Oil Field Camp Wives and Mothers

by Grace Dobler

Women whose husbands and fathers worked in Kansas oil fields during the boom years of the early 1900s have a legacy of experiences as wives and mothers making homes and caring for families in oil field camp settlements. From the legacy, three recorded oral histories are presented here from interviews with women who lived in Greenwood County oil field camps. Their personal stories also are histories that give us a wider view of oil camp life thirty to sixty-five years ago.

The background of these particular women and their families—"oil field people"—living in "oil field camps"—is connected to the period following the petroleum industry's move from depleted oil fields back east, opened in the late 1850s in Pennsylvania, Ohio, Indiana and Illinois, to the prairies of Kansas and the oil fields of Oklahoma and Texas.1 Between the 1890s and the 1920s, settlements of oil field families began to dot the oil-rich prairie pastures and farmlands.2 As new oil fields were opened on company-leased lands—usually remote from other communities—oil firms provided housing on the leases in small settlements which oil field people called "camps."

To the general public, the phrase "oil field camp" when used in connection with the history of petroleum development in Kansas, may not be as familiar or denote the same sense of excitement as do the terms "oil strike," "gusher," or "boomtown." However, the camp was important to those whose daily lives were related to the oil fields, for the camp's cluster of company houses was home.

"Boomtown" and "oil field camp" often are given the same meaning, but they were not the same. Most oil boomtowns had been platted and recorded in earlier years as frontier or early railroad towns, long before oil was discovered near them. City officials were elected, and in due time public facilities were built.3 On the other hand, oil field camps were temporary and located on oil company leases of privately owned farms or pastur-lands. Five to fifteen houses usually made up a camp, with some camps having bunk and boardinghouses for men without families. The Seeley camp in Greenwood County, however, was large, having at one time sixty to seventy-five houses.4

The typical company house was rather flimsy because it was not built for a permanent site. The walls were of single construction, rooms were arranged in a row, one after the other from front to back, and outside and inside doors were centrally located. Because of this particular room arrangement, the houses were known as "shotgun" houses. According to lore, the name shotgun house came about because, as someone, somewhere, at sometime observed, a person facing the door at either end of the house could fire a shotgun and the shot would go straight through the building and come out the other side.5

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3. No plat for oil field camps could be found in Greenwood County courthouse records.
5. For other references to oil towns, see William Allen Green, Midian, Kansas: History of an Oil Boom Town (Wichita: Copycat Service Co., 1964), 131; Madison News, January 22, 1920.
6. Alice Long mentioned the shotgun houses in her interview, using this name. Descriptions were also given in the Dunham, Beeman, and additional interviews, which were collected for the Greenwood County Museum but not quoted here. Lawrence P. Klinsworth, Oil Hill: The Town That Cites Service Built (El Dorado: Butler County Historical Society, 1977), 63.
Camps were usually ten to twenty miles from the nearest town. However, most settlements had a grocery store, and larger camps often had more than one store, besides other places of business. There was a schoolhouse in or near each camp, and usually a post office, although some camps were on mail routes.6

Through the work and conditions of oil field life, oil field people, as a group, were distinctive as were those of other occupational backgrounds. Oil field people, because of their often isolated and self-contained camps and the impermanence of their places of work, formed close family-like associations with each other that became, for many, lasting friendships through the years.

The image of oil field workers does not seem to appeal to the general public as does, for instance, the cowboy and his horse. But oil field workers, roustabouts, tool dressers, drillers, teamsters and pumphers, laboring in the oil fields in dirty, greasy, and often dangerous conditions, required many of the same admirable physical characteristics as the cowboy.7 Working in the oil fields took strength, stamina, and a toughness of mind and nerve. The wives, mothers, and daughters of these men needed matching qualities of fortitude, and they had it.

6. Verna Beeman and Essie Dunham interviews, 1981; additional interviews held in the oral history collection, Greenwood County Museum.


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*This undated map of Greenwood County's oil fields pinpoints the location of oil camps—Seeley, Burkett, Teter, and Scott—discussed by the women in their interviews.*
As a lot, the workers were generally considered by others as “tough,” in a derogatory sense. But, in truth, as individuals, they were as varied in personality as one would find among persons in other groups of our society. Alongside the tough element—the loudmouths, brawlers, and general troublemakers—were the steady, dependable men who were responsible employees and good husbands and fathers. Among the oil field employees it was not uncommon to find boys of fifteen or sixteen years of age; they supported themselves and some were likely to help financially press parents to support the family.

