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Texas, the Tulsa Race Massacre, and White-Supremacist Energies: Petroleum Workers and Anti-Black Violence in the Mid-Continent Oilfields

Résumé

Abstract: This article examines the early twentieth-century oil workforce in the Mid-Continent petroleum region of the United States, focusing on the centrality of white supremacy within the oil industry. White oil workers and the communities where they predominated frequently perpetrated acts of racial violence and numerous racial pogroms broke out in cities and towns where oil was produced. These expressions of white supremacy were responses to the particular social relations engendered by the industry's boom-and-bust cycles, a backlash against labor radicalism, and a means through which oil workers expressed white masculinity. The article reframes the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre as the most explosive instance of this kind of oil-based racial violence.¹

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1 Many of the sources I use throughout this piece come from a series of oral histories done with oil workers and their families in Texas in the 1950s. A number of the interviewees used racist language in their reminiscences. Given the nature of this article, I feel it's important to present those utterances largely intact. With that said, I have chosen to write the N-word as "n***er." My hope is that this preserves the substance of the language used by the historical actors who are central to this article while not inadvertently perpetuating the racial hatred that those historical actors displayed. I also want to inform readers that the article covers particular instances of racial violence that may be distressing to read about.

INTRODUCTION

1 H.P. Nichols learned to embrace racial violence when he was a child. Nichols grew up in Austin, Texas in the 1890s, where among other pastimes he and his friends organized a neighborhood baseball team. One day, Nichols and his white teammates attempted to expel a group of Black children from an Austin field so the white boys could play baseball. In Nichols' words, he and his white friends believed that they were "entitled to the best baseball diamond in town." However, when Nichols and his friends descended upon the group of Black ballplayers, the latter fought back, forcing their white attackers to retreat. Nichols returned to his home with two black eyes and a bloodied nose and mouth courtesy of a schoolboy whom Nichols only knew as "Dynamite." H.P.'s father noticed his son's battered state and whisked him to the family barn, demanding to know what had happened. After hearing his son's explanation, Nichols' father took H.P. to the Black section of Austin. "In very terse language, I was told to get out and beat the hell out of Dynamite," Nichols recalled, sarcastically adding "that [Nichols' father] would see to it the others of the colored gentry did not attack from the rear." As his father approvingly watched on, the young Nichols surprised "Dynamite" and punched him in the face, knocking him to the ground, where a brief fight commenced. When the fracas had dissipated, Nichols and his father returned to their section of Austin with their white masculinities seemingly restored.¹

2 A few years after the above encounter, H.P. Nichols, now a young man, began a career as an oilfield worker. He experienced the early days of the Texas oil industry, traveling from boomtown to boomtown in search of work as a driller. In 1904, Nichols was in Beaumont, where just three years earlier the first major oil boom in Texas history had occurred atop a series of petroleum-rich salt domes known as Spindletop. While Nichols was working in Beaumont a murder

of a white man occurred, and the accused culprit was Black. The suspect had disappeared in the days following the killing, but not long after, as Nichols happened to be walking through downtown, the accused man reappeared. Nichols recalled that someone quickly recognized the man and yelled, "There is that damn n***er killer," and that almost immediately, "some eight or ten six shooters were blasting holes in the quiet air" as numerous civilians attempted to shoot the suspect.² Within a matter of seconds, a white man armed with a rifle shot the fleeing Black man in the back, killing him. Nichols was not shocked. He quipped that before the shooting, "I never realized that so many men carried young cannons concealed about their person." Otherwise, in his view the Black man's killing was just another instance of boomtown justice.

This article focuses on the white men such as H.P. Nichols who predominated in the Mid-Continent oil industry of the United States in the early twentieth century. It is concerned with how these oilmen framed the search for and production of petroleum around certain notions of white masculinity in ways that made instances of racial violence such as those described above appear as legitimate acts of justice to individuals such as Nichols. The dreams of oil-based prosperity among white people in the Mid-Continent not only reinforced preexisting racial hierarchies in the realms of labor markets, land-ownership, and proprietorship; petroleum booms also helped unleash heightened fears about the possibilities of Black wealth amid white poverty and influxes of nonwhite "outsiders" into newly minted oil regions. In oral-history accounts from white oil workers, petroleum-industry journals, and boomtown newspapers, outbreaks of racial violence in and around the oilfields of Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas, and Arkansas frequently appear alongside explanations of the everyday white supremacy that situated Black men in and around oil towns as potential threats to white prosperity. These ideas permeated white oilfield working culture and rendered extralegal violence

¹ H.P. Nichols, *Texas Oil Industry Reminiscence*, "Introduction," H.P. Nichols Collection, box 2.325/J81, Briscoe Center for American History, University of Texas, Austin (forthwith Nichols, *Texas Oil Industry Reminiscence*).

² Nichols, *Texas Oil Industry Reminiscence*, "Wild Shooting at Beaumont."

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carried out by white men against Black people as unexceptional in the eyes of most whites. I argue that a combination of these racist pathologies combined with deteriorating employment conditions among oil workers precipitated the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre.

- 4 The casualness with which Nichols and many of his contemporaries recalled such instances of extralegal racial violence in autobiographies and oral histories highlights the extent to which white supremacy and the “cheapness” of Black people’s lives were common-sense notions among many white Americans at the time. Consider a story from another white oil worker named Walter Cline. Cline worked for an oilman named Walter Sharp who tasked Cline with traveling to a prospective Texas oilfield to lease land. Cline had never done this before and asked Sharp if he should let the other lease men and potential lessors in the area know that he was leasing land on behalf of Sharp. “Oh,” Sharp said, “Let everyone know you’re in town. Don’t ever forget that. Let people know you’re there.” And then he quipped, “If you can’t do anything else, kill a Negro. I’ll get you out of it and they’ll know you’re in town after that.”³ Often masqueraded as humor, oilmen from executives to workers frequently spoke of the disposability of the non-white peoples they encountered through their work. This was indicative of the larger role played by race and racism in the social worlds that emerged within and around the oil industry in the early twentieth-century Mid-Continent.⁴

³ “Walter Cline interview”, box 3K20, tape 46, Oral History of the Texas Oil Industry Collection, Briscoe Center for American History, Austin, TX (forthwith OHTOI), 8. This and subsequent citations from this collection refer to typewritten transcripts of audio interviews, hence the inclusion of page numbers.

