

PETROLEUM DRILLERS, ROUGHNECKS AND ROUSTABOUTS: OIL WORK IN CENTRAL CALIFORNIA

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INTRODUCTION

Oil field work has been part of the San Luis Obispo County, Santa Barbara County and Ventura County, (tri-counties) California's economy since the late 1800s. Petroleum labor in California throughout the twentieth century has been influenced by three primary trends: unionization, proliferation of technology, and regulations. Beginning with the turn of the century, large and small firms converged on the state to extract oil. During this early period oil field workers became political forces, demanding union recognition, the eight-hour workday, and better pay. From 1950 to 1968, automation of the oil field extraction process shrank the labor force and eroded union power. During 1969 to 1986 there was a barrage of environmental and employment diversity legislation's (i.e., affirmative action), which altered the occupational culture practices and demographics of a traditionally white, male dominated work force. Finally, beginning around 1987, the tri-counties' major oil firms began pulling their operations out, leaving oil workers to choose between a limited number of employment opportunities overseas, to work for the smaller companies who acquired the larger companies' onshore and offshore investments, or to find work in other local industries like the biotechnology firms. The story of the tri-county oil worker is one of an occupational culture that resonates with the past, but at the same time has been forced to change due to government regulations, automation of work processes, and corporate flight to other regions in the world.

METHODS

My analytical approach entails the use of multiple data points. To begin with I conducted thirty in depth interviews with a variety of current and former oil platform workers from the tri-county region. Second, I utilized archival data that included government documentation, historical oral interviews with former oil employee, official correspondences with government agencies, press releases and corporate promotional pieces. Third, I conducted local newspaper article searches that made reference to oil production and workers in the tri-counties. Fourth, I utilized the World Wide Web to

look at tri-county oil company web pages to find current policies on worker diversity and affirmative action programs that companies have instituted.

Interviews were obtained by utilizing a "snowball" sample. This method involved building an initial list of names of oil workers from media sources, company prospectuses, and informal contacts. Each interviewee was asked, "do you know any other oil workers that we can speak with?" always pressing for diversity, including female and minority respondents. I used this sampling technique for several methodological reasons: first, it was important to track how oil field work has changed throughout history making it important to contact women workers. Given their relatively small representation in oil work, it was more likely to contact them through a snowball sampling than if I used a random sampling strategy. Second, gaining interview access to oil workers depends on worker trust, which is more easily gained through personal referral. Finally, a snowball sample allows access to both current and former workers.

In addition to the interviews, I utilized archival materials and media representations of oil platform work to inform my research. Archival materials included government documentation in particular health and safety regulations (California Occupational Health Safety codes (CalOSHA)), affirmative action programs (Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC)); union literature on participation and representation, and corporate documents including official correspondences with government agencies, press releases, and promotional pieces.

Finally, I searched the local media for articles and references to offshore oil work. Two papers in particular were systematically analyzed for their press coverage. The Santa Barbara Newspress and the Ventura County Star each provided long term coverage of an area intimate with on and offshore oil production and business (see Molotch et al. 1996). In addition, the Los Angeles Times was utilized to look at global trends of the petroleum market that is currently affecting oil employment in the tri-counties. By tracking public representations of oil work, I gained access to both the public perceptions of such activity, an historical

account of oil work in the tri-counties, and insights into how oil work was and is structured.

Early Twentieth Century

Unionization

The popularity of the automobile in the early 1900s, the United States' involvement in World War I, and the demand for petroleum products stimulated oil exploration and production in California (Williams 1997). Large and small firms from other parts of the U.S. converged on the state to extract oil. In doing so these new companies looked for and hired savvy laborers who were knowledgeable about the illusive California geology. Their geological expertise and willingness to improvise on standard drilling techniques to handle the state's warped geology distinguished the California workers from oil workers elsewhere in North America. While California crude sprang to the surface, oil well workers were becoming an effective political force in central California and the tri-counties. Through unionization they changed the organization and compensation of oil employment. First, they struggled for and won better working conditions by requesting that companies implement safety standards; second, the twelve-hour-work-day was changed to an eight-hour day; and third, workers gained higher wages that were consistent (in other words, the wages did not fluctuate with the market price per barrel); and fourth, they won a higher wage. These situations created a work environment that was unprecedented compared to oil production work in other states. The California workers embodied a distinctive "working man's" culture that was exclusively white, male, and resistant to outsiders throughout the majority of the twentieth century.

1950 to 1968

Technological Advancements Undermine Collective Bargaining

The 1950s brought technological advancement that undermined the collective power of labor. As previously stated, workers during the early part of the century had expertise and knowledge about California geology that was relied upon by managers. This relationship began to deteriorate in the late 1930s when oil firms began hiring formally schooled engineers to create more efficient drilling processes, machines, and tools to extract oil. Computers and state-of-the-art automation promised efficiency that surpassed oil field worker ingenuity and reliability. Ideas and new products were manufactured by engineering firms that specialized in design and construction of fabricated offshore oil rigs and state-of-the-art drilling machinery that could tap oil reserves previously deemed impossible to reach.

1969 to 1986

Government Regulations Change Work Processes and Oil Field Culture

Oil producers during this era were confronted with a barrage of local, state, and federal governmental regulations. These regulations required many tri-county companies to decrease their industrial pollution, encourage diversity in the predominantly white male work force, and regulate workers' health and safety while on the job. Many of these regulatory changes were met with resistance from oil firms and their workers. The continued adherence to traditional ways of doing business led to sexual harassment suits and governmental pollution fines that were levied against individual workers and/or the company. Even though California industry was the center of public scrutiny and environmental regulation, this trend was intensified in the tri-counties by the 1969 Santa Barbara Channel oil spill (for more information on community reaction to the spill, see Molotch et al. 1996). This increased public attention has influenced the way oil work is accomplished in the tri-counties. Furthermore, this public scrutiny has altered the way some individual workers view their relationship to the environment, which has long term implications for petroleum production in the region.

1987 to 1997

Downsizing

During this period, many large firms sold their tri-county operations and began leaving the area. Major companies, such as Unocal, Mobil, Arco and Chevron began selling their leases and equipment to smaller companies like Torch/Nuevo and Tosco. The majors moved their operations out of the tri-counties in order to take advantage of cheaper labor, lower environmental standards, and the rich, untapped oil deposits of South America, Southeast Asia and the former Soviet Republics (Kraul 1998; Risen 1998). Employment opportunities in the tri-county oil industry during the 1990s were low and non-existent. Some tri-county workers began requesting domestic and overseas transfers. Other workers rationalized that domestic jobs were not available and began looking for jobs outside of the oil industry. Still others maintained their jobs but became insecure about their futures.

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