

COMMEMORATING SPINDLETOP: THE POWER OF HISTORICAL MEMORY IN  
BEAUMONT, TEXAS

by

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## **DEDICATION**

To Mom and Dad, who never once let me believe my dreams could be anything less than a reality. You always said I was going write a book one day. I hope this is close enough for now.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	<b>Page</b>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	v
CHAPTER	
I. DISCOVERING SPINDLETOP.....	1
II. COMMEMORATING SPINDLETOP .....	14
III. THE CONTEMPORARY LEGACY OF SPINDLETOP .....	47
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	56

## I. DISCOVERING SPINDLETOP

Writing about Beaumont, Texas in their 1952 book, authors James A. Clark and Michel T. Halbouty declared that “no other city can lay claim to a more significant event along the highway of human progress.”<sup>1</sup> However, to many located outside of the state of Texas, the city of Beaumont is not likely to spark a sense of recognition. How could these authors make such a bold claim about Beaumont’s significance not only to the state, but to global advancement? The answer lies in the historic commemoration of a turn-of-the-century event that occurred in a place known as Spindletop.

Clark and Halbouty argued that Beaumont is central to the modern American industrial age because of the unprecedented quantity of crude oil discovered in the Spindletop oil field on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1901. At 10:30 a.m. that morning, the oil derrick drilled by brothers Curt and Al Hamill and Peck Byrd on Spindletop Hill, several miles south of Beaumont, Texas, erupted in a stream of oil. For nine days, the Lucas Gusher, thusly named for lead engineer and driller Anthony Francis Lucas, blew up to 100,000 barrels of oil each day. Such a sight was the first of its kind. Expert geologists had declared the Gulf Coast empty of oil prospects only six years earlier. Yet the original investor in the idea of oil on Spindletop Hill, Pattillo Higgins, remained steadfast in his belief of its potential as a petroleum drilling site.<sup>2</sup> Spindletop was not the first major oil field in the United States, or even in Texas. Yet the sheer quantity of crude oil available in such an unexpected geographic region generated a rush of exploration and new possibilities for the American oil industry. The Spindletop oil field would eventually run

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<sup>1</sup> James A. Clark and Michel T Halbouty, *Spindletop*, (New York: Random House, 1952).

<sup>2</sup> Robert, R. Wheeler, “Spindletop Saga,” *Texas Gulf Historical & Biographical Record* 12, no. 1 (November 1976): 25-39; Tracé Etienne-Gray, “Higgins, Pattillo,” *Handbook of Texas Online*, Accessed April 27, 2021. <https://www.tshaonline.org/handbook/entries/higgins-pattillo>.

dry, and oil expeditions would fan out, resulting in substantial discoveries across the state and beyond. But the region of Southeast Texas remains a major refining and petrochemical center to the present day.<sup>3</sup>

Many historians and industry figures have depicted Spindletop as the birthplace of Texas oil and a revolutionary event that restructured the American petroleum industry. In doing so, the event itself and the independent oil producers, known as wildcatters, who arose in its aftermath assumed mythic proportions. Beaumont citizens transmit Spindletop lore through the generations to impart desired community origins and values. Yet the historical memory of Spindletop also helps the oil industry suppress criticism, claim political validation, and legitimate a selective history that glorifies the wildcatter spirit of American free enterprise and individualism. The repetition of this particular historical memory at local commemorative celebrations helps entrench the myth of Spindletop within community identity, bolstering both ideological and economic support for the oil industry.

### **Beaumont and the Petroleum Industry**

Beaumont is located on the Neches River in the Southeast Texas region about 85 miles east of Houston. Founded in 1835, the city held a population of 9,427 by 1900, a 186 percent increase from 1890.<sup>4</sup> Agriculture dominated the economy of Texas in the late nineteenth century. East Texas, specifically, relied heavily on the lumber industry from the 1850s onward. Beaumont became a thriving sawmill town after the Civil War, boasting three of the largest sawmill establishments in the South by 1889. The Neches

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<sup>3</sup> Judith Walker Linsley et al., *Giant under the Hill: History of the Spindletop Oil Discovery at Beaumont, Texas, in 1901* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 2002), 212.

<sup>4</sup> United States Census Bureau, "Abstract of the Thirteenth Census," (1910): 74.  
<https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1910/abstract/abstract-1910-p3.pdf>



River supplied an easy mode of transportation to raft logs from the East Texas forests down to Beaumont. The expansion of railroads throughout the postbellum period led to a growth of urban centers and a transformation of Texas's farming and ranching industries. Before the Spindletop discovery, Beaumont was already an industrial lumber town on a trend of upward growth. Texas's commercial oil enterprise that followed the Spindletop discovery in 1901, however, revolutionized the transportation and petroleum-adjacent industries through the abundance of cheap fuel. This moment of discovery created a multi-million-dollar oil industrial complex that came to define the Southeast Texas region.<sup>5</sup>

Shortly after the Lucas Gusher struck "black gold," Beaumont became a veritable oil boomtown that experienced rapid population and economic growth. Workers hastily constructed three small towns around the oil field – Spindletop, Gladys City, and South Africa (the segregated settlement for Black and Mexican American workers). All three communities lacked adequate housing or dining facilities and suffered from poor sanitation issues. Beaumont's more established status meant that it drew the largest crowds, attracted by the available hotels, restaurants, and entertainment opportunities. The city felt the harsh effects of the boomtown atmosphere as well. Residents and short-term visitors alike waited in long lines for food and outhouses that erupted in fist fights. Sanitation problems led to diseases such as dysentery and typhoid. The atmosphere was filled with pollutants and the smell of oil and gas.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Jonathan K. Gerland, "Sawdust City: Beaumont, Texas on the Eve of the Petroleum Age," *Texas Gulf Historical & Biographical Record* 50 (November 2014): 131–56; Ellen Walker Rienstra, Judith Walker Linsley, and Beaumont Chamber of Commerce, *Historic Beaumont: An Illustrated History*, (San Antonio: HPN Books, 2003), 24.

<sup>6</sup> Diana Davids Hinton and Roger M. Hinton, *Oil in Texas: The Gusher Age, 1895-1945*, 1st ed., Clifton and Shirley Caldwell Texas Heritage Series: No. 3 (University of Texas Press, 2002), 36-37.

The economic success of oil exploration, transportation, and refining reverberated to other major industries in Beaumont and the surrounding area. The need to transport oil products led to an expansion of docks and shipping facilities, while the lumber industry saw increased exports from the construction of refineries, businesses, and residential areas. The petroleum industry experienced its most dramatic growth during World War II with the development of petrochemical units to produce synthetic rubber and other strategic materials. The Texas Gulf Coast remained central to the nation's refining capacity after the war, supported by the government's decision to build the first pipelines stretching from the region to the East Coast. In the aftermath of Spindletop, Port Arthur, just southeast of Beaumont, emerged as a major refining center on the Upper Texas Gulf Coast. Today, the city boasts the largest oil refinery in the United States, Motiva, which was constructed by the Texas Company (now Texaco) in 1902.<sup>7</sup>

The one-hundred-mile stretch of the Gulf Coast from Houston to the Beaumont-Port Arthur metropolitan area has remained the largest center of refining in the United States since the 1920s. Renowned oil historian Joseph Pratt describes how the “steady growth of manufacturing jobs in the refineries and chemical plants” brought thousands of industrial workers to the region. From the earliest days of Spindletop, the refining and petrochemical industries have provided the opportunity for individuals to seek economic success for themselves and their families. The central role of oil-related workers in the local economy has helped define the identity of Southeast Texans throughout the twentieth century and into the present. Pratt argues that the public success of these workers “gave the region an optimistic tone,” a characteristic that would ensure the

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph A. Pratt, *The Growth of a Refining Region* (Greenwich: Jai Press Inc., 1980), 51, 92-94.

continued support of the petroleum industry even in the face of later environmental and public health concerns.<sup>8</sup>

### **Myth and Memory in Beaumont**

Politicians, business leaders, and local historians in the Southeast Texas community have accorded Spindletop an exalted status in the decades since its discovery. These local actors with political power have named streets, motels, and non-profit organizations, to name a few, in Spindletop's honor. "Spindletop" is an inescapable term for anyone who spends considerable time in the region, often coinciding with an acknowledgement of the major role of crude oil and refining to the community's economy and livelihoods. Due to its immense claims of historical significance, the story of Spindletop quickly took on mythic proportions as the citizens of Beaumont transformed the discovery into a historical narrative worthy to represent the community's origins and values.

Mythmaking is the process of constructing an imagined, fantastical collective narrative. This process often entails the creation of an origin story in which community members trace their sense of solidarity and community identity. Community officials who wield influence, such as museum directors, business leaders, and politicians, decide what to remember of the community's past and what values should inform present decisions. As Kurt Ritter observed in his study of mythmaking during the American Revolution, the unifying rhetoric of myth helps construct a shared identity and national ethos upon which future consensus is built. Ritter explained how questions of identity centered on what characteristics were distinctively American and what unique destiny the

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph A. Pratt, Martin V. Melosi, and Kathleen A. Brosnan, eds., *Energy Capitals: Local Impact, Global Influence* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), 38-39.

colonists imagined for the burgeoning country. To be sure, the use of the term “myth” does not mean that certain events did not happen nor lack historical importance. Historical narrative becomes myth when events are distanced from the present and celebrated as exceptional moments guided by heroic figures.<sup>9</sup>

The story of Spindletop relies on a cast of courageous, innovative men who led to the discovery of the oil field. Indeed, the concept of founding figures, most commonly “founding fathers,” is a recurring theme in mythical origin stories of American cities and towns. In his study on American individualism and identity, *Habits of the Heart* (1985), Robert Bellah identified two heroic characters that are most prevalent in American culture: the cowboy and the hard-boiled detective. Both figures are valued for their courage and individualism, traits that allow them to accomplish significant actions alone. Their decisions are “not depending on [others’] judgement, and not submitting to their wishes.” The ability to work independently, without full approval from others, is typically conflated with moral superiority or goodness in myths of founding figures.<sup>10</sup>

Pattillo Higgins embodies the role of the unique individual who served society best by standing alone and acting independently. Throughout his youth, Higgins acquired a reputation as a bully and a fighter who frequented saloons and was never spotted around town without his gun. After attending a religious revival service in Beaumont in 1885, Higgins became baptized and abandoned his life of crime and violence. He took on a new role in town as a brick manufacturer and Sunday School teacher. His position as a respected town leader would again come into question just a few years later as Higgins

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<sup>9</sup> Kurt W. Ritter, “The Myth-Making Functions of the Rhetoric of the American Revolution: Francis Hopkinson as a Case Study,” *Today’s Speech* 23, no. 2 (Spring 1975), 26.

