

# LIFE IN A TWENTIETH CENTURY PETROLEUM WORK CAMP

R. Scott Baxter  
University of Nevada, Reno

## ABSTRACT

It has been demonstrated that corporate activities can be very influential in the development of company towns and work camps. This paper explores the interaction of a large petroleum corporation and the sociocultural aspects of an early 20th-century company oil camp in the southern San Joaquin Valley. This paper outlines major expectations of the study and preliminary results from the examination of the town plan, architecture, and other material remains through the use of oral histories, archival research, and initial archaeological field investigations.

### Introduction

In the first half of the twentieth century a large portion of California's economy was dependent on the petroleum industry. The largest company participating in this industry was Standard Oil which was involved in all levels of oil production. During this time period approximately 20% of Standard Oil's labor force was employed at remote pump stations in the central and southern San Joaquin Valley (White 1962:526). The employees at these stations lived on company property and were subject to the forces of company policy. It is the interaction between Standard Oil and its employees who resided at one such pump station, Rio Bravo, that is the focus of this paper.

### History of Petroleum Industry in California

The petroleum resources of California have been known and utilized for thousands of years. The Native Americans who originally occupied the region were aware of these resources and utilized the bitumen bubbling to the surface as a mastic, for decorative purposes, and other utilitarian uses (Hodgson 1987:2-6; Moratto 1984). The Spanish who followed these people used the petroleum resources as a mastic and lubricant for their wagon axles (Hodgson 1987:7). It was only the later influx of U.S. immigrants who first began using these resources for their familiar uses today as mechanical lubricants and fuels. By 1855 these immigrants were mining petroleum for market (Hodgson 1987:7). As early as the 1860's petroleum resources in the Central Valley of California were being recovered and distilled into fuels, in particular kerosene (Cook 1971:5).

Heavy drilling for petroleum had been an ongoing project in the eastern United States from the time Edwin Drake drilled the first successful well in Pennsylvania in 1859 (Fanning 1936:16). Petroleum derived products were in heavy demand by the turn of the century as illuminating oils, mechanical lubricants, and as fuel for industry, domestic heating, the newly emerging oil burning locomotives (Aubury 1904:102-3; Bean and Rawls 1988:280; Federal Trade Commission 1921:26; Tait 1946:185), and the fledgling automotive industry (Federal Trade Commission 1921:56). However, it took the conversion

of the United States and British Navies from coal burning to oil burning fleets to spur heavy development of oil resources in the Central Valley of California (Jacobs 1973). By 1914 the combined California oil fields were producing more oil, at 100 million barrels a year, than any other field in the world (Federal Trade Commission 1916:33). All this oil went through several steps from the well until it reached market. Each was a labor intensive process often carried out in what were at the time remote areas.

### Oil Fields

The initial operations of the company started in the oil fields. Here the search for and recovery of oil were undertaken. Wells, drilled in a more or less scientific manner, were bored into the earth and if oil was discovered in economically feasible amounts the drilling derrick was supplanted by a pumping rig. The drilling of these wells was often long drawn out work, sometimes taking over a year to complete. As a consequence, these wells were often accompanied by small settlements of their own.

### Pipe Lines

Once a successful well was completed it was usually connected to other wells via oil pipe lines. Early on these were thread fitted and later welded pipes used to transport crude oil to a central location. This would be either a refinery, or if one were not in proximity, to a pump station which would then utilize another, larger pipe line to transfer the oil to a refinery. These pipe lines could span hundreds or thousands of miles and small work camps moved along the lines as they were being built.

### Pump Stations

Pump stations, of which Rio Bravo is one, were designed to transfer oil via pipe line long distances from remote oil fields to established refineries. The pump station under investigation is one in a series used to transfer oil from the oil fields in the Southern San Joaquin Valley to the Richmond Refinery in the Bay Area. By 1921 the fields in the San Joaquin Valley

that Rio Bravo was servicing were the chief producing fields in California (Vander Leck 1921:162).

### Refineries

Refineries were the final step in this process. Once there, crude oil was distilled or cracked into various components. These were in turn sold to distributors for consumption by the general public. These refineries were often near urban areas where the refined products could be readily marketed.

