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**Oil Boomtowns Happen, But How?**

In *Oil Booms: Social Change in Five Texas Towns*, Roger M. Olien and Diana David Olien (now Hinton) note that scholars of the oil boom had not advanced our understanding of the phenomena—which the Oliens consider generally to be “an extreme variety of a familiar modern phenomena, rapid urban growth”—beyond its depiction in film and popular writing as the creator of “anarchic hell holes.” Olien and Olien sought to revise “the dark boom-to-bust view of oil booms,” which was “long overdue.” In examining “actual conditions,” they found that the booms experienced in the twentieth century by McCamey, Midland, Odessa, Snyder, and Wink in the Permian Basin of west Texas produced economic and social benefits that outlasted the temporary hardships of boom life.[1]

Since the publication of *Oil Booms*, Brian Black has given the “anarchic hell hole” the scholarly attention it deserves as a category of oil boom. In *Petrolia: The Landscape of America’s First Oil Boom* (2000), Black focuses in particular on the environmental consequences of petroleum extraction at the intersection of capitalist speculation and industrial technology in northwestern Pennsylvania in the nineteenth century. In doing so, he explains why the “dark boom-to-bust view of oil booms,” as Olien and Olien put it, was not a stereotype but reflected actual conditions in cases where makeshift commercial and residential structures or tents were hastily erected along with and amid derricks, gathering pipelines, and related infrastructure. In this respect, the “classic boomtowns” of Pithole, Red Hot, and Shamburg differed from the five Permian Basin towns, which either already existed or were established outside the oil fields whose exploitation catalyzed their booms.
In *Oil Cities*, Henry Alexander Wiencek sheds light on the creation of both types of oil boomtowns. Using Black's nineteenth-century boomtowns as a point of departure, Wiencek makes his most significant contribution to the history of extractive industry boomtowns in a multifaceted examination of the “anarchic hell hole.” Oil City, which receives the most attention in the book, was indeed “a turbulent, bloody place, where shootings, fires, explosions, and random violence were commonplace in everyday life,” as Olien and Olien describe the boomtown depicted in popular culture.[2] But its conditions, Wiencek argues, “were not simply the inevitable products of the volatile natural resource extraction that underlay its economy.” Rather, “they were social, economic, and political constructions,” the products of white supremacy, path-dependent economic hierarchies, and resource allocation decisions by Caddo Parish government (p. xvi). In considering in some depth the case of Shreveport, Wiencek also adds to our understanding of twentieth-century oil boomtowns in the category of the west Texas towns. Considering boomtowns in both categories enables Wiencek to show in stark relief commonalities and differences between them.

*Oil Cities* begins not in northwest Louisiana but in the southeast portion of the state, where oil was discovered in 1901 near the small town of Jennings soon after the well that ushered in petroleum’s modern age blew out at Spindletop, near Beaumont, Texas. An established center of rice production, Jennings had a robust municipal government and civic organizations, both of which secured public order. As the ensuing chapters show, this was not the case in Oil City.

At the same time, the area around Jennings did not escape the oil well fires and explosions experienced later in the northwest corner of the state. Wiencek illustrates the ecological damage caused by petroleum extraction with discussion of a pamphlet produced by a local oil company, “The Jennings Gusher Fire,” which reported on a fire at one of its wells that burned for six days. Wiencek selected a photograph of smoke billowing from the well for the cover of his book, which demonstrates dramatically that the violence to the environment inflicted by this industrial activity reflected actual conditions. In this set piece, Wiencek closely links petroleum extraction with environmental catastrophe, foreshadowing his discussion in chapter 6 of the creation of similar “hellscape”s in and around the boomtowns of northwest Louisiana.

