

The Bayou Blue Oilfield Chronicles

Collected Short Stories

From Louisiana's Acadian Parishes
and the Gulf of Mexico
in the early 80's drilling boom

Richard Ellett Mullin

This book is dedicated to all of those
with whom I trained, lived, worked and played in the early 1980's
in America's Foreign Country, Louisiana.

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My employment by Schlumberger Offshore Services
began with training as a Field Engineer
in Belle Chasse, LA (Plaquemines Parish)
followed by assignment to
the Morgan City Open Hole district office (St. Mary's Parish)
with subsequent transfer to the Larose Open Hole district office
(Lafourche Parish).

In this book Morgan City is referred to as Brashear City.

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All references to Schlumberger or any other company are anecdotal.

Working for Schlumberger was a formative experience
and I continue to hold the company in high regard.

I am no longer employed by, nor associated with the company.

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Preface

Wherever oil and gas are found they leave an indelible trace. And there is always the inevitable oilfield trash. But more on those thoughts later.

Why these stories? Why this moment? Why Louisiana? Why the oilfield?

Don't know diddly about oil and gas? Don't care diddly?

Shame, but don't run so fast. Let's take things one at a time.

First, Louisiana is intriguing. Where else can you find the claim to be “America's Foreign Country” so utterly legitimate? That's the nickname they've adopted in the Atchafalaya Basin, the home of America's great unknown river. And of Brashear City, the setting for the first and several other stories in this collection.

Certainly, a close examination of Louisiana wouldn't be complete without taking in some hunting and fishing in the Sportsman's Paradise. Two stories here include fishing trips and another one ends with a hunting experience. But none of these stories ask the reader to be a blood-sport participant to relate.

And the food, oh the food! One does not live by bread alone; occasionally there must be seafood. And of course, dark coffee. How could any writing about Louisiana spare the topic of food, and restaurants? You'll find generous portions here, circa the early 1980's, when the Acadian Parishes and New Orleans were in boom-times, along with the rest of the Gulf Coast Region, thanks to oil and gas exploration and production.

This collection started with one memory. It had haunted me for nearly four decades and it needed to be written down. The result was *Railroad Avenue*. Several more Louisiana stories followed as summer turned to fall in 2018. As it turned out these stories came together to form a chronology. They shared characters, and the stories needed each other to form a complete account. Reflecting on Ambrose Bierce's famous short story, *An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge*, I contemplated titling this book, *Occurrences in the Louisiana Oilfield*. Because for every story, behind it lies an actual occurrence that served as its inspiration.

At various points in the process of writing *The Bayou Blue Oilfield Chronicles* I felt an undercurrent. While I never intended it, the collection began to touch on the elegiac. And toward the end of writing the stories, I had to admit my feeling for oil and gas had somehow changed in the process of writing and through the passage of time since the aforementioned occurrences.

This surprised me. It was certainly an unexpected outcome of a writing project born of fast-held preconceptions, a colorful sense of nostalgia, and vivid memories.

Starting from those vivid memories, no attempt has been made to disguise the places; they are important to the integrity of the work. But the dividing lines between fact and fiction can never be sorted out. After nearly four decades, I couldn't even try. The stories trace the experiences of a young college graduate recruited by the oilfield services giant, Schlumberger, to work offshore in Louisiana. These were the glory days of drilling in the Gulf of Mexico. Since then so much has changed. The early 1980's seems so distant.

It was a task for me to reenter the arcane world of rigs and roughnecks, of pipe dope and electronic instruments, of drillstrings and casing, of explosives and radiation sources, of company men and toolpushers, of veteran Vietnam chopper pilots and unlimited expense accounts for twenty-one-year-old oilfield worms.¹ It all started with my longstanding pride in having been part of the world-altering industry that Americans created. Yet along the way, it began to be weighed down by the consequences and residue that follow the oil and gas industry around. Even though there are more lighthearted moments than tragic ones in these stories, a good many of the footnotes provide evidence of things lost, memories of things that will never happen or exist again.

Here you'll find a collection of Louisiana stories about personal encounters, work on the offshore rigs, close interaction with the idiosyncratic Cajun populace, and about New Orleans and its surrounds. Since the setting is the early eighties, the stories capture a pre-Katrina Louisiana where longtime residents talked about hurricanes as "just a little rain", or as the French would say, *mauvais temps*, bad weather. But Hurricane Katrina changed all of that.

As is so often true, a traveler's hurried view, even if it includes brief contact with a few of the locals, is not enough to fully experience a region, especially one so rich and seductive. Louisiana keeps its secrets, and you have to scratch a little grime off of a windowpane to get a look inside. To know what is going on, you have to work in a place for a while, and to become part of the scene. You cannot write toward that. You have to live it.

Whether taken as pure nostalgia or something more, whether real or imagined, the stories here frame the things that made a time and place unique, and they bookend the change that has happened in Louisiana over nearly four decades. Change isn't unique to Louisiana, but it has had

¹ Worm is a term for an oilfield greenhorn, a newcomer to the industry.

more than its fair share. Nothing has been spared, not population, nor institutions, nor businesses, nor the beautiful regional culture defined by the French language. Once secreted among interconnected bayou waterways that were the distributaries of North America's greatest river, what remained of these in the early eighties was but a trace, but it was enough.

Much of the land itself has been lost and continues to be lost to subsidence and erosion. And with it, a way of life stands in danger of being watered down even further. As ice melts somewhere and the coastal delta lands of Acadian Louisiana subside, we can only witness a slow-motion drowning in the rising waters of the Gulf. Ironically, the Faustian bargain responsible for this unintended consequence of land loss is the deal the world made long ago with the rich hydrocarbon system deep beneath the affected land.

When I wrote the final story here, I couldn't help but ask, what will become of the good earth, *Terrebonne*, if the sea keeps rising like this and the land keeps sinking? But someone else will have to write that history.

For now, it seems as good a time as any to stick a skewer into all of this, to spear some Louisiana experiences *en brochette*, and to hold the savory morsels accountable to the flame of memory, "*Toujours en regrettant nos jolis temps passés.*"²

² "Always with regret for the good old days." Chorus, *Parlez-nous a Boir*, from Grammy-nominated album, *Trace of Time* by Steve Riley and the Mamou Playboys. Recorded January 1993, Ultrasonic Studio, New Orleans, Louisiana. *Ultrasonic* was established in 1977 on Washington Avenue in Uptown New Orleans and recorded thousands of home-grown Louisiana as well as internationally acclaimed musicians and bands. The studio suffered catastrophic flooding in Hurricane Katrina in July 2005 and has never re-opened.