Slappin' Collars and Stabbin' Pipe:

Occupational Folklife of Old-Time Pipeliners

by George Carney

The development of pipelines to transport petroleum began soon after the discovery of the first oil well near Titusville, Pennsylvania in 1859. Samuel Van Syckel of Titusville laid the first successful pipeline in 1865; it ran for a distance of four miles and was buried two feet underground. The first pipeline company was organized in the late 1860s by Henry Harley, a Pennsylvanian, who supervised the construction of a two-inch line from the Pennsylvania oil fields to the Atlantic seaboard. It was not until the discovery of the prolific Glenn Pool field in Oklahoma in 1906-07, however, that the first long pipelines were laid. The remarkable output of the Glenn Pool resulted in the Texas Company, Gulf Oil, and Standard Oil (under the name of Oklahoma Pipeline Company) completing pipelines which reached from eastern Oklahoma to the Gulf Coast by 1910.

It was during these three companies' operations that many of the skills and customs associated with the work of pipeliners reached fruition. A great deal of preparation and the coordinated efforts of a large number of workers was necessary for the successful completion of a pipeline over long distances. Acquiring the right-of-way, surveying the route, and staking the line were among the many tasks performed before the various pipe-laying gangs moved in to begin construction.

The first job in laying pipe was executed by the bush gang, a crew of 50-75 men who cleared the right-of-way of trees, brush, and other debris and graded it in preparation for stringing the pipe. The next responsibility was that of the stringing gang to place the joints of pipe end to end along the route where they were to be screwed together. Old-time pipe joints (sections) were approximately twenty feet long and ranged in diameter from two to eight inches, the largest joints weighing close to 600 pounds. The ends of each joint of pipe were threaded; screwed tightly on one end was a coupling, called by pipeliners a collar. A half collar, or "thread protector," on the other end kept its threads

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Tong gang near Glenn Pool Field in Oklahoma ca. 1908.
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Pipeline camp and tong gang in Oklahoma in 1909.
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from being damaged during the transportation and handling of the pipe.

The ditching gang, consisting of seventy-five men, usually followed the pipe stringers. The ditchers were equipped with picks, round-pointed shovels, and spades with long, narrow blades called "sharpshooters." The first layer of the ditch was dug with the sharpshooters and the dirt that remained was "crumble out" with the shovel. Picks were used in especially hard ground. Normal dept for pipeline trenches was two feet and the width depended on the diameter o the pipe.

After the line was strung and the trench dug, the laying gang moved in to begin the screw pipe connections. The work process of the laying crew involve a number of specialized tools and skills necessary in screwing the joints of pip together in place. Major items of equipment included lay tongs (also called pipe scissors or hooks), pipe jacks and jack boards, growler boards, lazy board carrying irons, pipe calipers and spinning ropes (see sketch of tools). One member of the laying crew prepared the pipe by removing the thread protector, cleaning and oiling the threads on both ends, and checking inside the pip for foreign matter. The key workers of the laying gang consisted of a back-up man, the collar pecker (also called the collar pounder, knocker, or slapper), the hook hitters or strokers, the jack man, and the stabber. Additional men were needed to move joints of pipes and "spell off," or relieve, the other men.

The procedure followed in screwing a joint of pipe included several steps which required an enormous amount of skill and interaction between the workers. The last joint on the line was held above the ditch by the lazy board, usually operated by the back-up man, who was positioned behind the collar. He also manipulated the back-up tongs with the handles on the ground to kee the pipe from recoiling while the new joint of pipe was being screwed into th collar. The joint of pipe to be screwed in was then picked up with pipe calipe resembling large ice tongs, sometimes called carrying hooks, and placed with its threaded end ready to insert into the collar of the last joint of pipe laid. As the joint was set into the collar, the stabber, who stood at the opposite end of the collar, threw his arm around the pipe and started the threads into the colla For a large diameter pipe, the stabber used a stabbin' board (a board or pole stuck in the end of the pipe) to help hold the pipe straight until the threads could be started into the collar.

As soon as the joint was lined up and threads started, the stabber shouted "Catch it!" This cued the jack man who quickly placed the jack and jack board in position to hold the pipe. The jack (a wooden board which acted as a brace for the jack) stood on a growler board which provided stability and kept the jack and jack board from sliding into the ditch once the pipe was rotated.

