

# The Folklore of the Oil Industry

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*Jim Harris*

A cycle of stories told in the southeastern New Mexico oilfields since the 1960s features two hippies as its central characters. In one story, one hippie tells the other that he is going to work in the oilpatch because he heard they have a pusher on every rig and fifty-foot joints. For folks not familiar with the industry, a tool pusher is the foreman on a drilling rig, and as the drilled hole gets deeper, sections of pipe called “joints” are put together to keep the drill bit on the bottom.

Like other occupations, oil industry workers have their own verbal art, customs and practices that are unique to it, and the hippie joke illustrates just one aspect of a rich and varied tradition. Occupational jokes, anecdotes and tales circulate among roughnecks and engineers about famous and foolish workers, heroic and tricky deeds, and spectacular accidents. For instance, Houston oilfield firefighter Red Adair appears in stories as a heroic figure, while fictional comic versions of him populate the industry’s jokelore.

Some themes of the jokelore travel widely among ethnic and occupational groups. For instance, the roughneck — the lowest paid hand on an oil rig, known by many derisive names — is portrayed as the dunce of the oilfields, similar to the way Irishmen, Poles or Aggies are por-

trayed in other cycles of stories. Whether the stories travel widely or are unique to the industry, many are humorous and bawdy.

Oilworkers also have their own body of superstitions and customs. It is bad luck, for instance, to speak, even indirectly, about a “blowout,” or explosion in a well, for fear that speaking about such a catastrophe will cause it to happen. The “pushers,” or foremen on the rigs, wear cowboy clothes, as much because of the image of the cowboy as because it is the local costume in west Texas. “Roughnecks” or “weevils,” who do the real dirty work, go to the rigs every day in outfits they call “greasers.” No one ever wears leather gloves, despite the physical wear on the hands; instead cloth gloves are used so that they can be ripped off quickly if they are ever caught in the machinery. There are, of course, enormous financial rewards for working in such dangerous conditions, and by custom these are sometimes celebrated by having a barbecue just before bringing in a well that promises to be very productive.

In these depressed 1990s not many people travel to the oilfields to find work, as the hippie does in the joke. But whoever comes to the oilpatch finds a group of friendly people bound together not only by common financial concerns for a volatile oil and gas business, but also by a shared body of traditions that helps the besieged industry stay together.

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