

Chapter Fourteen: A relatively Humble Standard

The title of this chapter plays with the meaning of the two capitalized names when one is used as an adjective and the other as a noun. Thus this chapter is about Standard Oil and Humble Oil and how in the years between 1943 and 1953 they created a norm for these projects which was tied into their overall management style and philosophy. In contrast to their philosophical approach as it has appeared to other writers and to this writer at other times, this was humble standard of operating procedure. To a great degree oil was trying to fit into America's energy coast (and yes was hoping to transform it -- but--) they saw and others saw the operation of the energy sector in the region as one important set of activities among many. They aspired to lead as has been stated before, but the leadership had a different flavor and texture than other times and places have sometimes been asked to consume. It was easier on the palate.

There is evidence of this in their dealings with Flaherty himself. Flaherty had known great triumphs and *Nanook* is still at least the equal of *Louisiana Story* by almost every measure. But he had known a variety of pressured manipulated projects where his work was compromised. Murnau had squeezed him out of directing their supposed collaboration, *Tabu*. The story one sees on screen was largely written by him and some of the locations and casting may be due to him as well as many other aspects of the film. But great as the film is in its own right it was Murnau's as a director and it is more accurate to give Flaherty half a dozen other credits on the film and not to list him as director. That was only his greatest and not his only disappointment in terms of feeling taken advantage of by those with whom he worked. Compared to much of his life's work this was a his widow Frances later asserted -- a princely commission. Princes are not often equated with humility but in fact the royalist ideal is of a gentler and more deft touch in rule than is typical of the tyrant or the dictator. Not to overstate the case this is a story about oil companies which behaved themselves. During the time and in the place which this text describes....

In Chapter Twelve it was remarked that Dudley Leblanc's thirty-fourth birthday party was an occasion for him to receive a kind of tribute from people from a variety of industries but not the petroleum industry. It is also true that we have discussed how the Broussard Brothers became a very successful firm and remains so today but its growth as a major named focus in the oil industry on the Attakapas Prairie has been a fairly slow process. The firm was located mostly in Chalmette at first and then has gradually assumed more prominence in the region. Only in recent years has it bought the prominent and fairly stately office building in a leafy neighborhood where it now holds sway. Chris Crusta Flying Services was operated by Danny Babin of the Gueydan area and by Chris Crusta of Abbeville. Both were pilots with distinguished military careers however, the firm which provided crop dusting services across the Parish for many years also helped to launch the business career of one of the leading figures in the oilfield in Vermilion Parish and the Prairies. Revis Sirmon was a French speaking native of the region

whose family farmed rice and who married a Cajun girl, name Lorraine Breaux, many of his closest friends were Cajuns. Yet Revis Sirmon was a distinctly non Cajun person with his own set of folklore and religious experiences shaping his life. His close relationship with the wealthy rice-milling Godchaux family was a relationship with a white Creole family. Possibly there both not being Cajun entirely formed a common part of their identity in the intensely Cajun region. Revis Sirmon flew fifty combat missions in Europe in World War II and loved to fly. However, after a few years of the risks of agricultural aviation and with two small children to worry about leaving orphaned he was ready to spend more time on the ground. He went into the oilfield fluids business called the mud business with the backing of Frank Godchaux III. Revis Sirmon's memoirs, *Eternal Pilot*, a book co-written with Joseph Chaillot do a good job of charting his life in Acadiana and the tensions between Cajun identity and residence in Acadiana. They also provide a useful glimpse of his rise in the local oilfield world and its ties to world commerce and it also is true that the book like so much else describes many people whom I knew well although it also leaves out a great deal and a great number of people whom I know were involved in the events described. But whatever angle one takes in viewing these things it is different than the take of a book like this one, the scholar has to bring something to the research as it is not the book's purpose to address any or all of these questions directly. Revis Sirmon was encouraged by the ethnically prominent Charles Broussard of the Flying J. Ranch to ask Edwin Edwards (who has always identified as Cajun) to appoint him to the Mineral Board, while in that position he raised the royalty payments made to the State for mineral leases. However, as an active commercial oilman he was disqualified from future service after seven fairly distinguished years on the board when new ethics rules defined his operations as a conflict of interest. He resigned rather than before the newly propounded rules would have formally disqualified him. My maternal grandfather was in business with Revis Sirmon in a company called Riptide Investors and in developing a port known as Freshwater City. However, almost all of this oilfield story is outside the scope of this book. Almost all but not quite all. It was in 1953, the very end of this period that the pilot known as the Scatterbrain Kid founded his mud company. This was just one more sign of the growing importance of the oilfield and related industries in the immediate region where Louisiana Story had been filmed.

