

# YOU'VE COME A LONG WAY BABY!

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A casual view of the 2,200 acre property adjacent to the San Jacinto Ship Channel does not fully attest to the value and the influence that the Exxon Refinery possesses for its Baytonian neighbors. The refinery has undergone significant changes to achieve its present status as one of the largest and most productive refineries in the world. What was once "a great rice field shimmering in the sun with nothing but sena beans, man-high, making a sea of green as far as the eye could reach" is now a zenith of industrial excellence.<sup>1</sup> Through continuous growth, modification and improvement, the Exxon plant evolved from an idea, to a primitive operation, and then finally to the sophisticated operation that it is today.

The Exxon Company began as the Humble Oil and Refining Company which was officially chartered on June 21, 1917. The Board of Directors included Ross S. Sterling as President and W. S. Farish, R. L. Blaffer and H. C. Weiss as vice presidents.<sup>2</sup> On April 16, 1919, the blueprints for the refinery were laid out by a small group of engineers on the porch of an old farmhouse.<sup>3</sup> At that time, the lonely farmhouse was the only building on the property, which was mainly forest and swamp-land, "almost impenetrable."<sup>4</sup>

A large number of workers were hired at the then generous wage of 40¢ an hour. Despite the high wages, however, labor turnover was high.<sup>5</sup> This fluctuation in the labor force resulted from the severe environmental conditions under which the men had to work. Located on the upper end of Galveston Bay, the site of the new refinery was infested with flies, malaria-carrying mosquitos, grasshoppers and a variety of poisonous snakes. Also, construction workers faced almost intolerable weather conditions. As reported by one source:

"it rained for one hundred days straight, and storms in May harrassed workers and wrecked buildings and equipment. The earth, when dry, was as hard as cement, but when the rains commenced, it grew slippery and sticky. It balled up on the feet and shovels of workers and clogged ditching machines until they racked themselves to pieces."<sup>6</sup>

A significant inconvenience and example of the primitive conditions at the Humble compound lay with the laundry. Because of the warm temperatures, high humidity and constant rain, dirty clothes became more soiled with mold and mildew. There were no laundry facilities on the premises, so the men had to send their clothes on a boat to be cleaned. Often it would take weeks for the cleaned laundry to be returned.<sup>7</sup>

With these conditions, it is not surprising that Dr. Charles M. Aves was soon called to duty in August, 1919, as Humble's first company physician.<sup>8</sup> Soon after reporting for duty, Dr. Aves, realizing the overwhelming work load and the need for additional help, wrote a letter to a former soldier, under his command during World War I, asking for his assistance. Norman Brooks Culver, "Doc" to his friends, received the letter with enthusiasm and readily accepted the position offered. Much of our insight into the very primitive conditions of Humble at its start comes from "Doc" Culver's memoirs.<sup>9</sup> His appointments as "overseer" to the small company hospital paid \$125 per month, a modest sum by today's standards. The



*"Refinery Finery"*  
Typical wet weather dress in the refinery.



*"Tent Town"*  
A 1920 photo of Humble Oil & Refining Co. as work progresses. The building in the right foreground is the old rice farm homestead, first used as an engineering office. Other buildings are the mess hall, office buildings and warehouse. The tents in the background housed the workers.

wage did not even include room and board which totaled \$8.50 per week.<sup>10</sup> Following Mr. Culver's arrival, and as a progressive move, the company sent Dr. Aves to Houston to organize a medical department for the entire Humble company.<sup>11</sup>

The temporary hospital served as a microcosm of the primitive conditions existing all over the refinery grounds. Aves described the hospital as being similar to "an army regimental hospital . . . with eight beds for white men and tents for negroes and Mexicans." No nurses were on the premises "because we have no place to keep them, and on account of the mud."<sup>12</sup> The wood frame building was relatively small, with one door, "some eight or ten small windows" maybe five feet from the floor and screened. A wooden canopy in front of the establishment acted as its only source of shade. A wood burning stove in the center of the "waiting room" with a tea kettle full of water served as its only source of heat and hot water.<sup>13</sup> All of the washbasins drained onto the ground under the structure, only adding to the already enormous problem with mud.