The pumper, one who operated and maintained pumping units for transferring piped oil to storage tanks, usually lived outside the main camp at a distance from perhaps half a mile to several miles away. He earned a higher wage than a roustabout who worked on drilling rigs, and oil companies sometimes provided the pumper and his family with larger quarters, perhaps a house of four or five rooms. An oil field wife had reason to be pleased and a little proud if her husband got to be a pumper. An employee in that position was likely to be a settled and dependable family man; in the Greenwood County oil fields, a pumper and his wife were often natives of the Greenwood and Butler County areas.

From earliest oil boom years—beginning in 1915 and on into the 1950s—oil field communities were pretty, much self-contained. Since they were mostly isolated, and in the early years, lacked ready transportation, residents had to keep close to their camp homes dependent upon neighbors and friends for social life and help in emergencies.

Not every family owned a car in those first years, and when automobiles did become the usual mode of travel, breakdowns, flat tires, and bad roads had to be reckoned with. Before “all weather” roads, the roads and travel were affected by all kinds of weather. In wet weather, mud could be hub deep, with flooding and washouts. During winter months, heavy snows made roads impassable until they were cleared, sometimes days later. Hot, droughty days of summer meant sweltering in the heat as one bumped along on washboard, dust-fogged roads. Going “to town” was not a casual undertaking if town was some distance away.

Women who had never learned to drive a car—and there were a number of them well into the 1940s—depended on their husbands, friends, and neighbors for leaving camp. In emergencies, there might be several offers to take a sick child or injured husband to the doctor, but having a way to town for the seldom urgent matters of shopping for a new hat or on a rare occasion going to the beauty shop could mean waiting patiently—or impatiently.

Oil field wives, mothers, and daughters “made do” in those distant oil field communities, knowing hardships and stressful conditions. Yet, they also very much enjoyed the simple pleasures as they found them and as they made them. The women met the challenges of loneliness, sickness, cramped housing, and hard work by having close family ties and forming sincere friendships. Where they found a need for social and cultural activities, they organized clubs or extended hospitality in their small homes. Friends and relatives met for such entertainments as card games, homemade ice cream, or musical entertainments provided by those who played instruments and enjoyed playing and singing together to appreciative listeners.

Oil field camp women organized groups which included the Parent-Teacher Association, Home Demonstration units, study clubs, and Sunday school classes. They supported school improvements and, when needed, helped with special school events. Most camps had a school in or near them, attended by camp children and other pupils in the district. Oil field districts had especially good school systems because of added tax revenues from oil production within the district.

Typical of rural districts, the schoolhouse also was the social and cultural center. Monthly community meetings, featuring local talent, and the school programs for Christmas and the last day of school, presented by the teacher and pupils, were the main entertainments for most families outside their homes.

9. Mildred Wilson Smith, interview with author, 1981, oral history collection, Greenwood County Museum. Mrs. Smith, now of Eureka, Kansas, lived in the Sallisards camp for forty years; Sarah Lettie Thompson, Our Fifty Years in the Oil Fields of Ohio, Illinois and Kansas, and the Friends We Have Known (N.p., 1950), 3; Green, Midian, Kansas, 84. One woman recalled that parents signed releases for teenage boys to work for the oil companies during the summer months, and these boys were expected to work with an older, experienced person. She and her husband had signed a work release for their son in 1930 when he was seventeen years old. I assume this release requirement was in compliance with stricter child labor laws from the Fair Labor Standards Act passed in 1938. Ada Churchman, interview with author, 1983.
10. Verna Beeman, Essie Dunham, Alice Long interviews and additional 1981 interviews, oral history collection, Greenwood County Museum. See also Green, Midian, Kansas, 86-87; Klimworth, Oil Hill, 19.
11. This was particularly brought out in the interviews with Dunham and Long.
12. Doris McGhee, interview with author, 1981, oral history collection, Greenwood County Museum. For another reference to the importance of music, see Thompson, Our Fifty Years in the Oil Fields, 16-18.
"Suppers" at the schoolhouse were social gatherings for visiting and eating with friends and neighbors. There were soup suppers and potluck suppers. Some were planned on a regular basis but others were "gotten up" just for special occasions, the "special occasions" conveniently coming along often as a reason for meeting. Most districts had a yearly pie and box supper, although it was held on a monthly community meeting night, following the program. Women of the neighborhood—giggling girls and staid wives—brought home-baked pies, cakes, and, most important, hand-decorated boxes filled with good food from their own kitchens to be "auctioned off for a worthy cause" to bashful boys and well-instructed husbands.