⁴ For secondary sources on the social worlds of Mid-Continent oilfields, see Touraj Atabaki, Elisabetta Bini and Kaveh Ehsani (eds.), *Working for Oil: Comparative Social Histories of Labor in the Global Oil Industry* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Mody C. Boatwright, *Folklore of the Oil Industry* (Dallas: Southern Methodist University Press, 1963); Darren Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil: How Christianity and Crude Made Modern America* (New York: Basic Books, 2019); Kenny A. Franks, *The Oklahoma Petroleum Industry* (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Heritage

Oil work and racial violence acted as theaters for the performance of a certain vision of white masculinity. Oilfield labor was violent work done almost exclusively by men, and for many oilfield workers, their physical prowess both on and off the jobsite was an integral part of their masculine identities. Furthermore, in the Mid-Continent fields, most oilfield work was reserved for white men. In particular, lucrative work on drilling crews was strictly withheld from Black workers, but teamster work (haulers of oilfield supplies), ditch-digging jobs on pipeline crews, and lower-paid, “unskilled” work could be available to Black workers. At times, oil companies even preferred Black workers for these jobs. Thus, there existed a gray area in terms of the racial distribution of job access in oilfields, and as we’ll see, in many cases white workers violently rejected the presence of Black workers on any jobsite. It was in these instances of racial violence that two central venues of white-masculine display—oilfield labor and anti-Black racism—collided.⁵ The particular

Association, 1980); Paul F. Lambert and Kenny A. Franks (eds.), *Voices from the Oilfields* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1984); Judith Walker Linsley, Ellen Walker Rienstra and Jo Ann Stiles, *Giant under the Hill: A History of the Spindletop Oil Discovery in Beaumont, Texas, 1901* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2002); Wallace Scot McFarlane, “Oil on the Farm: The East Texas Oil Boom and the Origins of an Energy Economy”, *Journal of Southern History*, vol. 83, n° 4, 2017, 853-88; Roger M. Olien and Diana Davids Olien, *Oil Booms: Social Change in Five Texas Towns* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982); Bobby D. Weaver, *Oilfield Trash: Life and Labor in the Oil Patch* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2010).

⁵ This article mainly focuses on white perspectives of racial violence. For a fuller set of perspectives on the connections between race and oil in the Mid-Continent, see Mark Boxell, “From Native Sovereignty to an Oilman’s State: Land, Race, and Petroleum in Indian Territory and Oklahoma,” *The Journal of the Gilded Age and Progressive Era*, vol. 20, n° 2, 2021, 216-33; Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil*, 110-14 (cf. note 5). This article focuses in particular upon anti-Black violence in Texas and Oklahoma, but amid the early oil booms there was also widespread violence and exploitation of Native Americans, including African-Indigenous people, particularly in Indian Territory/the State of Oklahoma. See Boxell, “From Native Sovereignty to an Oil Man’s State”; Angie Debo, *And Still the Waters Run: The Betrayal of the Five Civilized Tribes* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1940); David Grann, *Killers of the Flower Moon: The Osage Murders and*

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places where oil was found and produced mattered, as white oil workers frequently attempted to expel Black workers from these places. The historian Andreas Malm writes that fossil fuels such as oil and coal fit neatly into nationalist mindsets, including visions of white nationalism, because these energy “stocks” are bounded in place and easily defined in territorial terms, especially compared to solar, wind, or animal power. Racial violence in the Mid-Continent’s oilfields was representative of this notion. White men sought to exclude non-whites from the benefits of petroleum abundance in the specific places where oil companies drilled for crude, on the basis that the money and jobs that flowed through oil should exclusively belong to white people. Violently excluding Black workers from oilfield work was a means through which white communities claimed an exclusionary type of ownership of the Mid-Continent’s fossil-fuel stock.⁶

- 6 The first third of the body of the article focuses on acute instances of anti-Black violence in Texas oilfields between 1901 and the 1930s as well as examples of how white oilmen utilized encounters with Black people within the context of oilfield work to reinforce racist stereotypes. In short, white oil workers often viewed Black people and their labor as potential threats to white privilege. At the same time, white workers, managers, and executives cast Black residents of oilfields as the butt of jokes, derided for their supposed backwardness amid the modernizing forces unleashed by petroleum. While most instances of racial violence in the oilfields occurred spontaneously, formal white supremacist organizations also emerged in the Mid-Continent during the same period, most notably in the form of the Ku Klux Klan, whose members viewed oilfields as sites that demanded extralegal policing against nonwhite working-class people, against labor unrest, and

against the many vices that oil booms helped underwrite. Finally, in the final portion of this article I’ll focus on Tulsa, Oklahoma, which was the so-called “Oil Capital of the World” during the first three decades of the twentieth century. The city’s 1921 race massacre can in part be understood as the United States’ largest outburst of oilfield violence and the massacre—the most destructive instance of anti-Black violence in American history—was a product of racial cultures and social instabilities that the petroleum industry exacerbated across the Mid-Continent.

WHITE WORKERS, BLACK GOLD

7 New workers arriving at oilfields, long-time residents of new petroleum regions, and oil companies all articulated and policed racial difference through a number of avenues. Some of these methods were quotidian and seemingly created ad hoc, such as the slang terms that oilfield workers and their families used on the job and at home. Other efforts wore the guise of economic and industrial efficiency, such as the establishment of all-white company towns. Still others stood out as deliberately violent, taking the form of organized vigilante action that was explicitly white supremacist in nature. The various forms of race-making and race-policing that marked the Mid-Continent oilfields grew out of not only the Jim Crow culture that flourished in the region. It also grew out of a longstanding regime of company-ordered industrial discipline, from the ethnic and religious fears that many white Protestants felt towards non-Protestant immigrants, and from an insistence among white workers that the relatively high-paid jobs that were a feature of the petroleum industry be reserved for white men. If, for those who benefited from it, oil appeared especially suited to the labor and the progressive desires of white Americans when compared to other extractive industries, this was all the more reason to preserve white supremacy within the industry’s labor regime and among the communities where oil flowed.

the Birth of the FBI (New York: Doubleday, 2017); Donald Fixico, *The Invasion of Indian Country in the Twentieth Century: American Capitalism and Tribal Natural Resources*. (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2012 [1998]).

