"We Are All in This Together"—Immigrants in the Oil and Mining Towns of Southern Kansas, 1890-1920

by Daniel C. Fitzgerald

It was a hot, dusty, windy afternoon the first time I drove along the Kansas highway that meanders from El Dorado to Augusta. I was expecting to find old wooden oil derricks, deserted shanties and shotgun houses decaying under the unmerciful Kansas sun. After all, this was Butler County, the one-time queen of all county oil booms, the birthplace of a hundred “get rich quick” stories, a place where many folks did get rich and those that did not picked up the pieces and moved on to the next oil strike. I was ready to photograph deserted oil towns and to interview dozens of old-timers eager to reflect on “King Oil” and the good old days.

I found none of the above. El Dorado and Augusta were clean, prosperous towns. There was nothing tangible left of many of the other oil towns except for roads that led to nowhere and foundations that were stripped clean of even bottles and tin cans. The wooden oil derricks were replaced long ago by unimaginative pumpers. Last but not least, the old-timers, for the most part, had been lost in the recent past. Those few that remained and remembered first-hand the oil strikes were becoming fewer and fewer with each passing year. They spoke of the Butler County oil boom with only a few exciting adjectives and seemed to almost enjoy down-playing the whole experience. I realized, as a historian, that the challenge of recapturing the story of that boom time would be greater than originally anticipated.

The challenge of analyzing the oil boom period in Kansas from 1890 to 1920 becomes a supreme one when looking at the individuals involved, especially the immigrants. County histories, state oil reports, newspapers, oil company histories, and even personal reminiscences generally reflect upon only one aspect of the oil boom, and that is the boom itself. The event not the individual takes precedence. Hundreds of pages of material exist concerning where the first strike occurred, what company financed the operation, how much oil gushed forth each day, how deep the well went, and how proud of the industry the local citizenry were. Rarely, however, does the written record appeal to the personal viewpoints—the workers, the newcomers, the men and families who followed the fields. However, this article will shed some light on an otherwise little documented historical melodrama by examining some questions. What kind of life did the immigrants experience in the oil fields? From what areas did they immigrate? How did their lives differ

Development of commercial wells in the 1890s made oil production an economic force in Kansas. Pictured is the Calander Well in Wilson County.
from the native-born American worker? Did they experience any kind of harassment? Lastly, how did their lives differ from the immigrant in the nearby coal mining region? For the sake of this article, the definition of an "immigrant" will include those individuals who immigrated to the United States and then shortly came to the Kansas fields to work. Most attention will focus upon the European immigrants, although it is important to note that immigrants from Mexico are also an important group to consider.

Oil discoveries came early to the Kansas frontier. It did not take the early homesteaders long to realize that small quantities of oil were in the family's drinking water or could be found on the surface of a local stream on a late summer day. In the mid-nineteenth century, oil was seen as a novelty or as a medicinal agent.¹

Development of this resource did not become big business until the 1890s, however, when attempts to locate oil wells took on a more organized approach. Drillers kept a feverish pitch of excitement alive for much of the 1880s around Paola, Kansas. In June 1888, a "gusher" was struck near Paola and yielded nearly ten barrels of crude a day. At the same time a large quantity of natural gas also was discovered. The local Paola newspapers reported the day-by-day happenings, but truthfully the profit potential of the field was not realized for years to come.²

It was not until 1892 that the first commercial well was drilled at Neodesha and the oil boom era in Kansas officially began. W. M. Mills with the help of several Neodesha businessmen including Dr. Thomas Blakeslee; William Hill, the local banker; Pierce and Eson, the town druggists; and T. J. Norman, Neodesha blacksmith, drilled three wells. The first one, drilled on November 28 to a depth of 832 feet, produced twelve barrels of crude. This well was drilled on land donated by T. J. Norman and was named appropriately enough

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“Norman No. 1.” Today, its place in Kansas oil history is perhaps a more impressive legacy than the money it made its owners.3

Mills never became the oil tycoon he envisioned for himself. He sold his interests to the firm of Guffey and Galey, which secured leases on nearly one million acres of land around Neodesha and in six adjoining counties. Their activities, as well as those of other short-lived companies which have since passed into history, set off a boom of enormous proportions during the 1890s and into the first decade of the twentieth century. Between the years 1891 and 1897, in Neodesha alone, nearly 241 wells were drilled, of which 137 were dry, and 87 produced enough oil to pay for the failures. Towns multiplied in size and workers arrived daily by train, bringing along families and their hopes for riches.