<sup>10</sup> Robert N. Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 145-146.

became more convinced of the presence of oil under Spindletop Hill and attempted to persuade the citizens of Beaumont of his vision. The hardest blow to his theory came when William Kennedy, the assistant state geologist, published a scathing critique of Higgins's claims in the *Beaumont Journal*, warning the community against investing in such a foolish prospect. In the years leading up to 1901, many became disillusioned with Higgins's dreams of oil and promises of millions in return for prospective stockholders. Many derisively called him "the millionaire" behind his back. The initial public disregard of Higgins would only serve to fuel his status decades later as a righteous visionary once historians configured him in the Spindletop mythos.<sup>11</sup>

The independent "wildcatter" is a central character to the memory of Spindletop and the romanticized mythology of early oil boomtowns. This founding figure searched for oil in wild country through speculative but successful drilling deals with oftentimes little capital and much luck. The wildcatter spirit has retained such an appeal due to its embodiment of the Horatio Alger myth, a uniquely American narrative that anyone may achieve success through individual perseverance and hard work. This mythical figure appeals to working-class individuals by convincing them that labor and industry is sufficient to gain social mobility and thrive within the capitalist system. Historian Lawrence Goodwyn best described the lasting appeal of this "rags to riches" archetype in the Southeast Texas region in noting that, in a way, Spindletop midwived "the emergence in America of a new kind of entrepreneur, the Texas independent oil producer, the prototypical American 'wildcatter.'" The constructed historical memory of Spindletop has relied on these archetypes and other similar symbols to demonstrate desired

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<sup>11</sup> Robert R. Wheeler, "Spindletop Saga," *Texas Gulf Historical & Biographical Record* 12, no. 1 (November 1976): 25–39; Linsley, et al., *Giant Under the Hill*, 41.

community values as well as attitudes towards the oil and gas industry.<sup>12</sup>

The study of memory is essential to understand the use of mythmaking in creating official historical narratives. This research builds on the substantial public history scholarship on “memory studies” to analyze the use of myth and the presentation of the history of Spindletop. Several theories of historical memory remain highly contested, yet most historians distinguish between individual memory (personal recollections held by singular people) and collective memory (shared claims to truth held by social groups or communities). Mythologized figures and events bolster these shared claims that constitute a substantial part of community identity.<sup>13</sup>

The terms historical memory, collective memory, and public memory are often used interchangeably, albeit scholars have differentiated them in various ways. At base, these concepts refer to a socially constructed claim to the past which functions as a source of individual and group identity and therefore can operate as a site for defining and contesting notions of nationhood, citizenship, and belonging. Due to the unequal distribution of power and resources, historical memory often reflects the interests of elites rather than experiences of “ordinary” citizens or marginalized groups. Public historian Martha Norkunas has shown how, on the local level, organizations such as historical

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<sup>12</sup> Lawrence Goodwyn, *Texas Oil, American Dreams: A Study of the Texas Independent Producers and Royalty Owners Association*, Barker Texas History Center Series: No. 5 (Center for American History by the Texas State Historical Association, 1996), 3. It should be noted that independent oil associates funded Goodwyn’s work, which reads largely celebratory and uncritical. *Texas Oil* places wildcatters’ pursuit of the American Dream within a legacy of Jeffersonian agrarians and Wild West cowboys in opposition to Big Oil and Big Government. Works such as these aid the process of mythmaking by allowing industry figures to directly shape how people perceive them.

<sup>13</sup> For key works on memory and history, see Maurice Halbwachs, *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire*, (Paris: F. Alcan, 1925); Michael G. Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*, First edition. (Knopf, 1991); David Lowenthal, *The Past Is a Foreign Country - Revisited* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Jeffrey K. Olick, “Collective Memory: The Two Cultures,” *Sociological Theory* 17, no. 3 (1999): 333–48.

societies and tourism promoters focus their resources on presenting a particular version of the past in order to “legitimate contemporary personal, social, and political circumstances.”<sup>14</sup> These dominant actors who interpret history for the public use practices such as media and the arts, monuments, and official institutions such as museums to inscribe historical memory on the individual and collective consciousness. Historical memory therefore carries different political meaning depending on when, where, and by whom it is produced.<sup>15</sup>

Local officials must continually present and re-affirm mythical origin stories to solidify their status as the accepted historical memory. Formal commemorative activities are one of the most prevalent forms of community remembrance. They often take place during anniversary celebrations and are commonly funded and shaped by local politicians, business leaders, and other elites. Historian John Bodnar noted that cultural authorities coordinate commemorative celebrations “to calm anxiety about change or political events, eliminate citizen indifference toward official concerns, promote exemplary patterns of citizen behavior, and stress citizen duties over rights.” Public celebrations of anniversaries have historically served as rituals to strengthen community ideals and educate citizens, youth in particular, on the virtues and lessons from the past. Haitian historian and anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot argued the importance of commemorations to historical memory, specifically as rituals that easily package history

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<sup>14</sup> Martha Norkunas, *The Politics of Public Memory: Tourism, History, and Ethnicity in Monterey, California*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), 6.

<sup>15</sup> Mark-Thiesen, Cassandra, Mihatsch, Moritz, and Sikes, Michelle, *The Politics of Historical Memory and Commemoration in Africa* (München: De Gruyter Oldenbourg, 2021), 4. Some scholars have challenged the dichotomy between elite and “ordinary” narratives, claiming that this simplified binary does not account for the plethora of participatory commemorations in which official memory is shaped by popular culture and demonstrations of democratic citizenship. See Ekaterina V. Haskins, *Popular Memories: Commemoration, Participatory Culture, and Democratic Citizenship*, (University of South Carolina, 2015), 4-9.

for public consumption. Trouillot defined commemorative rituals as those that “create, modify, or sanction the public meaning attached to historical events deemed worthy of mass celebration.” Commemorative events are performative, expressive, and hold intent to communicate certain social and political values.<sup>16</sup>

### **Historic Commemoration in Beaumont**

Three commemorative celebrations in Beaumont have profoundly shaped the historical memory of Spindletop. The first commemorative events took place during the postwar era in 1951. During this period, oil industry elites imbued their remembrances of Spindletop with their present concerns over Cold War tensions with the Soviet Union. The second major celebration of Spindletop was the American Revolution Bicentennial in the 1970s, a decade that witnessed America’s decline as the major leader in the global oil industry as well as a rising trend of social and economic conservatism. The third period of commemorative activities occurred during the turn of the millennium, when the one hundredth anniversary of the Spindletop discovery in 2001 coincided with a period of debate over climate change in an era of rapid globalization. During all three commemorative periods, local leaders both celebrated the Spindletop discovery and used its mythology to quell the contemporary anxieties and political values of the era.

These three commemorative eras of Spindletop each coincided with a period of oil depletion fears. In *The Quest* (2012), energy expert Daniel Yergin argued that intense anxieties that the world has “run out of oil” have flared at various times. Periods of

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<sup>16</sup> John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1992), 166; Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 116. For further scholarship on historic commemoration, see Laura Mattoon D’Amore and Jeffrey Meriwether, *We Are What We Remember: The American Past Through Commemoration* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2012); Lyn Spillman, *Nation and Commemoration: Creating National Identities in the United States and Australia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).



surging demand mixed with unanticipated shortages from political or economic crises stoke fears of production shortages that will continue to decline, also known as “peak oil” theory. Yergin identifies one such specter of peak oil arising at the close of World War II, with fears stoked by the United States becoming a net importer of petroleum for the first time and thus no longer self-sufficient. Another period of peak oil fear emerged in the early 1970s when surging oil consumption led to a growing demand, most dramatically tested by the OPEC crisis in 1973. Finally, the most recent occurrence of peak oil theory began in the late 1990s. This time, anxieties increased in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis and in response to accelerated growth and consumption by China and other developing nations due to globalization. The resurgence of theories that the world has reached peak oil production combine with specific historical circumstances – Cold War anti-communism or the new age of globalization – to place the oil and gas industry and those that most depend upon it in a position of self-defense. These particular historical contexts, and the effects they have on local historical memory, are the focus of this thesis.<sup>17</sup>

Commemorative activities in Beaumont demonstrate the links between Beaumont’s local history, national politics, and global economic change in the second half of the twentieth century. Like other forms of historical memory, I argue that the narrative of Spindletop has been contingent upon the attitudes of political and economic elites in these specific historical periods. As historian Edward Countryman has noted: “Any reconstruction of the past is a cultural artifact, reflecting its own time and intervening in the world in which it is produced.” The products of these three

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<sup>17</sup> Daniel Yergin, *The Quest: Energy, Security, and the Remaking of the Modern World* (London: Penguin Books, 2012), 231.

commemorative periods are cultural artifacts in themselves which reveal how contemporary anxieties affected the historic discourse and central themes used to remember Spindletop. This thesis relies on archival materials from commemorative activities held in the Beaumont Chamber of Commerce Records and the Spindletop 2001 Commission Collection at the Tyrrell Historical Library in Beaumont, Texas. To place these commemorative events within national and global contexts, this thesis also relies on newspapers and government memorandums and reports. Lastly, research visits to commemorative sites established in the 1970s and 2000s provided foundational primary source material for this thesis.<sup>18</sup>

This research contributes to the field of public history by offering a case study of an under-studied region in Texas that illustrates the connections between local historical memory, community identity, and narratives of national progress. It reveals how strategies of public remembrance are flexible and can be adapted by those in power to meet shifting political contexts. This research adds to the historical scholarship on memory and commemoration by revealing the connections between how business and civic leaders shape history at the local level in ways that reflect the national political climate.

Furthermore, this thesis highlights how historical memory shapes community identity. Because Spindletop serves as the city's founding event, the resulting memory

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<sup>18</sup> Edward Countryman, "John Ford's Dreams Along the Mohawk: The Making of an American Myth," in *Presenting the Past: Essays on History and the Public*, ed. Susan Porter Benson, Stephen Brier, and Roy Rosenzweig (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986), 87. There has been one previous work to study the commemoration of Spindletop in a broad sense. D. Ryan Smith's "Spindletop's 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration" utilized Beaumont Chamber of Commerce Records to present an overview of the planning process and the organizers' overall vision for the event. He concluded that the celebration leaders' goals of educating the public, honoring the petroleum industry, and encouraging community pride were ultimately successful.

has been a profound force in shaping the community identity of Southeast Texas. The mythology of Spindletop influences the civic values citizens hold dear and the way they perceive themselves and their place in the nation. Texas politicians continue to suggest that local business leaders follow in the footsteps of the men who struck oil at Spindletop. Speaking at a Spindletop Award ceremony in Beaumont, Governor Greg Abbott declared that the “entrepreneurial and innovative spirit” that led to the discovery “lives on in current day business leaders throughout Southeast Texas.” Investigating how civic leaders, politicians, and industry figures have presented the official history of Beaumont uncovers how historical memory is used to garner influence and support for the petroleum industry by reinforcing the industry’s deep roots in Beaumont’s community identity.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Office of the Texas Governor, “Governor Abbott Attends 2018 Beaumont Chamber of Commerce Annual Meeting and Spindletop Award Ceremony,” October 9, 2018, <https://gov.texas.gov/news/post/governor-abbott-attends-2018-beaumont-chamber-of-commerce-annual-meeting-and-spindletop-award-ceremony>. The Spindletop Award is given annually to a regional business that has a demonstrated impact on the local community.

## II. COMMEMORATING SPINDLETOP

*“Amazing is the word for it!”* These words underlined an ink drawing of a group of men surveying the spread of oil derricks in the 1901 Spindletop oil field. They appeared in a 1951 advertisement for Humble Oil and Refining Company, fifty years to the day from the Spindletop discovery outside Beaumont. The ad evoked a sense of urgency by declaring that the oil industry is in a “grave emergency that now confronts our country” and must outdo current rates of oil production “for the defense of our country and for our economic welfare.” The Humble Oil company capitalized upon the publicity surrounding the fiftieth anniversary of Spindletop to declare its own position within the United States economy as a major energy supplier. This moment exemplifies the use of historical memory by a major oil company to convey political beliefs of the time: the urgent crisis of the Cold War, the need to assert American superiority, and the essential role of petroleum to the U.S. economy.<sup>1</sup>

The year 1951 marked the first of three commemorative periods in which political and economic leaders transformed Spindletop into a symbol for both American values and the birthplace of American industry and progress. Through a variety of methods – advertisements, public speeches, historical re-enactments, and more – the Spindletop anniversary celebrations acted as a means to entrench the historical memory of Spindletop within the minds of Beaumont citizens. By doing so, politicians, civic leaders, and commission members further reinforced the place of the petroleum industry within

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<sup>1</sup> Humble Oil and Refining Company, advertisement, *The Baytown Sun* 34, no. 158, 10 January 1951, 7. The urgency was understandable in regard to the shifting oil economy. In 1948, United States imports of crude oil exceeded exports for the first time, illustrating an unfamiliar dependency on other countries. See Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money, and Power* (New York: Touchstone, 1991), 410.

the community identity of Southeast Texas.