In chapters 2 through 6, Wiencek establishes the reality of the “anarchic hell hole” of popular culture through thick descriptions of actual conditions in Oil City. Chapters 2 and 3 indirectly answer questions posed in *Oil Booms* (Wiencek does not cite the work): “Who were the people who came to oil boomtowns? Where did they come from and why did they move on?... How did housing and public services meet their needs? What part did women and members of racial and ethnic minority groups play in the boomtown? Were boomtowns really as lawless as their stereotype paints them?”[3] Chapters 4 and 5 demonstrate that much of the violence that contributed to the creation of northwest Louisiana as a “turbulent, bloody place” was not the stereotypical frontier variety depicted in popular culture but rather racial discrimination, intimidation, and physical attacks perpetrated by whites against black landowners and workers. Chapter 6 surveys the widespread and appalling degradation of Caddo Parish’s environment caused by countless oil well fires and explosions, pipeline leaks, releases of crude oil from open earthen pits, and discharges of saltwater produced by drilling. As an industrial activity, petroleum extraction damaged both built and natural environments. In elaborating actual conditions, Wiencek demonstrates the reality on which the stereotype offered in *Oil Booms* was based. Further, he establishes that the oil boomtown of the nineteenth century examined by Black was replicated in the twentieth century. He concludes that Oil City was an economic, political, and social creation of government officials, oil
company managers, and others who believed that subsurface crude oil reserves would soon be exhausted and that therefore the people who worked to extract them constituted a transient population.

Wiencek’s description of Oil City’s built environment and social fabric might have been lifted from the pages of any one of the works of Boyce House, a newspaper columnist who “best illustrate[s] the mud and blood school of popular writing on oil booms,” according to Olien and Olien.[4] Oil City sprung up amid the derricks of the Caddo oil patch; its labor force was composed mostly of single white males who had been agricultural workers in the South but included individuals from as far away as Europe and South America. The many women who arrived in Oil City mainly worked in the sex trade, which flourished because of the captive demand for its services and the indifference of officers of the law. Oil field workers were housed mostly in tents pitched next to drilling sites. Brothels and saloons too were constructed “as close to the wells as possible” (p. 31). A commercial district of “hastily built shacks” that burned to the ground in whole or in part on many occasions was constructed and reconstructed along “mud-laden” Land Avenue (p. 22). Tellingly, Oil City had no paved roads.

Oil City’s “sea of largely male workers fed a rowdy social atmosphere of drinking and violence” that aligned with “the notorious oil boomtowns” of popular imagination (p. 17). But conditions in Oil City were not the inevitable or “natural” outcomes of oil booms. The privately built environment reflected assessments of investors and proprietors that the community was “little more than a temporary investment to make money while the oil flowed” (p. 24). Oil City generally lacked government institutions, perhaps most crucially a fire department. There was a police presence, but officers were “apathetic at best and corrupted at worst” (p. 28). The city was governed by the parish police jury, the equivalent of a county board of supervisors, seated in Shreveport.

In sum, boomtown conditions in Oil City were “the direct and intentional product of civic disinvestment, apathetic public officials, and ineffective ... law enforcement” (pp. 25-26).

Oil City was not the only boomtown in the Caddo oil patch. With the inclusion of Mooringsport and Trees City in *Oil Cities*, Wiencek complicates our understanding of the “classic boomtown.” White men who brought their families with them established Mooringsport as a reaction to Oil City, not only its public disorder and pollution but also its racially mixed population. (Black men, most of whom had toiled as sharecroppers, were present but marginalized in oil field work; black women were well represented in the Oil City sex trade.) In the interest of recruiting and maintaining a sober and therefore more productive workforce, independent oil operators Michael Benedum and Joseph Trees planned, designed, and constructed the company town of Trees City, replete with brick residences, paved streets, and services normally supplied by municipal government. Like Oil City, Mooringsport and Trees City were products of social engineering. The divergent paths taken by the three boomtowns, Wiencek argues, demonstrate that we should not expect conditions in a “classic boomtown” to “inevitably mirror the rough conditions of the oil field” (p. 33).