When the pipe was secure, the stabber cried "Roll'er!" which indicated he was ready for the spinning ropes (usually two 1½ inch ropes ten feet long) to be looped around the pipe two or three times. As one worker pulled back on the end of each rope to make it grip the pipe, several gang members pulled forward, causing the joint to rotate in the proper direction. By pulling the ropes from opposite sides of the pipe, it was kept straight and the initial stage of screwing the pipe were completed while the threads were still loose.

As the joint was being started and slack taken up by the spinning ropes, the collar pecker, who was seated behind the collar on the joint that had already been laid, began to pound rhythmically or slap the collar into which the pipe was being screwed. The cadence provided by the collar pecker's hammer(s) (one or two of the ball peen type) served two purposes: it made the pipe turn easier, or as Bill Hester, 77-year-old former pipeliner from Drumright, Oklahoma, explained, "it kept the collar warm;" the collar pecker's action also set the work pace for other members of the laying gang. When the pipe began to turn hard, the collar pecker would "knock off" the spinning rope crew and they would immediately "hook on" with the lay tongs. Each set of tongs varie in size and weight depending on the diameter of the pipe. For six inch pipe o larger there were three men to a set of tongs (two strokers, or hook men, and one point man).

According to Al Hill, 68-year-old retired pipeliner from Broken Arrow, Okl homa, the collar pecker developed certain rhythmic "licks" for each set of

tongs as they hooked onto the pipe. At the beginning, two sets of tongs turned the pipe; however, as it became more difficult to screw, more sets of tongs were "knocked on" by the collar pecker. In order to keep the pipe constantly rotating, the tongs were operated so that half of the sets were screwing while the other half recovered, e.g., if there were four tongs on the pipe, numbers one and three would be "on top" turning the pipe down as numbers two and four would be recovering from down position to be "on top" for the next rotation downward. In this process, the tong men were hitting the hooks on alternating beats of the hammer ("break out") which could be done when the pipe rolled easily. When the pipe rolled harder, the collar pecker would "hit a lick" that called for all sets of tongs to stroke in unison ("break in"). When the pipe was made up, the collar pecker would "ring'em off" with a special rhythmic pattern and the laying crew would move on to the next joint of pipe.

Hill, who recalls "slappin a few collars in my day," says "it was a matter of teamwork between the collar pecker and the tong men." Each collar pecker developed his own method and, once the tong men learned that technique, they could not follow another hammer man. It was imperative, therefore, for a collar pecker and tong crew to remain together for the duration of a pipe laying contract.

Brice Downing, a 56-year-old pipeliner from Tulsa, Oklahoma, compares the collar pecking rhythms to "listening to music." He contends that the tong men developed an "ear" for the tones and tempo of the hammer and, "if the collar pounder hit a sour note, the tong men let him know about it." The best collar peckers used two hammers and could play tunes on the collar such as "Turkey in the Straw" and "Yankee Doodle." Hill remembers that on various occasions the workers would "dance a little jig" to his collar pecking rhythms.

As part of the laying operation, the pipe was painted for protection against corrosion. "Ship bottom red," a red lead paint, was used in swampy areas, while a black tar paint was applied in drier regions. The "dope gang" performed this task.

After the joints were properly connected and painted, the line was placed on skids where it was eventualluy lowered into the ditch by the lowering-in gang. Large wooden windlasses were used to raise it off the skids and into the ditch. The backfilling gang then covered the line by using shovels and a special piece of equipment called a marmon board, which some former pipeliners such as Bill Hester believe was the forerunner of the bulldozer. It was a board approximately five feet long by three feet wide with eye bolts on each end and two handles in the center. A double tree was attached to the eye bolts whereby a team of mules could provide power for moving the dirt. The worker used the handles to manipulate the board and direct the dirt into the ditch.

Following the backfill work, a cleanup, or dress-up, gang moved in to pick up damaged joints of pipe, thread protectors, empty paint barrels, and other debris. They also repaired fences and any damage done while laying the line. Upon completion of their work, the pipeline was laid.

After 1940 pipelining became more mechanized. Bell-hole welders replaced tong men, side boom operators displaced jack men, and airplane spotters supplanted line riders. Despite these changes, pipeline construction retains the basic objective of laying a pipe underground over long distances, and to achieve that goal, large crews of workers are needed. Among these workers, an occupational culture continues to thrive. Each worker contributes a specialized skill, certain codes of behavior are observed, and communication between workers is a necessary part of the work process. Thus the occupational folklife of pipeliners remains a significant element of the American oil industry.

Finally, I would like to express my appreciation to all those Oklahoma pipeliners who contributed information for this research. Had it not been for them, this article would never have been "flanged up."

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