### **Spindletop Commemoration in the Postwar Age of Consensus**

The postwar climate directly influenced the celebratory methods and rhetoric used by civic and corporate officials during the first major commemorative period in Beaumont's history. During the week-long celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the Spindletop gusher, both city of Beaumont and oil industry leaders attempted to connect the historical memory of Spindletop to their present goals and anxieties. For the first time, anniversary planners aimed to encourage the entire community of Beaumont to remember Spindletop's importance to the region and to dedicate an entire year to the theme of Spindletop commemoration. The commemorative activities of the Spindletop Fiftieth Anniversary celebration took the varied forms of exhibits portraying industrial progress, radio re-enactments, and spectacular revues, all of which reflected the greater social, political, and economic concerns affecting the United States after World War II.

Historians characterize the 1950s as the Age of Affluence, noting the decade's postwar economic growth and relatively low level of income inequality. The security and optimism generated by this affluence also created a politics of consensus, in which sharp cleavages in society did not vanish, but rather lost their political and emotional impact. However, the 1950s also faced rivalrous tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union. These were the Cold War years – decades of intense efforts by Americans to distance themselves from Communist influence and justify their own military and economic might. The United States' economic boom and cemented status as a global superpower helped bolster the latter claim, but the fears over the expansion of the Soviet Union into Eastern Europe and the assumed threat the country posed to liberal democracy

resulted in a war fought heavily on ideological grounds. Rising anxieties on the home front from challenges to traditional gender roles, higher expectations for personal satisfaction, and the intensifying rebellion against cultural mores required Americans to construct stronger arguments in favor of their exceptionalism.<sup>2</sup>

During the Cold War, U.S. officials sought to define “Americanism” primarily in oppositional terms – namely, it was not Communism. In *The Culture of the Cold War* (1991), Stephen J. Whitman noted how Americans grasped firmly to long-familiar concepts of their national identity, such as the “traditional commitment to competitive individualism” and free enterprise. To many in the United States, the ideology of freedom in all aspects of personal life was the strongest counternarrative to Communism, resulting in “business achievements [becoming] perhaps the most common vindication of American life.”<sup>3</sup> Yet the capitalist ideology that economic growth and abundance represented the most effective path to American progress mostly characterized the beliefs of the middle and upper classes. Precisely because it was this class of individuals who would most likely hold the political and economic power to shape local and community histories, it is not surprising that praise for material progress and American industrial supremacy took center stage in public commemorations during the postwar years.<sup>4</sup>

In the face of unfamiliar factors, many “cold warriors” turned to history in their

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<sup>2</sup> Robert E. Lane, “The Politics of Consensus in an Age of Affluence,” *The American Political Science Review* 59, no. 4 (1965): 874–95. For scholarship on the Cold War and 1950s American culture, see M. Keith Booker, *The Post-Utopian Imagination: American Culture in the Long 1950s*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2002); John Lewis Gaddis, *The Cold War: A New History*, (New York: Penguin Press, 2005); Akira Iriye, *Global Interdependence: The World after 1945* (Harvard University Press, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 53.

<sup>4</sup> Peter J. Kuznick and James Burkhart Gilbert, *Rethinking Cold War Culture* (Smithsonian Institution Press, 2001), 64-66.

search for symbols of American tradition, power, and patriotism. Nostalgia for the past materialized in the renewed emphasis on the nuclear family and traditional gender roles. As historian John Bodnar has noted, many postwar commemorations shared a common message of national growth and change for the better. These notions were reinforced in the face of new Cold War competition in which leaders sought to “defend and celebrate American progress in contrast to the underdeveloped economies of the Communist states.” The glorification of industrial progress became a common theme at local celebrations, especially for communities seeking to demonstrate their worth to the national economy and discredit other “non-democratic” nations.<sup>5</sup>

The fiftieth anniversary celebration of Spindletop followed a similar Cold War commemorative framework by honoring industry leaders and national progress. Spindletop commission planners received copies of the official program for the Chicago Fair of 1950, which explained the fair’s theme of “Frontiers of Freedom” as the story of American economic progress paved by courageous *freedom-loving* pioneers, to look to as a potential model. The anniversary celebration drew on these contexts in attempting to reassert Spindletop’s place within the new American narrative as the most powerful nation. The representation of Spindletop as the birthplace of the American oil industry meant that the memory of the event could help justify the economic might of the United States.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> John Bodnar, *Remaking America: Public Memory, Commemoration, and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press: 1992), 166.

<sup>6</sup> Richard M. Fried, *The Russians Are Coming! The Russians Are Coming!: Pageantry and Patriotism in Cold-War America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 99; “The Chicago Fair Official Guide Book,” (1950), 2. [https://www.rgusrail.com/fairs/cf\\_1950/cf\\_1950.pdf](https://www.rgusrail.com/fairs/cf_1950/cf_1950.pdf). (Emphasis added). Scene eleven of the “Frontiers of Freedom” pageant depicted Spindletop and its use of the rotary drill as an “ingenious tool [and] product of an enterprising people,” making it all the more likely that Spindletop commission members used the Chicago Fair as a reference for how to frame their own commemoration.

The year-long fiftieth anniversary celebration of Spindletop in 1951 was the first widespread community-oriented commemorative period when Beaumont honored Spindletop as a historic founding event.<sup>7</sup> Celebratory events began on January 4<sup>th</sup> and culminated on the anniversary date of the 10<sup>th</sup>, although the influence of Spindletop was present throughout all of 1951, as multiple oil and gas-adjacent organizations held their annual conventions in Beaumont. Although no numbers exist for the total participants in all the events, traffic experts estimated a crowd of approximately 75,000 attendees at the parade which traveled throughout the streets of downtown Beaumont. A local competition helped choose the tagline for the anniversary celebration – Spindletop: Where Oil Became an Industry. This tagline set the tone for the week-long commemorative activities which collectively emphasized the prominence of the petroleum industry in both the community’s past and the power of corporate identity in the present.<sup>8</sup>

Commission planners used this event to foster a sense of civic participation and teach citizens the values after which they should model themselves: the wildcatters’ independence, hard work, perseverance, and enterprising, capitalist spirit. The Fiftieth Anniversary Commission boasted an array of industry men, with the executive committee composed of Chairman John W. Newton and W. W. Leach, both of Magnolia Petroleum Co.; Phil S. Justice of Sun Oil; Scott W. Myers, an independent oil operator; I.F. Betts of the American National Bank; Marion E. Brock and Dr. A. M. McAfee of Gulf Oil; C. W.

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<sup>7</sup> Linsley, et al., *Giant Under the Hill*, 215. Smaller commemorative events took place before 1951. In 1941, on the fortieth anniversary of the Spindletop discovery, the Lucas Gusher Monument Association erected the Lucas Gusher Monument on the original oil field where the well came in.

<sup>8</sup> D. Ryan Smith, “Spindletop’s 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration,” *Texas Gulf Historical & Biographical Record*, 32 (1996): 70; Spencer W. Robinson, Spindletop 50th Anniversary Proceedings, 1951, box 16, folder 14. Spindletop 2001 Commission Records, AC-354. Tyrrell Historical Library, Beaumont, Texas (Hereafter cited as Robinson, Spindletop 2001 Commission Records).



Cooper of Pure Oil; and Frank L. Wallace of the Texas Company. The committee appointed Spencer W. Robinson, long-time editor for the Gulf Publishing Company, as the Executive Director. These men were knowledgeable of the potential economic and educational benefits of community anniversary celebrations. In this first commemorative period, therefore, oil industry men drove the historical narrative of Spindletop, rather than local historians or citizens.<sup>9</sup>

To impress upon community members the importance of technological progress and industrial growth, the Fiftieth Anniversary Commission arranged for the construction of a Spindletop Hall of Exhibits. Showcasing displays from forty-five petroleum companies and related organizations, the exhibition communicated the central theme of the fiftieth anniversary, “Then and Now.” Comparisons between manufacturing and industrial equipment from 1901 and 1951 made up the bulk of the displays. Continuing the theme of “Then and Now,” a replica of a 1901 oil derrick was constructed in downtown Beaumont next to a modern oil rig from the 1950s. With permission from the Texas Railroad Commission, the 1951 rig drilled 5,000 feet in a demonstration of modern oil drilling capabilities. This display implied Spindletop was the catalyst for much, if not all, of the technological advances displayed from the last fifty years, encouraging a sense of awe and intense pride within the local community.<sup>10</sup>

The commemorative activities represented Spindletop leaders, such as Pattillo Higgins, Anthony Lucas, and other early oil industry men as local founding figures who represented the “common man.” Two entertainment spectacles demonstrate how the

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<sup>9</sup> Robinson, Spindletop 2001 Commission Records. Dr. Almer M. McAfee pioneered the commercial use of catalytic cracking, a process that laid the foundation for modern petroleum refining, a fact that speaks to the insider knowledge of the industry held by the commission members.

<sup>10</sup> Robinson, Spindletop 2001 Commission Records.

Spindletop story was dramatized and mythologized to communicate the reputable ideals possessed by these men. On January 9<sup>th</sup>, chemical company Dupont's radio series, "Cavalcade of America," presented the story of Spindletop over the NBC network using Hollywood stars Robert Cummings and Teresa Wright as Captain Anthony F. Lucas and his wife, Caroline. The broadcast displayed Lucas's "pioneer spirit . . . [as] typical of the American petroleum industry" as it recounted the tale leading up to the Spindletop discovery, along with a heavy subplot of romance. Lucas's courage and persistence ran throughout the story, as shown when Lucas's marriage proposal to Caroline is emphatically refused, only for the scene to fade directly into the next in which the couple is exchanging conjugal vows. This radio story solidified Lucas's role in the memory of Spindletop as an independent founding figure in the oil industry and a mythologized hero of Beaumont's history.<sup>11</sup>

Theater exhibitions also became commemorative opportunities to link the romanticized past with contemporary society through a shared dependency on oil. Another entertainment aspect of the anniversary celebration were two performances by the Beaumont-based Melody Maids, a traveling women's chorus, of their original "Spindletop Revue." This production included songs such as "Black Gold!," "Boom Town!," "MY Man's a Roughneck," and "The Drilling Song." The finale number drove home the importance of petroleum to the Texan identity, with lyrics singing the praises of "Oil for the beacon of liberty, oil for the nation's supremacy . . . for the backbone of industry, mankind's greatest discovery – is oil!" Tracing the origins of the oil industry to these heroic figures and working-class "roughnecks" created a direct historic link

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<sup>11</sup> Dupont Cavalcade of America program, box 26, folder 10, Beaumont Chamber of Commerce Records, Tyrrell Historical Library, Beaumont, Texas.

between the memory of Spindletop and the contemporary petroleum industry.<sup>12</sup>

The culmination to the week-long celebration was the Fiftieth Anniversary Dinner, during which speeches and souvenirs best demonstrated the intended community values of American individualism and industrial progress. One inconspicuous, yet meaningful, component of the dinner program was the logo which featured a circle with the numbers 1901 on top of 1951. The symbolism of both years intertwined within the same circle depicted the community's desire to define Beaumont and its residents, specifically those in the oil industry, with equal values and work ethics as the "free men with vision and daring" of 1901. Attendees of the dinner were given a stock certificate as a souvenir, which guaranteed the owner "One Share of Happiness" for having participated in the Fiftieth Anniversary Celebration and enjoyed the "pleasures incidental thereto." The souvenir provided guests with a feeling of exclusivity and accomplishment for attending, ending the week a happier member of the community. The certificate, decorated with Spindletop imagery, demonstrated the anniversary celebration's intended goals of raising community unity, local historical consciousness, and pride in the petroleum industry.<sup>13</sup>

Reflecting the Cold War atmosphere of the period, the anniversary celebration consistently reflected capitalist values by tying the memory of Spindletop to the economic goals of postwar America. The looming threat of communism and its associations with repression, lack of autonomy, and weakness informed the speeches given by oil industry executives during the Fiftieth Anniversary dinner. As D. Ryan

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<sup>12</sup> Melody Maids, "Song Saga of Spindletop," box 1, folder 5, Spindletop 2001 Commission Collection, Tyrrell Historical Library, Beaumont, Texas.