Cases observed in the small, wood frame hospital ranged from something as minor as a hangover to something as major as a severely fractured skull or severe burns. One of the cooks in mess hall number 4, known as "Frank" made a concoction from dried fruit that evidently turned out very tasty and "extremely intoxicating." The name given to this inebriating beverage was "prune juice." It was not uncommon, following a wild night of "prune juice parties," for the hospital to treat many a case of acute headache. Lined up in iron cots along the wall, the patients bore witness to an assortment of afflictions. In one bed might be a patient with a knife or bullet wound, in the next, conceivably, someone with a snake or spider bite. Sufferers with infections and/or severe eye irritation might fill the next few beds. Broken or even amputated limbs, not uncommon infirmities, shared quarters with patients who suffered high fever from sunburn or malaria mosquitos. Outside would be tents filled with victims of smallpox, typhoid, influenza and pneumonia.

The small hospital often overflowed with illness, and extra tents would have to be set up to house the infirmed.<sup>14</sup> At times, hundreds of injections would be given in a single day. Many medications came in tablet form and had to be dissolved in a teaspoon of water and boiled over an alcohol lamp before being drawn into a syringe and injected into the injured with a lengthy, painstaking process.<sup>15</sup>

Food poisoning from the company mess halls was a continuous problem both for the employees and for the doctors. With no mechanical refrigeration, food spoiled easily.<sup>16</sup> Home canned items such as oysters were a frequent source of the poison.<sup>17</sup> Vomiting and diarrhea were common ailments to the men on the compound. There were "not near enough toilets to accommodate the sick." "In the moonlight night, one could look over the rice fields and see men squatting down by the dozens, like some animal."<sup>18</sup>

The refinery provided an old army tent for its employees with one light bulb in the center and a steel cot for each man. "Bathrooms" were set up at the end of each row of tents. A friendly negro, "Honey Boy," disposed of the contents in the five gallon cans.<sup>19</sup> Separate camps served blacks and Mexicans.<sup>20</sup> The white collar workers (clerical help, engineers, etc.) had their camp complete with private mess halls while top management enjoyed wood frame houses. All of the facilities were color coded for the different races.<sup>21</sup>

Even considering the severe weather conditions and the extraordinary illness record, according to the *History of Humble Oil and Refining Company*, "the weakest point in Humble's employee situation in the 1920's was the continued high accident rate." In 1921, the hospital report for 1920 showed that out of 1,000 em-

ployees. 2,266 accident cases occurred. "Out of the 2,266 accident cases, 506 (almost one fourth of the cases) were injuries to the eyes, which in most instances could have been avoided had the men worn glasses."<sup>22</sup>

In an effort to reduce the accident rate, the company initiated health and safety committees. Men were soon ordered to wear "metal helmets, safety shoes and goggles, gloves, and gas masks when handling noxious crudes."<sup>23</sup> The Committee on Health and Sanitation was set up in March 1921 to oversee the "water supply, sanitation, locker and washroom equipment, occupational diseases, elimination of unhealthful working conditions, hospitals, first aid, etc."<sup>24</sup> One interesting contrast to this great concern for safety comes from the same issue of the company's publication, *The Humble Bee* that boasts of the soon-to-come Acid Recovery Plant that would "help in eliminating the mosquito nuisance as we will have *plenty of fumes* to spare. Might be well to warn the men when they are visiting this plant or working there not to wear any jewelry or carry any metallic objects which they do not want *corroded*!" For what we considered a modern industrial operation at the time, it is obvious the company still had much to learn. We can laugh today at their outward ignorance but be glad that fortunately, times did change, and such a blatant violation of personnel safety would not go unchecked today.