Southeastern Kansas was alive with the smell of oil fever. Among these oil workers were the immigrants and their families. Where did they come from, and what brought them to the oil and natural gas fields?

The first appearance of immigrant laborers in southeastern Kansas dates back to the 1870s. Literally adjoining the new oil and gas fields (in some instances within the same county or township) were the coal mining fields. In 1874 the first underground shaft mine was opened in Sacramon, Kansas, located in north-central Cherokee County. The success of this shaft mine brought the opening of several more in Cherokee, Crawford, and Bourbon counties. This ushered in the most commercialized and organized development of coal mining yet conceived in the region. The depth of the coal seams in this area, sometimes as deep as 285 feet, made shaft mining mandatory for commercial extraction. Until these underground mines were constructed, most coal mining remained unorganized and limited to surface extractions.

When shaft mines increased in number and coal companies became larger enterprises, the local population was too small and too expensive to use as a labor force. Most local males were not interested in working deep in the shafts and preferred to remain on the farm. A need for outside labor in large numbers and at minimal expense coincided with the first decade of large arrivals of foreign-born immigrants into the United States. These immigrants fitted the needs of the coal companies perfectly. They were hardworking and did the job for comparatively less money than the resident work force in the region. They also were willing to do the hazardous work required in underground mining and were less apt to wander to other professions since they were chiefly unskilled laborers and many of them could not speak English. Coal companies advertised and sent representatives to eastern seaport cities in order to encourage the employment of new immigrant arrivals, and the immigrants came to southeastern Kansas in large numbers from the 1870s through the first two decades of the twentieth century.4

By 1890 the coal region retained little of its agrarian roots. Coal companies constructed a number of company towns, with colorful names like Croweburg Camp, Dogtown, Water Lilly, and Pumpkin Center. Established especially for the coal companies to supervise their workers, these company towns also allowed the immigrants to retain their identity while living in shotgun houses almost adjoining one another. Coal company managers were also better able to direct and control the operations of their mines with their employees living in these camps.

Many of the immigrants who came to these coal company towns were from Italy, Austria, Yugoslavia, Germany, France, Belgium, and Great Britain.5 Besides being attracted through written promotional brochures, advertisements and agents, they also heard of the coal mining opportunities through “word of mouth.” Often the immigrant who came to the mines looking for work would send word to his friends and relatives in Europe. Multiply this method dozens of times and it is no won-

3. *Kansas City Times*, April 7, 1897: Rister, Oli, 31-33.
4. Ibid., *Neodesha Daily Democrat* for February-April 1897 are also excellent sources for examining the oil boom and the progress made in the Neodesha fields.
5. William E. Powell, “Former Mining Communities of the Cherokee-Crawford Coal Field of Southeastern Kansas,” *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 38 (Summer 1972); 180; John G. Clark, *Towns and Minerals in Southeastern Kansas: A Study in Regional Industrialization, 1890-1930*, Special Distribution Publication 52 (Lawrence: State Geological Survey, 1970): 93-94. Before deep shaft mining, drift and strip mining using horses or other animals were the main methods of extraction. For a description of other and earlier methods, see Walter H. Schowen, “Coal Resources of the Cherokee Group in Eastern Kansas, I. Mucky Coal,” *Kansas Geological Survey Bulletin* no. 134, pt. 5 (Lawrence: University of Kansas Publications, 1959). Finally, on the subject of immigrants and how they learned of the coal fields, see Ann Schofield, "The Women’s March: Miners, Family, and Community in Pittsburgh, Kansas, 1921-1922," *Kansas History* 7 (Summer 1984): 161, where she states that the need for workers was so great that agents were sent to the Illinois and Pennsylvania coal fields and to the port of New York to recruit immigrant miners. Transportation was then promised to come to Kansas.
nder that immigrant labor was easy to find. Many of these immigrants were also experienced miners, having worked in the European mines. The Italian workers were especially adept and experienced in shaft mining procedures. Also, employment in the Kansas coal mines was nearly guaranteed during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Roughly nine-tenths of the immigrants who came looking for work found it. A