<sup>13</sup> Dinner Program, Spindletop 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commission, *Tyrrell Historical Library Digital Collections*, <https://tyrellhistoricallibrary.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16058coll97/id/4/rec/2>; Stock certificate, Spindletop 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commission, *Tyrrell Historical Library Digital Collections*, <https://tyrellhistoricallibrary.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/p16058coll97/id/11/rec/3>.

Smith noted in his research on the fiftieth anniversary, the speakers “used the occasion as a forum for addressing business issues and extolling the American system of free enterprise.” During the dinner, B. Brewster Jennings, president of Socony-Vacuum (now Mobil), presented a speech entitled “The Spirit of Spindletop” in which he made direct connections between American values and industry. Jennings claimed that the Spindletop discovery was only possible due to the economic system of free enterprise, “something, besides oil, that Russia lacked.” The postwar desire to discredit the Soviet Union and assert American power and supremacy inculcated his remembrance of Spindletop.<sup>14</sup>

Other speeches at the dinner consolidated the American Cold War ideology of freedom. In “Progress, Productivity, and Wages,” General Motors President Charles E. Wilson proclaimed that the men from Spindletop would be horrified by the present state of the world, finding that “world peace is now in jeopardy due to the Marxists.” Wilson believed the solution lay only in the American political system of “individual enterprise, personal responsibility, free competition, . . . [and] freedom itself.” In the language of commemoration used by these corporate leaders, the memory of Spindletop served primarily as a vehicle to champion the American economic system in contrast to the centralized Communist government of the Soviet Union.<sup>15</sup>

Within this anxious yet prosperous postwar setting, industry leaders in Beaumont planned and executed the 1951 Spindletop Anniversary Celebration. They hoped to remind both community members and outsiders of the social and economic significance of the original oil discovery, as well as the continued economic and educational benefits

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<sup>14</sup> Smith, “Spindletop’s 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebration,” 70; Robinson, Spindletop 2001 Commission Records., 28-35.

<sup>15</sup> Robinson, Spindletop 2001 Commission Records, 36-43.

of the petroleum industry. The anniversary commission's goal was to distinguish Beaumont as its own exclusive community, while also tying their history into the very fabric of the nation's progress and future. They highlighted the individualism of Beaumont's founding heroes while stressing their connections to the American economy and the international sphere. In achieving these goals, the historical narratives crafted to commemorate this event focused on the traditional themes of heroic founding figures, industrial progress, and traditional American values such as free enterprise.

### **Spindletop Commemoration in the Conservative 1970s**

The American oil industry experienced the crisis-level transformation of the global market in the 1970s. The fact that the United States' Bicentennial coincided with the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Lucas Gusher presented an opportunity for civic leaders to re-affirm Beaumont's importance to the nation's economy and history. The seventy-fifth anniversary celebrations resulted in the largest enduring project commemorating the memory of Spindletop: the reconstruction of several original buildings from the small boomtown named Gladys City that had sprung up in the months following Spindletop's discovery. In 1976, both the historical memory of Spindletop and the newly built Spindletop-Gladys City Boomtown Museum (Boomtown Museum) received official endorsement and public support for their association with American national values, further cementing and building upon the characteristics of the community identity established in 1951.

In order to understand how official leaders formed the memory of Spindletop under certain political circumstances, it is necessary to place the seventy-fifth anniversary within the broader context of the 1970s. The decade has received substantial scholarly

interest from historians, particularly with regard to the political and economic upheavals in the United States. Still reeling from the clashes over racial inequality and counterculture movements of the previous decade, the 1970s witnessed the continuation of the Vietnam War, a major energy crisis, and the recession of 1974, the worst economic downturn since the 1930s. By the middle of the decade, the postwar economic boom had decidedly come to an end, and industrial unrest took hold in the face of massive layoffs, stagnating wages, and factory closures. Deindustrialization fundamentally altered the American landscape and devastated the automotive, steel, and rubber industries. The effects of deindustrialization caused intense responses from both the working class and corporate elites. The latter faced intense pressure from a disillusioned labor force and economic losses from the downsizing of industries. Although a strict adherence to free trade policies was the cause for much of this harm, as Quentin Skrabec has noted, conservative Republicans came to see any attack on free trade as an attack on American capitalism itself.<sup>16</sup>

New Right conservatives blamed both big government and progressive social programs for the death of the American Dream in the 1970s. The Republican Party argued, with some success, that the economic woes were caused by the welfare programs initiated by President Johnson's Great Society. Corporations and rising conservative thinkers mobilized Americans by building their political agenda on the virtues of the free market. Many working-class and middle-class Americans found it easier to locate

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<sup>16</sup> Quentin R. Skrabec, *Fall of an American Rome: De-Industrialization of the American Dream* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2013), 69-72. For further scholarship on the 1970s, see Judith Stein, *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Trades Factories for Finance in the Seventies*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); Lane Windham, *Knocking on Labor's Door: Union Organizing in the 1970s and the Roots of a New Economic Divide*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017).

scapegoats for their economic struggles in the social programs meant to alleviate poverty than to acknowledge the failings of free-market capitalism. Facing the economic despair of the 1970s, many Americans embraced free-market capitalism to the approval of corporate leaders; the wildcatter of the early twentieth century became the entrepreneur of the 1970s.<sup>17</sup>

The United States' controversial decision to provide aid to Israel in their war with Egypt and Syria in 1973 heightened these domestic economic tensions. The oil-producing countries of the Middle East that formed OPEC (Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries) coalition cut off their supply of petroleum to the United States. The resulting supply cut and price surge forced the federal government to boost domestic production while also supporting contradictory policy measures of energy conservation. As Matthew T. Huber remarked in *Lifeblood* (2013), the 1973 OPEC embargo had such strong effects partly because the year 1972 had "marked the end of a postwar American capitalism based on substantial oil production capacity." The United States could no longer be the producer to step up in moments of crisis, and this knowledge had consequences for the American ideology of freedom. American petroleum companies needed to maintain national dependency and stave off further loss of profits or political power. The OPEC crisis, in which the price of oil rose by 300 percent, compelled corporate leaders to respond to the impacts of industrial decline and criticism. The desire to enhance America's relationship with oil paralleled the need to strengthen the industry's image

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<sup>17</sup> Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 2; For an in-depth study on the building of a business culture among the youth of the 1970s, see Bethany E. Moreton, "Make Payroll, Not War: Business Culture as Youth Culture," in *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s*, edited by Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 52-70.

within the oil-dependent communities, such as Beaumont, that had suffered most from these economic setbacks.<sup>18</sup>

Spindletop's 1976 celebration was part of a larger effort to encourage nationwide American Bicentennial celebrations commemorating the signing of the Declaration of Independence. In commemoration of the Bicentennial, the Lyndon B. Johnson administration established the American Revolution Bicentennial Commission in 1966 to plan and develop nationwide activities and assist local governments in planning community celebrations with financial and thematic support.<sup>19</sup> The Commission identified three commemorative themes for the celebration: Heritage '76, which emphasized American heritage in a historical perspective; Festival U.S.A., which encouraged citizens to expand their knowledge of local history; and Horizons '76, which urged every citizen to complete a project which manifests pride in their community. The Beaumont Bicentennial Commission was chartered by Mayor Ken Ritter on May 21<sup>st</sup>, 1974, with the main theme of "Spindletop." The commission resolved to honor the Texas Bicentennial theme "The Promise of America: Past, Present, and Future" through the framework of Spindletop's seventy-fifth anniversary.<sup>20</sup>

The city of Beaumont offered its own Bicentennial gift in the form of the Spindletop-Gladys City Boomtown Museum, a permanent institution symbolizing the

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<sup>18</sup> Matthew T. Huber, *Lifeblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital*, (University of Minnesota Press, 2013): 101; Paul Sabin, "Crisis and Continuity in U.S. Oil Politics, 1965–1980," *Journal of American History* 99, no. 1 (June 1, 2012): 177–86. Huber's book directly addresses the ideological link between oil and the "American way of life." He analyzes how oil's entrenchment within American ideals of freedom, individualism, and property create these crisis narratives over community and livelihood.

<sup>19</sup> Martin I. Elzy, "Another Celebration of Our Heritage: The Johnson White House and the Nation's Bicentennial." *Proceedings and Papers of the Georgia Association of Historians* 4, (1983): 70-77. Columbus State University Archives and Special Collections.

<sup>20</sup> Elmer B. Staats, "Report to the Congress: Planning for America's Bicentennial Celebration -- A Progress Report," *U.S. Government Accountability Office* (June 6, 1975), I; Beaumont City Council, Resolution 74-187, May 21, 1974.



integral connection between Spindletop and the nation's economy. The Beaumont Bicentennial Commission expended over \$500,000 for the project meant to commemorate the birthplace of the petroleum industry. The museum featured a reconstructed Wild West-style town with a saloon, barber shop, and twentieth-century oil rig which gushed water in a re-enactment of the infamous discovery. While the museum allowed visitors to experience life in a turn-of-the-century boomtown, it also reasserted the significance of the oil industry by demonstrating the economic progression of Beaumont. John Bodnar explained how government officials emphasized national progress during the Bicentennial by looking to the future, hoping to "stimulate activities such as the construction of a hospital, for instance, that would make a 'lasting contribution' to future generations." Local officials hoped to bolster national and community identity by establishing new intellectual and cultural institutions. The Boomtown Museum served as Beaumont's lasting contribution to the "Horizons '76" theme, making the statement that Spindletop deserved a place in national, as well as local, historical memory.<sup>21</sup>

A major focus of the reconstructed Gladys City buildings was historical authenticity. To these purposes, the staff relied heavily on the *Spindle Top Guide and Directory*, published by C. B. Hice around 1903. This guidebook provided the foundation in choosing which businesses should be included in the representation of Gladys City. Rather than rely on historic objects from other regional museum or archival collections,

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<sup>21</sup> Joe Dobal to Milt Mitler, memorandum, "Gladys City: New Old Town," 16 April 1976, Betty Ford White House Papers, 1973-1977, Gerald R. Ford Presidential Library, <https://www.fordlibrarymuseum.gov/library/document/0018/94278518.pdf>; Jerry Graham, "Texas Sunshine Smiles on Betty Ford," *The Port Arthur News*, 22 April 1976, Newspapers.com; Bodnar, *Remaking America*, 230.

local residents and merchants donated the era-appropriate artifacts that furnished the buildings, ensuring that the final product was a participatory community effort. For the “Broker’s Office,” the Jefferson County Bar Association donated items, while the Gulf Coast Pharmaceutical Association assisted in furnishing the Gladys City Drug Company. Other buildings included a photographer’s studio, blacksmith’s shop, general store, post office, and livery stable/mortuary. Other individuals and organizations from Beaumont donated several hundred thousand dollars in the hopes of seeing the museum become a reality.<sup>22</sup>