### **Rio Bravo Pump Station**

Rio Bravo Pump Station was established in 1908 by Standard Oil Company for the previously stated purpose of transferring crude oil from the southern San Joaquin Valley to refineries in the Bay Area. The importance of this site may be underlined by the fact that this station was part of the only pipe line connecting central valley oil fields to Bay Area refineries (Fig. 1) (Federal Trade Commission 1921:76). The site contains two main components, an industrial component and a residential component (Fig. 2).

### Industrial Component

The first of these, the industrial component, is composed of a pump house, boiler house, paint house, bath house, heater house, blacksmith shop, office, and mail room, as well as a maze of oil lines, water lines, manifolds, and valves. Unique to this site was an extensive tank farm utilized for storing large quantities of crude oil (Adams 1995). Most of these structures, though modified, are still standing, as the station was utilized and maintained into the 1980s. In addition to these deliberately constructed features there is a dense buildup of several decades of industrial debris scattered about the site.

### Residential Component

The residential complex was composed of approximately 12 separate cottages for families. One of these still remains and the foundations of several others are present. Bunkhouses, of which none are currently standing, were provided for single men. Traveling repairmen were often put up in one of the families' homes (Scott 1994). Though many similar complexes contained other structures devoted to the recreational activities of the residents it is not yet known if these were present at this site. This component may differ from the image of tents and small cabins often brought to mind by the term work camp. However, the sole purpose of the workers and their families residing here was to operate and maintain the pump station. When their stint here was finished the occupants were not welcome to stay. There were no stores, no post office, probably no recreational facilities, nor any of the other accoutrements often necessitated by or affiliated with a town. So in this sense it was, despite the permanence of the residential structures, strictly a work camp.

### **Research in Progress**

This research was spurred by one basic research question: Did the company influence the lives of the inhabitants at the site? That such may be the case in company owned communities has been demonstrated by a number of researchers. John S. Garner (1992) demonstrated the influence of corporate policy through his study of town plat and architecture, which he found often resulted in the segregation of ethnic and social groups in a hierarchical pattern. John Franzen (1992) illuminated how important foodways were to company employees in Michigan logging camps and how this need was manipulated by lumber companies in accordance with the surplus of labor. At Lowell, Massachusetts Mary Beaudry and Stephen Mrozowski (1988) demonstrated how pervasive company policy was in the lives of women in the dormitory setting there. Adrian and Mary Praetzellis (1993) have shown similar results. Their work at the Cole and Nelson Sawmill in Sierra County, California demonstrated the influence a small capitalist venture had on managing the vices of its employees. Since this previous work at other company-owned communities strongly supports the hypothesis of company influence the basic research question has been rephrased as: How did corporate activities affect the lives of the inhabitants?

### **Methods and Theoretical Approach**

The following lines of evidence are being utilized to answer these questions: 1) documentary evidence in the form of company records, government records, census data, personal papers, local newspapers, and photographs; 2) oral histories collected from individuals familiar with the site; and 3) archaeological evidence collected at the site from surface features and deposits, including structures, as well as material collected from limited excavations.

### **Role of Standard Oil**

Company policy did have a profound effect on the lives of employees of Standard Oil Company. Prior to the 1910s most employees were required to work 12-hour shifts seven days a week, they often lived in tin sheds, and were considered little more than day laborers. After the infamous Ludlow massacre in Colorado, Standard Oil's major stock holder, John D. Rockefeller Jr., forced major changes in the company (White 1962:526). The work week and shift was shortened and housing and provisions were improved in an effort to better relations with its employees. In addition, despite the lack of any stores, traveling peddlers, common at the time, were not welcomed by oil companies and were often driven away, leaving residents dependent on Standard Oil for many daily needs.

### **Conclusions**

Standard Oil Company was pervasive in the lives of its employees at Rio Bravo. They lived in housing provided by the company, the quality of which varied with the political

climate within the company, though it appears that Rio Bravo residents were provided with more than adequate housing. They were also forced to accommodate boarders in their homes as terms of their employment. Additionally, their choice of goods may have been influenced by the company which actively deterred peddlers from its holdings. This action left the only sources of supplies to be the company or the nearest town, Bakersfield. The roads to Bakersfield were notoriously poor, making transportation by horse or Model T difficult.