Humble Oil and Standard Oil lend their names to the chapter and especially the capitalization of the words Humble and Standard in its title. They have since merged but at the time of the focus of this study from 1943 to 1953 they were both relatively autonomous and certainly legally independent corporations and each had a distinct and significant role that they played in the production of these photographic projects and the film *Louisiana Story*. The two companies had national and global connections and so forth but both came from distinct regions in the United States outside of Louisiana where they retained significant rootedness. It is not easy to minimize the importance of the oil industry and of Standard Oil of New Jersey and Humble Oil in the production of these projects more than has been done here without leaving aside a very significant part of the story indeed. The truth is that cramming what is left of the essential parts of that story into one chapter is not an entirely satisfying solution either. But it is the solution which is achievable in this case.

GAS RECYCLING PLANT IS ASKED IN ERATH FIELD

Preliminary plans for the erection of a gas recycling plant estimated to cost \$2,000,000 in the Erath oil field in Vermilion Parish though the unitization of approximately 3300 acres included in the productive area were discussed at a public hearing held here Monday by Conservation Commissioner Jos. L. McHugh and other members of the committee.

The notice which appears here set in perspective the money spent on Louisiana Story and on the larger photography project. Here there are two points and set of line from which to measure. One is to compare the cost of the film to what Flaherty had spent on other films and also to what Hollywood spent on a feature film. The other set of measures is that established by what the oil and gas industry were spending on other expenditures in the region. That will come back into this chapter and has already appeared in the comments made in Abbeville and Vermilion Parish which appeared in Chapter Eleven of this text. The same little article lends us more insight.

The public hearing was adjourned Tuesday afternoon and will open until the presentation of additional information, it was announced by E. L. Gladney, Jr., attorney for the commission. Other members of the commission attending the hearing were H. N. Bell, director of the minerals division; John J. Huner, state geologist; and Percy Irwin Chief Petroleum Engineer.

We see the importance the newspaper attributes to this commission in giving details of various kinds including names. We see that there is an attorney, a director, a geologist and a petroleum engineer. We also see that the Conservation Commission is a very well established and multifaceted bureaucracy. Additionally the lack of even one distinctly Cajun name or any of the phrases that might be used if the people involved had close ties to large numbers of readers. Such a thing is not entirely determinative of their identity and connections to the place but it does indicate such a level of connections or the lack thereof. This reminds us that the local readership were informed participants but did not necessarily have a shared identity with the oil industry.

The operators owning about 85 percent of the leases located within the productive limits of the Erath field and who are seeking the orders from the commission to unitize the field include the Phillips Petroleum Company, the Texas Company, The Humble Oil and Refining Company and the Tidewater Associated Oil Company.

