



By 1912 efforts to improve sanitation had become evident as depicted in this photograph of Crawford Street.

OIL! A RESERVOIR OF HOUSTON HISTORY

BY LOUIS J. MARCHIAFAVA

Oil, the blood of Houston's life pulse, has acquired a mystique as no other industry has in the history of the United States. It is a legacy with a distinctly individualistic flavor. With the opening of Texas oil fields during the early twentieth century a new era emerged—an era of the “wildcatter”—characterized by men willing to risk all in a win or lose opportunity of a lifetime. Oil discoveries were reminiscent of the West Coast gold strikes which carried with it a sensationalism resulting from the seemingly “hit or miss” nature of the exploitations, the instant wealth, and the men, who with few of the technological advantages of today, appeared to defy the odds of the unknown in achieving the American dream.

The exploration for oil in Texas has a long history, dating to 1866 when the first oil well began operation in Nacogdoches County near Oil Spring. Lynis T. Barrett, who in truth, can be termed the original Texas wildcatter, brought in oil through the then unique boring technique. With a capacity of ten barrels per day, Barrett's “strike” was seen as a significant achievement. Indeed, his success and the discovery of oil in other areas of the state prophesied a cornucopia of wealth which in time gave rise to a regional folklore expressed in books and on film.

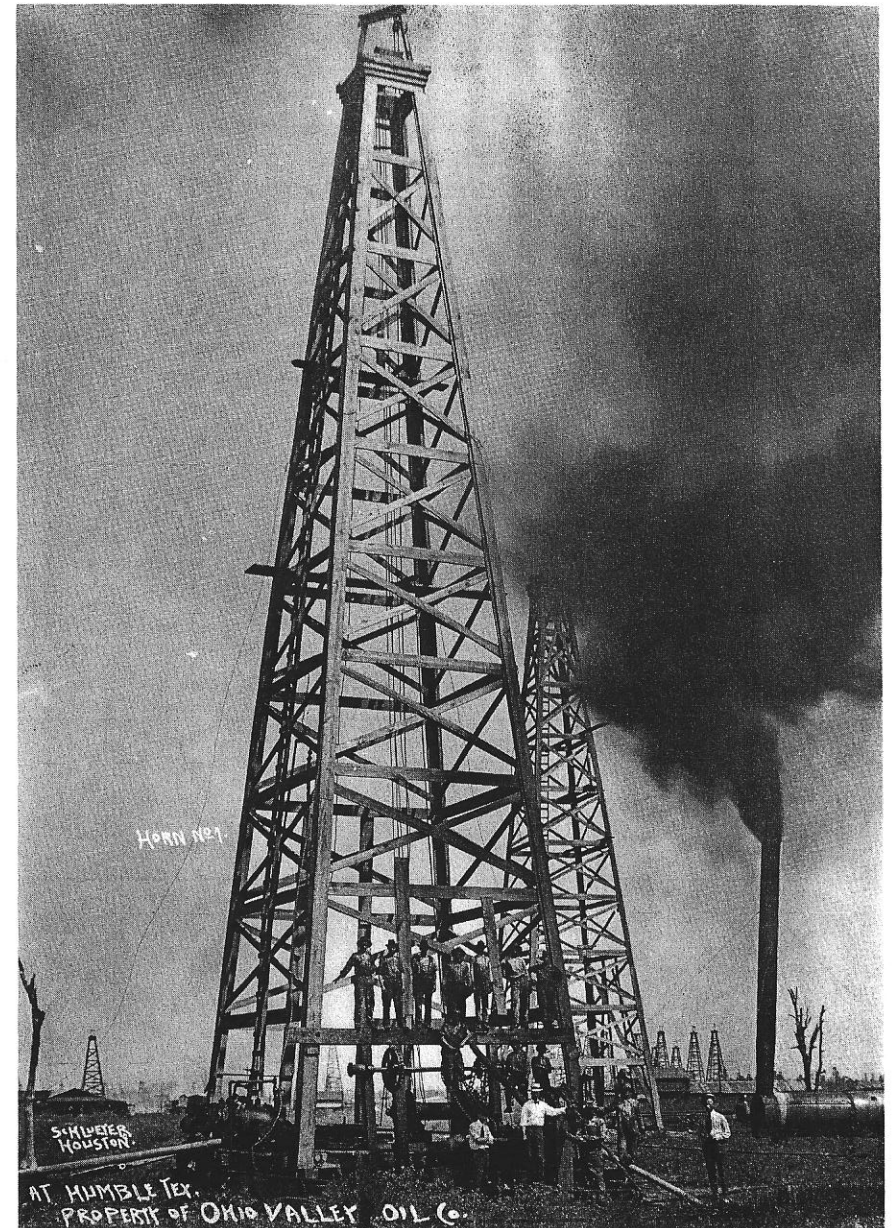
Although serious oil operations in Texas began as early as 1895 in the Corsicana area, the opening of the Spindletop field in 1901 marked the beginning of Houston's romance with the petroleum industry. A year later a gusher came in at Sour Lake, followed by the opening of the North Dayton and Humble fields in 1905. The changes were dramatic. Land, which had previously sold in the Humble region for \$6,400 an acre before the Moonshine Gusher came in, jumped to \$16,000 in less than a week. Oil syndicates became a well-known term linked with names such as ex-Governor James Hogg, Joseph S. Cullinan, Judge Harry Masterson and Walter B. Sharp. The Rice Hotel lobby became a bustling beehive where speculators and operators exchanged information and made deals of a lifetime.