Tying the official cultural institution within the ritual of Spindletop commemoration, the newly erected Boomtown Museum was the site for the January 10, 1976, festivities for the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Spindletop discovery. The event opened with speeches from official figures including Victor Rogers, chairman of the Beaumont Bicentennial Commission, Ken Ritter, Mayor of Beaumont, and Texas Governor Dolph Briscoe. The celebration offered performances by brass bands and barber shop quartets, a cross-country wagon train, and tours of the newly reconstructed Gladys City. Representatives from the oil companies Exxon, Texaco, Mobil, and Gulf, the latter three of which have their foundation in the Spindletop oil field, made appearances at the ceremony as well, signifying the connections between the historic event and the modern presence of the oil industry. The cornerstone of the day’s activities was the recreated Lucas Gusher which shot a massive geyser of water into the air replicating the moment of discovery seventy-five years earlier. This recreation of the past created a tangible link between the memory of the event and Beaumont residents

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<sup>22</sup> Calvin B. Smith, “The Spindletop Museum: Its Past, Present and Future,” *Texas Gulf Historical & Biographical Record* 12, no. 1 (November 1976): 40–49.

experiencing the same emotions and simulated experience near the original location.<sup>23</sup>

The commencement speeches on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1976, reveal how contemporary political issues again shaped the historical memory of Spindletop, this time emphasizing American free enterprise with regard to rising conservatism and global threats to oil. The Commission Chairman, Rogers, claimed that the re-enacted gusher was “symbolic of the debt the Beaumont and Southeast Texas area owe[d] to the natural resources,” implying a parallel debt to the contemporary oil companies without whom the vast crude oil reserves would remain underground. Governor Briscoe utilized the historic anniversary to assert a political statement about the current shape of energy policy. His speech lauded the Southeast Texas region as a forerunner in the petroleum industry for decades and lamented the fact that more oil reserves were left untapped because of a resistance to drill in other regions. Briscoe condemned regulation of the oil and gas industry, remarking that it kept consumers away from equitable energy prices. The Texas governor’s focus on not only the history of Spindletop, but its ties to current economic policy, demonstrated how the contentious decade of the 1970s influenced the discourse of commemoration. These official figures invoked the historical memory of Spindletop to instill within the local audience the necessity of the petroleum industry and to validate its economic power.<sup>24</sup>

Individuals who contributed to the re-creation of Gladys City received souvenir certificates that highlighted the values of education, cultural achievement, and pride in local heritage. The certificates sported the 1976 Texas Bicentennial seal and entitled each

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<sup>23</sup> Frances Shenkkan, “Gusher, wagon train to aid Gladys City fete,” *The Port Arthur News*, January 9, 1976, Newspapers.com.

<sup>24</sup> Rondah Irving, “Geyser Heralds Lucas Gusher Return,” *The Port Arthur News*, January 11, 1976, Newspapers.com.

holder to their “share of Beaumont’s pride in this civic accomplishment.” The certificate was a similar commemorative strategy to the fiftieth anniversary, during which certificates entitled the holder to their “Share of Happiness.” The 1976 certificate demonstrated the need to emphasize national ties to the oil industry within the tumultuous economic circumstances. Such commemorative efforts fostered a sense of participation in the community’s history and ensured that local citizens saw the significance of the city’s ties to both the nation and American values.<sup>25</sup>

The romanticized atmosphere of the Boomtown Museum helped bolster official leaders’ claims to a connected local, state, and national mythology. First Lady Betty Ford visited the museum on April 21, 1976, as part of the year-long Bicentennial celebrations. Having a visitor of national status bestowed Spindletop and the Texas oil industry with necessary validation in the uncertain economic climate. In interviews with local press, Ford evoked the mythology of cowboys and the Wild West, stating that the boomtown site depicted ““the things [she had] heard about Texas and Texans.”” Ford’s relation of the historic Spindletop site with the iconography of Western frontier mythology demonstrated the success of the site in producing a return to a romanticized past by which, as Ford said, “everyone young and old can be entranced.” Early discourse on the Gladys City “living museum” emphasized its role as a place simply to imagine what boomtowns looked like and to commemorate the birth of the Texas oil industry.<sup>26</sup>

The Boomtown Museum is characteristic of local living history sites that include reconstructions or re-enactments from the American past. Historian David Glassberg

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<sup>25</sup> “Gladys City Boomtown USA,” souvenir certificate, 1976. A replica souvenir certificate may be purchased at the Spindletop-Gladys City Boomtown Museum as of February 2022.

<sup>26</sup> Graham, “Texas Sunshine Smiles on Betty Ford,” *The Port Arthur News*; Smith, “The Spindletop Museum,” 43.

argues that such reconstructions provide visitors with “an oasis of timelessness in a contemporary life perceived to be constantly changing.” During the 1970s, some living history sites, like Colonial Williamsburg, responded to the new “social history” by including interpretation of women and people of color. But these responses to social history were exceptions to the rule. While there were three towns which developed around Spindletop Hill, it is notable that the Boomtown Museum takes its name only from two: Spindletop and Gladys City. While this may be attributed to the availability of historical materials on the segregated South Africa settlement, the museum chose to focus its interpretive lens on the boomtowns which best fit into the Anglocentric narrative of Western frontier success. By touring the early twentieth-century buildings, visitors could gain a glimpse of the “distant” past when wildcatters roamed the streets, and oil gushers blew untamed. The Boomtown Museum presented an opportunity to escape contemporary conflicts by experiencing the mythologized origins of Beaumont’s modern economic identity.<sup>27</sup>

The idea of boomtowns in the minds of many Texans echoed images of the Wild West and the lawlessness of the frontier. Boomtowns that sprung up around newly discovered oil fields in the early twentieth century were known as places where rag-tag wildcatters came in hopes of finding fortune. Frederick Jackson Turner’s much-cited “Frontier Thesis” of 1893 emphasized the American frontier characteristics of individualism, self-reliance, and love for the freedom that the wilderness provides. The excitement underlying the belief that more prosperous oil discoveries were waiting to be

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<sup>27</sup> David Glassberg, “Living in the Past,” ed. Jay Anderson, *American Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (1986): 309; Clarke A. Chambers, “Editor’s Page: The ‘New’ Social History, Local History, and Community Empowerment,” *Minnesota History* 49, no. 1 (Spring 1984): 14-18.

found by the next determined, resilient man evoked nineteenth-century ideals of Manifest Destiny, where opportunity and the American Dream lay just in the “unsettled” lands ever further West. The romanticization of both frontier and boomtown life thus melded in the minds of many anxious Americans envisioning a life filled with the prospect of self-made success and less political and social turmoil. By championing the origins of American industry and the hard-working values of wildcatters in the oil boomtowns, the memory of Spindletop served as a medium to support industry figures and free-market ideals in the present.<sup>28</sup>

The frontier boomtown spirit captured the wave of cultural nostalgia and traditional social values that swept the U.S. South during this decade. Social and political historian Jefferson Cowie has described the 1970s as an era of a nationwide blue-collar revival in which American workers gained a new sense of identity and media attention focused on the discontent of the “common man.” Working-class economic interests combined with an attention on traditional values amongst the cultural upheaval. This socially conservative turn was a reaction to the perceived licentiousness and liberal cultural elitism of the progressive 1960s. Richard Nixon and the New Right coalition worked to shift white working-class men away from labor concerns and “to the shared terrain of culture, social issues, and patriotism.” There was a distinct gender dynamic to the reinvigoration of a blue-collar individualism in the 1970s; this faction of the disgruntled “Silent Majority” was coded as conspicuously male. This played into the

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<sup>28</sup> Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Frontier in American History* (New York: Open Road Integrated Media, Inc., 1920), 10-32. These mythic notions of white male exceptionalism have been challenged by scholars, but Turner’s work offers a useful framework through which to consider the appeal of the frontier as a process. See Joan M. Jensen and Darlis A. Miller, “The Gentle Tamers Revisited: New Approaches to the History of Women in the American West,” *Pacific Historical Review* 49, no. 2 (1980): 173–213.

cultural forces driving people to return to patriotic, masculine representations of the past, such as boomtown wildcatters, that best aligned with their vision of an ideal future.<sup>29</sup>

Throughout the local commemorative period in Beaumont in 1976, the historical narrative of Spindletop remained virtually the same in many ways, such as encouraging pride in the local oil industry. The newly constructed Spindletop-Gladys City Boomtown Museum evoked the memory of Spindletop as both a chance to escape contemporary anxieties with a trip to the mythologized Wild West origins of Beaumont and an opportunity to reaffirm contemporary political ideology about the importance of the oil industry – issues that held both national and local import for the Southeast Texas area. These effects continued to influence the community identity of Beaumont in similar ways as the fiftieth anniversary celebration by harnessing the historical memory of Spindletop to celebrate the local contributions of the petroleum industry.

### **Spindletop Commemoration in the New Millennium**

The one hundredth anniversary of Spindletop occurred in Beaumont at the turn of the twenty-first century in which, for the third time, local commemoration reflected the contemporary anxieties and political debates of the era. The rise of international competition and growing environmental consciousness presented a major challenge to the ideology of the oil industry in these years which affected the rhetoric of Spindletop celebration. The Spindletop 2001 Centennial Commission planned and carried out the one hundredth anniversary celebration with close collaboration from Texas politicians, business leaders, and university faculty. The civic leaders on the commission intended to reaffirm Beaumont's place once more within the nation's economic progress while

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<sup>29</sup> Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 1-3, 125-166.

creating lasting improvements for the local community. Their commemorative actions coincided with the pressures of globalization as well as environmental activism that placed the blame for global warming on the oil industry.

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 set the stage for a re-structuring of global power, what economist Constantine Michalopoulos deemed a “new international economic order.” The rapid expansion of trade, unforeseen technological developments, and the rise of China as a world economic giant all marked the unceasing spread of globalization.<sup>30</sup> As the new millennium approached, there was no question that the decade of the 2000s would be one of global proportions, evidencing a continuous shift to international dependence between countries. The U.S. domestic oil industry was facing intense competition. Oil companies profoundly felt the anxieties over what high dependence on foreign sources of crude oil could entail with the ghost of the OPEC crisis still looming overhead. The U.S. General Accounting Office Report on the Year 2000 acknowledged that the nation is “vulnerable to ... failures of oil production and transportation in other countries.” Although the United States was still one of the largest petroleum producers, the country also imported over half of its consumption from foreign oil sources. This dependency forced American petroleum corporations to reckon with their vulnerable position in the global economy at the dawn of a new millennium.<sup>31</sup>

A new tension during this third Spindletop anniversary period was the rising rhetoric of environmentalism, which held the petroleum industry as one of its major

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<sup>30</sup> Constantine Michalopoulos, “The Many Faces of Globalization,” in *Aid, Trade and Development: 50 Years of Globalization*, ed. Constantine Michalopoulos (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2017), 165-205.

