

Oil in Texas: The Gusher Age, 1895–1945. *By Diana Davids Olien and Roger M. Olien.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002. xi + 307 pp. Photographs, maps, illustrations, bibliography, notes, index. Cloth, \$39.95. ISBN 0-292-76056-6.

Reviewed by Linda B. Hall

Diana and Roger Olien have been writing about the Texas oil business for twenty years, producing important books on topics that include the lives of Texas independent oilmen and the experiences of workers in the Texas oilfields. This new volume breaks no new ground but, rather, synthesizes their findings in a chronology of the first fifty years of the Texas oil business. It is also a fascinating tale.

The authors link the discovery and exploitation of petroleum resources to other economic and business sectors in the state. In particular, the impact of the oil boom on agriculture—both the important cotton business and the cattle industry—is emphasized throughout. Further, they explore the ways in which the oil boom transformed the Texas Gulf Coast into a major shipping area and enabled petroleum-related businesses, such as oil refining and petrochemicals, to prosper.

The Oliens examine the factors that enabled Texans to maintain control of their oil resources, even when large corporations from elsewhere entered the state. The answer, they indicate, lies in the antitrust sentiment that was already well developed at the time of the first major petroleum discoveries in the state. As early as 1836, when the Republic of Texas issued its constitution, antimonopoly settlements were entered in its court records, and, until the end of the nineteenth century, that sentiment and the willingness to initiate antitrust action only increased. Laws were even passed prohibiting integration, either horizontal or vertical, thereby spreading the business opportunities widely in any given sector. These laws, which were in effect at the time of the huge discoveries at Spindletop in the Gulf Coast region in 1901, were used to withstand encroachments by national corporations. The Texas oil business, in its first fifty years, would be open to enormous numbers of relatively small entrepreneurs, who benefited from prevailing ideas of fairness and from existing and developing legislation. Though many failed, others became enormously wealthy, and still others amassed significant,

though more modest, fortunes. Governor James Hogg succinctly put the question in 1900, when he asked, referring to an early struggle with Standard Oil, “Shall Texas, or the Trusts control?” (p. 22). The answer, firmly implied, was Texas, of course.

The organization of the book is, unsurprisingly, chronological, though within chapters, and even in separate chapters, the authors range across the various regions of Texas. Although huge reserves were discovered from the Gulf Coast to the Permian Basin in west Texas, they were developed at widely different rates. Many factors contributed to these variations: the quality of oil; the distance to markets; the facilities (or lack of them) for getting oil and natural gas to these markets; the accessibility of the deposits; and the costs and technologies of production. One of the book’s great strengths is that it keeps these factors continually in the forefront of the narrative. One of its drawbacks is the authors’ tendency to catalog discoveries and advances in all parts of the state. While this enables them to paint a comprehensive picture of the development of the business, a more useful strategy would have been to expand their analysis, comparative and otherwise, which would have been helpful to readers who are more interested in the industry than in a recital of local issues.

Two other problems detract from the book’s usefulness. The first is that its index is based largely on names, rather than on categories of information. The other, more serious, problem is the lack of a strong introduction and conclusion. Instead, the text plunges into the narrative, which, though interesting, ends abruptly with the events of World War II. The reader longs for a sense of what this localized history of an industry all meant and for an overview of what was to come. While the Oliens no doubt intend to follow up with another volume synthesizing a later period, it would still have been useful to discover their views on the state of the industry during this period and their perception of how Texas in 1945 fit into the global picture.

Nevertheless, the story they have told is a good one: its scope, within the state of Texas, is comprehensive, and the connections between petroleum and other parts of the Texas economy are carefully detailed. The book would make an excellent introduction to the subject for the general reader or a good classroom text in courses on the history of Texas, the regional economy, or the petroleum business.

Linda B. Hall is professor of history at the University of New Mexico. A Texan herself, she has a long-term interest in the history of that state as well as of the oil business, though the focus in her own work has been on Mexico, as can be seen in her books Oil, Banks, and Politics: The United States and Post-Revolutionary Mexico and Texas and the Mexican Revolution: A Study in State and National Border Policy, the latter coauthored with Don M. Coerver. Her current work is on the development of the film industry in the first half of the twentieth century in a cross-border context.