Friends and neighbors met informally in their homes for visiting, card games, candy making, music and, at one home, croquet by gas torchlights on summer evenings. Men enjoyed fishing and horseshoe pitching, and they participated in baseball games on Sunday afternoons. Groups gathered for ice cream socials, and in some camps there were dances. At Seeley, dances were held during the thirties in the Birtiel Garage, which was also the place for a big Halloween party each year when people came in costume and masquerade. In the mid-1930s, Seeley people organized and held a three-day fair with good exhibits from the surrounding towns and farms.13

The majority of Greenwood County women who knew the early oil boom times of this century, common to the period of their youth and of their backgrounds, did not have opportunities for more than an elementary education—in formal schooling. But those who were intelligent, inquiring minds, wide ranging and lively interests gave considerable thought and effort to encouraging educational and cultural opportunities within the camps and wider communities.

These women, now in their sixties, seventies and eighties, were the children, young wives, and mothers in the oil field camps fifty to sixty-five years ago. In 1981 eight of these women generously agreed to share memories of those historical years through taped interviews for the Greenwood County Museum.

Material from three of those interviews has been chosen to tell, through the women's recollections, something about that particular era in Kansas during the first half of the twentieth century as they saw and experienced it. They are representative of women whose lives were influenced by the "boom" and the petroleum industry. The three women also reflect the general philosophy and values of their generation, impressed upon them not only by family and community, but by sweeping national and world events, specifically the Great Depression and World War II.

The following interview material has been edited where necessary for easier reading. It is based on or quoted from taped reminiscences of Essie Dunham (Mrs. Jim), Verna Beeman (Mrs. Vonie), and Alice Long (Mrs. Howard). All still resided in Greenwood County at the time of the interviews.

**Essie Dunham: Seeley and Burkett Camps**

In her interview Essie Dunham, now of Madison, recalled some of her experiences in the Seeley and Burkett camps and made a brief reference to the Scott camp.

As a child, Essie lived on a farm in Anderson County until about 1920 when her father decided to give up farming to work in the booming oil fields of Greenwood County. He "got on" with Cities Service at the Seeley camp eight miles or so southwest of Madison. Essie's mother began running a boardinghouse in their home, and Essie helped with the work of preparing three meals a day, usually serving ten or twelve men. She explained:

All three meals were served because they [the men] just lived in the bunkhouse and [had] nowhere else to have their meals.

It was the Seeley gasoline plant. It was a plant, and they had the bunkhouses that they lived in and we fixed their breakfast for them, and they had to go back to work. And we'd have to go back into Madison to get our groceries [usually twice a week] which was quite a little drive, you know, and then we'd fix their dinner and their supper. And then we'd pack pails if they needed them packed to go out in the field.

In 1925 Essie married Jim Dunham, a Cities Service employee she had come to know at the boardinghouse, and they moved to Burkett, a camp six miles southwest of Seeley, where Dunham worked as a pumper. Essie remembered the Burkett camp house and the challenges she knew there in keeping house and rearing children:

They were little gray oil field houses... [Ours was a] Cities Service house, and we lived there a year. I expect, and then they moved it back into the field about a quarter of a mile. It was just two little rooms—a bedroom and a kitchen, and of course, we had to haul water... And it wasn't long until I had a couple of little ones come along and I had to wash on the board. Oh! I never will forget that. It was such a chore, and we had to haul water [besides]. And I can remember one

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Oil and gas fields, as well as pipelines such as those of Cities Service and Panhandle Eastern, are highlighted in the sectional map (ca. 1940) which includes Greenwood County.
time I rubbed a blister on my thumb and really had two red streaks that went to my shoulder, and I thought "Oh dear, I guess I'll die here leaving two little ones to take care of." Well, anyhow, I went to Doctor L— and he said, "You'll have to keep your hands out of water. It's never going to get well unless you do." Well, of course, I couldn't do that. I said, "With two little ones and washing diapers on the board?"

I remember one Christmas we thought we'd go have our pictures taken—for our Christmas gifts. We were still in the two little rooms and it was cold and stormy that day and we had a pretty good fire. Of course we burned the raw gas, and we had a range to heat by in the kitchen. I had washed that morning and I had hung the clothes around to get dry. So when we got back [from town], when we opened the house, the heat poured out, and that was the hottest place you ever saw. And even the gold fish were dead in the fish bowl. The eggs were cooked in the shell. The bed was too hot to go to bed in. I just never saw—I don't know what kept it from just bursting into flame. It was just terrible! But we finally got the house cooled down and the babies to bed.