"We believe that the Erath field constitutes one of the greatest and most valuable reserves of gas-distillate and gas-condensates now known to exist in the entire mid-continent area," declared Dan DeBaillon, Lafayette, attorney who represented the operators. "We can state frankly, with the firmest of convictions, that waste of a large percentage of these valuable resources is eminent, and inescapable, if this

field be either unoperated. Wisely planned development and intelligent operation of this field as a unit, as distinguished from development and operation on a wasteful basis, will result in the recoveries of millions of barrels of distillate and condensate not otherwise recoverable and at the same time, billions of "cubic feet "of gas can be saved by returning the gas to the productive formations. This returned gas, by, helping to maintain the reservoir pressure, will itself greatly increase the ultimate recoveries of distillate and condensate and also will itself, as gas, have a value in dollars and cents estimated in terms of millions of dollars. ¹

Here we see that Humble Oil which would interact closely with Standard Oil in pursuing the making of Louisiana Story was accustomed to interaction with other oil companies in unitization hearings, in other interactions with the Conservation Committee and in a variety of other circumstances. While they had a special relationship with Standard Oil the industry itself was to some degree a cohesive community which could pursue its community interests in ways not so dissimilar from the way that the Cajuns and the documentarians also formed communities capable of pursuing community interests.

The article goes on at some length and its detail in some places is at least some real and fairly compelling evidence that the readers of the *Meridional* had a fairly sophisticated understanding of the oil industry at the start of the SONJ projects. It also shows the Vermilion Parish definitively had relationships with Humble Oil.

The oil industry was remaking the realities of the life in Acadiana during the years between 1943 and 1953. One of the purposes of this chapter will be to understand through the lens of the work done on Louisiana Story and the rest of the SONJ projects how the oil industry operates and what its culture was as regard interacting with the people, local culture and the environment of Acadiana. Without going into great detail we will seek to understand as well to what degree the portrayal of the oil interests is a valid one -- mostly in the film but also briefly revisiting their portrayal in the photographic projects. There are various levels of distrust for that portrayal which are possible and in this study we will at least be honest about what level of mistrust is at the foundation of our study. This is a book largely about perception and understanding. Here we take a further step back and ask ourselves how we ought to perceive both the role of the oil company and industry that funded these projects and the way that historians, scholars in general and others have perceived those involvements up to now.

One real factor to remember in the midst of documenting and analyzing these projects and the people and places that they chose to document is that Standard Oil was footing the bill. The relationship between Humble Oil and Standard oil was a complicated one and a complete understanding of that relationship is beyond the scope of this text. However one of the

¹ Saturday June 10, 1942 *Abbeville Meridional* front page above the fold

objectives of this chapter will be to create a basic framework of understanding for that relationship in its most basic configuration without much appreciation for the nuances and complexities of the full reality even where those different and varied complexities may have shaped and impacted the experiences of the production and organization of the SONJ photography project and the Flaherty unit that created *Louisiana Story*.

I was honored to sit with Mr. Sirmon for a year (2008) and gather his stories, organize them, and ghost write this book for him (as acknowledged in the Introduction). I will be glad to answer any questions I can about it ... Joseph Chaillot (josephchaillot@gmail.com)

At this writing there are over 125 years of ExxonMobil history and one can fairly trace the evolution of the company to many stories including that of Humble Oil as well as that of Mobil. But the main story is surely still that of Standard Oil which has evolved and developed from a New Jersey based and largely regional distributor and marketer of kerosene in the U.S. to the iconic symbol of an industry which is only overshadowed by state firms in a few countries and is the largest publicly traded petroleum and petrochemical joint stock corporation in the world. The company in 1943 and in 1953 was closer to today's firm than to its origins. The biggest difference is perhaps hidden behind a similarity is that while ESSO and EssoMarine were prominent brands that had the kind of currency still true of the company's dealings with the larger world today as today they operate in most of the world's countries and are readily identified familiar brand names: Exxon, Esso and Mobil. There was another name that really mattered in those days and was essential to the life of the firm and which is not so important today.

That name was Rockefeller.

Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge, located in eastern Cameron and western Vermilion Parishes, is owned and maintained by the State of Louisiana. When deeded to the state the refuge encompassed approximately 86,000 acres, but beach erosion has taken a heavy toll, and the most recent surveys indicate only 76,042 acres remaining. This area borders the Gulf of Mexico for 26.5 miles and extends inland toward the Grand Chenier ridge, a stranded beach ridge, six miles from the Gulf.

