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Oil Boomtowns

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Oil Boomtowns

Butler and Greenwood Counties were both organized in 1855. But they would have to wait more than a half century to realize the promise of illustrious place names like “El Dorado” and “Prospect Township.” When World War I raised the demand for oil, prices spiked and investors came calling on area farmers and ranchers, who quickly learned that oil was a “better crop than alfalfa.”

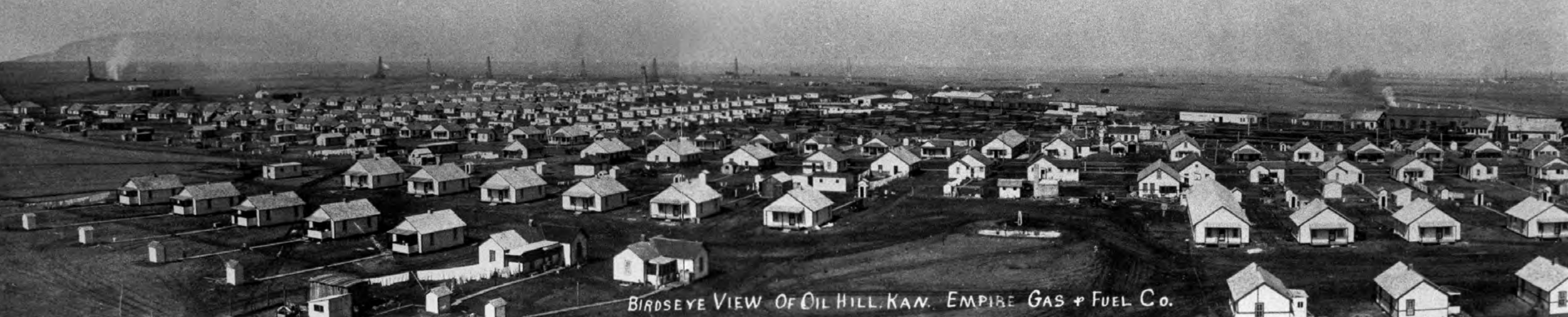
El Dorado, a town whose name can be translated as “the gilded one,” was the epicenter of the Kansas oil boom. In September 1915, the Wichita Natural Gas Company tapped the first well on the land of John Stapleton. Named Stapleton #1, it was revolutionary as the first oil well in the world located by scientific methods. This pioneering use of industrial geology set off a frenzy of speculation resulting in the largest oil-producing field in the world at the time. In 1918, the El Dorado Field produced nearly twenty-nine million barrels. By 1919, Butler County boasted 1,800 producing wells. As El Dorado scrambled to supply the new industry, its population

OPPOSITE:

1917

John Elliot Jenkins

All images courtesy Butler County History Center and Kansas Oil Museum



BIRDSEYE VIEW OF OIL HILL,
KANSAS, EMPIRE GAS & FUEL CO.
Courtesy Butler County History Center and Kansas Oil Museum

exploded, burgeoning from 3,000 to 20,000 between 1915 and 1920.

By the 1920s, Greenwood County had stolen the title of “Oil Capital of Kansas.” Wildcatters first struck oil there in July 1916, and the county produced seventy-two million barrels of oil between 1921 and 1929. Among the disparate characters who invested in Greenwood County’s fields were industrialist Jean Paul Getty and world heavyweight champion Jess “The Great White Hope” Willard. Both Eureka and El Dorado profited greatly from the oil boom; however, many of the larger investors further exploited the boom through the construction of self-sustaining

company towns. Among them were Oil Hill, Midian, and Haskin in Butler County; and Teterville, Thrall, Kenbro, Birkett, and Sallyards in Greenwood County. It seemed that each of these oil boomtowns—replete with the standard array of shotgun houses and general stores—sprang up from the Kansas prairie overnight. Oil Hill boasted tennis courts, a swimming pool, and even a golf course.

Flint Hills oil boomtowns bore a close physical resemblance to boomtowns from other regions and eras. But the culture of Flint Hills oil fields was unique. In comparison to the wild and woolly boomtowns of Oklahoma

and Texas, Butler County boomtowns were downright puritanical. And the Greenwood County ranchers were known for their courtesy, lending their equipment and time to the oilmen working on their land.

As the nation’s oil supplies increased, oil prices, which were as high as three dollars and fifty cents per barrel in 1915, plunged as low as sixty-six cents in 1933. With oil profits waning, many of the



EL DORADO, KANSAS—
OIL FIELD CIRCA 1917
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entrepreneurs who had made fortunes in the oil fields invested their profits in Wichita’s fledgling aircraft industry. Although shotgun houses can still be found in El Dorado and Eureka and oil rigs still dot the Kansas landscape, the oil boomtowns of the 1910s and 1920s have all but disappeared.

For more information see *Discovery!*
by Craig Miner

Christy Davis, Executive Director of Symphony in the Flint Hills, Inc. and a fifth-generation Kansan, has worked in the historic preservation field for much of her career. Two of her ancestors died in oil-field-related accidents, and her grandfather, Jack Swalley, was pulling oil wells with a team of horses while he was still in high school. She holds an M. A. in Public History from Wichita State University.