Then after we lived that way awhile, he [her husband] built on a little back porch and we moved out there and just papered it with just these prints from newspapers' (chuckles). That's what we papered our kitchen with. It did help to have just a little more room. And as the years went by, why, we decided that we'd have a little more room. And we had an old building down by the garage and we moved it up onto the side of the house to make...more room. And, at the time, we decided we'd keep a couple of schoolteachers. They wanted a place to stay and we was close [to the Burkett School]. They knew us well and they wanted to come. We had a man schoolteacher, Mr. Knox from Piedmont, and then a lady [came] from down by Quincy... So we made room for them. We fixed her in the living room on the divan—that was her bed—and Mr. Knox slept in the little back room with my son, and they just had a lot of fun. And we had a lot of fun of an evening. We'd get together. We had lots of friends and good neighbors. And we got together and played a lot of cards, and we played croquet.

The Dunhams had a large croquet ground, lighted by gas torches for playing after dark or for having outdoor parties. The family lived just outside the main part of the Burkett camp which Essie described:

We lived in the north end of the camp and it was right across from the schoolhouse and just a half mile down—the road was a little grocery store. There was a camp [Burkett] there by the grocery store. I expect there was about eight houses down there in camp, and then there were about five or six houses just kind of between the camp and our place up by the schoolhouse—just strung along, not really in a camp. She also remembered when the first Burkett schoolhouse burned down:

One cold morning, I think it was the 7th of January.... Oh! It was so cold. And I'd gotten up to get breakfast ready for the schoolteachers...to get their lunch packed and all, and I looked out and saw this schoolhouse [burning]. And, of course, everybody come, gathered to take care of it [the fire], and it burned down and we had to build a new schoolhouse.

The new schoolhouse, built of brick, was torn down about thirty years later, in the early 1970s; it had not been used after school consolidation of the 1960s. At peak attendance during the 1930s and 1940s, there had been about thirty students in the two-room school.

Sunday school classes were held in the school building, and Essie was one of the Sunday school teachers. Occasionally church services were held there too. The school building was also a community center for several social functions in the camp area.

Burkett never had a post office; mail was delivered from Hamilton to Burkett. The Dunhams used ice, also delivered from Hamilton several times a week, for their homemade ice chest during their earlier years. Later, they were able to afford a kerosene refrigerator; it had to be lighted each night, and in the summer it made unwanted heat besides. Although they bought kerosene for use in their refrigerator, the oil company supplied free raw gas for heating, cooking, and light. Eventually, there was a charge of two dollars a month for gas, although for that price there was no limit to the amount used.

Not until the 1940s did Essie have electric powered conveniences such as an electric iron or electric fans. During those early years, she did the ironing on the kitchen table. She said that there was no room in the small house for an ironing board, nor money to buy one.

Typical of other camp residents, Burkett people also had to haul water, both for household use and for drinking. Essie recalled: "And we hauled water. We had to haul water all the time to wash with, to do our cooking, and everything...."

The Burkett camp began sometime around 1920, and it was booming when the Dunhams moved to the settlement in 1925. In giving a little of the camp background, Essie said:

It was a Cities Service camp. And, I think it was 1941, then, that Phillips took it over and we moved to Scott [a camp twelve miles west of Burkett] and worked for the Phillips over there.

Then we were transferred back to Burkett.... With Phillips.... At that time, it was quite a big camp then.
Essie Dunham, 1930s and 40s

Essie Dunham and daughter, Beverly, 1940s.

House at Burdett camp, 1930s.

Essie Dunham and children, James and Velma, early 1930s.
It had built up with Phillips... There were, I think, fifteen houses. It was just kind of headquarters there at Phillips.

As Mrs. Dunham recalled, Burkett, as a Phillips-owned camp, was at its peak in the 1940s. Oil field activity had declined by the 1950s, and in 1958 the camp was broken up.

**Verna Beeman: Seeley Camp**

The Seeley camp six miles northeast of Burkett, previously mentioned by Mrs. Dunham, was the home of Verna Beeman for more than thirty years. Verna was born in Missouri, and when she was two years old her parents went to Oklahoma. Ten years later the family came to El Dorado, Kansas, when the “boom was on.” She and Vonie Beeman, married in 1922, later came to Greenwood County to help his parents, the E. P. Beemans, run a grocery store and boardinghouse in the St. Louis oil field camp north of Virgil. After a year, both couples traveled to Idaho in their Model-T car and truck, camping along the way, to buy “cheap, cut-over land” they had heard about. Not caring for the Idaho land, they started back to Kansas the day after their arrival in Idaho—after doing the family wash. Back in Kansas, Vonie Beeman went to work for the Cities Service company, with which he was to stay for thirty-eight years. Most of those years were spent in the Seeley camp where the Beeman family also had a grocery store from 1924 to 1937. Verna worked in the store and helped manage it too.