⁶ Andreas Malm, *White Skin, Black Fuel: On the Danger of Fossil Fascism* (London: Verso Books, 2021), 274–77.

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- 8 Racial violence was endemic to the Mid-Continent's first oilfields. Largescale oil discoveries in the early twentieth century at Spindletop in Beaumont (1901), Sour Lake (1903), and Goose Creek (1903), all located along or near the Gulf Coast of Texas, inaugurated petroleum's rise in the Lone Star State. Segregation in these early Texas oilfields reflected the racist hiring practices of the sawmill industry, which had dominated the region before the Spindletop boom. Employers banned Black workers from working on drilling rigs and made it especially difficult for Black laborers to become drillers, a job that required extensive training and was thus labeled "skilled labor." Hardeman Roberts, a white man who worked in these early Texas oilfields, recalled very few labor disputes in the first years of the industry's presence, but the conflicts he did remember centered on attempts by large producers such as Gulf Oil to employ Black workers on drilling rigs. White workers "didn't allow that," Roberts stated. "[White workers] allowed the n**ers to drive teams and all that, but we did not work on the drilling rigs with them." Roberts explained that, in his eyes, it was fine for Black individuals to purchase and operate their own drilling rigs but employing Black oilfield workers alongside white labor was not acceptable. Simply put, "The boys wouldn't stand for it. They wouldn't accept those n**ers."⁷
- 9 Definitions of worker skill in the oilfields both helped constitute and were constitutive of racial hierarchy. Low-paying jobs that were considered "undesirable" by white workers and their employers—such as digging ditches for pipelines, excavating earthen storage tanks, hauling equipment, and driving cattle through mud to churn up slush pits—remained open to Black workers. This division of labor, which was rhetorically based on "skill" but was, in reality, often rooted in race, served to reinforce hierarchy on the jobsite. When this hierarchy appeared under threat, white oil workers rebelled, and efforts by white workers to preserve a segregated workforce showed how the industry's high wages became intertwined with racial animus. In 1902, white oil workers in Beaumont raided the city's Black neighborhood, known to whites as "South Africa," due to the presence of Black workers who were employed by tank-building firms on a jobsite that white workers believed should be reserved for them. A shootout commenced, with one white man wounded as a result. Entire towns in the Spindletop area, such as Saratoga, were segregated during the oil boom, and black residents were told not to be caught in white parts of Beaumont after dark. In the Big Thicket fields in southeast Texas, white workers physically drove Black construction workers from the area, based on the belief that the wages Black men labored for were too low. Bill Bryant, a white foreman for an oil company in the Sour Lake field, witnessed the aftermath of an armed attack carried out by an unknown assailant against a tent full of Black pipeline workers. At least two men were wounded in the incident and Bryant found six of the Black workers hiding under a mattress following the shooting. Bryant helped ensure that the wounded men made it to a nearby hospital, but by the next day all of the Black workers, about forty in total, had abandoned the jobsite. The laborers felt threatened enough that they did not even bother to take their belongings with them.⁸
- There were many white people who bristled at these vigilante attacks against Black workers, but their anger was derived from the violation of property rights that oil companies suffered when whites attacked the temporarily hired Black laborers, not because of any deep concern for the Black victims. In addition to a career as an oilfield worker, Bill Bryant also worked as deputy sheriff in Hardin County, Texas where the Saratoga oilfield boomed in the years following

⁷ "Hardeman Roberts interview", box 3K23, tape 180 II, OHTOI, 7,33.

⁸ Geoff Mann, *Our Daily Bread: Wages, Workers, and the Political Economy of the American West* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 1-12, 81-85; Linsley et al., *Giant under the Hill*, 168-73 (cf. note 5); Steven A. Reich, "The Making of a Southern Sawmill World: Race, Class, and Rural Transformation in the Piney Woods of East Texas, 1830-1930" (PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1998, 198-202); "W.H. (Bill) Bryant interview", box 3K19, tape 28, OHTOI.

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the Spindletop discovery. Bryant made it clear that he would protect Black people from racist whites *if* those Black individuals were employed by oil companies and only when those Black workers were in the act of laboring for said oil companies. When a group of angry white workers forcibly removed a crew of Black teamsters from a Gulf Oil Corporation worksite, Bryant responded in the following manner:

Well, I know all of those boys over there, and I went over and I worked it out with them, told them, I says, “Now, these n**ers is driving those teams for the Gulf, who are on their payroll; and now, if any of you boys wants a job driving a team, we’ll give you a job, and we’ll put your wagons on if you want work. Now, if you don’t, you let the n**ers alone, as long as they are on the wagon. But if they get on the sidewalk, and you can’t whip ‘em, you call for me and I’ll help you.” We didn’t have any more trouble. They just went along and strung the line; they just needed someone to get ‘em straightened out—they was good guys; they was just a bunch of them who wanted to whip some n**ers, but they didn’t have no right to run them off the teams cause that line had to go through.⁹

11 The details of Bryant’s encounter with the white men who had “run off” the Gulf’s Black teamsters is telling. In Bryant’s eyes, the white teamsters were only wrong in so much as they were directly preventing Gulf Oil from constructing a vital piece of petroleum infrastructure. Bryant scolded the white men in deference to capital, not because they were guilty of extralegal racial violence, and communicated his belief that white attacks against Black men were justified in other contexts.

12 At other times, conflicts between oil companies, their Black employees, and angry local whites devolved into shootouts between private citizens. Like Bill Bryant, Landon Cullum also worked for Gulf Oil, including overseeing the construction of a tank farm near Lufkin, Texas in 1913. When Cullum hired an experienced group

of Black teamsters to construct the tank farm, white men in the area protested, stating, “You’ve got to get these Negroes out of here. We’re not going to let them stay here. We don’t allow a Negro in this country.”¹⁰ Gulf agreed to comply with the demand, telling Cullum to work something out with the white teamsters in the area in order to avoid further trouble. However, after a few days employing an inexperienced all-white work crew, progress on the tank farm was lagging and Cullum called his superiors in Beaumont to demand that the experienced Black workers be rehired. When the Black workers returned, local whites again gathered to protest, telling Cullum and his colleagues that if they did not remove the Black workers, the whites were “going to run them out of here with guns.”¹¹ Cullum and the rest of the Gulf crews refused to comply with this demand for several days, when an armed group of whites began roaming the woods at the edges of the tank farm. At this point, the Black workers grew noticeably terrified and Cullum’s bosses in Beaumont were wary of keeping the crew in the area.

