Texas society. But the extent to which its activities benefited the working class is an issue well worth debating—and one that arises when reading between the lines of *Black Diamond! Black Gold!*

Copyright (c) 1999 by EH.NET and H-Net. All rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational uses if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact the EH.NET Administrator. (administrator@eh.net, Telephone: 513-529-2850; Fax:513-529-6992)

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-business>

Citation: Jason Manning. Review of Woodard, Don, *Black Diamonds! Black Gold!: The Saga of Texas Pacific Coal and Oil Company*. H-Business, H-Net Reviews. January, 1999.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2654>

Copyright © 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.