This was only the beginning. In 1908 the Goose Creek field began production; Damon's Mound revealed its potential in 1915; and the Blue Ridge field began operation in 1919. By the 1930s operations had begun in Conroe, Eureka Heights, Tomball and South Houston. By the time of the latter strikes a new geophysical technology had developed to assist the intuitive talents of the wildcatter of previous decades.

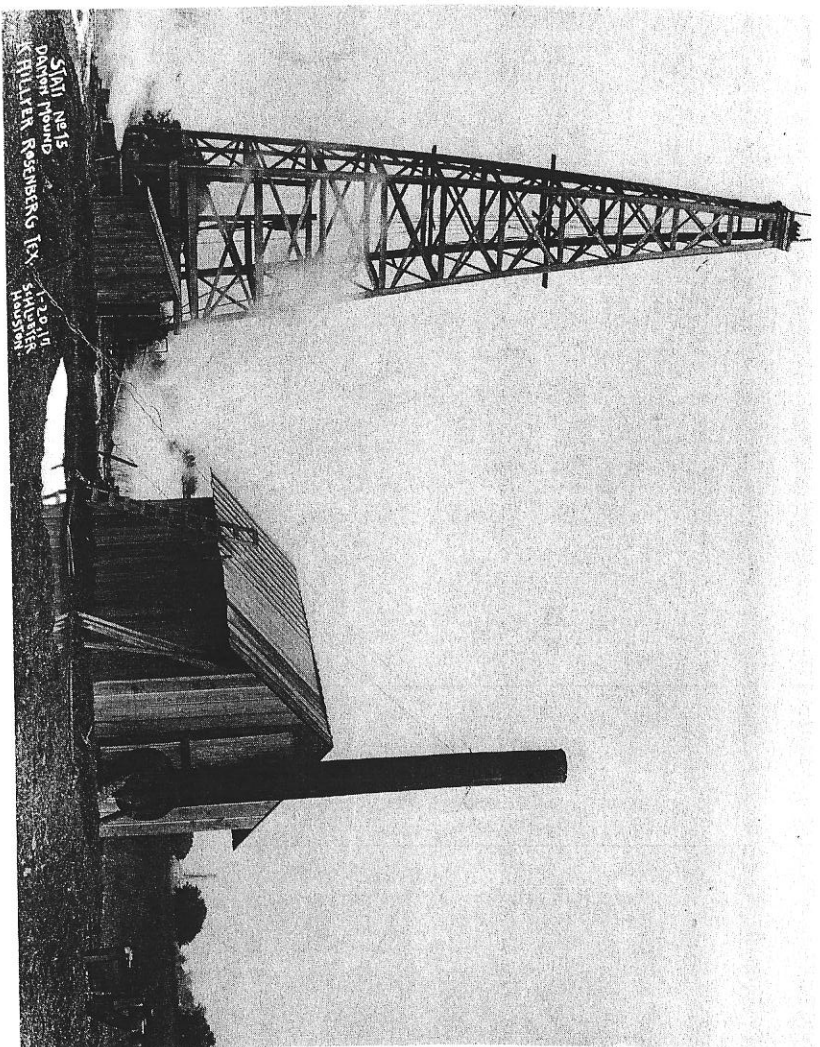
Even before the 1930s the Bayou City had made its mark as a petroleum center. That evolution occurred soon after the Spindletop and Humble strikes. The Texas Company, founded by Cullinan, constructed a pipeline from Humble to Houston and tank farms soon sprang up around Houston. In 1915 the Gulf Oil Company established facilities at Lynchburg, followed in the next fifteen years by the construction of seven additional refineries. Houston became known as the "Gateway to Beaumont" with the discovery of oil at Spindletop, but with the opening of the Humble field the Bayou City rapidly became a petroleum center in its own right.