That night, Cullum, along with a handful of his white partners and three Black teamsters, armed themselves and waited for an attack. At midnight, amid a driving rainstorm, the shooting started. The local white men who sought to “run off” the Black workers fired into the workers’ tents from the cover of a patch of corn. Cullum and the rest of the men in Gulf’s employ bolted for a nearby ditch, where they returned fire. The shootout continued until around 3:00 AM. Homer and another of the white Gulf employees suffered superficial wounds. When Cullum and the others emerged in the morning, the rest of the Black teamsters who had stayed the night in the camp “were all huddled up there, and they were scared to death.”¹² When the Gulf workers investigated the patch of corn where the local whites had been firing from, they discovered a dead white man, and another who had been wounded. At this point, they called their

¹⁰ “Landon Haynes Cullum interview”, box 3K23, tape 198, OHTOI, 7.

¹¹ Ibid., 9.

¹² Ibid., 12.

⁹ “W.H. (Bill) Bryant interview”, box 3K19, tape 27, OHTOI.

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bosses in Beaumont, who called the local sheriff to ensure that Cullum and his colleagues would be held in protective custody, presumably to protect against a lynching attempt. The next day representatives from Gulf arrived in Lufkin to ensure that its employees were freed and announced that it would only hire all-white crews in the area going forward.¹³ The tank-farm shootout illustrated the lengths to which some white workers were willing to go to expel what they saw as unjust entities—in this case, Gulf Oil and its Black teamsters—that both economically and racially emasculated white men. It also highlighted the amount of danger with which oil companies were willing to burden their temporary Black workers in the pursuit of streamlined construction projects.

14 White oil workers not only encountered Black employees of oil companies on the job, but also frequently traversed and labored upon land where Black tenants and landowners resided. Burt Hull worked in the pipeline division of the Texas Company (better known today as Texaco) leading surveys of prospective pipeline routes and construction crews that laid the lines. In the early twentieth century, survey and line-laying crews traveled hundreds of miles by foot, roaming through woods, farmlands, and wetlands in all conditions for weeks at a time, often relying on tenants and landowners whom they encountered for both labor and a place to set camp. One night during a line-laying excursion, Hull and his crew arrived at a homestead near Conroe, Texas. Finding no one at home, the pipeliners requisitioned washtubs they found on the property in order to take baths, rounded up the farm's cows to gather milk, and helped themselves to a few chickens and eggs. This wasn't uncommon for work crews who arrived on empty properties, and crew leaders such as Hull were expected to pay the landowner for the spent supplies as well as for the right to lay the pipeline. However common this practice was, a Black man turned out to be the tenant on the land and owned the animals that the Texas Company crew had commandeered, and the man was angry

when he first encountered the oil workers later that night. Hull avoided a bigger confrontation by offering the tenant the opportunity to work on the pipeline crew, a common deal that the tenants and sharecroppers that pipeline crews encountered often accepted. Hull hired the man to help clear timber and brush from the heavily wooded areas that the pipeline crew was working in. The tenant ended up taking a permanent position on the pipeline crew. Hull noted that he was the only permanent Black employee he ever hired.¹⁴

Burt Hull's encounter with the Black tenant farmer 15 points to how the work that was central to the operations of the petroleum industry was shaped by the racial geographies of the early twentieth-century Mid-Continent. There were considerable populations of Black tenant farmers and modest landowners who made a living in numerous pockets of rural Texas and Indian Territory/Oklahoma. The onset of an oil boom brought white oil workers and their lucrative employers into these corners of the region, exposing Black oilfield residents to a volatile mix of opportunities and threats. H.P. Nichols was one oil worker who chronicled the fraught dynamic between oil companies and rural Black people and who chose to utilize his encounters as a means of reinforcing an already well-developed set of racial prejudices. By the early 1930s, Nichols had progressed from drilling to working as a "lease man" in the East Texas field, acquiring leasing rights from landowners on behalf of oil producers. This work involved perfecting titles to pieces of land, which could involve interviewing family members and neighbors in an attempt to establish rightful owners and heirs. In a sense, Nichols and others like him were biographers of oilfield families and chroniclers of the history of landownership in and around oilfields, a task that brought lease men into intimate contact with numerous Black families in the East Texas countryside.

The anecdotal encounters that Nichols chose 16 to highlight from such experiences reinforced his notions of Black people's backwardness and

¹³ Ibid., 10–12.

¹⁴ "Burt E. Hull interview", box 3K22, tape 129, OHTOI, 11.

inferiority. What Nichols and many oil workers seemed to most revel in were encounters with rural folk whose poverty they reacted to with a mixture of revulsion and racist and/or classist humor. For instance, Nichols felt it necessary to record how repulsed he was by the smell of rural Black homes where he held summertime meetings with landowners. And he was especially appalled at encountering Black women who had children out of wedlock. In both cases, he suggested that dirtiness and sexual impropriety were behaviors unique to Black people. Nichols and other chroniclers of oilfield labor enjoyed juxtaposing their industry, which many oilmen boasted was the most modern in the world, with the meager living conditions of the rural peoples who resided where most oil was produced. If these oilfield residents were non-white, then all the more noteworthy the contrast between progress and poverty and all the more exaggerated his revulsion.¹⁵

17 At the same time, Nichols and others admitted that, within the context of an oil boom, the relationships between Black lessors of land and local whites often resulted in the latter dispossessing the former. As Nichols wrote, “Negro land owners of East Texas were imposed upon and the imposition was generally due to misplaced confidence in white merchants, or questionable white friends upon whom they relied for guidance.”¹⁶ Nichols recalled an older Black man who owned nearly 200 acres “but did not know the difference in the value of a one- and ten-dollar bill” and could not read or write his name. A “white merchant friend” had taken charge of obtaining oil leases on behalf of the Black landowner, with the landowner receiving less than \$200 in bonuses and royalties when all was said and done. Clint Wood, who also leased land for oil companies in the East Texas field, remembered a wealthy white landowner named Malcolm Crim who managed the leases of neighboring Black landowners. Wood recalled that whenever lease men would arrive in Crim’s

area, he’d tell prospective Black lessors, “Now, you don’t lease this land till you first see me. I’ll make the trade for you.” Wood claimed that all of the Black people living near Crim “trusted him, because they knew that he’d protect ‘em.” He recalled that at least one of these Black landowners or tenants grew wealthy from the leases that Crim negotiated on his behalf. Even so, this sort of race-based paternalism echoed the histories of slavery and rural tenancy and offered an easy way for enterprising whites to siphon royalties from Black lessors.¹⁷