Seeley was one of the larger camps because it had a gas plant. At peak population, there were from sixty to seventy-five houses in Seeley, housing employees from a number of oil companies: Cities Service, Skelly, York State, Magnolia, Phillips, and others. Verna described the camp and neighboring camps as she knew them:

At one time there was another store there at Seeley, it was down by the schoolhouse a mile south of us, but it burned down. When the field started, there was a cafe right there across from the store... It was kind of like a little town, you know, because there was so many people there. But it [the camp] just began... going down when the Phillips moved their camp over... by Teterville. They called that the “Green” field. At one time, Teterville... had a store and post office. They had a lot of people over there... [But] when one field went “down, why production went down... [then] they’d find somewhere else [to drill]... The “Green,” as Verna explained, was the name given to the new Phillips camp:

And it was [called] the “Green” field because there was three sisters that owned...all this land, and they [people] called it the “Green.” And they had a schoolhouse over there, and they had a schoolhouse up at Teterville, and it was not very far from the “Green.” They had a big schoolhouse up there [at Teterville].... About every place where there was a big camp... they had a schoolhouse. Burkett... had a nice schoolhouse.

Seeley had a nice school, too. During highest enrollment, about sixty pupils attended the school, as most Seeley families had four or five children during that period of the 1920s and 1930s.

Recalling Seeley housing, Verna thought of it as “pretty nice.” The houses, constructed by company builders, were usually three rooms and rented for four and five dollars a month. Although three-room houses were more numerous, there were larger ones. The Beeman family lived in a four-room house with bath. Verna described housing at Seeley and nearby camps:

The Phillips had nice houses. A four room house and they [each] had a bath, ‘cause they had water... and inside toilets. But, a lot of them had outside toilets, and they [the toilets] were W.P.A. projects. That was when the W.P.A. was workin’ lots of men... and they would put up those toilets outside. They were real nice. But a lot of the houses—they were all right. The York State camp—they were all modern houses... had their water and everything.

Asked if some of the oil firms built better houses than others for employees, Verna replied, “Well, some of them, but they were all pretty much the same.”

Water, in short supply, loomed as one of the foremost problems for nearly all of the women who lived in the camps. Farm and ranch women, too, belonged to the sisterhood of women who kept house and reared families without plenty of water. For Verna, however, water was not too much of a concern. As she said:

We didn’t have too much trouble because we had cans to haul it in, you know, and... had plenty of drinking water because we’d go to the schoolhouse. You see, the schoolhouse had a big cistern, and we got a lot of water there. And then we’d get a house on up north that had a good well, and we’d get water up there. It was well water. But we never... really had any trouble with it, because we had plenty of river water....

River water, she explained, had been piped to each house in Seeley by “the company,” for household use; farm families along the line used water from it too.

Verna did her washing once a week on a washboard, using water heated outside in boilers. She got her first
Verna Beeman, 1930s

Women's Club at Seeley camp, early 1930s - Verna Beeman, far left, front.

Verna Beeman, Seeley camp, 1930s.

Verna Beeman with husband, Varie.

Beeman Home on Seeley Lease.
washer, gasoline powered, in 1933 and changed some years after to an electric washer. Cooking was done with gas because of the plentiful supply from the company gas plant. Although there was electricity in the camp, ironing was done with gas irons or those heated on a stove.

Thinking back on her experiences as a storekeeper, Verna believed that they stocked their store with about the same basic supplies as seen in our stores of the 1980s. In the early years, a large icebox in the store kept perishables cold. When electricity came into rural areas, Beemans used electrical refrigeration for keeping meats and produce.

They did not buy fresh vegetables and fruit from nearby farmers, but did “take in” eggs which were then crated and sold to a produce business in Madison. Very few eggs were sold through the store because most families had a flock of chickens, including the Beeman family that had turkeys, too, which they sold.

The family had milk cows, bottling milk and cream to sell in the store. Taking care of milk and cream, washing and scrubbing milk buckets, separator parts, and bottles was no small task. Verna had that responsibility except for help in the summer when her high-school-age sister came to spend school vacation with the Beemans.

Besides groceries, Verna stocked a few dry goods: sheets, pillow cases and hose, and customers could buy chunks of ice for iceboxes and get gasoline from the pump by the store. However, there was no livestock or poultry feed kept on hand. Seeley folks, including the Beemans, bought most of their feed in Madison. Although the Beemans did not buy local produce, Verna did recall one instance when a farm woman came into the store wanting to sell apples:

A farm lady... came in one day and said she had some apples, wanted to know if I wanted some apples. I said, “No, I have apples... we get them from the wholesale house in Emporia.” She said, “Well, I’ve got lots of them.” And I said, “Well, if somebody comes in and wants some, I’ll tell them you have apples for sale.” She said, “I don’t want no oil field people.”... I said, “Well, alright.” But I never did tell anybody (chuckles) ‘cause I was oil field people too. But, that was kind of the way they felt. After a lot of them [oil field families] left, why they [farm folks] kinda got friendly with the ones that was left there. And they were nice people, too, the farmers were. I don’t know, seems as though they [had] thought oil field people was tough, following the camps, you know. But, then... there was a lot of tough people otherwise. But... everybody was nice—we thought.