<sup>31</sup> United States General Accounting Office, “Year 2000 Computing Crisis: Readiness of the Oil and Gas Industries,” May 19, 1999, <https://www.gao.gov/products/aimd-99-162>.



targets. The decades of the 1990s and 2000s witnessed a wave of environmental activism unseen since the Carter Administration. Media spectacles during the twentieth anniversary of Earth Day in 1990 relied upon individual sympathies to invoke an emotional response to long-term environmental dangers. The *Earth Day Special* encouraged citizens to take responsibility for long-term change through small, individual actions such as recycling. Many activists criticized the media framing of environmentalism as manipulating consumers into finding empowerment through the market rather than challenging corporate power structures. Nonetheless, the movement raised public awareness of the global environmental crisis and placed “green” issues in a national spotlight throughout the decade.<sup>32</sup>

Global warming due to the human emission of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases appeared on the minds of international governments as well, leading to the negotiation of the Kyoto Protocol at the 1997 United Nations Convention. The protocol called for industrialized nations to commit to maximum carbon emission levels, with the European Union pledging to cut emissions by eight percent. However, the U.S. Senate’s adoption of the Byrd-Hagel Resolution in July 1997, declaring that the country would not enter into any agreement which exempted developing countries, ensured that the Senate would not ratify the groundbreaking Kyoto agreement later that year. A lobbyist group associated with Exxon, the Global Climate Science Team, also introduced efforts to manufacture uncertainties and misinformation about climate science which aided the campaign against ratification. The rejection of the Kyoto treaty seemed to mark the end of any significant place for climate change within the United States political

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<sup>32</sup> Finis Dunaway, *Seeing Green: The Use and Abuse of American Environmental Images*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015): 241-243.

agenda.<sup>33</sup>

The environmental justice movement and fears of global warming became influential enough to permeate political campaigns in the year 2000. Former Vice-President Al Gore, running as the Democratic Presidential Nominee, reinforced his views on environmental protection in his announcement of candidacy in 1999, promising to “address the international challenge of global warming.”<sup>34</sup> In a pitch for a \$125 billion energy plan, Gore repeatedly called out the dangers of the United States’ dependence on “Big Oil,” and his opponent George W. Bush’s close ties to the oil industry. The political conflicts over environmentalism underlined how politicians engaged with the Spindletop Anniversary Celebration.<sup>35</sup>

Demonstrating how closely political contexts drove the commemoration of Spindletop, Texas Governor George W. Bush established the 2001 Centennial Commission on June 2, 1997. The Commission served as the primary organizational body responsible for planning the year-long commemorative activities leading up to the anniversary on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The Commission Chairman Evelyn M. Lord recounted visiting Governor Bush’s office in Austin in 1996 in which they “enjoyed a lengthy conversation about the importance of the oil industry to the nation’s economy.”<sup>36</sup> This exchange set the tone for the Centennial, ensuring that the anniversary celebration would

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<sup>33</sup> Union of Concerned Scientists, *Smoke, Mirrors, & Hot Air: How ExxonMobil Uses Big Tobacco's Tactics to Manufacture Uncertainty on Climate Science*, (Union of Concerned Scientists, 2007), 9; Daniel Yergin, *The Quest: Energy, Security and the Remaking of the Modern World*, (London: Penguin Books, 2012): 489-492.

<sup>34</sup> Al Gore, “Al Gore’s candidacy speech in full,” *The Guardian*, June 16, 1999, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/1999/jun/16/uselections2000.usa1>.

<sup>35</sup> Frank Bruni, “The 2000 Campaign: The Vice President; Gore Unveils \$125 Billion Energy Plan,” *The New York Times*, 28 June 2000, 24.

<sup>36</sup> Evelyn M. Lord, “History and Recollections of the Spindletop Centennial Effort,” *Texas Gulf Historical & Biographical Record* 38 (November 2002): 21.

closely align with the goals of the Texas oil industry. The Texas House Bill establishing the commission stated it must consist of employees of Beaumont's Lamar University and the Texas Energy Museum<sup>37</sup>, the executive directors of the Texas Railroad Commission and Texas Historical Commission, and several others.<sup>38</sup> The goals of this diverse commission were as follows:

[To] remind and inform the community, state and nation about the significance of the discovery; create lasting commemorations of the importance of the Spindletop discovery in celebration of the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary, celebrate the event in a way that fosters participation and pride, [and] promote a greater understanding of the discovery and the impact on the oil industry.<sup>39</sup>

Plans for the January 10<sup>th</sup> celebration, given the moniker the "Big Day," were thus in preparation for several years before its execution, enabling the creation of large-scale projects that have left a lasting mark on the community to the present day.

The Centennial Commission's official seal made a visual statement about the celebration's intended goals of the national importance of Spindletop. The commission's logo depicted the Lucas Gusher flanked on either side by a Texas flag and a United States flag with the dates 1901-2001 underneath. This imagery placed Texas on an equal footing with the United States and positioned the oil derrick in between the two, spurting high above. This visual representation of the centrality of crude oil to the economic identity and industrial progress of both the state and the nation built upon the idea of an interconnected Texan and American exceptionalism, a theme developed during past commemorative periods and carried into the remembrance of Spindletop in 2001.<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> The Texas Energy Museum opened in Beaumont on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 1990, on the anniversary of the Lucas Gusher. Its interactive exhibits explore topics related to petroleum science, modern oil refining, and the Spindletop discovery.

<sup>38</sup> Texas House Bill 1428, *Texas Legislature Online*, capitol.texas.gov.

<sup>39</sup> G.A. Begin, "Yearlong Spindletop commemoration begins," *Port Arthur News*, January 11, 2000, 2A.

<sup>40</sup> *The Texas Gulf Historical and Biographical Record* 37, no. 1 (May 2001).

The one hundredth anniversary of Spindletop necessitated even grander statements of recognition and remembrance from years past. Nothing more significantly demonstrated this urgency than the efforts to have representatives from the 2001 Centennial Commission at the opening of the New York Stock Exchange to ring in the year leading up to the Big Day. On January 10, 2000, Beaumont Mayor David Moore and commission member Lanier Yeates gaveled in the day's session of the NYSE.<sup>41</sup> In the words of Chairman Evelyn Lord, the act was intended to "show the importance of oil to the economy of the nation and of course, to the world."<sup>42</sup> The presence of Beaumont civic leaders at the most symbolic institution of the United States' marketplace for the anniversary of Spindletop underlined the integral connection between the memory of Spindletop and the American values of free enterprise and competition.

Similar to the fiftieth anniversary commemorative period, the 2001 Commission placed an emphasis on the educational opportunities to ensure Texas youth understood the importance of oil to Texas history. In collaboration with the Texas State Historical Association (TSHA), the Commission developed an education program entitled "Spindletop and the Story of Texas Oil." The TSHA Summer Institute in June 2000 dedicated two days out of five conducting workshops for teachers from across the state on Spindletop's impact within Texas, United States, and world history and created lesson plans designed to reach 57,000 students state-wide. Texaco, one of the companies formed in the aftermath of the Spindletop discovery, sponsored the entire initiative, ensuring that

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<sup>41</sup> Dan Wallach, "The 'Big Day' is coming soon in Beaumont," *Beaumont Enterprise*, Dec 26, 1999, box 3, folder 4, Spindletop 2001 Commission Collection, Tyrrell Historical Library, Beaumont, Texas.

<sup>42</sup> Evelyn M. Lord, interviewed by Penny Clark, June 26, 2001, transcript, box 1, folder 11, Spindletop 2001 Commission Collection, Tyrrell Historical Library, Beaumont, Texas.

the oil industry had a formative role in the educational materials developed.<sup>43</sup>

Another major undertaking during the year leading to the “Big Day” celebration was a large improvement project for the Boomtown Museum in Beaumont, including building restorations, interpretive improvements, and a new Visitor’s Center. Planners envisioned the new Visitor’s Center as an opportunity “to tell the story of these heroes of Spindletop in a way it has never been told before, and to pay tribute to them for generations to come.” The project proposal highlighted the importance of the individuals who helped discover Spindletop as embodying the “essence of the American entrepreneurial spirit.” The interpretive improvements came in the form of new panels installed in many of the individual recreated buildings within Gladys City, as well as the Visitor’s Center, which remain the main interpretive texts on display in 2022.<sup>44</sup>

The new interpretive texts in the Boomtown Museum now reflected the trend toward social history affecting the academic field since the 1960s. The new panels describe the historical details of Spindletop, both the good and the bad, mostly rejecting oversimplified constructions of the past. One panel describes the realities of the boomtown atmosphere in Beaumont, noting that drinking water and sleeping arrangements were sparse, while fraud and greed ran rampant. The interpretive plaque in the Guffey Post Office offers more on this topic by describing the three small towns that sprung up around Spindletop Hill – Spindletop, Gladys City, and South Africa. The plaque mentions that Spindletop was a muddy, unsanitary town known for crime and violence, while South Africa revealed the realities of segregation for Black and Mexican

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<sup>43</sup> “Educational Initiative,” box 4, file 10, Spindletop 2001 Commission Collection, Tyrrell Historical Library, Beaumont, Texas.

<sup>44</sup> “Improvement Project Proposal,” box 4, file 16, Spindletop 2001 Commission Collection, Tyrrell Historical Library, Beaumont, Texas.

American workers who were barred from the highest-paying jobs on the drilling rigs.<sup>45</sup>

Despite this acknowledgement of the negative aspects of boomtown life, the overarching historical narrative presented at the Boomtown Museum reinforces the mythical origin story. The panel in the first building, the Walkenshaw and Co. Sheet Metal Workers, emphasizes the role of Spindletop as a “training ground for Texas oil” and pays special attention to the three large oil companies formed in the aftermath of Spindletop which still exist in some form today – Guffey (Gulf), Texaco (Chevron), and Magnolia (Mobil) – linking the businessmen of the past to the modern oil industry. Both panel text along with an introductory video emphasize the rapid population growth of Beaumont almost overnight (from 9,000 to 50,000) due to the discovery. Although many of the fortune-seekers who rushed into Beaumont would not remain for an extended period of time, this detail of a population boom underlines the role of Spindletop in producing rapid economic development. The new interpretive panels imparted a memory of Spindletop that distinctly emphasized its position as the birthplace of Texas oil.<sup>46</sup>

By 2001, the historical memory of Spindletop had developed into the foremost defining feature of Beaumont’s past, as shown by the renewed emphasis on ensuring Spindletop was a significant part of the landscape of Southeast Texas. One of the major efforts of the Spindletop 2001 Centennial Commission was the creation of “Spindletop Park” to mark the original location of the Lucas Gusher as “a permanent gift to the community.”<sup>47</sup> The location of the Spindletop oil field was designated a Registered National Historic Landmark in 1967, which had previously only been marked by the

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<sup>45</sup> Author visit, Spindletop-Gladys City Boomtown Museum, Beaumont, Texas, February 19, 2022.

<sup>46</sup> Author visit, Spindletop-Gladys City Boomtown Museum, Beaumont, Texas, February 19, 2022.

<sup>47</sup> Laurie Hall Leister, interviewed by Penny L. Clark, July 13, 2001, box 1, folder 11, Spindletop 2001 Commission Collection, Tyrrell Historical Library, Beaumont, Texas.

1941 Lucas Gusher Monument. After the monument's relocation to the Boomtown Museum, there was no physical marking of the original Spindletop well accessible to the public until Spindletop Park.<sup>48</sup> Spindletop Park consists of a pentagonal viewing platform with its point directed towards a flagpole in the distance marking the original location of the Lucas Gusher. On the platform are six interpretative panels detailing the history of the Spindletop discovery and its impact on the local area afterwards. Spindletop Park, at the time of its creation, represented an educational initiative that could engage the public through the power of place.<sup>49</sup>

The culmination of the Centennial Commission's efforts resulted in the "Big Day" commemoration on January 10<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The Boomtown Museum again served as the setting for the celebration, and the living history interpreters working amongst the recreated wooden buildings brought the original boomtown atmosphere back to life for a day. With an attendance of roughly twenty thousand, the celebration was a massive community event, consisting of an opening speech by former President George H. W. Bush, a performance of a song commemorating Spindletop written specifically for the occasion by country music artist Tracy Byrd, and a historical re-enactment of the moment of oil discovery. Children's activities at the "Big Day" sought to mix historical education and entertainment to engage young attendees with early twentieth-century experiences. Wells Fargo offered stagecoach rides, and local history museums set up stations for children to create corn husk dolls, homemade potpourri, and quilt squares.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> "Texas NHL Lucas Gusher, Spindletop Oil Field," National Register of Historic Places Nomination Form, Jefferson County, Texas, National Register #66000818.