RACE, OILFIELD CULTURE, AND ORGANIZED WHITE SUPREMACY

The language that oil workers adopted and the myths that spread from field to field in the industry’s early years reflected the whiteness of the workforce. White oil workers used racial slurs to modify terms for common pieces of oilfield equipment and to caricature types of people one might encounter during a boom, reinforcing the dehumanization of people of color through an exclusionary workplace vernacular. On its own, the term *n***er* was a common word for an improvised lever used on the job. A *n***er boy* was an automatic firing control on a boiler, a *n***er head* a steam conductor on top of a boiler or a post used as leverage for a winch line, and *n***er wool* a substance used as packing to shut off water in a borehole, named for its resemblance to kinky hair. The term *n***er rich* described anyone who made enough money during a boom to participate in high-stakes gambling. Beyond a shared workplace vernacular, oil workers also forged bonds between each other while living uprooted, highly mobile lives through the telling and retelling of myths, which often intertwined ideas about labor, masculinity, and race. One story representative of the genre came from Gib Morgan, a driller who grew famous among oilfield workers as a storyteller and folklorist. Gib relayed a tall tale from his time working as a foreman on a ditch-digging gang that labored on a pipeline project. The ditch diggers were all Black men,

¹⁵ Nichols, *Texas Oil Industry Reminiscence*, “Liars and Bastards,” 2-4.

¹⁶ Nichols, *Texas Oil Industry Reminiscence*, “East Texas,” 1-2.

¹⁷ “Clint Wood interview”, box 3K20, tape 59, OHTOI.

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one of whom proved recalcitrant to Morgan's orders. As the story went, the two men eventually began to brawl, rolling into a river where they battled beneath the water, whittling each other with knives. The mythical interracial fracas drew an imaginary crowd that numbered in the thousands. Gathering workers and spectators bet tens of thousands of dollars on the fight:

The only way the spectators had of knowing how the battle was going was by watching for the pieces of flesh that came to the surface of the water. When there were more pieces of white-skinned flesh than black-skinned flesh coming up, the odds were in favor of the black man. When there were more pieces of black-skinned flesh than white-skinned flesh coming up, the odds were in favor of Gib.

19 After two weeks of underwater fighting, Gib and the Black worker surfaced to sharpen their knives. However, both men were so hungry that each ate a beefsteak four inches thick and, satisfied by the meal, agreed to a truce. While whimsical and fashioned to draw laughs, Morgan's tale was rooted in the racial hierarchy of oil work. The fight started when the anonymous Black worker, laboring in the "unskilled" job of ditch digging, defied Morgan, the white boss. The story also exhibited the shared manhood of all oil workers, which in this case proved capable of transcending racial difference, at least for the duration of a meal. However, this does not disprove the fact that white people defended white manhood and womanhood against racial "amalgamation" with purpose and vigor amid the oil booms. Formal organizations that were explicitly white supremacist often saw to this.¹⁸

20 One of these organizations was the Ku Klux Klan, which was prevalent throughout the Mid-Continent region from World War I until

the mid-1920s. The organization carried out numerous terrorist actions against Black people, non-Anglo whites, immigrant workers, and white people who violated certain social and cultural expectations. Klansmen and other white supremacists in the Mid-Continent often identified petroleum fields as centers of racial, sexual, ethno-national, and class-based threats to white, native-born hegemony. The Klan was active throughout the region's oilfields between World War I and the mid-1920s as oil towns and other mining areas proved ripe territory for migrant laborers, union activities, and the perception among middle-class whites of rampant crime and vice. One historian of the Cushing field suggests that in the boomtown of Quay, upwards of fifty percent of the 5,000 residents were members of the Klan.¹⁹ A Klan member from Muskogee, Oklahoma complained to his congressman that the surrounding oil towns were filled with "no counts" who harassed women and girls and made a mockery of middle-class, white values. He stated that the presence of the Klan "certainly was born of great necessity in this oil country," and that following threats of violence by Klansmen the "town is almost a Sunday-school class."²⁰ The Klan's presence in the oilfields reflected the anxieties that white residents felt towards the great influx of working-class outsiders that oil booms attracted as well as the possibility and, at times, the reality of non-white landowners growing wealthy through royalties from oil production.

Klan rhetoric at the time especially exalted the "home" as a sacred place to be protected from "alien" influences. A preacher and Klansman from Texas wrote in 1926, "The Klan prizes the home above all institutions and stands for its defense, the purity of womanhood, the sanctity of the marriage vows and the development of character. No true Klansman will ever wreck a home,

¹⁸ Lalia Phipps Boone, *The Petroleum Dictionary* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1952), 186, 207; Gib Morgan story from Lawrence P. Klintworth, *Oil Hill: The Town That Cities Service Built* (El Dorado, KS: Butler County Historical Society, 1977), 39-45, Cities Service Collection, Western History Collections, University of Oklahoma (Cities Service forthwith), box 30, folder 9.

¹⁹ George O. Carney, *Cushing Oilfield: Historic Preservation Survey* (Stillwater: Department of Geography, Oklahoma State University, 1981), 13.

²⁰ U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Rules, KKK, 67th Congress, 1st session, 1921, 6, cited in Carter Blue Clark, "A History of the Ku Klux Klan" (PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 1976), 59.

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despoil womanhood, break his solemn marriage vow or desecrate such a holy union.” The chorus of one Klan song sung at meetings during the 1920s went, “Home, home, country and home / Klansmen we’ll live and die / For our country and home.”²¹ Given the obsession with the preservation of stable, racially homogenous homes, oil boomtowns especially vexed Klansmen and middle-class whites in general. Boomtowns not only attracted men and women of color and immigrants from outside of the United States, but also unwed working-class women, who, in the eyes of many of the men and women of the Klan, represented the ultimate danger to the maintenance of stable, nuclear families. “Home” as the Klan defined it was nearly impossible to establish in a boomtown, in both its abstract, social and cultural form as well as in a physical state. Many oilfield workers migrated to and from booms with their families; however, the political economies of boomtowns often forced families to construct improvised housing from discarded carbide cans, empty oil barrels, and whatever other scraps of wood and metal could be salvaged. The lucky ones erected canvas tents and dealt with the ensuing infestations of dust, rats, and mosquitoes.