A few of their customers did try to get out of camp without paying their grocery bills which by custom were paid monthly. A few never did pay bills, but the majority of people were honest and dependable customers.

Along with storekeeping chores and responsibilities, were the good times too. Some incidents brought good laughs when those concerned had a sense of humor. Verna chuckled about the unfortunate, but funny, plight of one of their customer friends:

One of our neighbors came in one morning. He had to come and get his milk every morning...they didn’t have an icebox. So he wanted a half gallon of syrup. So I got it for him... they had those old half gallon cans, you know, with a bail on it. When he got ready to go out, he picked this syrup up and the bail came off of it [the can]. I just had to laugh. I just laughed and laughed. He said, “Just for that, you can clean it up.” I said, “Well, it’s really worth it to see the look on your face.”

Sometimes there were also worrisome experiences:

There was a store on up north from us... about two miles north and a mile east on the corner, and it was robbed one night. We were always afraid, you know, that it would be us [next]. But we never had any trouble. But one evening there was some fellow came in... and he was an awful looking fellow. Jack Garrison, he... worked for the Phillips down there. He was in that evening. He stayed with me. He stayed for, oh, about two hours, and this fellow left.

After the suspicious-looking fellow left, Jack told Verna that although he had well that he was to “hook off” after stopping at the store, he was not going to leave her alone with the man because, as Jack said, he did not know “what the fellow might do.”

The Beemans’ store was one of the gathering places in the Seeley camp. Because the family lived in the back of their store for some years, customers and friends came at all hours to buy something or to visit and play cards. Verna recalled card games played during the evenings:

Nearly every night, there would be somebody come in to play pitch. Sometimes until eleven o’clock. And I’d worked all day and I was tired. But, then we did, we played pitch nearly every night [as] someone would come to play...

Card playing was a popular pastime either as a casual gathering at the store or in a friend’s home or in two card clubs. One club met during the day and the other met in the evening when both men and women could attend. Seeley people enjoyed other entertainments as well:

They had a P.T.A. down at the schoolhouse, and then, during the war... if any of the boys [service men] came home, we would have a dinner for them.
And if they wanted to dance, they could. We always had a dinner for the boys who came home on furlough. Our boy [Jonie Beeman, Jr.] came home and we had a real big doings down at the schoolhouse.

We had our ice cream parties and things in our yard after we moved out of the store. Then, Birtcil's Garage, that was the main place for entertainment. It was just up the hill from the store... and in the wintertime they had this stove [which burned gas] to keep them warm. [On] Halloween, we'd always decorate the garage with corn shocks, kaffir corn, all kinds of leaves and things. And there would be a big crowd there. Some would come dressed in masks....We always had a good time up there. And they had these suppers, soup suppers, chili suppers. Then they danced. They had Denny Cassel [now of Madison]. He played out there. He had several [that] played with him.... If somebody decided they wanted a party, they'd just tell Jack [Birtcil] they was gonna [have one]. That was it. There'd be a big crowd.... That's the way we did our entertainment. We didn't get in the car and take out somewhere.

The Seeley schoolhouse was another community center, and Verna talked about social events there too:

That's where they had the carnival, down at the schoolhouse. It was real nice too. Lots of people came. The clubs would have... penny supper[s] down there... and that's the way we made our money. The clubs would clean the schoolhouse and the school board would pay them for that. So we always had plenty of money for the bridge club and [other] clubs around 'cause we got out and did those things.

The P.T.A. put on many programs at the school, including plays which were exchanged with Burkett and other neighboring communities.

Seeley residents welcomed opportunities for a party. Verna remembered their yard as one of the popular summertime gathering places. It was kept mowed by her children, and it had lights for social events after dark. One time they had a "turkey sandwich" party when their neighbor's errant turkey kept getting out of its pen, usually coming to Beemans'. After the neighbor, Mr. Cassel, had gotten his turkey out of the Beeman yard numerous times, his exasperation inspired him with the party-making idea:

So he said one day, "I'm going to kill that turkey... and why don't we have sandwiches." So he killed it and we had sandwiches out in the yard, [with] covered dish. So things like that would come up...[and that's] what we did. Everybody was willing.