Life in the company towns was unique for the American Midwest. The townships most affected by coal mining in Crawford and Bourbon counties contained as much as thirty percent foreign-born. While some of the towns were virtual "melting pots" of American-born whites, blacks and European, others contained only one or two nationalities. These immigrants tended to live together in the same section of town, and relied upon one another for daily activities, conversations, and companionship. This comradship gave the workers a feeling of identity with one another and a feeling of security in a new land where everything was different. There was, in fact, safety in numbers. When one views the situation where security was a factor and that many may have been acquainted in Europe, then it is easy to see how living in the same section of a company town could occur. The immigrant viewed himself, his family, and those of his same ethnic background as an integral part of the community where dependence on one another was a valued facet of existence. Therefore, they viewed one another as being a part of a group, as being together in a situation in a particular place at a particular point in time.

Coal mining, however, offered few long-term advantages for the immigrant and his family. It was merely a starting point and a way for many newcomers to establish themselves. It was not an opportunity for long-term self-improvement. Salaries were extremely low. The average salary for an unskilled worker in the coal fields was three dollars a day in the peak mining year of 1916. In years of depression, it was far less. Expenses were high; groceries at the company store were higher than at privately owned stores in other area communities, and the rent for the small company-owned shotgun houses was also comparatively high. Coal mining was very seasonal and unstable. The demand slackened every spring and summer, and prices for coal collapsed some years while increasing the next. It was also dangerous work. Coal mining for many years had the worst record for job-related accidents in Kansas industrial history. One mine explosion in Frontenac on November 9, 1888.

Unidentified rig workers pose at a derrick in the early El Dorado oil field.

9. Powell, "European Settlement.," 154-57; Carman, Foreign Language Units, Crawford and Bourbon county sections.

claimed the lives of forty-seven miners, many of them Italian immigrants. When a hearing was held a few days later regarding the accident, one of the main causes cited for the accident was the incompetence of some of the Italian workers in the shaft. Whenever accidents occurred, it was common to blame the immigrant, whether involved in the accident or not.

Despite all of the disadvantages, immigrants were hesitant about seeking other jobs to supplement the family income. They feared that if the work load suddenly increased and they were not present because of other temporary employment, the chances were great that they would be fired. Language barriers for many immigrant workers severely limited other job opportunities, especially in a region which, outside of the company town, remained mostly agrarian. The coming of the oil boom in nearly the same region, however, changed the situation and offered the immigrant and his family other opportunities to improve themselves. The chance for some social mobility, if not easier economic times, seemed possible for the immigrant and his family in the new Kansas oil fields, where the pay was generally higher than in the mines.

The little gusher, Norman No. 1, in Neodesha, Kansas, opened the way for oil and gas developments across most of southeastern and south-central Kansas in the 1890s and early twentieth century. The towns and the counties are too numerous to mention here. In fact, if one glances at a map of southern Kansas today, one would be hard-pressed to find a town that was not affected in some respect by the oil and gas boom years.