22 Rents were exorbitant in boomtowns, especially for family dwellings. In many places, boarding houses rented a single bed to two of three workers who slept in staggered shifts and bars leased pool tables and chairs to drowsy boomers overnight. Such conditions often made it impossible for families to stick together in the oilfields.²² Workers understood what this meant in terms of the racial and class perceptions of those around them. Charlie Storms, an animated

rig builder, detested his inability to keep a home in one place, lamenting how “[a] man rents a house here like I done, buys his furniture and *begins trying to live like most white folks do*, and he’ll have to pull up and follow the oil. Either that, or leave his family there and go hisself [sic] and maybe not see ‘em for months at a time.”²³ Storms’ anger over struggling, as a working man, to “live like most white folks do” animated how race, class, and gender combined in the oilfields, creating impossible expectations of working-class migrants that, in turn, encouraged white-supremacist policing of social standards.

Oil workers enjoyed a semblance of freedom 23 that most other extractive laborers in the United States did not. The only exception was in the small number of company towns that sprang up around particular oilfields. One of these was a town called Oil Hill, established by the Cities Service Company (known today as Citgo) in southern Kansas’ El Dorado oilfield. Cities Service practiced a brand of heavy-handed paternalism over workers and their families in Oil Hill, which precluded the vigilante violence that was prevalent in other oilfields. However, this did not mean that the Klan was not present throughout Butler County, where the El Dorado field was located. A Klan chapter was founded in the city of El Dorado in 1918 and reported a membership of four thousand. One unnamed resident recalled that, at times, “white-robed figures seemed be everywhere,” burning crosses on a hill west of Oil Hill at night. The Klan’s ideologies on race, ethnicity, and class were echoed by white citizens in the area. One long-time resident of Oil Hill, a doctor who had treated injured workers and their families, proudly proclaimed that “the population of Oil Hill is one-hundred percent American.” Every employee of the Empire company (a Cities Service subsidiary) was white and “none speak a foreign language and all are native born Americans.” The doctor insisted that little to no class animosity existed in the racially uniform company town and that the highest official and lowest wage earner lived side-by-side

²¹ Walter C. Wright, *Religious and Patriotic Ideals of the Ku Klux Klan* (Waco, TX: Grove Printing Company, 1926), 38, Carter Blue Clark Collection, box 1, folder 6, Western History Collections (forthwith “CBC”); *Kloran: Knights of the Ku Klux Klan* (Atlanta: Knights of the Ku Klux Klan), 13, CBC, box 1, folder 5; for the intersections of race and gender and the Second Ku Klux Klan, see Nancy MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1994).

²² Roger M. Olien and Diana Davids Olien, *Life in the Oilfields* (Austin: Texas Monthly Press, 1986), 28–31, 65–67, 98–99.

²³ Lambert and Franks, *Voices from the Oilfields*, 37, emphasis added (cf. note 5).

in houses of the same size and design. These white-supremacist gestures were further echoed in Cities Service's hygienic programs, which included educating young women on "the fundamentals of eugenics." These sentiments pointed to the desirability of company towns from the perspective of oilmen. Companies marshaled racial homogeneity in service of mitigating class animosities and instilling discipline in workers.²⁴

THE BOOMTOWN POGROM: THE 1921 TULSA RACE MASSACRE AS OILFIELD VIOLENCE

24 Beginning on the night of May 31, 1921, and lasting through the morning of June 1, thousands of armed white civilians, assisted by local police and members of the Oklahoma National Guard, invaded Tulsa's Black neighborhood, Greenwood, which was known to many Black Americans for its thriving business district, Black Wall Street. Pitched gun fights between white men and Black men, many veterans of World War I, broke out and when all was said and done, the white mob had killed anywhere from 150 to 300 Black people and had burned hundreds of structures to the ground—people's homes, churches schools, businesses. At the immediate level, the massacre was precipitated by the unsubstantiated allegation that a young Black shoeshine named Dick Rowland had assaulted a white teenage elevator operator named Sarah Page. On the evening of May 31, a white mob gathered at the Tulsa County Courthouse where police held Rowland in custody and demanded that the police hand over Rowland so he could be lynched. As this would-be lynching party grew, dozens of armed Black men arrived on the scene and declared their intention to defend the courthouse. A confrontation between one of these Black men and a member of the white mob led to a gunshot, at which point the deadliest spree of collective anti-Black violence in American history commenced. During the overnight hours and the morning of June 1 thousands of white people descended on Greenwood, killing hundreds of

Black Tulsans and burning thousands of buildings to the ground.²⁵

25 The origins of the Tulsa Race Massacre can be framed in a number of ways. Certainly, what precipitated the attack on Greenwood was far bigger than the assault Dick Rowland was accused of. The massacre occurred within a brief period between the end of World War I and the mid-1920s in which dozens of "race riots" broke out in every region of the United States, fueled by white people's anger and resentment towards new urban populations of Blacks and the refusal of Black veterans of the war to acquiesce to racist whites. However, Tulsa was distinctive from most of the cities where this violence occurred in that it was a relatively young city, a boomtown known as the "Oil Capital of the World," with a population that had grown due to petroleum's rise in the region from just over 1,000 people in 1900 to 70,000 people by 1921. While the record of who exactly participated in the race massacre is unclear and incomplete, the central role apparently played by white oil workers in the riot and the precipitating sparks set off by the larger forces of the oil economy in and around Tulsa suggest that the 1921 race massacre was not only the most destructive example of racial violence in American history, but also the most heinous bout of petroleum-fueled racial violence in the history of the Mid-Continent's oilfields and oil cities.

26 White Tulsans' attraction to extralegal political violence was on display in the years before 1921, and this vigilantism was closely tied to oil. In October of 1917, unknown assailants bombed the Tulsa home of the prominent Pennsylvania oilman, J. Edgar Pew, who headed the Carter Oil Company and whose family had founded the large independent Sun Oil Company (Sunoco). While no one was harmed in the bombing, Tulsa's business class and its defenders wasted no time in declaring war on the suspected perpetrators. Immediately, the *Tulsa Daily World* began a media

²⁴ Klintworth, *Oil Hill*, 63–64, 72 (cf. note 19); *The Empire*, vol. 1, n° 21, 10 October 1918), Cities Service, box 30, folder 10.