When the Rockefeller Foundation officially granted the property to the state, they spelled out in the Deed of Donation exactly how the property was to be used. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service makes periodic inspections of refuge activities and

has reversionary rights over the refuge if the state fails to meet its obligations pertaining to the Deed of Donation, as amended.

The major terms of the original agreement stipulated 1) the property must be maintained as a wildlife refuge, 2) boundaries must be posted, 3) enforcement agents must protect the area from trespassers and poachers, 4) no public taking of fish or animals is allowed, 5) refuge staff must study and manage the property for wildlife, and 6) mineral revenues must be used on the refuge first (surplus may go toward education or public health). In 1983 the Deed of Donation was amended with a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) between the Department of the Interior and the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. The MOA allows for regulated sport fishing and commercial trapping when compatible with the primary purpose of the refuge as a wildlife sanctuary. The MOA also allows surplus revenues to be used for land acquisition for wildlife management purposes. A 1987 MOA between the same two agencies ceased yielding surplus revenues for education or public health.

Planners had the foresight to realize that mineral revenues would cease at some point in time, and steps were taken to ensure that the refuge would be financially capable of operation and maintenance indefinitely. Act 321 of the 1972 legislature created the Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge Trust and Protection Fund (Trust Fund). One fourth of funds derived from royalties, rentals, or otherwise from Rockefeller mineral leases were to be deposited in the Trust Fund until a principal of \$5 million was reached. Act 342 in 1978 raised the Trust Fund goal to \$10 million. Act 807 in 1980 increased the Trust Fund goal to \$20 million, and also established the Rockefeller Scholarship Fund for Louisiana wildlife students from 5% of interest from the Trust Fund. Act 63 of 1982 raised the Trust Fund goal to \$30 million, and Act 707 of 1989 reduced additions to the Trust Fund from 25% to 5% of mineral revenues. Senate Bill 662 of 1989 established an annual donation of \$150,000 to the Fur and Alligator Advisory Council, and Act 832 of 1995 raised the Trust Fund cap to \$50 million.

Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge is one of the most biologically diverse wildlife areas in the nation. Located at the terminus of the vast Mississippi Flyway, south Louisiana winters about 4 million waterfowl annually. Historically, Rockefeller wintered as many as 400,000-plus waterfowl annually, but severe declines in the continental duck population due to drought and poor habitat quality on the breeding grounds have altered Louisiana's wintering population. More recent surveys indicate a wintering waterfowl population on Rockefeller Wildlife Refuge reaching 160,000. In addition to ducks, geese, and coots, numerous shorebirds and wading birds either migrate through or overwinter in Louisiana's coastal marshes. Neotropical migrant passerines also use the shrubs and trees on levees and other "upland" areas of the refuge as a rest stop on their trans-Gulf

journeys to and from Central and South America. Although Canada geese no longer migrate to the refuge from breeding areas in the north as they once did, a resident flock of giant Canada geese was established in the early 1960s.

Common resident animals include mottled ducks, nutria, muskrat, rails, raccoon, mink, otter, opossum, white-tailed deer, and alligators. An abundant fisheries population provides recreational opportunities to fishermen seeking shrimp, redfish, speckled trout, black drum, and largemouth bass, among others. No hunting is allowed on the refuge, but some regulated trapping is allowed for furbearers that could potentially damage the marsh if their populations are not controlled.

The refuge is a flat, treeless area with highly organic soils which are capable of producing immense quantities of waterfowl foods in the form of annual emergents and submerged aquatics. Since 1954 Rockefeller Refuge has been a test site for various marsh management strategies, including levees, weirs, and several types of water control structures utilized to enhance marsh health and waterfowl food production.