<sup>49</sup> Author visit, Spindletop Park, Beaumont, Texas, February 19, 2022. For more on how the power of place strengthens the connection between community identity and local history, see Dolores Hayden, *The Power of Place: Urban Landscapes as Public History*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995).

<sup>50</sup> "Children's Boomtown Gushes Fun During Centennial Celebration on Jan. 10<sup>th</sup>," box 4, file 16, Spindletop 2001 Commission Collection, Tyrrell Historical Library, Beaumont, Texas.

By 2001, the Lucas Gusher re-enactment had become a ritualized performance associated with the commemoration of Spindletop. Anthropologist Christine Hastorf wrote that rituals can create a link to individuals and groups in the past, working to re-confirm culture and provide meaning and structure for the present.<sup>51</sup> The 1901 drilling rig and its modern counterpart served this role during the fiftieth anniversary celebration. By the seventy-fifth anniversary, this performance had improved into an operational replica Lucas derrick, and finally, in 2001, the celebration boasted a professionally engineered replica which could shoot a gusher on command. The process of mythmaking requires this repetition for each successive generation to continually assert the importance of Spindletop to community, state, and national identity.

As part of the Lucas Gusher ritual, Tracy Byrd, who originated from the Southeast Texas area, performed a new song narrating the events of the Spindletop discovery with the help of costumed re-enactors. At exactly 10:30 a.m., a rumbling announced the arrival of oil from the recreated Lucas Gusher built by donated labor from Sigma Engineering and Mason Construction.<sup>52</sup> Attendees of the Spindletop Anniversary Celebration became part of the spectacle, donning umbrellas and raincoats to frolic in the gusher water, imagining what former Texans had felt a century prior. A local news anchor reported that the day's events helped residents experience the excitement of this historic event "one hundred years after Beaumont came to life," reinforcing the idea that the oil found on Spindletop Hill was the catalyst for the modern city.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Christine Hastorf, "Studying Ritual in the Past," *Kroeber Anthropological Society Papers* 2, no. 85 (2001): 5.

<sup>52</sup> Evelyn M. Lord, interviewed by Penny Clark, June 26, 2001, box 1, folder 11, Spindletop 2001 Commission Collection, Tyrrell Historical Library, Beaumont, Texas.

<sup>53</sup> Spindletop-Gladys City Boomtown Museum, "Spindletop 2001: The Big Day (2001)," *Texas Archive of the Moving Image*, [texasarchive.org](http://texasarchive.org).



One major drawing attraction on January 10<sup>th</sup> was the introductory speech given by former President George H. W. Bush, whose son, George W. Bush, would be inaugurated into office just one week later. In his remarks, President Bush drew on the history of the discovery of oil on Spindletop Hill to invoke the values of the United States in the present day. He claimed that the story of Spindletop “embodies the independent, hard-working, enterprising spirit” of the American people. Additionally, President Bush used this occasion to connect Texas’s historical role in the oil industry to contemporary political issues, namely the rising criticisms against environmental pollution and global warming. He argued that the incoming President and Vice-President, George W. Bush and Dick Cheney, had the ability to stand up to extremism because of their thorough understanding of how vital the oil industry is to both national security interests and the economic well-being of the nation.<sup>54</sup>

Former President George H. W. Bush’s speech demonstrated how government officials and politicians can often invoke historical memory to garner support for political causes and make influential statements on current affairs. Ostensibly, the Spindletop one hundredth anniversary celebration meant to commemorate the historic place of this event within the timeline of economic development of the Southeast Texas region. Bush referenced the mass of people “who like to beat up on the oil industry” and had “nutty ideas about energy policy” that would “jeopardize the future.” In doing so, Bush drew upon the common interests of Beaumont residents gathered for this event in direct opposition to the growing political coalitions campaigning for stronger protections for the environment. The statement was clear: to raise criticism against the oil industry was to

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<sup>54</sup> “Spindletop 2001: The Big Day (2001),” *Texas Archive of the Moving Image*.

criticize the very backbone of Beaumont's history and progress as a city.<sup>55</sup>

The 2001 commemorative activities around Spindletop reflected many of the values – individual economic success, healthy competition, courage in the face of danger – established during the earlier anniversary periods in the 1950s and 1970s. The entrepreneurial spirit embodied by the men of Spindletop permeated nearly all aspects of the celebration and its efforts to disseminate the historical memory of Spindletop, not only to Beaumont residents, but state-wide. Now, local and state officials evoked the origin story of Spindletop and its “founding fathers” to reinforce the necessity of the oil industry to the region, state, and nation in the face of growing criticism and vulnerability in the new millennium. The official narrative of Spindletop remains mostly unchallenged since this period, as the interpretative plaques created during the 2001 commemorative period at the Boomtown Museum and Spindletop Park are still present at these sites.

## **Conclusion**

Each commemorative period of Spindletop built upon the values and symbols of the previous efforts at historical remembrance. As the first widespread commemoration, the fiftieth anniversary celebration served as a guide for how the community should remember Spindletop. Corporate leaders in the 1950s used the ideological battle of the Cold War to prop up their messages of Spindletop's legacy within local and national memory. The industrial exhibits, dramatized performance media, and corporate officials' speeches all made the point clear: the early men of Spindletop were courageous American workers who believed in the spirit of free enterprise and persevered in the face of all odds. The events suggested that the average citizen of Beaumont should embrace

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<sup>55</sup> “Spindletop 2001: The Big Day (2001),” *Texas Archive of the Moving Image*.

and identify with these values as well.

Because the seventy-fifth anniversary coincided with the American Bicentennial, there was a heavy emphasis on Spindletop's ties to national history. Although grand statements about Spindletop's influence to both the national and global economy permeated the commemoration at the fiftieth and one hundredth anniversary celebrations as well, the 1976 event explicitly sought to foster a sense of pride in community history by remarking on its place within national historical memory. The Spindletop commemoration responded to the economic and social conservatism of the 1970s by emphasizing the mythologized aspects of the boomtown's Wild West atmosphere. Finally, in 2001, contemporary political statements again played a large role in the commemoration, forsaking environmental issues and tying the local history of Spindletop to the central facet of American national ideology: capitalism. Former President George H. W. Bush's opening remarks set the tone by overtly connecting Spindletop to the global and environmental anxieties of 2001. The memory of Spindletop presented to the public has altered slightly over the years, responding to the greater historical circumstances of the particular time. Yet the fundamental lessons gleaned from the past, used to define the community identity of Beaumont, have remained remarkably similar.

These historical values are central to the historical memory upon which the community rests its contemporary identity, legitimacy, and significance. The consistent reference to the local oil and gas industries in the commemoration of Spindletop still ties the identity and livelihood of contemporary citizens to the massive oil industries founded in the early twentieth century. The emphasis on Spindletop as the origin story for Beaumont, Texas reveals how the characteristics and values associated with this

historical memory – of an enterprising and industrious spirit – continue to drive the community’s shared perception of themselves as Southeast Texans and, even greater, as Americans.

### III. THE CONTEMPORARY LEGACY OF SPINDLETOP

The historical memory of Spindletop promoted during these three commemorative eras continues to drive public perception of Beaumont's history. Anniversary celebrations occur at the Spindletop-Gladys City Boomtown Museum every year around January 10<sup>th</sup> using many of same commemorative actions and themes. Notably, these annual celebrations continue to include the ritual public performance of the Lucas Gusher replica. The mission statement of the Boomtown Museum as of 2022 is: "To kindle the wildcatter spirit in everyone through rich, shared experiences inspired by the history, significance, and legacy of Spindletop." The museum brochure describes a wildcatter as "someone who took on risky business ventures, like banking or later, oil exploration" and encourages visitors to work to embody this spirit by being "curious, determined, creative, passionate and responsible leaders." While the language has been updated for modern audiences since 2001, the larger intent – to raise community leaders who appreciate free enterprise, American individuality, and industrial progress – remains the same.<sup>1</sup>

The Boomtown Museum is the central mechanism through which Beaumont citizens continue to learn their local history. Advertised as one of the leading tourist attractions in the city, the museum is a main producer of the memory of Spindletop and its historical legacy. The museum still works to bolster community engagement through Halloween and Christmas festivals, open mic days, family picnics, and woodcarving and blacksmith classes. The museum hosts "Coffee and Spindletop" online discussions featuring local historians, history enthusiasts, and museum staff. Throughout 2022, the

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<sup>1</sup> *Where the Wildcatter Spirit Lives On*, (Beaumont: Spindletop-Gladys City Boomtown Museum, 2022), museum brochure.

Boomtown Museum held gusher re-enactments with the mechanical derrick constructed in 2001 approximately once a week to allow visitors to experience the original oil gusher people in Beaumont witnessed in 1901.

The Boomtown Museum continues to boost popular appeal through the Wild West imagery fashioned in the 1970s. Spindletop anniversary celebrations became annual events at the Boomtown Museum around 2013. Originally referred to as the “Driller’s Reunion,” these events consist of a re-enactment of the Lucas Gusher, demonstrations of period activities such as printing and woodcarving, film showings, and music performances. Recent celebrations have included skits from the Big Thicket Outlaws, a group that performs “Old West” style skits and shootouts, with titles such as “Post Office Robbery” and “Rooming House Runaway.” Another common feature is the costumed re-enactors of the Ladies Temperance Movement, who hold picket signs outside of the Log Cabin saloon building and teach tea etiquette to attendees.<sup>2</sup>

Industry giant ExxonMobil has been the main sponsor of the Spindletop anniversary celebrations in the twenty-first century. The presence of ExxonMobil’s support is also clear throughout the Boomtown Museum. The company logo is displayed on the introductory video in the Visitor’s Center and on interpretive signage on the reconstructed buildings. As a museum dedicated to telling the story of one of the most significant oil discoveries of the twentieth century, the sponsorship of Exxon Mobil, headquartered in Texas, might seem like an innocuous partnership. However, it is worth

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<sup>2</sup> Spindletop-Gladys City Boomtown Museum, “Here is the 120<sup>th</sup> Anniversary event schedule this weekend...” Facebook, January 6, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/SpindletopGC/photos/3677986532266486>; Spindletop-Gladys City Boomtown Museum, “The 121<sup>st</sup> Anniversary of Spindletop,” Facebook, January 8, 2022, <https://www.facebook.com/SpindletopGC/photos/4780966365301825>; The Big Thicket Outlaws, “About,” Facebook, October 11, 2021, <https://www.facebook.com/groups/943857332895079/>

interrogating the risks taken by any cultural institution that associates itself with a private company known for its environmental and human rights violations.<sup>3</sup>

The public perception of companies that financially support cultural institutions, such as museums, can alter visitors' perceptions of a cultural site's authenticity, or how closely its actions align with its stated values. Tourist attractions rely on both public and private funding to support the continued efficacy of the site through actions such as maintaining collections or creating public programs. A 2018 study found that a supporting company's perceived level of altruism may affect the cultural site's authenticity, which in turn can significantly impact individuals' visiting intentions. Cultural institutions have received criticism for receiving support from individual or corporate donors that do not align with their ethical codes. For example, the National Portrait Gallery in London ended their thirty-year partnership with oil giant BP in April 2022 in the wake of public protests. Corporations plagued by controversies may reflect poorly upon the altruistic image of the site they choose to sponsor. Therefore, directors of museums and similar institutions face considerable challenges in balancing their ethical and financial interests when taking on corporate sponsorships.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Spindletop-Gladys City Boomtown Museum, author visit, February 19, 2022; Kerrie M. Taylor, "Thicker Than Blood: Holding ExxonMobil Liable for Human Rights," *Syracuse Journal of International Law and Commerce* 31, no. 2 (2004): 273-297. In June 2001, eleven villagers from Aceh, Indonesia filed a lawsuit against ExxonMobil, which was later dismissed, claiming that the corporation was complicit in the human rights abuses committed by their employed security forces. The suit also alleges that ExxonMobil financed the atrocities by providing "material support." A spokesman for ExxonMobil denied any complicity in human rights violations.