This site differs from company complexes previously studied. Residents did not live in a dormitory setting as in Lowell where employees were under close supervision. Rio Bravo was not a temporary camp like the Michigan logging camps which moved as surrounding timber was expended. Pump stations were not seasonally occupied as was the Cole and Nelson Sawmill whose employees found employment elsewhere during the off season. Nor was Rio Bravo a complete town like those studied by Garner (1992). These pump stations may therefore represent a unique type of community, centered around one industry, with long term residents, dependent on outside sources for provisioning, and under strict corporate control.

In initiating this research more questions about how corporate structure affected the lives of the people residing at Rio

Bravo have arisen. How did the company's need to provide for its various mobile work camps affect the people living at this community? Many of the companies camps were composed wholly of men, in contrast to the familial community represented at Rio Bravo. Were all communities provisioned similarly or were the demographics of the various communities taken into account? If not, how were the needs of the women and children at Rio Bravo provided for?

It is hoped that continued work at this site may lead to the development of what Robert L. Schuyler (1988:40) termed a "historic ethnography," which is a contextualized, holistic approach to a community study with a stated theoretical approach. The goal in developing this "historic ethnography" is to assist in a regional understanding of the social and economic spheres of the early twentieth century petroleum industry in California.

#### Notes

I would like to thank Fred Adams and Chevron Pipe Line Company for their cooperation in this research, Jack Scott for his assistance and knowledge, and Dr. Donald L. Hardesty and Jane E. Jalutkewicz for their comments.

#### REFERENCES CITED

- Adams, Fred  
1995 Personal communication.
- Aubury, Lewis A.  
1904 *Production and Use of Petroleum in California*. California State Mining Bureau Bulletin No. 32.
- Bean, Walton and James J. Rawls  
1988 *California: An Interpretive History*. McGraw-Hill Book Company, New York.
- Beaudry, Mary C. and Stephen A. Mrozowski  
1988 The Archaeology of Work and Home Life in Lowell, Massachusetts: An Interdisciplinary Study of the Boott Cotton Mills Corporation. *Industrial Archaeology* 14(2):1-22.
- Cook, Fred S.  
1971 *Steamboats in the Valley*. Volcano, California.
- Fanning, Leonard M.  
1936 *The Rise of American Oil*. Harper & Brothers Publishers, New York.
- Federal Trade Commission  
1916 *Report on Pipe-Line Transportation of Petroleum*, February 28. Government Printing Office, Washington.  
1921 *Report of the Federal Trade Commission on the Pacific Coast Petroleum Industry: Part II Prices and Competitive Conditions*, November 28. Government Printing Offices, Washington.
- Franzen, John G.  
1992 Northern Michigan Logging Camps: Material Culture and Worker Adaptation on the Industrial Frontier. *Historical Archaeology* 1992 26(2):74-98.
- Garner, John S.  
1992 *The Company Town, Architecture and Society in the Early Industrial Age*. Oxford University Press, New York.
- Hodgson, Susan F.  
1987 *Onshore Oil and Gas Seeps in California*. California Department of Conservation, Division of Oil and Gas, Sacramento.
- Jacobs, Phillip J.  
1973 *Boom or Bust-Boom!: Lakeview Oil Field and the Critical Years of Petroleum Development in Kern County*. Term Paper on file, Library, California State University, Bakersfield.
- Moratto, Michael J.  
1984 *California Archaeology*. Academic Press, San Diego.

- Praetzellis, Adrian and Mary Praetzellis  
1993 *Life and Work at the Cole and Nelson Sawmill, Sierra Count, California: Archaeological Data Recovery for the Granite Chief Land Exchange.* Tahoe National Forest Report No. 41.
- Schuyler, Robert L.  
1988 Archaeological Remains, Documents, and Anthropology: a Call for a New Culture History. *Historical Archaeology* 22(1):36-42.
- Scott, Jack  
1994 Personal communication.
- Tait, Samuel W., Jr.  
1946 *The Wildcatters An Informal History of Oil-Hunting in America.* Princeton University Press, Princeton.
- Vander Leek, Lawrence  
1921 *The Petroleum Resources of California.* California State Mining Bureau, Bulletin No. 89.
- White, Gerald T.  
1962 *Formative Years in the Far West: A History of Standard Oil Company of California and Predecessors Through 1919.* Appleton-Century-Crofts, New York.