Unbridled industrial oil activity inflicted “staggering” damage to Caddo Parish’s landscape (p. 17). Those who lived in the oil patch experienced “an eternally red night sky [from uncontrolled fires], massive pools of oil or saltwater next door, and all the sounds and smells that accompanied nearly twenty-four-hour production” (p. 117). Wiencek found no evidence that Caddo Parish officials recognized the unfolding environmental disaster, much less showed an impetus to respond to it. Rather, their agenda invariably focused on Shreveport’s infrastructure, public health, and educational needs.
As Oil City endured environmental catastrophe, public disorder, and social squalor, Shreveport thrived. In fact, in *Oil Cities*, Shreveport stands apart from the boomtowns in its hinterlands as “the city” and not as a boomtown in its own right. And the relationship between “city” and “boomtown” was anything but benign.

In Wiencek’s telling, Shreveport enjoyed the benefits of the early twentieth-century boom in northwest Louisiana not as the result of “market” or “natural” forces but because of its parasitical relationship to Mooringsport, Oil City, and Trees City. Caddo Parish deployed the taxes generated by crude oil production in public works and civic projects, such as the monumental Caddo Parish Courthouse, even as it starved the boomtowns mired in the oil patch of public resources. As a bedroom community for the “winners” of petroleum extraction, including independent operators and major oil company managers, lawyers and other white-collar professionals, commercial proprietors, and landowners with bank accounts filled with royalty income, Shreveport also collected property taxes on the assessed value of their residences. It used these public funds to construct substantial municipal buildings that stood in stark contrast to the makeshift wooden structures of Oil City. Further, Shreveport was home to financial firms that swindled naive investors far and near of their savings. Perhaps most egregiously, it also served as the base of operations for white attorneys who committed legal violence against black landowners who stood to gain handsomely from leasing the mineral rights of their agricultural lands and who necessarily relied on a court system stacked against them for representation. *Oil Cities* makes a valuable contribution to the history of oil boomtowns by contrasting Shreveport with the boomtowns in its hinterlands and, in so doing, provides a framework for future research.

In Wiencek’s typology, Shreveport does not meet the definition of a “boomtown” (even though its population almost quintupled, to 76,655, between 1900 and 1930). Indeed, the already moderately prosperous city did not so much as boom as pivot from its position as a distribution and processing node for agriculture and lumber. To be sure, Wiencek offers evidence of boomtown conditions, in particular when he describes the underserved and segregated black districts in the lowlands adjacent to the river and the bustling, but strictly regulated, red-light district that operated therein until it was shut down in 1917. In describing the city’s largely white, upscale residential neighborhoods of elegant homes on tree-lined, paved, and gas-lighted boulevards, which domiciled the “winners” of the boom, Wiencek presents Shreveport above all as an orderly and prosperous place, to drive home the disparities between it and Oil City in particular.

*Oil Cities* breaks new ground historiographically but could have done more to anchor its findings in the literature on both regional oil development generally and twentieth-century oil boomtowns in particular. Wiencek often cites *Petrolia*, which serves as a touchstone for his multifaceted examination of actual conditions in Mooringsport, Oil City, and Trees City, but he misses an opportunity to compare and contrast the experiences of these communities with contemporary boomtowns. For instance, like Oil City, two of the Permian Basin towns examined in *Oil Booms*— McCamey and Wink—were established with the discovery of an oil field and declined, but continued to exist, after the boom. Further, an elaboration of the similarities and differences between Shreveport, on the one hand, and Midland and Odessa, on the other, would have shed additional light on this type of oil boomtown.[5] Drawing on *Petrolia* and the boomtown of popular imagination for his boomtown template also appears to inform Wiencek’s conception of Shreveport as “the city,” and not a boomtown. Further, when he discusses regional oil developments, such as the discovery of the Spindletop, East Texas, and Yates fields in Texas, and state regulatory regimes, Wiencek invariably cites Daniel Yergin, *The Prize:*. 
To be sure, *The Prize* does provide basic information that sets the context generally for oil development in northwest Louisiana. But in the three decades since Yergin's magisterial tome won the Pulitzer Prize for Nonfiction, scholars have advanced our knowledge and understanding of these topics significantly.[6] Engaging with the more recent literature on regional oil development and twentieth-century oil boomtowns would have driven home even further the significance of the findings in *Oil Cities*.

Notes