<sup>4</sup> Alessandro Biraglia, Maximilian H. E. E. Gerrath, and Bryan Usrey, "Examining How Companies' Support of Tourist Attractions Affects Visiting Intentions: The Mediating Role of Perceived Authenticity," *Journal of Travel Research* 57, no. 6 (2018): 811-823; Antonia Cundy and Anjili Raval, "Scrutiny Mounts over Corporate Funding of the Arts: Environmental, Social, and Ethical Concerns Raised Over Institutions' Partnerships," *Financial Times (London, England)*, October 2, 2019; Gareth Harris, "National Portrait Gallery in London ends BP sponsorship after 30 years," *The Art Newspaper*, February 22, 2022, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2022/02/22/national-portrait-gallery-in-london-ends-bp-sponsorship-after-30-years>.

The commemoration of Spindletop raises the question of why the official historical narrative continues to support an intense reliance on the Texas petroleum industry, and why the accepted narrative has been so resistant to change. The next major commemorative era may not come until the one-hundred fiftieth celebration of the Spindletop discovery. It is possible that local leaders will continue to use historical memory in the service of defending the petroleum industry and promoting Beaumont history as one of heroic individuals who worked in the spirit of free enterprise. Any significant change to the historical memory of Spindletop will be difficult due to the inextricable links between the community identity of Southeast Texas and the historical presence of major oil companies in the region.

The centrality of the petroleum industry to Southeast Texas livelihoods and local economies affects not only the region, but the state of Texas as a whole. The Texas Gulf Coast conglomeration of refineries and chemical plants produced 87.3 percent of the state's total production as of 2021. Following this, Texas's economy is ranked second in contributing to the United States' annual Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The state provides nearly one-third of the country's crude oil refining capacity. Many of the statements made about Spindletop's significance to modern industry may appear far-fetched, and many can be disputed or diminished when placed in proper comparison. Yet it is an undeniable fact that the causal effects following the Lucas Gusher are still evident today. The question is whether the far-reaching social and economic impacts of



Spindletop are worth the environmental degradation and health consequences for residents of refinery towns such as Beaumont and Port Arthur.<sup>5</sup>

Residents living near industrial facilities, such as refineries and petrochemical plants, often reap adverse health risks from continued exposure to air releases of carcinogens and toxicants. In 2019, facilities in the Beaumont region released 76,842,349 pounds of unauthorized air pollution, the highest in Texas. Many of the facilities are next-door to residential areas, schools, and senior living centers. A study conducted by the University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, Texas compared air pollution levels and self-reported health statuses of Beaumont, Port Arthur, and the reference community, Galveston. Levels of the chemical benzene in Beaumont measured between 2.5 to 3.5 times greater than in Galveston. One area of Port Arthur displayed levels of 1,3 butadiene, a gas used in making rubber and plastic that is classified as a human carcinogen, nineteen times higher than Galveston. Both Beaumont and Port Arthur residents reported higher levels of respiratory and ear/nose/throat symptoms than the reference community. Even more dangerous than these unauthorized releases are potential large-scale air pollution events from unexpected disasters.<sup>6</sup>

Just before 1 a.m. on November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2019, the chemical manufacturing plant owned by Texas Petroleum Chemicals, or TPC Group, in Port Neches, Texas, exploded

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<sup>5</sup> “Gulf Coast Refining Capacity,” *Greater Houston Partnership*, April 2021, <https://www.houston.org/houston-data/gulf-coast-refining-capacity>; “Texas State Energy Profile,” *U.S. Energy Information Administration*, May 19, 2022, <https://www.eia.gov/state/print.php?sid=TX>.

<sup>6</sup> Catherine Fraser, “Illegal Air Pollution in Texas 2020,” *Environment Texas Research & Policy Center*, October 2020, [https://environmentamerica.org/texas/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/TX\\_Pollution\\_2020\\_scrn.pdf](https://environmentamerica.org/texas/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/TX_Pollution_2020_scrn.pdf); Debra L. Morris, P. Jene Barker, and Marvin S. Legator, “Symptoms of Adverse Health Effects Among Residents from Communities Surrounding Chemical-Industrial Complexes in Southeast Texas,” *Archives of Environmental Health* 59, no. 3 (March 2004): 160–65. Environment Texas’s 2020 report provides a full overview of the top polluting chemicals released from industrial plants, associated health risks, and recommendations for how the state can work to reduce illegal air pollution.

in a massive blast. A second blast shocked the city, located within the Beaumont-Port Arthur metropolitan area, the next afternoon, leading to calls for mandatory evacuations for the surrounding area. The explosions displaced residents the day before Thanksgiving, blew in windows and doors of nearby homes, and resulted in eight injuries at the TPC plant itself. The blast did not cause any fatalities. Earlier that year in January, the TPC Group had been fined \$214,388 for air quality violations due to its release of 1,3 butadiene and other petrochemicals. In the days to follow, the community rallied together in a show of solidarity and resilience, traits that residents have learned to adapt from living near a dense cluster of refineries and petrochemical plants. Even in the aftermath of the event, one resident declared, “the plants are the lifeblood of this place. If they go away, the town goes away.”<sup>7</sup>

Although many residents of the Beaumont-Port Arthur metropolitan area are aware of the health risks and threats of disaster associated with living near these refinery complexes, a deep support of the oil industry remains central to community identity. A justification for continued dependence on oil and gas is part of the national identity of the United States as a whole. Author Matthew T. Huber has hypothesized that the association of oil with the “cherished ideas of property, freedom, family, and home” is responsible for making “its deleterious ecological consequences that much harder to reverse.” The massive growth of the American oil industry throughout the twentieth century came to be associated with everyday comforts such as automobile ownership and energy to light and

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<sup>7</sup> Rick Rojas, “Explosions Shake a Texas Town and Its View on Thanksgiving,” *New York Times*, November 28, 2019. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/11/28/us/port-neches-texas-explosion.html>; Kelsey Johnson and Scott Eslinger, “TPC Group Explosion Demonstrates Vulnerability of Southeast Texas Schools near Petrochemical Plants,” *12 News Now*, February 26, 2020, <https://www.12newsnow.com/article/news/investigations/tpc-group-explosion-demonstrates-vulnerability-of-southeast-texas-schools-near-petrochemical-plants/502-c0490257-ef41-4723-8c63-362bf07b542f>.

heat homes. He asserts that American production and consumption of oil has created “cultural and political structures of feeling that . . . produced an unprecedented form of individuated power and control over everyday practices.” The ideology of oil as an arbiter of American freedom and individualism, Huber suggests, will be the largest barrier to any substantial change in energy policy and consumption.<sup>8</sup>

The public commemoration of Spindletop as the origin story for Beaumont, Texas continually ties the identity and livelihood of citizens to the massive oil industries founded in the early twentieth century. Sociologists Shannon Bell and Richard York have demonstrated how ecologically destructive industries, faced with their imminent decline, “increase their efforts to maintain and amplify the extent to which the ‘economic identity’ of communities is connected with the industry that was historically an important source of employment” for the region. As part of an industry which faces consistent criticism, these companies must ensure that they are seen as key components of individual and community identity, not simply a means of employment. One way to guarantee this is to strengthen the historical memory of local significant events that harbor sentiments of nostalgia, tradition, and community pride. Unlike extractive industries such as coal mining, the economic livelihood of Southeast Texas continues to rely strongly on the oil and gas industry, and it does not appear to be changing soon. Yet the concerns for oil industry leaders to maintain power and profits in the face of criticism through ideological control are undoubtedly similar to other extractive industries.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Matthew T. Huber, *Lifblood: Oil, Freedom, and the Forces of Capital*, Quadrant Book (University of Minnesota Press, 2013), xvi, 169.

<sup>9</sup> Shannon Elizabeth Bell and Richard York, “Community Economic Identity: The Coal Industry and Ideology Construction in West Virginia,” *Rural Sociology* 75, no. 1 (2010): 136.

The historical memory of Spindletop helps the oil industry suppress any true dissent or criticism of the detrimental effects of living near a major petrochemical complex in light of the technological progress and material comforts it has supplied. As shown by a 2015 study, communities with strong historical ties to one dominating industry “may be more forgiving of the environmental externalities associated with that facility.” Risk acceptance is higher in communities that develop close socio-cultural and economic ties to local industry as citizens use processes of normalization, temporal distancing, and enduring confidence to manage conflicting feelings. Residents may downplay environmental and health threats by deferring to the longevity of collective memory and trust associated with a particular industry.<sup>10</sup>

The relationship between oil companies and Southeast Texas workers, however, is not always amicable. In 2021, ExxonMobil and a local branch of the United Steelworkers union engaged in the longest labor dispute at a United States refinery since 1980. Exxon had proposed to freeze wages for many workers and eliminate protections for which the union had fought for decades. After contract negotiations failed to reach an agreement, ExxonMobil engaged in a ten-month lockout of around 650 employees at their Beaumont refinery, currently the eighth largest in the nation. In January 2022, Exxon amended its contract offer, granting small concessions, but falling far short of the refinery workers’ preferred goals. The Beaumont union, Local 13-243, voted to approve the contract 214 to 133. The protracted campaign to decertify the union suggests a stronghold of Beaumont

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<sup>10</sup> C. M. Messer, T. E. Shriver, and A. E. Adams, “Collective Identity and Memory: A Comparative Analysis of Community Response to Environmental Hazards,” *Rural Sociology* 80, no. 3 (2015): 314–39; David Brown, Alice Mah, and Gordon Walker, “The Tenacity of Trust in Petrochemical Communities: Reckoning with Risk on the Fawley Waterside (1997–2019),” *Environment and Planning E: Nature and Space* 5, no. 3 (September 2022): 1207-1229.

workers who support ExxonMobil and believe the union does not work in their best interests. This labor activism reveals the limits of historic commemoration to unite community identity around exploitative industries.<sup>11</sup>

This thesis is not a call to action for residents of the Beaumont-Port Arthur metropolitan area to reject their generational ties to the oil and gas industry which is still responsible for supporting the economic development of the region. The collective identity of Southeast Texas may never be untangled from the petroleum industry. Rather, this research serves to highlight the fact that civic leaders may utilize and manipulate local history according to particular temporal circumstances in order to claim political validation. Historicizing events in their proper context reveals the underlying motivations behind much of the language and symbolism used in the remembrance of a specific moment in history. Historical memory is not static – it is prone to adapt to the contemporary climate. Residents of any area that depends on one major industry must be wary to not appeal to pride in their region’s history in lieu of valid concerns over the region’s present and future.

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<sup>11</sup> Justin Miller, “The Battle of Beaumont,” *Texas Observer: A Journal of Free Voices* 114, no. 2 (March/April 2022): 28-37. As of October 2022, the National Labor Relations Board has declared ExxonMobil’s actions during the lockout “unlawful” and are seeking back pay for the affected workers.

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