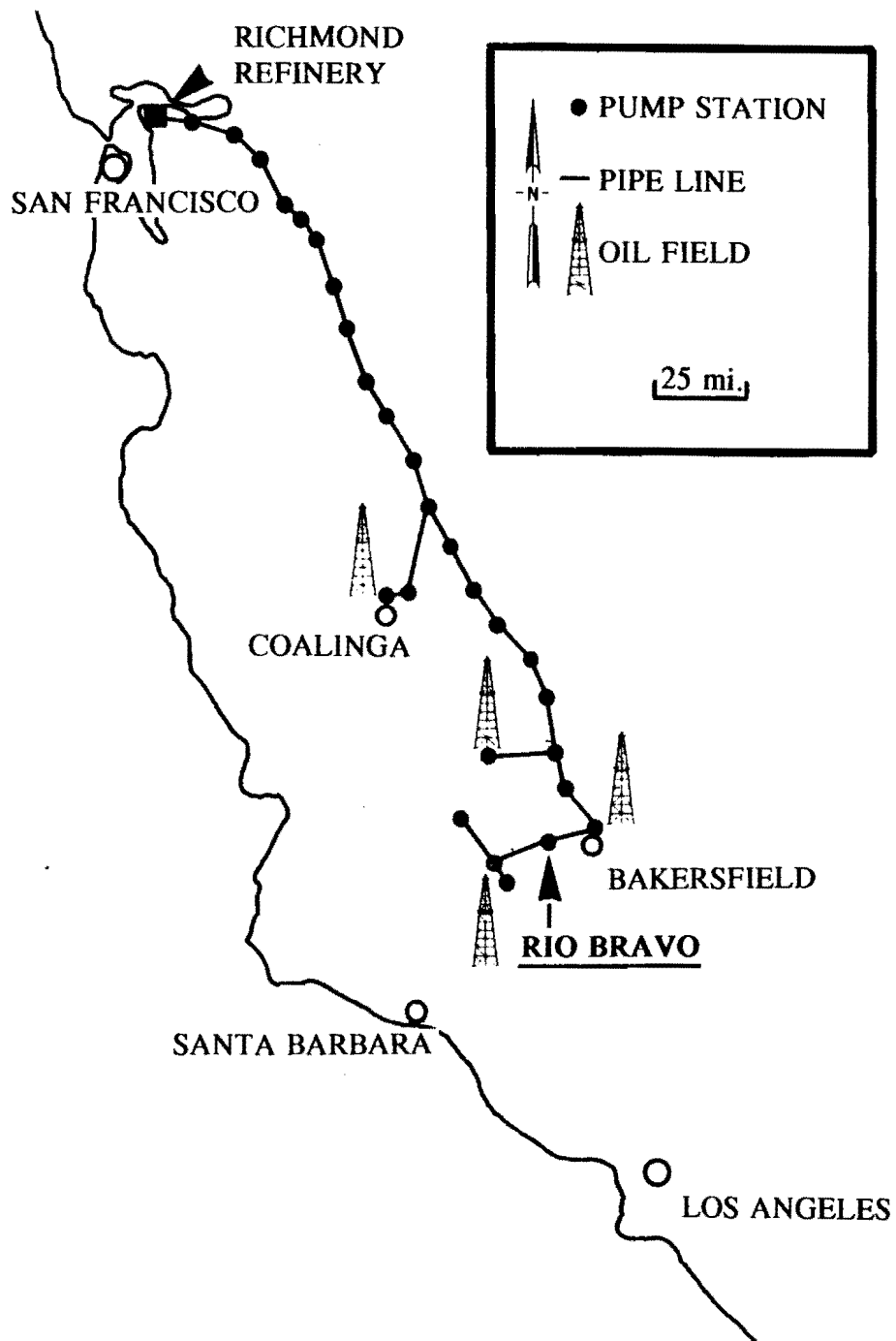


Figure 1. Location of Rio Bravo Pump Station.