Opportunities for unskilled workers, however, were mostly limited to the larger fields in those early years. Smaller oil developments, such as the one mentioned in Paola, could rely on local labor to do the work. The larger fields, such as those in Allen County, around Iola; Anderson County, around Garnett and Colony; Wilson County, around Neodesha; and Montgomery County, around Coffeyville and Independence, offered unskilled immigrant workers some advantages over coal mining. In short, much of the immigrant labor that

11. Powell, “European Settlement,” 160-61. Crawford County Clippings 3:117, Library, Kansas State Historical Society. For actual statistics year by year on mining accidents see, Kansas State Inspector of Coal Mines, Annual Reports for any year represented from the late nineteenth to early twentieth centuries. Mining accidents were so common that page after page in these mine reports are filled with facts and figures concerning work-related accidents. For information on Pomonos mining disaster see, Pittsburg Headlight, November 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 1888. Although the newspaper was not consistent in reporting the place of origin for all miners killed in the explosion, a partial listing indicates that at least one English, two Belgian, three French, and seven Italian miners died.

13. Safety in the oil fields was not always much better. State of Kansas, State Bureau of Mines and Labor Reports (Topeka: Kansas State Printing Plant), for the years 1915-1920 indicate that the oil fields were sometimes the second biggest area of industrial accidents.

During the oil boom days, wooden derricks, like these outside El Dorado, covered the landscape and filled the view.
came to the oil fields came from the adjoining coal mining communities in the Cherokee-Crawford-Bourbon fields.\textsuperscript{14}

One other major source of workers, some of them immigrants, was the oil field region in the states of Pennsylvania and Ohio. Newspapers in the eastern United States and especially near the above mentioned oil fields, were interested in any news available on the development of the Kansas fields and printed the latest strikes and success stories in glowing terms. This attracted much interest among those eager to improve themselves and move west. Seeing Kansas as just the opportunity they were waiting for, many departed from the older eastern fields.

This place of origin of many of the workers and immigrants is defended by information contained in the Kansas census records for 1905 and 1915. One of the best examples of where this census information can be useful is in the Garnett field. Garnett townpeople were the unprepared recipients of a rush of workers, many of them immigrants, just prior to 1905. According to the census returns, many of the new arrivals were from Pennsylvania, Ohio, and from the Kansas coal mining communities nearby. Few arrivals came directly from Europe; in fact, only a handful of families, oil-related or not, were immigrants whose places of origin were listed as outside the United States. The Anderson County example is unfortunately one of the few oil and gas counties where Kansas census records are useful tools. Many of the other counties had strikes that were either so short-lived or occurred at such an inappropriate time in relationship to the taking of the census that the records are not always useful. When the strikes were over, the workers would leave, many times passing through without appearing in any state census.\textsuperscript{15}

The opportunities offered immigrants in the oil fields in comparison to opportunities in the coal mines were sometimes superficial. The larger oil strikes offered immigrants advantages and disadvantages. Employment was less seasonal but also less permanent. If a strike did not last, an immigrant family would have to move to the next big oil strike looking for employment. On the advantage side, wages were consistently higher, especially in the larger oil fields. A worker could bring home twice as much money as in the coal fields, but this varied from place to place. Also, the unskilled work was less hazardous. There was no underground shaft work. However, oil field labor did have its share of accidents. There were many years when the state oil inspector's reports and the state labor reports placed oil-related occupations as the second or third most dangerous because of accidents. Despite the fact that coal mining usually topped the list of injuries and deaths, this was not much of an improvement.\textsuperscript{15}

The most abrupt change in the life of the immigrant who moved to the oil fields was the loss of interrelationships among those of the same linguistic or ethnic backgrounds. Housing was at a minimum and everyone was thrown together wherever there was an empty room. Life was also transitory—one's neighbor might be there for a week and then disappear. The dependence on one another, that feeling of "We Are All in This Together," had made life more bearable, but in the makeshift oil camps, a more suitable phrase might have been, "We Are All in This Alone."\textsuperscript{15}

Harassment was another factor and played a significant role in the life of the immigrant in the oil and gas fields. One of the most interesting cases of harassment against workers, before the El Dorado 1915-1916 oil strikes, was in 1904 and 1905 when the Kansas Natural Gas Company hired several hundred immigrant workers—a great number of them Italian, Austrian, Greek, and Mexican—to lay the first natural gas pipeline from Montgomery County to northeastern Kansas. It was a major undertaking which required many months to finish and was almost entirely completed with immigrant labor.