A serious violation of the new safety rules was smoking on the job. Employees were instructed not to smoke and to carry only safety matches on refinery grounds.<sup>25</sup> The company boasted of its fine fire protection squad but protested at having to put out fires started by careless employees.<sup>26</sup> Men were warned "once again" in the May issue of the *Humble Bee* to abide by the company's rules or be discharged. By the June issue "several men [had] sacrificed their jobs by deliberately SMOKING!!"<sup>27</sup>

Steady improvement of the company's injury record was soon testimony to the progress being made. During the decade from 1934 to 1944, Humble had reported 341 disabling injuries and 4 fatalities. The accident report from 1954 to 1964 was a vast improvement – disabling injuries totaling 142, fatalities remaining at four. Over the last ten years, Exxon has had only a reported 21 disabling injuries and no fatalities. Today, eight Exxon employees devote their time entirely to the promotion of safety at the Exxon Baytown Refinery and millions of dollars are spent each year on various incentive programs and safety measures.<sup>28</sup>

Other matters urgently requiring attention were the length of the work week and the growing need for a stable working force of high quality.<sup>29</sup> Management clearly understood that satisfied employees worked better than dissatisfied employees, and such satisfaction would lead to greater profits. As early as May, 1921, Humble established a program for a 48-hour week, a considerable improvement from the previous 60-hour week. Humble employees now worked only five full days with Saturday being a half day.<sup>30</sup>

One more step to betterment was taken in 1930 with the formation of the Mutual Benefit Association. The MBA was, and still is, "strictly an employee-owned and operated institution. The association has provided competent, low cost, medical service through diagnosis and treatment of ailments in their early stages." The monthly dues of \$1.00 covered all outpatient medical expenses. The MBA still operates today with monthly dues of \$6.00, but with the option of including spouses of employees for a minor additional charge. MBA officials soon hoped to include the children of the Exxon employees.<sup>31</sup>

By 1935, nearly every issue of the *Humble Refinery Bee* carried news of sickness benefits plans, industrial accident benefits and low cost protection to the

majority of employees for group life insurance. Also in 1935, Humble allowed for the renovation of its medical facilities and extended their service to include such privileges as periodic medical examinations for all employees without cost.<sup>32</sup>

In 1945 the fight for better conditions continued. The company "wage[d] extensive war on disease-carrying pests in [the] refinery. Residents [were] urged to use similar measures in homes to improve community health standards."<sup>33</sup> As still one more example of Humble's modification and improvement, the Refinery Hospital was enlarged and "air-conditioned throughout."<sup>34</sup> The air-conditioning was an especially innovative move for 1945.

Under the heading of "community service," Humble shared its substantial wealth with the people of Baytown. In 1946, Humble company donated \$500,000 to the construction of the San Jacinto Memorial Hospital, a new community hospital, which is still in full operation.<sup>35</sup> Between the years 1947 and 1953, Humble spent three million dollars on a pollution control program, an amount ostensibly increased by three million more over 1953 and 1954.<sup>36</sup> These two gestures are representative of the value and influence the Baytown, Exxon Refinery possesses.

In 1983, Exxon was awarded one of the highest acclaimed honors in the industry. The coveted "President's Award" acknowledged them as being the safest refinery in the country.<sup>37</sup> Once nothing more than "a great rice field," today's Exxon employs over 3,000 employees and has the capacity to refine over 350,000 barrels of crude per day.<sup>38</sup> The benefits offered to its employees are both generous and extensive, and conditions at the Baytown refinery are nothing if not optimum. Had Humble not set up operations on that 2,200-acre tract across from the ship channel, there would have been no Baytown. Exxon did not *come to* Baytown, rather Baytown *came from* Exxon. It brought with it people, jobs and opportunity for all.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>"Baytown," *Humble Bee*, 26 May 1921, Vol. 1, No. 11, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>"A Look at our Beginnings," personal scrapbook.

