

## BLACK AMERICANS' OIL INDUSTRY EXPERIENCES AND BLACK-OWNED OIL COMPANIES, 1903-1942

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**ABSTRACT:** Past experiences of Black people in U.S. oil fields ranged from horrific to heroic. Black men were generally not allowed to hold skilled jobs in oil fields during the first half of the 20th century, and Black women were rarely hired into the oil industry. Accounts in trade journals, newspapers or history books recorded the racial strife encountered in oil fields and in oil towns, especially through the 1920s and 1930s. This paper focuses on the upstream accounts concerning Black Americans and the little-known examples of Black-owned oil companies. Stories of racial violence, including lynching, demonstrate the significant struggles of those who sought oil industry employment or established one of several types of oil companies. Claims of being the first Black-owned oil company were common. All types of companies, from those who owned or brokered leases, to those who drilled and developed their own production, were dependent on the Black community. First, Black landowners were more likely to lease their land to other Black people. Second, financially successful Black people were more likely to invest in Black-owned businesses, including oil companies. The most significant recorder of this oil history was the Black-owned newspapers. The newspapers not only wrote extensively about Black-owned oil businesses, but their favorable articles promoted the companies to readers. The most complete information, although inadequate due to poor history preservation, was found on the Universal Oil, Gas and Mining Company of Shreveport, Louisiana, from 1930 to 1942. The company was Black-owned and operated, with its own drilling crew and field people. Its claims of being the first Black-owned oil company were not correct, but the company and the general manager (O. S. Strickland) were impressive. Black-owned oil companies existed before 1930, and included companies incorporated to manage their own land holdings, to broker leases, and to drill and develop their leases. These companies are first reviewed to put the Universal Oil, Gas, and Mining Company into historical perspective, then O. S. Strickland and his Shreveport oil company are discussed in more detail.

### INTRODUCTION

Reviewers of primary and secondary oil history sources, including oil field photography, encounter little material concerning African American (Black) peoples' experiences related to hydrocarbon exploration and production. Limited publications collect most of the better-known history through oral histories and oil field photography. Roger and Diana Olsen (1982, chapter 5; see also Olsen and Olsen 2002) give an overview of racial discrimination in Texas oil field history of the 1900s through the 1940s. For the most part, Black men were not allowed to be part of drilling crews or hold other skilled oil field jobs. Common work allowed was as cooks or as physical laborers doing dirt work, driving teams, hauling supplies and working on pipeline crews (Figs. 1 and 2). Specht (2011) reviews this extensive discrimination and discusses how Black "songsters and bluesmen" were some of the earliest contributors of recorded music with oil-related themes (p. 84). An outstanding biography of Jake Simmons, Jr. (1901-1981), accomplished oil man, is the only extensive account of a Black person's and family's experiences in the U.S. oil industry of the 1930s-1970s (Greenberg 1990).

King and Risher (1969) (Fig. 3) document an almost total lack of Black people employed in the oil industry. In 1940, less than one percent of all skilled, professional ("white-collar") and managerial positions in the Southern U.S. oil industry was held by Black men. Black females were also not generally hired. In Houston, the 1940 oil industry clerical staff was composed of less than one percent of Black females. The

largest employment of Black people in the 1940 oil industry was as unskilled labor in the Southern U.S. refinery industry. Here, Black workers made up six percent of the hourly refinery labor force (King and Risher 1969). The refinery presence of the AFL-CIO plus litigation filed by the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People) changed "separate lines of progression" in 1956 for Black worker contracts which previously limited them to unskilled labor (*Black Dispatch* 1956-4-26, p. 2). Oil field workers did not have unions. While there were more Black people hired into ex-



Figure 1. Black men digging a pipeline pathway, postcard, date and place unknown. Courtesy of the Permian Basin Petroleum Museum, Library and Hall of Fame, in partnership with The University of North Texas Libraries and The Portal to Texas History (<https://texashistory.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metapht49899/>).