The style of this text has been a bit less orthodox and strict in adhering to the manner in which some other standards of text have been put together by competent people seeking to establish a norm. Standard Oil was becoming a leading company in offshore exploration and was involved with others in that field and in deep drilling. But there world's largest refinery in Baton Rouge was leading the way to providing the petrochemical building blocks that would lead to thousands of consumer goods. An would usher in many of the most unique qualities of the emerging era an era of the very start of a process which would distinguish previous worldwide international commerce from what is called globalization. Standard Oil itself was a mature and venerable institution. In the 2007 film *There Will Be Blood* American and international viewers were reminded, if they had not already known, that the oil industry has been around for a while. This film was loosely based on the 1926 novel *OIL!* By Upton Sinclair. That novel dealt with many of the issues explored by people involved in these events -- and yet it is a profoundly different story. But regional texture, capitalism, a rough and dangerous industry, powerful personalities and socialism are all themes common both to this book and its subjects. Sinclair's novel and its subjects. Standard Oil may not concern but in the have been the name of the even today the company aware of its heritage Rockefeller dominated era and Abbeville based history that became Exxon was well the Attakapas was written of going back to the same year the among these people that by a French historian living of the Vigilante Committees of year was 1859 when the remembered exploring entrepreneurs



Colonel Edwin Drake and Uncle Billy Smith drilled the first successful oil well in Titusville, Pennsylvania. The colonel's discovery triggered an oil boom that in many ways resembled the gold rush of a decade earlier. The internal combustion engine was a long way into the future, as the icon of oil consumption. However it was also in 1859 that Jean Joseph Étienne Lenoir created the first commercially successful internal combustion engine. As the oil industry prepared to lead its way in creating this region's future few felt it was in any way a fledgling enterprise.



Lionel Leblanc and Robert Flaherty's parent's generation were in some cases unborn, were in diapers or in the case of a few late to procreate were when in 1870 Rockefeller and his associates formed the Standard Oil Company (Ohio), with combined facilities constituting the largest refining capacity of any single firm in the world at that time and seemingly exceeding any comparable entity consisting of consortia or government entities. In America 79 years is a fairly long time compared to most other continents. The idea that they were leading America to a new future does not mean that they were themselves perceived as new. The name Standard is chosen to signify high, uniform quality and the name Rockefeller was iconic as a symbol of wealth and prestige. It would be foolish and would distort the story to pretend that Flaherty, Stryker or the Cajuns did not have a healthy respect for all things Standard Oil.

In 1882 the SONJ entity which has its name or initials stamped on so many documents in this project came to be. It was in that year that it touched another great American icon when Standard Oil lubricated the invention of the man who also revolutionized the film industry by revolutionizing a system related to film itself. Standard Oil contributed to Thomas Edison's first central generating system by providing lubricants from its new chemical divisions.. Besides SONJ in this year, Standard Oil Trust formed to include the Standard Oil Company of New York (Socony) and in those years SONJ was referred to usually as the Standard Oil Company of New Jersey and shortened to two words rather than four letters --Jersey Standard. .



In 1885 the company became associated with New York City, where documentary film and photography had its main American nest from 1920 to 1953 at the

very shortest duration. That year the Standard Oil Trust relocated its corporate headquarters to 26 Broadway, New York City. The nine-story office building became a landmark which would have been known to the majority of the scene and history conscious film and camera people involved in this set of projects long before they worked for Standard Oil.

In 1911, following a landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision, that reshaped a lot of the United States in its view of itself in economic terms Standard Oil was broken up into 34 unrelated companies, including Jersey Standard, the SONJ which funded this photographic venture. The year also marks the first time Jersey Standard's sales of kerosene are surpassed by gasoline, conjectures about a photographic bias against horses which seems evident if in fact it exists would be related to the fact that by the 1940s the company depended largely on a product that in the early days had often been discarded as a waste product. In 1911 many buggies could carry a kerosene lantern and be good customers. Auto racing became part of the Standard Oil legacy through Mobil products in the decades between 1911 and 1943.