<sup>3</sup>Henrietta M. Larson and Kenneth Wiggins Porter, *History of Humble Oil and Refining Company*, 1st edition. (Business History Foundation, Inc., 1959), p. 96.

<sup>4</sup>"Baytown," p. 1.

<sup>5</sup>Norman B. Culver, memoirs on tape, tape 1.

<sup>6</sup>"A Look at Our Beginnings,"

<sup>7</sup>Culver, memoirs, tape 1.

<sup>8</sup>Larson and Porter, p. 97.

<sup>9</sup>Norman Brooks Culver came to Baytown in 1919 and stayed with Humble through its transition as Enjay, Enco and finally Exxon. He eventually retired from Exxon in 1958. Mr. Culver died in 1981, a respected citizen of the Baytown community and a valued friend of many. He left behind him a wealth of information on Baytown's "Early Day."

<sup>10</sup>Norman B. Culver, personal scrapbook, 1919-1980.

<sup>11</sup>Larson and Porter, p. 97.

<sup>12</sup>Culver, personal scrapbook.

<sup>13</sup>Culver, memoirs, tape 2.

<sup>14</sup>Culver, memoirs, tape 1.

<sup>15</sup>Culver, memoirs, tape 2.

<sup>16</sup>Culver, memoirs, tape 1.

<sup>17</sup>Betsy Webber, "Doc Describes Refinery Hospital in 1919," *The Baytown Sun*, 4 July 1976, p. 6-D.

<sup>18</sup>Culver, memoirs, tape 1.

<sup>19</sup>Culver, memoirs, tape 1.

<sup>20</sup>Photographs, Sterling Municipal Library, Baytown, Texas, number 150.

<sup>21</sup>Culver, memoirs, tape 1.

<sup>22</sup>"Hospital Report 1920," *Humble Bee*, 14 April 1921, Vol. 1, No. 5, p. 1.

<sup>23</sup>Walter Rundell Jr., *Early Texas Oil: A Photographic History 1866-1936*, 1st edition (Bryan: Texas A&M University Press, 1971), p. 122.

- <sup>24</sup>*Humble Bee*, 17 March 1921, Vol. 1, No. 1, p. 1.
- <sup>25</sup>"Once Again," *Humble Bee*, 19 May 1921, Vol. 1, No. 10, p. 1.
- <sup>26</sup>"Fire Protection," *The Humble Bee*, 5 May 1921, Vol. w, No. 8, p. 1.
- <sup>27</sup>*Humble Bee*, 2 June 1921, Vol. 1, No. 12, p. 1.
- <sup>28</sup>Jack Bonczynski, Exxon Safety Director, personal interview: 30 January 1984.
- <sup>29</sup>Larson and Porter, p. 98.
- <sup>30</sup>*Humble Bee*, 12 May 1921, Vol. 1, No. 9, p. 1.
- <sup>31</sup>Doris Sherron, Mutual Benefit Association, personal interview: 24 January 1984.
- <sup>32</sup>"Baytown Medical Department Enlarges Facilities and Extends Services," *The Humble Refinery Bee*, 21 November 1935, no Vol., no No., p. 4.
- <sup>33</sup>"Refinery Health Program Intensified," *The Humble Refinery Bee*, September 1945, no Vol., no No., p. 6.
- <sup>34</sup>"Refinery Hospital to be Enlarged," *The Humble Refinery Bee*, December 1945, no Vol., no No., p. 6.
- <sup>35</sup>"Memorial Hospital Plans Completed," *The Humble Refinery Bee*, November 1945, no Vol., no No., p. 6.
- <sup>36</sup>"3 Million Program Set on Pollution," *The Baytown Sun*, 10 October 1953, p. 1.
- <sup>37</sup>Jack Bonczynski, personal interview.
- <sup>38</sup>Baytown, Texas City Directory, 1952-53, p. 159.

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