Oil produced a breed of men which created the mystique of the industry. In addition to their uncanny ability to "make strikes," most became philanthropists like George Strake, Sr., developer of the Conroe field, who received numerous awards for his generosity as did Joseph Cullinan, James A. Abernethy, and Hugh Roy Cullen. The latter gave away more of his wealth to education and medical facilities than any other oil baron.

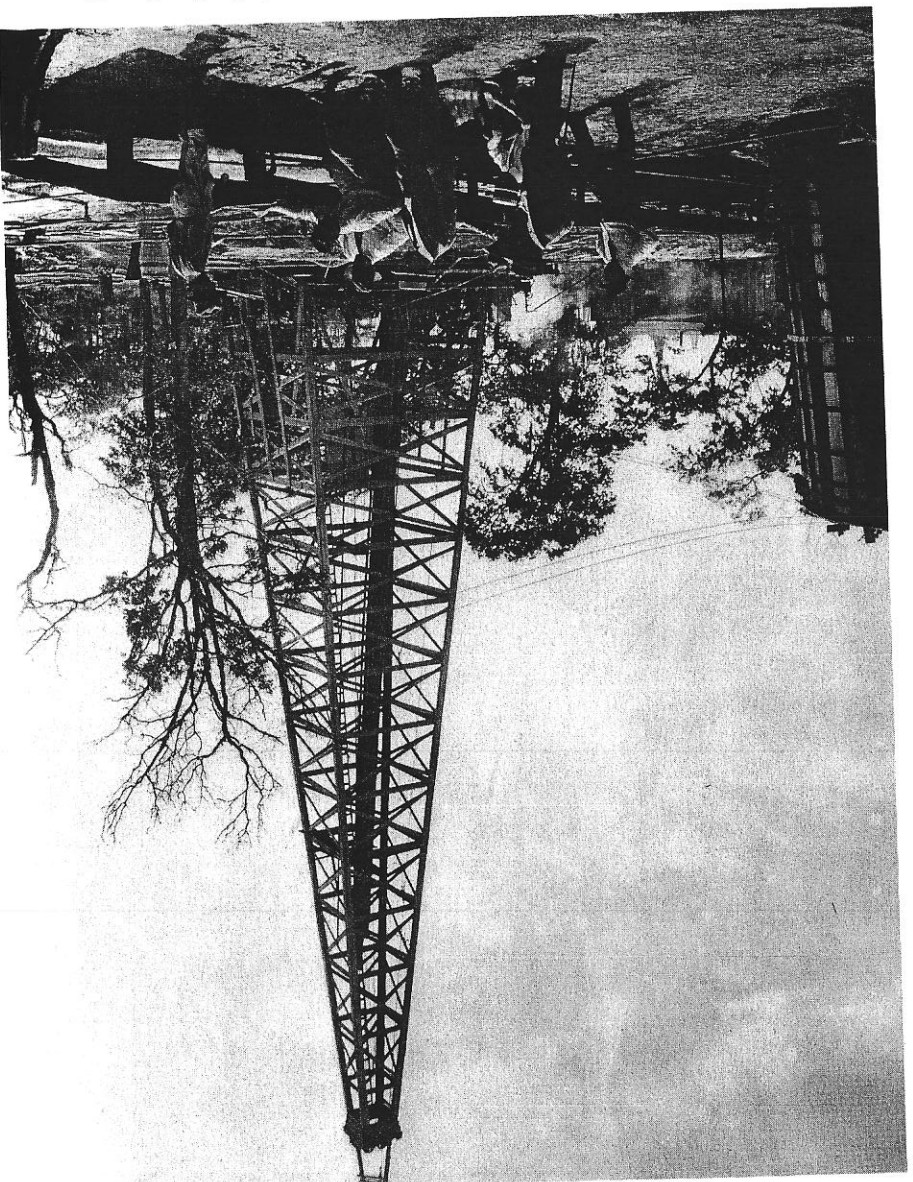
The scenes and faces depicted in photographs in the following pages capture some of the early moments in the oil industry and the men who created it. Together they form a legacy for future generations.



