



Empires of Industry: Wildcatters

The ***Empires of Industry*** series explores the development of the American economy through an examination of key businesses, industries, and events. ***Wildcatters*** is a one hour documentary that examines the 20th-century prospectors who made and lost fortunes searching Texas for black gold. Like the gold rush prospectors of an earlier generation, these adventurers dreamed of wresting fortunes from the earth. Their target was oil, and their destination was Texas. Part gambler, part geologist, a wildcatter risked everything to drill a hole in the ground in the hopes of becoming an instant millionaire.

Wildcatters turned sleepy hamlets into boomtowns, earned and lost fortunes, and enabled America's transformation into a nation of cars and drivers. With memoirs of former wildcatters, context provided by historians, and colorful visuals, this is a fascinating look at a unique chapter in American history. Educators may want to use clips from this program in their course units about the development of the American West and the rise of the oil industry.

CURRICULUM LINKS

Empires of Industry would be useful for classes on American History, History of Science and Technology, Economics and American Culture. It is appropriate for middle school and high school students.

VOCABULARY

Using the dictionary at www.merriamwebster.com, an Internet resource such as www.history.com, or an encyclopedia, ask students to define or explain the significance of the following terms. They may also want to keep their own list of important terms or “words to know” as they are watching this program.

- [cajole](#)
- [desolate](#)
- [exhort](#)
- [mesmerize](#)
- [pandemonium](#)
- [paragon](#)
- [patrician](#)
- [prolific](#)

- tenacity
- unsavory

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are wildcatters and what makes them so unique? What are a few adjectives you would use to describe them?
2. What do you think of when you think of a “cowboy”? Were their many different kinds of cowboys? Discuss.
3. What is the 'American Century?' Why is it called this?
4. Discuss the common characteristics of gamblers and wildcatters. Do you think wildcatters can be considered gamblers? Why or why not?
5. Do you think the popularity of the automobile fueled the oil industry? Were there any possible alternatives to the use of oil to fuel cars?
6. John D. Rockefeller was the founder of Standard Oil and one of the most powerful men in American history. How did Rockefeller build Standard Oil into the massive conglomerate that it became, and why do you think he was so successful?
7. Compare and contrast Patillo Higgins and John. D. Rockefeller. Both these men were in the oil business. How were they similar? How were they different?
8. Why was Patillo Higgins' well unique? How did Patillo Higgins' discovery change the town of Beaumont, Texas?
9. Wildcatters had to complete three steps before they began drilling. What were these three steps?
10. Discuss the 'twist of fate' that resulted in finding oil on Daisy Bradford's farm.
11. What was the 'black giant'?
12. Discuss the influence of World War II on the east Texas oil fields.

EXTENDED ACTIVITIES

1. Write a 'help wanted' advertisement for a wildcatter.
2. Research the life of John D. Rockefeller and his company, Standard Oil. Use your data to create a report on the man and his company, and their impact on American history.

WEBSITES

Background information and primary sources related to Standard Oil:

<http://www.micheloud.com/FXM/SO/rock.htm>

Background information about Patillo Higgins and Wildcatters:

<http://library.thinkquest.org/J0112442/toc.html>

BOOKS

Adams, Simon, et al. *Texas (Eyewitness Books Series): Discover the Wonders of the Second-Largest State, Its Fascinating History And Famous People*. (DK Publishing, 2003).

Burrough, Bryan. *The Big Rich: The Rise and Fall of the Greatest Texas Oil Fortunes*. (Penguin, 2009).

Chernow, Ron. *Titan: The Life of John D. Rockefeller, Sr.* (Vintage, 1999).