# RIO BRAVO PUMP STATION

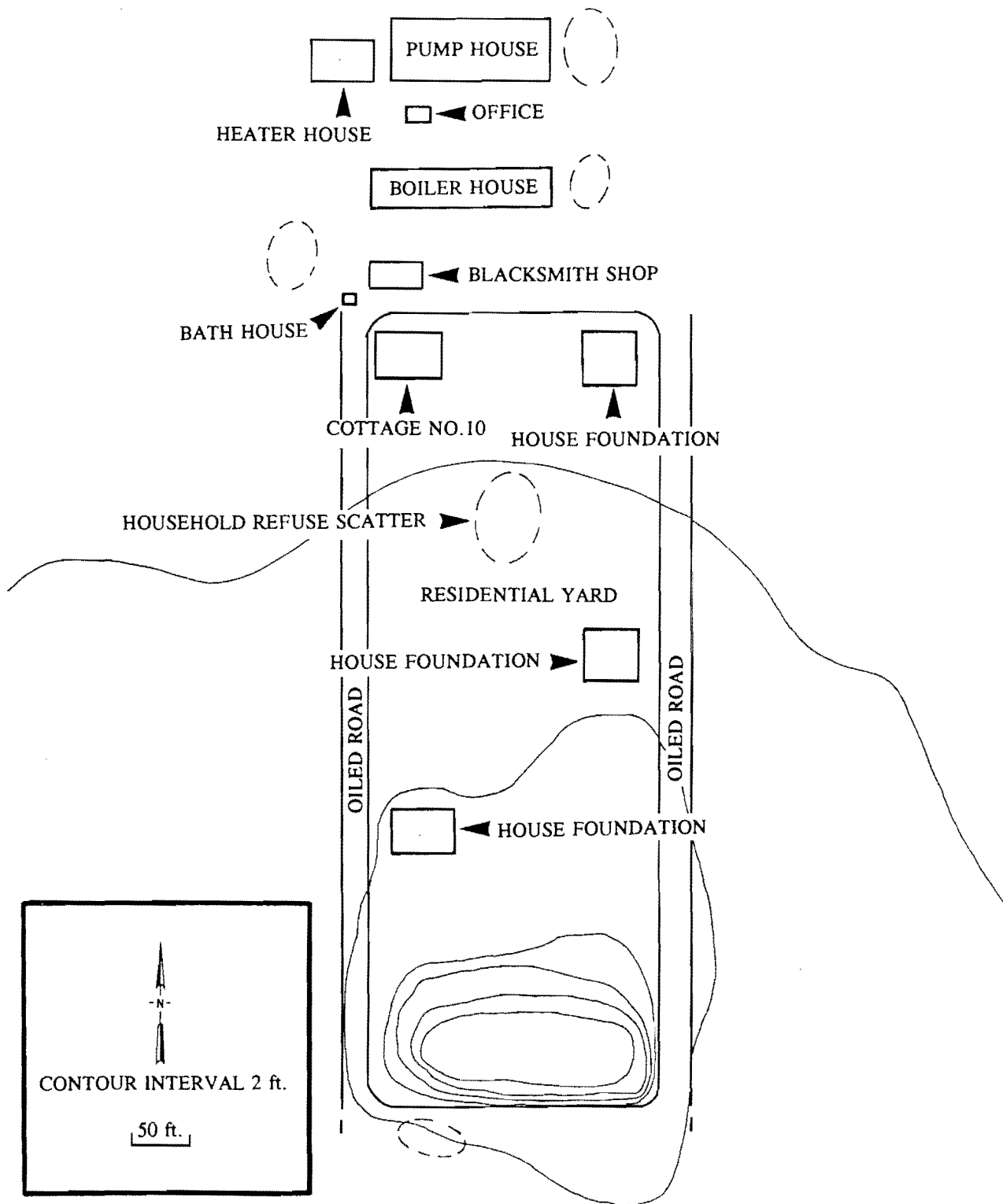


Figure 2. Map of Rio Bravo Pump Station excluding tank farm.