Life in an Oil Field Boom Town
From Charlie Jefferies, "Reminiscences of Sour Lake," The Southwestern Historical Quarterly, L (July 1946), 25-35.

For surging energy, unrestrained openness, and diabolical conditions otherwise, Sour Lake was head and shoulders above anything Texas had seen up until that time or perhaps has seen since. The site is on low ground. At that time little effort was made at drainage; and a short while after operations began, a large part of the field was worked up in such a mess of mud as can hardly be imagined.

One thing that made the mud so bad and rendered the place such an inferno in other ways was the crowded condition. There were few, if any, laws governing oil field operations; no such thing as restrictions on drilling existed. Landowners sold their land to anyone who came to buy it, the result being that a greater part of the field was soon a forest of derricks. As quantities of water are required to run a rotary drill, the slush which spread from these hundreds of wells and which was stirred up by the men working in it made the place a sight to behold.

As the oil field was the important feature of the Sour Lake scene as a whole, so was Shoestring, the center of interest of the oil field. Shoestring was a long narrow strip of land in the middle of the oil-bearing district, where development was most intensified. In many ways it was the pulsing life center of the oil field. Here the wells were thickest; here the mud was deepest; here the gas was strongest; here the boilers roared the loudest; here the efforts of the men had the fullest play...

Always nearby was the waste from the overflowed slush pits, giving the appearance of a freshly drained pond. The struggle between mud and men was close-locked. There were no roads, that is high, dry roads in Shoestring. The only way of getting around in that part of the field was by whatever means one could devise. A network of large pipes, not unlike a badly constructed spider web, ran about over the field. They had been laid without any regard to system, but they were usually up out of the mud, and these, to some extent, served as causeways.

Another highly noticeable feature of the field was the gas. The region is sulphurous, and the gas that comes out of the wells is highly impregnated with the mineral. As the pressure was enormous, forcing out millions of cubic feet of the poisonous fumes daily, it rendered the place highly dangerous. On damp, still days it could be smelled a mile or more from the field. It had a scent something like rotten eggs. This particular kind of gas was what the people about the old field called "rotten" gas. While it was disagreeable to be in, it was not the kind that was dangerous.

It was the gas fresh from the wells, less diffused and more highly impregnated with sulphur that the workers dreaded. This kind had hardly any scent, but it was as deadly as a murderer. Its effect when breathed was much like that of chloroform. If a person, or any living animal, inhaled a few strong breaths of it, he would fall over unconscious; and if he lay in it and continued to breathe it, he would die as surely as if chloroformed.

Another bad effect of the gas, while not so dangerous but much more painful, occurred when a person got it in his eyes. This affliction did not give much warning of approach. A man might be working along in a gassy place, thinking he was doing well; then perhaps late in the evening, his eyes would begin to itch a little and feel as if they had dust in them. If he did not quit immediately, the chances were he was in for some days of near blindness and as keen pain as he ever felt.

Apology may be due for so little being said of the gentler side of the picture; for a gentler side there indubitably was. Friendships were strong; generosity flourished; and deeds of noble conduct in many ways were to be seen constantly. But it is not these softer things that the old-timer usually recalls when his mind runs back on the past in this place. The rip-roaring side of life was typical of Sour Lake in the boom days.