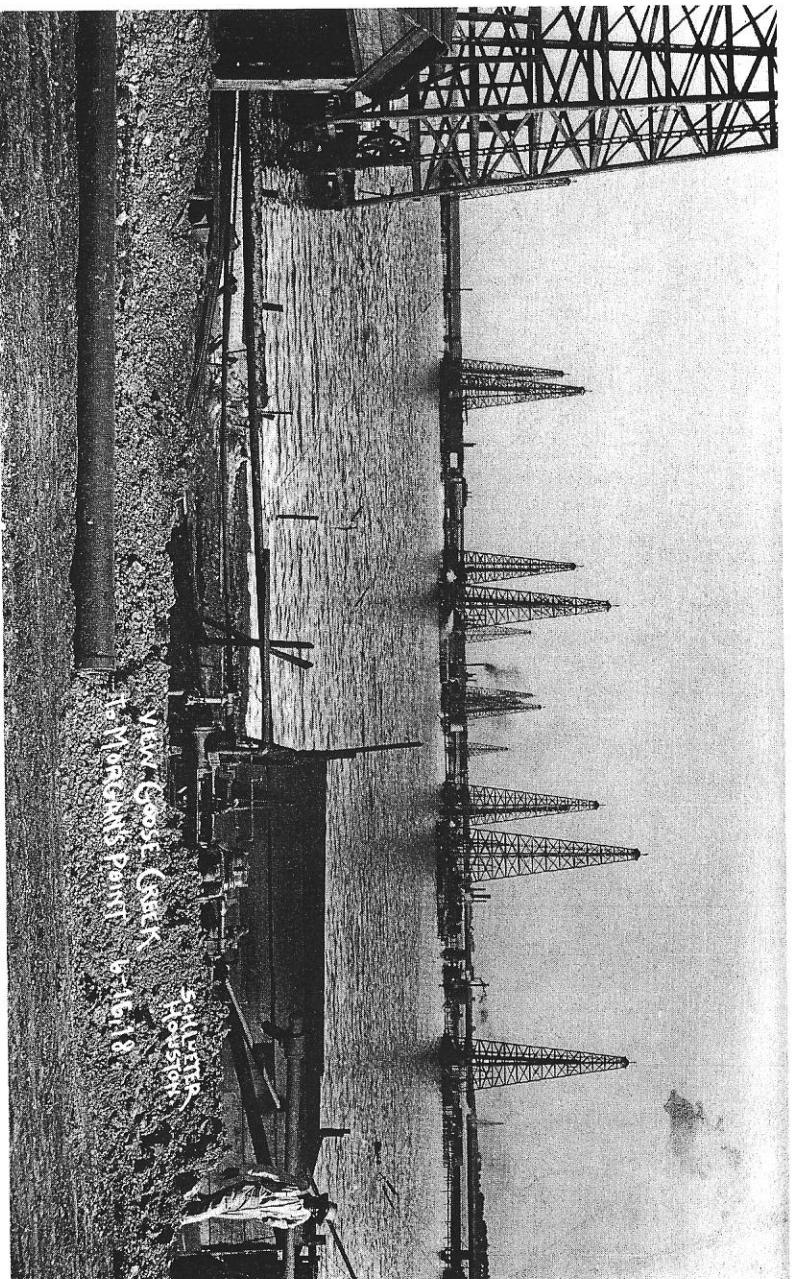
Early oil prospecting at the Humble field. *Bank of the Southwest, Schlueter Photographic Collection.*