\textsuperscript{14} Kansas census records for 1905 and 1915 help provide some clues and information on migration of immigrants within Kansas. This depends on the field and the time of the strike, however. Certain fields, such as the Anderson County oil and gas strikes, do indicate a large number of immigrants coming from the coal field region (as well, of course, as other laborers). Another region not discussed that could have attracted immigrant labor was the nearby lead and zinc mining district. However, Arrell M. Gibson, Wilderness Bonanza: The Tri-State District of Missouri, Kansas, and Oklahoma (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1972), 202-4, indicates that immigrants, as a habit, were not hired by company owners and that instead native-born Americans were usually given jobs in the district. Gibson noted that less than two percent of the population was composed of foreign-born immigrants. See also Clark, Towns and Minerals in Southeastern Kansas, 95-97.

\textsuperscript{15} Kansas State Decennial Census, 1905, Anderson County, Archives Department, KSHS; Schofield, "The Women's March," 161.

\textsuperscript{16} For examples see, State of Kansas, Mines and Labor Reports, 1910-1920; Clark, Towns and Minerals in Southeastern Kansas, 98-99.

\textsuperscript{17} The transitory nature of oil field work took its toll on the availability of historical documentation. Because of the tendency of workers to follow the oil strikes, many immigrants did not leave an impression on the record keepers. Newspapers in the region were always ready to overdramatize the latest oil strike, its location and potential, but rarely mentioned the workers who came literally by the hundreds to work in the fields. For example, see the Iola Register. Jobs was a community which in the 1890s struck both oil and natural gas in large quantities. The field was larger than most, transforming the agricultural community into an overnight boomtown. Perusing the Register issues which document the period, however, shows the reader little if anything on the workers' lives, much less the immigrants.
While Oil Hill claimed to be “100 percent American,” most oil towns such as Mulian (shown here in 1921) counted immigrant families in its population.

The *Kansas City Times* in 1905 gave the following description of the job:

There are more than 500 Greeks and Italians laying the pipeline in Allen county which is to carry natural gas to Kansas City. The men work about six feet apart in trenching...and are bossed by Irish foremen.... There are interpreters, too, twelve or more of them, because the men do not speak enough English even to order a meal. 18

Trouble occurred from the outset. A number of Coffeyville and Independence residents, businessmen, and newspaper editors opposed the pipeline plan because they would have no control over their own supply of natural gas. Most immigrants had to be recruited from other areas, such as the coal fields, in order to even begin work on the pipeline. Since many of these workers could not speak English, they had no idea what the political implications were. 19

The “anti-pipers,” as the townspeople and businessmen were sometimes called, assembled on December 19, 1904. They were dressed in old clothing and wore hoods. After nightfall, they rode to the immigrant camp and threatened the workers with guns, which frightened many of them. Then a section of the pipeline was blown apart with dynamite. The next day, many of the immigrants quit their jobs in fear of more threats of violence. Those that stayed were reported to be easily alarmed at the sight of any unidentified men after nightfall. Although the reasons behind the attack were aimed primarily at the issue of pipelines rather than at the

18 *Kansas City Times*, April 15, 1905.

19 This area was also well known for labor unrest and anti-immigrant stands. A fairly good history of this can be found in H. Craig Miller, *The Fire in the Rock: A History of the Oil and Gas Industry in Kansas, 1855-1976* (Wichita: Kansas Independent Oil & Gas Association, 1976), 44-53. See also *Kansas City Times*, April 15, 1905.
harrassment of immigrant labor, the immigrants were the unfair recipients of the abuse. There were other incidents along the way that were more illustrative.20

All along the construction of the pipeline in southern Kansas, the workers experienced other incidents of local bigotry and harassment. In the towns of Colony and Greeley, the immigrants were given their share of verbal abuse on the streets and in the local newspapers. The Garnett Eagle-Plaindealer of October 14, 1904, related the following:

Dagos of all kinds and sizes, dozens of them, smoking all kinds of pipes, were seen jabbering on the streets Saturday. Our people had begun to feel that Anderson County had been invaded by Italy but it later developed that they had been employed by the Prairie Oil and Gas Company to lay the pipeline from the oil field to Kansas City and had just completed their work and had been paid off. They were in town spending their money... The dealers who handled underclothing, soap, toothbrushes, and Bibles were not overlooked. [The Italians] are not desirable citizens and we are glad to see they have left.21

In the autumn of 1905, the pipeline builders finally reached Lawrence and Topeka, and in 1906 the final connecting links of St. Joseph and Kansas City, Kansas, were reached. The immigrants were then abandoned to seek new places of employment, their jobs finished.22

There were other incidents of violence in the oil region concerning immigrant labor. In Iola in 1900, thirty-three newly hired Italian workers were forced out of town by other angry workers who refused to work with them. Some immigrants were also involved in violent acts when grouped with black workers. In a company town built near Iola and called Bassett, immigrants and blacks were segregated for their own safety. On one occasion a fight between blacks and immigrants occurred over the fact that a black woman was washing her laundry upstream from several white families. To workers who would appeal for improved wages and benefits, immigrants and blacks were seen as potential strikebreakers. As such, the immigrants were often treated as outsiders, and the possibility of clashes continued. In 1906 and 1907 more violence occurred at Iola over a policy of hiring Mexicans as a hedge against strikes; homes of several Mexican families were even vandalized.23

In short, harassment played a role in the lives of immigrants in the oil region. In many ways their lives differed from life in the coal company towns. This is best exemplified by taking a closer look at the Butler County oil boom, which occurred several years later, beginning in 1915. This boom was better documented and was a much larger, more permanent boom than any oil strikes which had occurred previously in Kansas. By taking a much closer look at the Butler County boom, a better picture of immigrant life can be gleaned from the experiences recorded there.

The best documented oil field in Kansas is the region encircling the community of El Dorado. This also includes the other oil towns of Towanda, Augusta, Oil Hill, Midian, and Haskin's Camp. The first extensive oil drilling began in this area in December 1914. During the next year, many experimental wells were drilled with some success, but it was not until October 6, 1915, when the Wichita Natural Gas Company hit a heavy showing of oil at Stapleton No. 1, that the region began to boom. This was the beginning of an oil strike the likes of which have not been witnessed since in the history of the state.24

The excitement and problems which ensued were ones which few planners in the region were prepared to handle. Workers from many other oil and coal fields poured into the small Butler County agricultural towns looking for work and a place to stay. In eighteen months, El Dorado went from a depressed agricultural shipping point to a bustling town of over ten thousand people. Augusta went from less than fourteen hundred inhabitants to nearly four thousand. A sizable percentage of these workers were immigrants.

The El Dorado Republican did an outstanding job of reporting the influx of newcomers, as well as presenting daily reports of wells dug and new leases signed. Among the newcomers, the Republican noted a number of Greek, Italian, German, British, and even some Jewish immigrants among the wild and boisterous bunch that arrived. The Topeka Daily Capital of October 11, 1916, reported that many of these immigrants included "drillers, tool dressers, rigging slingers, carpenters, and teamsters, men who for the most part followed the oil game from camp to camp, mostly single men without responsibilities and who drew from $5-$8 per day and [were] in the habit of spending their money wisely."26

The first problem that faced many of the immigrants was housing. Hotels and boardinghouses were filled immediately. That left everyone else dependent on spare rooms and makeshift shacks for existence. The Capital also noted that the workers had "created a demand for houses and rooms, and rentals [had] gone sky high. Many people [were] living in barns and tents... One family was renting a barn for as much as it would cost [to rent] a comfortable home in Topeka. Spare rooms [went] for $50 a month."27

A reporter from the Kansas City Star noted similar incidents at about the same time: "Rents have advanced 200 to 300 percent. Queer structures, half tents, half shacks, are fitted in impudently between old buildings."28