Alice McKnight Long: Teterville Camp

Six miles west of the Burkett camp, up in the Flint Hills, and about ten miles southwest of Seeley was another oil field camp, called Teterville. It was not really a camp as far as having a cluster of buildings in one small location. It was more of a scattered community of family dwellings, oil field buildings, and a store on the Teterville pasture lease.

Alice McKnight Long, former librarian at the Eureka library, lived at Teterville as a child during the 1920s. Her father, Carl L. McKnight, was "farm boss," in charge of all the work on the lease. She recalled, often humorously, childhood experiences and impressions of Teterville.

Whatever was in Tetter land at the time was called Teterville. There was another camp west, and they were probably half mile west of us. And then the store was probably a half mile north of us, and then there was a row of houses down the hill from the store. The Empire camp which was on over....it must have been a mile or more from our house. But then... after that, things filled in rapidly. They were developing more all the time.

This must have been about 1920. My mother had died and we had been living with an aunt and uncle in Oklahoma, and [with] my grandparents, and around. And daddy decided he wanted all of us together again so he hired a housekeeper, an elderly lady from Matfield [Green]. I was three at the time, I guess... And then daddy met and married my stepmother. She was cooking in...a boardinghouse.

We didn't have any trees. We could see the creek about five miles east of us, maybe, and there were trees there. But that was the only trees that we could see.

And when we first lived in Teterville, we lived in one of the shotgun houses, you know, a living room, a bedroom, and a kitchen, all in a row. And that's where we were living when mother [Alice's stepmother] and daddy were married. We didn't live there very long. Mother had a daughter, also, who was my age, so that made four children. And we moved once into a larger house. Not much larger, but I can remember having Christmas there and it was pleasant. So it must have been a nice little house. But then we moved into one of the nicer houses—in lease houses. And this one had a screened porch, and a front room, a living room, and a dining room—all of things—and the kitchen. Then it had... what we called a playroom and the greenhouse and all our toys and playthings.

And in the kitchen, somebody had installed an old wood range with gas burners in it, and that's what we cooked on. Well, I thought it was a wonderful thing... You didn't have to carry in wood; you didn't have to carry out ashes and so forth.

But it [the range] had its drawbacks too.... For example, mother got badly burned. One time she was washing daddy's clothes and had the boiler on the stove and the grease [from the clothes] boiled out onto the stove and caught fire and burned mother's face and she
Alice (McKnight) Long, 1920s

Jeterville camp, 1921—left to right, Alice McKnight Long; a friend; Eunice McKnight; Alice's sister; a friend; Laverne McKnight; Alice's brother; Opal McKnight; Alice's step-sister.

Jeterville, shotgun house, 1920s.

Jeterville, 1921—left to right, Laverne McKnight; two friends; Eunice McKnight on wheel; Opal and Alice McKnight standing.

Jot House, south end of Jeter Hill, 1920s.
Camp Wives and Mothers

started out the back door. And just then daddy came in and caught her. Otherwise she probably would have died of the burns, you know. But he caught her and put the fire out, brought her to town and she got along all right. She always laughed and said, "Well, that was one way to get rid of freckles." It burned her face so badly that the new skin was not freckled.

We were lucky in that we had a churn, and if it rained we had water and didn't have to haul it. And if it didn't rain—everybody hauled water from a big spring that was over west of Teterville somewhere. I couldn't locate it now. It was good water, and we just took milk cans and hauled water. But most of the time we had cistern water and it was right there. We also had a washhouse which was, you know, something special out there.

I remember my brother [her older brother Laverne]... well, he was always talking into doing something foolish. (chuckle) It was just when we had heard about parachutes and he talked me into going up on the roof of the washhouse with mother's umbrella and jumping off. Luckily it wasn't very high... I always followed him around—dogged his footsteps. And we walked to school, which was... probably a mile and a quarter. But I always went with Laverne and left Emie and Opal [sister and stepsister] to tag along behind. Laverne and I went across the pastures and hit all the wells and so forth and went in all the engine houses and got warm, waded all the deep snow drifts.

He had made a sled, at one time, and I was "allowed" to ride it down the hill for the try out, you know. Bumped into a snow bank and cut my lip. I guess that was just part of growing up.

And we had a swing set made of pipe in the ell of the house. This playhouse [or playroom] was built onto the house. It made an ell. In the afternoon, we had a little shade there... We had two swings and two teeterotters built on the pipe. That was our shady place to play. And we didn't have a sandpile, but we had soft dirt which made lovely roads and so forth.