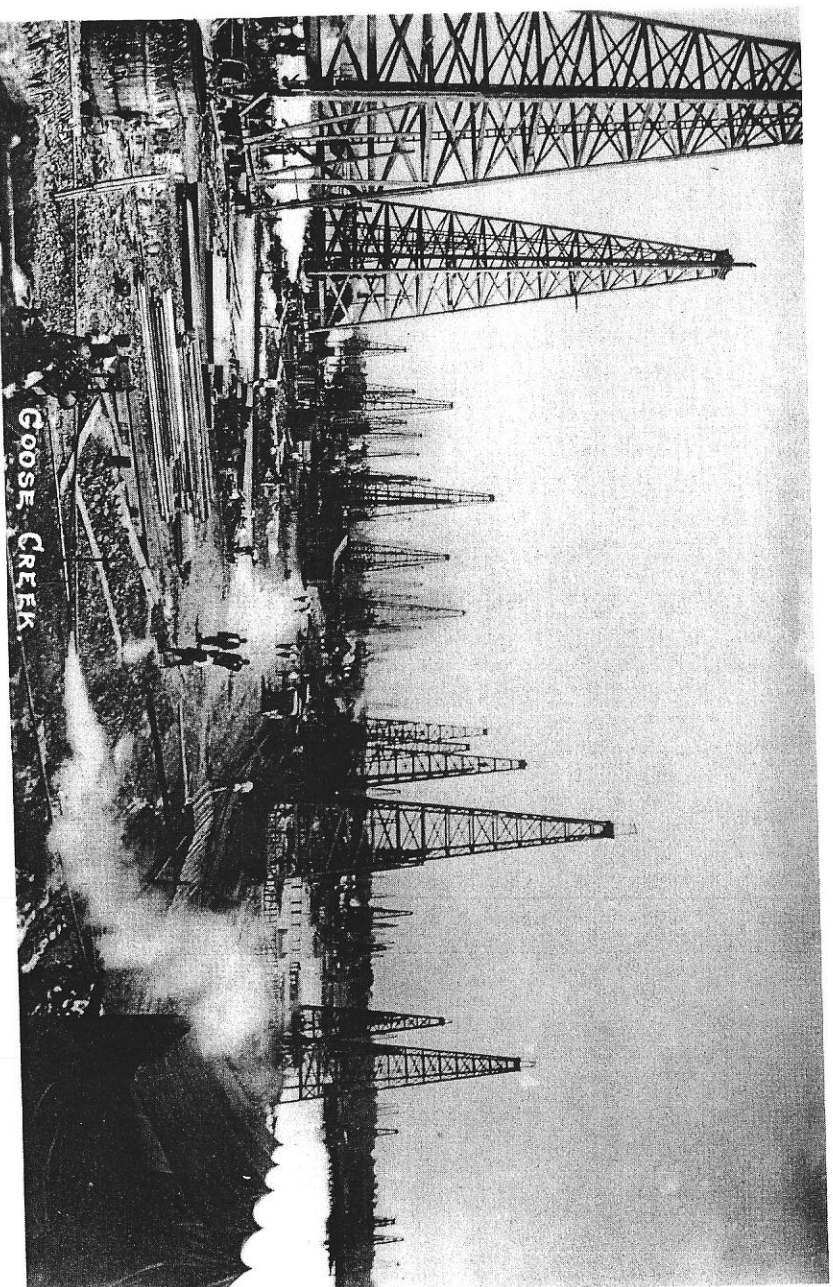
A successful strike at Damon's Mound, 1917. Bank of the Southwest,
Schueter Photographic Collection.