New communities such as Midian and Oil Hill were established in the middle of the oil fields, and both attracted populations of over three thousand each by the end of the First World War. Midian had its share of immigrants, but Oil Hill, a town built by the Cities Service Gas Company, claimed to have few if any immigrants living there. Of the once vibrant Oil Hill community an observer proudly proclaimed, "the population of Oil Hill is 100 percent American. Every employee is white, and 'none speak a foreign language and all are native-born Americans!'"29

Life for the immigrant worker in the Butler County fields differed little from his experiences in other oil company camps, except that housing was tighter. This housing shortage made interrelationships with others of the same ethnic group next to impossible. Life-style also differed very little from that of the native-born worker in reference to day-by-day activities. There were no clubs or organizations that were unique to a particular ethnic group. The immigrant was obliged to join the same clubs, play on the same baseball teams, and eat at the same restaurants as the other laborers. The assimilation of the immigrant oil field worker was complete.

While many of the immigrants who came to the Butler County fields were rig workers, some were involved in other services. In El Dorado, a number of Greek businessmen set up places of business. They owned grocery and hardware stores and shops that sold general lines of parts and equipment for oil rigs. Although the feeling of cultural identity no longer seemed to bind the immigrant worker in the field, the Greeks maintained a sense of identity among themselves and their businesses; perhaps they held a deeper sense of permanence, of belonging to a community as respectable business representatives, because they were not dependent on following the oil rigs. To show their appreciation to the community they called home, many of the Greek business owners pooled their resources and in 1920 they donated $5,000 for a bronze fountain to beautify El Dorado. The Greeks came to El Dorado to stay, and this was a way of showing their appreciation to their clientele.30

Many Jewish immigrants also came to El Dorado and established service-related businesses in the oil fields. The most famous immigrant was Isador Molk who recounted his experiences of life in El Dorado in his book, The Making of an Oilman. A Talmudic scholar born in Russia, Molk learned about oil field equipment while working in the Ohio oil fields.

When news of the rich El Dorado strikes in 1915 and 1916 reached the press, oil and several of his

25. Stratton and Kliment, The Kingdom of Butler, 117; Kansas City Kashrus, March 29, 1918. Issues of the El Dorado Republican for late 1915 and most of 1916 are fascinating record keepers for this extensive boom. By 1918 El Dorado had a population estimated at nearly twenty thousand.
27. Ibid., July 29, 1916.
29. Kliment, Oil Hill, 63.
The oil boom attracted workers to southern Kansas and drastically altered the lives of long-time residents. For many, life came to revolve around a well's production capabilities. This photograph from Augusta, Kansas, was captioned "over 25 barrels an hour."

One newspaper described the oil workers as "men who for the most part followed the oil game from camp to camp." Pictured are teamsters at Allen County's Liberty Well No. 1.
Jewish friends left to establish new businesses in Kansas. Some opened hotels and boardinghouses; Molk started a junk business selling used rope, pipe, and rig parts. What started as a business with a few dollars profit turned into a major enterprise netting thousands of dollars monthly. Later, in the 1920s, Molk formed the Cosmic Oil Company, which used secondary recovery techniques to revitalize old wells.

Isador Molk was an immigrant who made a substantial fortune in the El Dorado fields, but as he expressed it, he lost everything during the depression years. Nevertheless, immigrants like Molk and other Jewish and Greek businessmen proved that money could be made by them, as well as by their counterparts who labored daily in the oil-drenched fields.

The coming of World War I brought an increased suspicion aimed at all foreign-born immigrants in the oil fields. The general belief was that many of them were spies, agents, and saboteurs. The immigrants most closely scrutinized were those of German and Austrian birth. Most suspicions were based on paranoia; some were not.