The first year we went to school, the schoolhouse was over toward the Empire camp and it was a one-room school [called Teterville]... And then they moved the schoolhouse over quite away east, on top the hill, and added onto it. And it became a two-room school. And Anna Hoffman and Vivian James taught the two rooms. That was my third grade. We had to come to town [Eureka] when I was in the second grade. Daddy had decided we didn't learn much in the first grade, so he moved mother and we kids to town, and we went down to Random School. It was the second year that it was open... And then we went back out to the country the next year because daddy had developed ulcers batching. And we went back out, and this two-room school was much nicer than the little one-room school had been. We had a lot more kids by then. Two years had made quite a difference in the oil field in those days. And there were a lot of them coming from away up north... Shambaugh, and those other leases up in there by then."

And the teachers stayed at our house, which was quite important to us, we thought. I don't know that it mattered to anybody else. But we thought it was wonderful.

Teterville was about twenty-three miles from Eureka, and Alice remembered that as part of her father's duties, he had to make daily trips to Eureka and back with "time and gauges." The roads were "terrible," she said. Before rock crushers were in general use in the county, river gravel was used on the road between Teterville and Eureka. The hard and sharp Flint Hills gravel took its toll on vehicles and tires. Alice thought that her father must have traded cars often because of his daily trips to Eureka over those rough roads.

She spoke of the wooden derricks used in the early years by the oil industry:

When I was there [at Teterville], everything had a wooden derrick. Every well had a wooden derrick, you know. But you could see where all the wells were. There was one close to the house—he made a lot of noise. I don't remember the noise bothering, but anytime at night when the thing stopped, it woke you up.

Like most oil field families, Alice's family heated their house with natural gas supplied by the company. She remembered that the colder the weather, the less gas pressure there was for heating. She recalled that a time or two, she stayed in bed all day to keep warm.

She reminisced about company garages and tool houses, buildings that as a child she found fascinating:

The company garage had a pipe up in the middle. It had two stalls to park company vehicles, and this pipe up in the middle. And they lit the gas in it—a torch, you know, so that the company garage was warm most of the time. It was built onto the tool house. And tool houses are one of those things I remember because they were like nothing else. They were large storehouses with... a loading area built out round them. And, oh! I loved to go in there and go through all the pipe fittings and the waste bin, you know, and all those things.

Did you ever see "waste" like they used to use? Well, they used it in place of rags, and it was just threads and lint and so forth, all mixed together, mostly threads and

14. Shambaugh was a good-sized oil field along the Greenwood/Chase County line. Located in portions of Sections 1 and 2, Township 29 South, Range 9 East, Greenwood County, the area was later listed on county maps as being owned by Leota Roby, a daughter of the Shambaugh's.
it was—just came in wads. And they'd pull out a wad, you know, clean their hands and machinery.... And they wasted it. They wiped their hands and threw it down, made a mess.

But I remember the tool house over at this Empire camp. It was a big building. I remember going to a dance over there once. I don't know how they cleared it enough to have a dance, but they did. We had a wonderful time.

Conclusion

By the late 1950s, oil field camps were being broken up as oil production declined and petroleum firms closed down certain fields and operations. The better company housing was sold to individuals for homes. Some were moved to town and others to farm or ranch sites.

Employees moved to town, driving back and forth to the oil fields, and others found housing for their families near the leases by renting empty farm homes. Yet other employees moved to farms they had bought or to rented acreages to combine their oil field work with farming or ranching; the majority of these men and their wives had come from farm backgrounds to which they had wanted, eventually, to return.

Two of the three women whose interviews are presented here left the oil field camp life in the 1950s when the camps were closed. The third had gone in the 1930s when she went away to college and, later, to teach school in Greenwood County. Today Essie Dunham lives in Madison, Kansas, and does professional hand quilting, an art she began as a young woman when she made her first quilt in 1932 for her mother-in-law. Essie is active in church and club work, and she enjoys the Madison Lecture and Concert Series each season. After the Beemans sold their store in 1957, Verna and Vonie combined farming with Vonie's work as a pumper. Verna was a busy farm woman, a good neighbor, and one interested in her community—Seeley and, in later years, nearby Willow Valley where she made her home on the family farm until her death in January 1986. Alice Long worked for twenty-two years at the Eureka Carnegie Library, and on December 31, 1981, she retired as head librarian. Since retirement, she enjoys helping people through her volunteer work in the community and giving special caring interest to family and friends. She likes cultural and domestic arts, and she and her husband, Howard, enjoy camping.

With few exceptions, camp sites once bustling with family and community life returned to quiet pasture scenes. Only remnants remain to signify former human habitation: an occasional abandoned shotgun house, perhaps an enameled kettle—chipped and rusting in the grass—or broken pieces of dishes scattered here and there. And certainly old beds of iris and Hardy old-fashioned roses speak of one-time family life from another Kansas era.