# Report Fm Blk Amer

**United States. Dept. of Health and  
Human Services. Task Force on Black  
and Minority Health**

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**Hearings, Reports and Prints of the House Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce** United States. Congress. House. Committee on Interstate and Foreign Commerce,1969      **Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Black & Minority Health** United States. Department of Health and Human Services. Task Force on Black and Minority Health,1985      *The American Reports* Isaac Grant Thompson,1879      *Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Black & Minority Health: Hispanic health issues; Survey of non-federal community; Inventory of DHHS program efforts in minority health* United States. Dept. of Health and Human Services. Task Force on Black and Minority Health,1986      **Black Psychiatrists and American Psychiatry** Jeanne Spurlock,1999 Presenting a vivid historical account of the contributions that black psychiatrists have made to American psychiatry this important book documents the growth and influence of the group in tandem with the advancement of the field as a whole It provides us with a deep appreciation for what these pioneers accomplished and the hurdles they overcame Spurlock and the book s many distinguished contributors provide an overview of the history spanning generations and various areas of psychiatry This volume documents early and contemporary pioneers and their contributions to modern psychiatry Surveys of black psychiatrists in academia child psychiatry psychiatric research forensic psychiatry and psychoanalysis provide an enlightening view of their experiences From a collection of descriptive essays readers can step into the shoes of several pioneers and experience how they lived These personal reflections provide enormous insight into the history of American psychiatry Finally the book addresses current mental health issues affecting African Americans as well as the barriers black psychiatrists face and the coping mechanisms they use This work should be of particular interest to psychiatry students or residents and to anyone interested in the history of American psychiatry It discusses the widening opportunities for professional growth for black psychiatrists and the important place black psychiatrists have reached in the present mental health arena      The American Reports ,1912 Containing all decisions of general interest decided in the courts of last resort of the several states 1869 1887      The American Reports Isaac Grant Thompson,Irving Browne,1877      The American State Reports Abraham Clark Freeman,1898      **The American Lawyer** Frank Charles Smith,Lucien Brock Proctor,1893      *The American Architect and Building News* ,1907      **Report of the Secretary's Task Force on Black & Minority Health: Hispanic health issues, Inventory of DHHS programs, Survey of non-federal community** United States. Department of Health and Human Services. Task Force on Black and Minority Health,1985      **Reports, Head Officers, the Modern Woodmen of America ...** ,1901      FCC Record United States. Federal Communications Commission,1997      *Federal Communications Commission Reports* United States. Federal Communications Commission,1973-08-10      **Proceedings of the ... Session of the American Pomological Society** American Pomological Society,1884      **Reporting from Washington** Donald A. Ritchie,2005-03-15 Donald Ritchie offers a vibrant chronicle of news coverage in our nation s capital from the early days of radio and print reporting and the heyday of

the wire services to the brave new world of the Internet Beginning with 1932 when a newly elected FDR energized the sleepy capital Ritchie highlights the dramatic changes in journalism that have occurred in the last seven decades We meet legendary columnists including Walter Lippmann Joseph Alsop and Drew Pearson as well as the great investigative reporters from Paul Y Anderson to the two green Washington Post reporters who launched the political story of the decade Woodward and Bernstein We read of the rise of radio news fought tooth and nail by the print barons and of such pioneers as Edward R Murrow H V Kaltenborn and Elmer Davis Ritchie also offers a vivid history of TV news from the early days of Meet the Press to Huntley and Brinkley and Walter Cronkite to the cable revolution led by C SPAN and CNN In addition he compares political news on the Internet to the alternative press of the 60s and 70s describes how black reporters slowly broke into the white press corps helped mightily by FDR s White House discusses path breaking woman reporters such as Sarah McClendon and Helen Thomas and much more From Walter Winchell to Matt Drudge the people who cover Washington politics are among the most colorful and influential in American news Reporting from Washington offers an unforgettable portrait of these figures as well as of the dramatic changes in American journalism in the twentieth century American Municipalities ,1923 **Annual Reports of the Coal Mine Inspectors** Washington (State) State Inspector of Coal Mines,1915 *CMJ* *New Music Report* ,1999-09-06 *CMJ* New Music Report is the primary source for exclusive charts of non commercial and college radio airplay and independent and trend forward retail sales *CMJ* s trade publication compiles playlists for college and non commercial stations often a prelude to larger success **The Code of Federal Regulations of the United States of America** ,1989 The Code of Federal Regulations is the codification of the general and permanent rules published in the Federal Register by the executive departments and agencies of the Federal Government

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