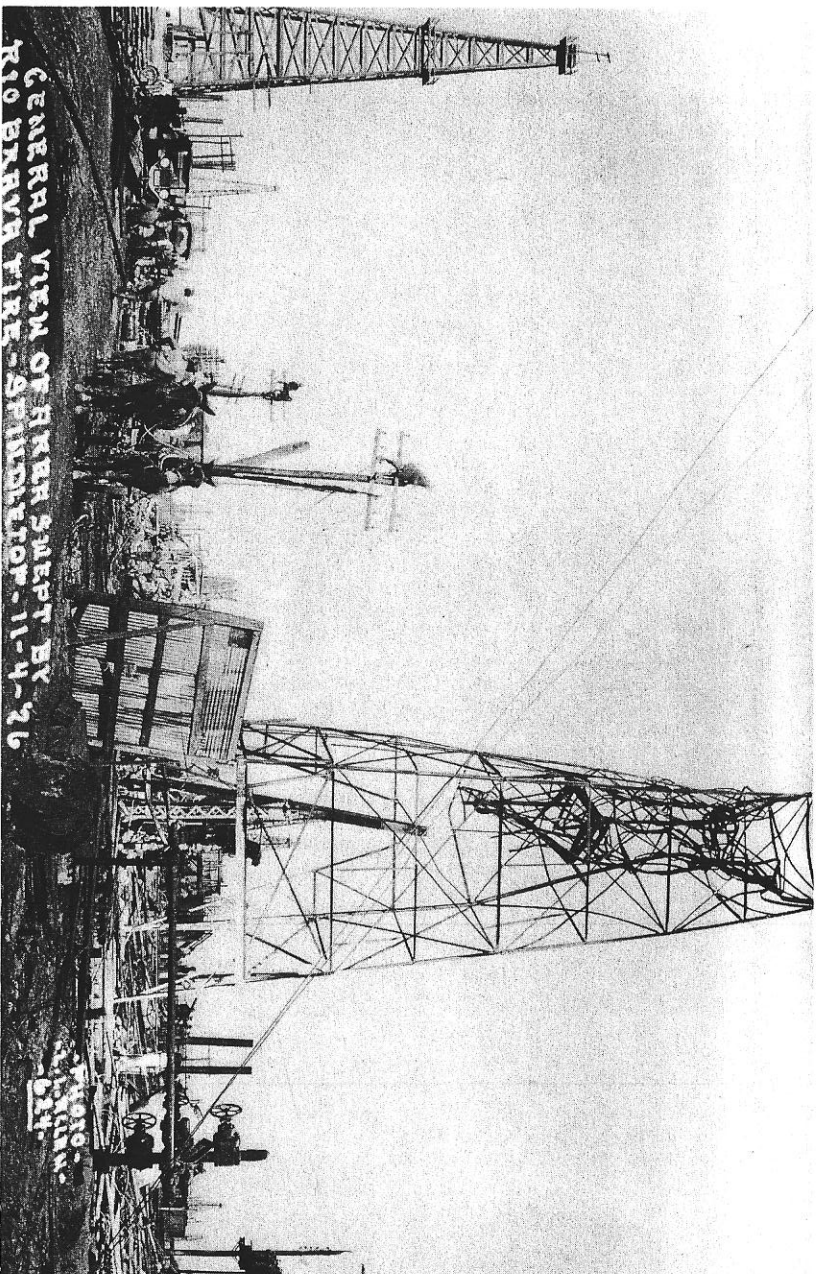
Inspection tour at the Humble field. Bank of the Southwest,
Schueter Photographic Collection.



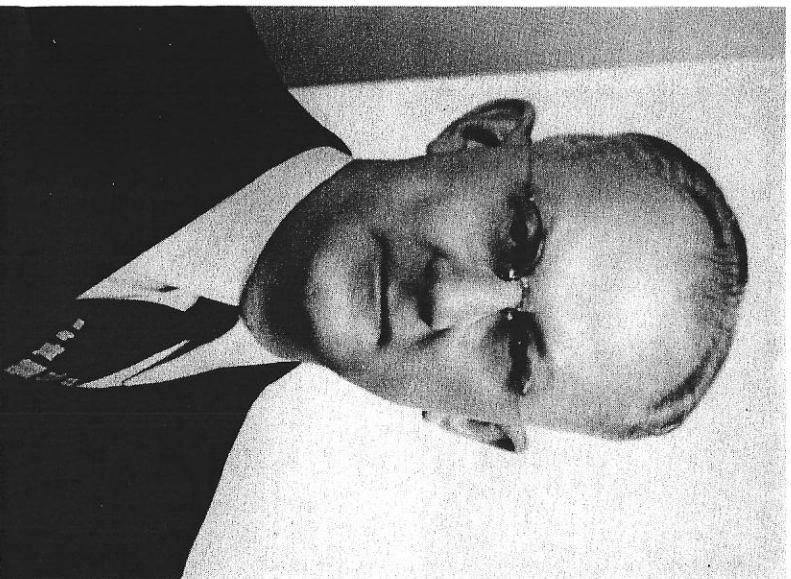
Drilling operations at Goose Creek. Bank of the Southwest,
Schlueter Photographic Collection.



Rig construction at Goose Creek. Bank of the Southwest,
Schlueter Photographic Collection.



Fires were a continual hazard of the early oil industry.



George W. Strake, founder of the Conroe field.



James S. Abercrombie, oil man and philanthropist.