In 1919 the company that actually furnished the drillers for Louisiana Story became a real part of the Standard Oil family and tradition when SONJ or Jersey Standard acquired a 50 percent interest in Humble Oil & Refining Company of Texas. In that same year Humble Oil, led by its pioneering Chief Geologist Wallace Pratt, developed the full commercial employment of micropaleontology in oil exploration. This study of microscopic fossils contained in cuttings and core samples from drilling was an aid in finding oil which tied the Oil industry more to local universities in various region and made the science and technology of the industry a bit more compelling. It laid the foundation for the kind of postwar industrial leadership sought in this set of projects.



Just about the time these projects were getting cranked up and closer to the subject of this text in 1942, the world's first fluid catalytic cracker went into onstream operation at Louisiana Standard's Baton Rouge refinery. The process, was developed by four SONJ scientists known as the "four horsemen," and became the worldwide industry standard for producing gasoline. *Fortune* magazine when it covered the story described it as "the most revolutionary chemical-engineering achievement of the last 50 years." In the fifties

SONJ would found more cultural and educational programs and more automobile related products as centerpieces of its overall vision. Those fascination with shaping culture through the Esso Education Foundation after 1955 and the increased interest in playing a dominant role in serving the needs of automobiles after the development of Uniflo in 1952 doubtless affected these projects, though this text does not provide a close analysis of how that played out.

This chapter simply provides a bit of history to serve as a background to other observations made throughout the text. It is very far from exhaustive and does not disclose a great deal of highly compelling close analysis of Standard's role here. But it is the place to make a few assertions if there is indeed any such place.

1. Standard Oil and its competitors and friends funded education, built things and employed people. But Cajun technology in building, dredging, design and drainage was seldom incorporated except by a few who struggled hard to do so. Lack of respect for the accumulated knowledge of regional conditions had a powerful negative set of impacts on the region from the Cajun point of view.
2. Standard Oil and the Rockefellers with deeply Baptist Protestant heritage may well be responsible for the lack of Catholicism in Louisiana Story simply because of their enormous general reputation. Likewise, the other desires and needs of that family and coporation likely transmitted themselves across the project with little direct efforts from those at the top of the power structures involved. All evidence for this is general in nature at this point and may exist in specific form or may not.
3. Cajun inventions continued to proliferate in navigation, crawfish farming seafood processing and elsewhere across the region, horseracing and breeding of the Cajun quarter horse continued to produce ethnic excellence. There is a sense among many that Cajun leadership in this industry and the cultural accommodations that could have produced better relationships never fully materialized.
4. Both Huey Long and Dudley Leblanc were at different times Public Service Commissioners and as such dealt with the oil and gas industry. The importance of this industry to all sides of the political spectrum over a much larger period than is central to this text can scarcely be disputed. Longism was of course more influential and successful than whatever Leblancism may be said to be. On the other hand, Huey was killed by the husband of one of Dudley Leblanc's Evangeline girls Yvonne Pavy for suggesting that she had Negro blood. Weis's family disputes that claim and he was in many respects one of the finest and most gifted citizens of Louisiana in his time. But it is highly credible that the dictator was killed for insulting the genealogy in question by a man who considered himself and his family superior specimens to Long himself. Dudley Leblanc, diminished over time but died in peace and as a fairly old man. The oil industry although soaked by Huey in many ways was more associated with Huey and the Long Machine than with Dudley Leblanc.
5. These projects coincided with the last great push of Dudley Leblanc in politics. Had he been closer to the oil industry and less close to four or five other industries it is quite

possible that his fortunes would have continued to rise and the period would have been a different one than it was.

In conclusion to this chapter, Standard oil is not at the heart of this text about a project it made possible. But in many ways it chose to take a back seat, to hide behind the scenery and many other metaphors. They influenced many things but determined very few. This chapter is the last numbered chapter before the conclusion and their role is the least thoroughly studied of the communities whose interactions define this text.