²⁵ For the most recent narrative of the Tulsa Race Massacre, see Scott Ellsworth, *The Ground Breaking: An American City and Its Search for Justice* (New York: Dutton, 2021), 17–39.

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campaign alleging that the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) were responsible and that the bombing of the Pew home was part of a larger plot to attack Mid-Continent oilmen and their assets. An editorial in the paper stated, “If the IWW...gets busy in your neighborhood, kindly take occasion to decrease the supply of hemp... The first step in the whipping of Germany is to strangle the IWWs. Kill ‘em just as you would kill any other kind of snake.” The same editorial stated that “The unrestricted production of petroleum is as necessary to the winning of the war as the unrestricted production of gunpowder” and that anyone who tried to reduce the supply of oil “for one-hundredth of a second is a traitor and ought to be shot!”²⁶

27 The anti-union furor grew to a fever pitch within days of the bombing. Seventeen members of the IWW who were arrested for the crime by Tulsa authorities were turned over by the police to a hooded vigilante group known as the Knights of Liberty. In the dead of night, with newspaper reporters in tow, the Knights drove the alleged perpetrators to a ravine on the outskirts of Tulsa where they whipped, tarred, and feathered each alleged Wobbly and ordered them to never return to the city, lest they suffer a worse fate. The incident was still celebrated by white Tulsans in the runup to the Greenwood pogrom. On May 29, 1921, just two days before the massacre commenced, the *Daily World* published an article that touted Tulsa as “civilized and refined” and bragged that the city was a place “where IWW’s anarchists are tarred and feathered whenever they become obstreperous.”²⁷ There is no doubt that the extralegal violence that white Tulsans exercised during World War I was spearheaded by the city’s white business elite, many of whom were oilmen. The Tulsa Chamber of Commerce acted as the city’s branch of the Councils of Defense during the war. The chamber reported

on seditious activity and antiwar sentiment and encouraged the extralegal policing of those deemed radical threats to businesses amid the war effort. The city’s white business owners were likely even more virulently anti-radical than most during the war, given the allies’ dependence upon Mid-Continent oil and Tulsa’s role as a major financier and staging ground for the production of petroleum.²⁸

White Tulsans tapped into this legacy of extra- 28
legal, anti-labor violence in the oil-soaked city during the 1921 massacre. In the immediate aftermath of Greenwood’s destruction, the *Oil and Gas Journal* (the petroleum industry’s leading publication whose headquarters were located in downtown Tulsa, mere blocks from the county courthouse where the massacre began) suggested that the armed Black men who had offered to defend Dick Rowland had been radicalized by the IWW. “Black malcontents have listened to the chatter of IWW disturbers,” the journal’s editors claimed, “and some white people have been convinced that negro ascendency here should be checked.”²⁹ Thomas James Sharp, the corporate secretary for the Garfield Petroleum Company in Enid, Oklahoma echoed these sentiments. In a letter to his family written in the weeks following the massacre, Sharp used over a dozen anti-Black slurs in the span of a paragraph, linking what he saw as the aggression of Black Tulsans to the radical politics of groups such as the IWW. “[Black people] are certainly the most treacherous, thieving, lying dirty lot that ever drew breath,” Sharp wrote, “and I would be in favor of moving them all to Russia with their first cousin Big Bill Haywood (a founder of and organizer in the IWW).” For oilmen, groups such as the IWW may have appeared to be a threat due to the possibility of a racially inclusive uprising of oilfield workers, but the little information gathered on the white rioters who were killed in the course of the massacre

²⁶ *Tulsa Daily World*, 9 November 1917, 3-4, cited in Scott Ellsworth, *Death in a Promised Land: The Tulsa Race Riot of 1921* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 29, 124; Clark, “A History of the Ku Klux Klan in Oklahoma,” 25 (cf. note 21).

²⁷ Quoted in Alfred L. Brophy, “Tate Brady, the Magic City, and the Dreamland,” *This Land*, September 2011.

²⁸ Lee Roy Chapman, “The Nightmare of Dreamland,” *This Land*, September 2011; Dochuk, *Anointed with Oil*, 184-93 (cf. note 5).

²⁹ “Exploiting Racial Hatred,” *Oil and Gas Journal*, vol. 20, n° 2, 10 June 1921, 2, 11.. Url: https://archive.org/details/sim_oil-gas-journal_1921-06-10_20_2/ (accessed 17/11/2021).

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suggests that oilfield workers were some of the main protagonists of violence in Tulsa. The same edition of the *Oil and Gas Journal* listed the names of two oil workers killed in the massacre. Arthur Janes was a 31-year-old driller from West Virginia who had been working in the Wynona oilfield, located northwest of Tulsa in the Osage Nation. He was shot and killed the night of May 31. G.W. Daggs, only 26-years-old, was reportedly the first casualty of the massacre. According to the journal, Daggs “happened to be in the vicinity of the Tulsa County courthouse when negroes began shooting.” The journal’s assumption that Daggs had simply been an innocent bystander and that Black Tulsans had perpetrated the first outbreak of violence played into a larger narrative of white innocence that was prevalent following Greenwood’s destruction.³⁰

29 Contradictory to this common obfuscation of who was responsible for the attack, it’s likely that white oilfield workers played a significant role as rioters. Among the twelve white men who were confirmed to have died during the massacre (all of gunshot wounds) and whose occupations were known, three were simply labeled “oilfield workers,” one was a machinist, one was a boilermaker, and one was the officer manager of a Tulsa oil company. Thus, wholly half of the dead whites whose occupations were known were or likely were petroleum workers. Of the twelve confirmed dead among whites, only two had been born in Oklahoma and only four were buried in Oklahoma. Of the ten for whom marital status was known, all but one was single, divorced, or estranged from his wife. These were all common characteristics of transient oilfield workers, many of whom traveled tens of thousands of miles over the course of their careers from boom to boom. There is also indication that individuals who had access to an oil-company aircraft attempted to purchase nitroglycerine from an oilfield-supply business with the

intention of bombing Greenwood from the air. As the *Oil and Gas Journal* reported:

Percy Barton, of the Central Torpedo Company, recently turned down an offer for emergency nitroglycerine. During the late race war here he was called up by telephone by men who desired to buy a considerable quantity of the explosive compound, to be dropped from an airplane over the embattled negro section of the city. The men who sought the nitroglycerine were intensely enthusiastic over the proposition of adding some window-breaking shocks to the excitement. They desired also to increase the casualty lists of the occasion. Mr. Barton positively declined to sell any of his nitroglycerine, regardless of inducements offered.³¹

Oil producers had long used nitroglycerine torpedoes to “shoot” oil wells, dropping the explosives into wellbores in order to blow up rock formations and induce greater flows of crude. Whoever attempted to purchase the nitroglycerine was almost assuredly an oil-company employee well-versed in the use of the substance as an explosive on drilling sites. This report from the industry journal—which would have maintained few if any connections with Tulsa’s Black community—corroborates the claims made by survivors of the massacre that they were bombed and/or shot at by aircraft during the course of the attack on Greenwood.³²

At the same time that the journal denounced some aspects of the massacre, it celebrated the role that local oilmen and oil workers played in establishing martial law in the immediate aftermath of Greenwood’s destruction. P.J. Hurley, vice president of the Gilliland Oil Company, Horace Bernard of the McMan Oil Company, and a handful of handpicked colleagues headed an

³⁰ Thomas James Sharp, letter, 28 June 1921, *Tulsa Historical Society*, 2021.170.001. Url: <https://www.tulsa-history.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/2021.170.001.pdf> (accessed 15/04/2022); “Exploiting Racial Hatred”, 10 June 1921, 2, 11

³¹ *Oil and Gas Journal*, vol. 20, n° 3, 17 June 1921, 4. Url: https://archive.org/details/sim_oil-gas-journal_1921-06-17_20_3/ (accessed 17/11/2021).

³² “Tulsa Race Riot: A Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot”, 2001, 116, 119; For more information on the accusations that Greenwood residents were bombed/shot at from the air, see *Tulsa Race Riot: A Report*, 103-07.

armed contingent deputized by the Tulsa County Sheriff to “make short work of any racial uprising that may be attempted in Tulsa city or county.”³³ The city had deputized hundreds of white men and boys on the night of May 31 when the violence first began, essentially authorizing white civilians to shoot and kill Black Tulsans without fear of legal recourse. Thus, the journal was proud of the oil industry’s central role in continuing this practice following the massacre.

32 As it was understood at the time, the pogrom in Tulsa was sparked by white resentment towards Black wealth, which correlated with the violent reactions that white workers commonly displayed when Black workers obtained oilfield work.³⁴ But the violence exhibited by white oil workers likely was not only fueled by these larger resentments, but also by the instabilities of the petroleum economy, which forced many white oil workers into lives marred by constant precarity. Flush production on Indigenous allotments in the Osage Nation, located north of Tulsa, and imports from Mexico led to subsequent collapses in oil prices in the lead up to the race massacre. The *Oil and Gas Journal* reported on the effect of falling prices on oil workers in the issue immediately preceding the massacre. Many had been turned out of work and “forced into idleness.” The editors suggested that any prolonged period of unemployment should be alleviated by the companies “to help their men through the lean days so that possible privations may be averted.”³⁵ In the journal’s first issue following the race massacre, the destruction of Greenwood (which again, happened mere blocks from the journal’s offices) was not the first event mentioned. Instead, the editors opened with an article lamenting the conditions of overproduction that gripped the

Mid-Continent’s fields at the time: “Oil operators in Oklahoma and Kansas pools where big wells may be expected are doing nothing to keep up the prices of crude. They continue, week after week, to complete wells...regardless of the effect the new production may have on the business generally.” These conditions put many smaller firms temporarily out of business, with the effect that “Many thousands of men have been thrown out of employment.”³⁶ The precarities that collapses in oil prices created only exacerbated the volatile mix of racism and aggrieved masculinity that ultimately sparked the race massacre.

CONCLUSION

In the Mid-Continent, petroleum undergirded 33 manifestations of racism and racial violence. Anti-Black racism was by no means confined to the oil industry, and it would be disingenuous to claim that white oil workers were inherently more racist than other whites. However, the Mid-Continent’s oilfields were in many ways distinct spaces characterized by social and cultural factors that made them ripe for white-supremacist violence: the volatility of the oil industry and of oilfield employment; the often violent masculine cultures that sprang up around oilfield labor; the outsized hopes and dreams that many whites placed in the possibility of striking it rich through “black gold;” and the grievances that these same peoples often felt when non-whites obtained some slice of petroleum’s windfalls all contributed to a larger environment of racial animosity that bore not only crude, but violence as well.

The flows of workers and money that the oil 34 industry funneled into particular corners of the Mid-Continent exacerbated preexisting racial animosities held by white residents while simultaneously reconfiguring racial geographies across the region. As we saw at the beginning of this article, the desires of white oilmen to produce and move oil as cheaply as possible often compelled them to bring Black workers

³³ *Oil and Gas Journal*, vol. 20, n° 3, 17 June 1921, 4 (cf. note 32).

³⁴ *Tulsa Race Riot: A Report*, 43-48 (cf. note 33).

³⁵ *Oil and Gas Journal*, vol. 20, n° 1, 3 June 1921, 3. Url: https://archive.org/details/sim_oil-gas-journal_1921-06-03_20_1/ (accessed 17/11/2021). Although this issue was published on June 3, two days after the Tulsa massacre, there was no mention of the massacre until the June 10 issue of the journal.

³⁶ *Oil and Gas Journal* vol. 20, n° 2, 10 June 1921, 1-2. Url: https://archive.org/details/sim_oil-gas-journal_1921-06-10_20_2/ (accessed 17/11/2021) (cf. note 30).

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into segregated communities, an imposition that many white men found intolerable. At the same time, oil's geologic fixedness made white people desirous of Black-owned land and brought white oil workers and managers into contact with Black communities in new ways. In a few instances, petroleum offered the opportunity for paternalistic oilmen to build racially homogenous model communities, but more often than not, oil

remade already existing cities and towns, such as Tulsa, in chaotic and unpredictable ways. In these boomtowns, the threat of violence was often the medium through which whites curbed the possibility that oil abundance might unleash new racial relationships, whether in the realms of labor, landownership, or proprietorship. In this sense, oil, race, and violence were always intertwined in the Mid-Continent.

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