The following reminiscence by Evaline Edmiston of Towanda illustrates a good example of this “immigrant paranoia”:

I feel sure that during that first year a German spy roomed alone in a shack in our yard. He worked in a busy local restaurant. He posed as a sort of knucklehead, without much intelligence. We knew he had a fine singing voice. He often hummed or sang snatches of songs as he passed to and from his work. One of our neighbors, who loved good music, made an effort to be sitting on her front porch that she might hear him as he passed. When his rent was due, he would stop at the door and pay mother, but he talked little until late one evening, after he had been there several months. He dropped by, came in, paid his rent, and sat and chatted for an hour or more. He said his home was in New York; that he had sung on the stage; that he had a speaking acquaintance with the Teddy Roosevelt boys and was in Buffalo at the time McKinley was shot. He was interesting, had a good speaking voice and used good English. Next morning when I went out to clean his room, both he and his few belongings were gone. He was not again heard from.

Paranoia was accelerated by the fact that the natural resource was crude oil and that the El Dorado fields were transporting most of their crude for use overseas in the war. Soldiers were stationed throughout the area to guard against bombings that could slow down the flow of the much needed oil to Europe. Searchlights were installed atop oil derricks, and their beams flashed across the prairie. Most of the guards were used after sundown, but a few, employed during the day and disguised as workers, were to look for German spies.

Nearly everyone in the region with any kind of an accent was watched carefully. One popular rumor was that German immigrants in the area selling poisoned cider to local soldiers. This led to the confiscation of eight hundred gallons of the suspected cider in a raid one night in 1917. Other German immigrants were suspected of peddling goods infected with tetanus germs. Several German peddlers were apprehended and escorted out of Butler County.

Much of the spy activity, real or rumored, was blamed on the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW). The IWW was suspected of being linked to every instance of sabotage committed by immigrant oil field workers, and in fact, IWW members openly sought to recruit members in the Butler County fields at that time. The IWW was responsible for a few recorded incidents. They were held accountable for torching wooden oil rigs, burning the Midian welfare hall, setting fire to two structures at the same time in Midian at different ends of town, and in attempting to blow up the central station of the Prairie Pipe Line four miles south of El Dorado. Fifty members of the IWW were indicted in the U.S. District Court at Wichita for “conspiracy to interfere with the oil production of the Mid-Continent field.”

Despite the acts of violence, the actual percentage of immigrants who were involved in the organization was very small in comparison to the feverish paranoia and suspicion against all immigrants who characterized this time period. It is no wonder that this area became a popular stronghold for the Ku Klux Klan just a few years later.

Immigrant life in the oil fields changed drastically from the time the first immigrants arrived in the bustling coal mining towns in the 1870s to the end of World War I. The most important point to consider is that the feeling of identity and ethnic ties had nearly vanished. The very nature of oil field work radically changed this together-

33. Ibid., 184-85.
ness. In the coal mining towns, homes and structures were more permanent; in the oil fields there was constant pressure and challenge to move from one strike to another. Permanent housing which allowed a close identity with one's own ethnic group was not of primary importance.

El Dorado represented one of the earliest and largest oil booms in the history of the state. Yet, in spite of its enormous potential, it was not permanent. In a few years, the boom slackened and many immigrants moved on again. The El Dorado boom illustrates a good example of those immigrants who based their livelihoods on business and service-related occupations instead of actual rig work. Most of these men, like Isador Molk, stayed in the area even after the boom had subsided.

Today, most of the oil company towns are gone. As an example, I was once shown an empty grass-covered field and was led to believe that I was looking at Oil Hill. Later, to my amazement, I found that my tour guide was right.

The title of this article, "We Are All in This Together," could best apply to those hardworking closely linked early coal miners. It does not apply to the oil field immigrant who became an independent agent, providing for himself and his family in the search for the Great American Dream.

Perhaps Rolla Clymer, editor of the El Dorado Times for decades, said it best when he wrote the following about the oil field workers, although it seems especially true when it pertains to the immigrant oil worker in particular: "They came among us...a strange and unique breed of stout-hearted men, equal to whatever event or fortune should try them. They passed their time, then death "rose and smiled" and took them away. It is our memory of them...that holds the past and the present together." 36

36. Quoted in Miner, The Fire in the Rock, 68.