

Tales of the Great Southwest

BY PAUL CULLUM

"CHICOLINI: I got an uncle lives in Taxes. MINISTER OF FINANCE: No, I'm talking about taxes—money—dollars. CHICOLINI: Dollars! 'Atsa where my uncle lives. Dollars, Taxes."

The Marx Brothers,
Duck Soup (1933)



Not everybody in Texas of course is rich. A healthy 15 percentile of the Lone Star State lives south of the federal poverty line, compared to a more diminutive 11 percent nationally. But if you want to talk massive influx of capital-intensive industry, large-scale generation of petro- or electrodollars, or sheer variety of cultures, climates, terrains, cuisines, or indigenous resources, then the Southwest may just be about the richest place there is.

The map shows a star-shaped convergence of the great geographies—mountains, deserts, plains, forests, beaches—all spindled pinwheel-like on Austin's central hills and the spire of Texas' capitol dome. Below the surface, in a thick flat sheet, lie aeons of oil, all the compressed wealth of old dead seas, while above it swirl the hurricanes and tornados and gentle cirrus spiral of Southwestern weathers. There are uncountable miles in every direction, and out of that is born a blind optimism, one that comes from never having to confront its contradictions.

Up until the Second World War, the southwest was suspended in time. Ultimately, the twin temptations of plentiful resources and cheap labor (brought about by the non-union right-to-work laws) combined with the accessible weather, open spaces, low-cost housing and the absence of a state income tax detonated the growing Frostbelt/Sunbelt polarization. A gradual but sweeping exodus of population and industry fled the North and East for the Southwest. It was as if, when America first was made available, all the varied colors and cultures had been flung up into the air, like Gatsby's shirts, and that all this while, a bearded gravity has been squatting on the Mexican border, waiting,

knowing eventually the laws of physics would watch all of them fall to collect, like layers of archaeology, into the Southwest. Today, Texas numbers three cities among the ten largest in the nation. Houston is a world-class oil and petrochemical center, and the home of NASA's Manned Spacecraft Center, and Dallas is the fastest-growing electronics market in the country, where California companies are shooting in as big and bright as asteroids. Together with San Antonio, they form the vertices of a triangle which includes the balance of Texas industry.

The Dallas-Houston rivalry is of a Los Angeles-San Francisco caliber, only back at the blistering genesis, unre-moved by all these generations of good-natured symbiosis. Unlike those two, Dallas and Houston are urban pockets without a particular history, scratching desperately for identities which will separate them in their own minds.

The key word to Houston's economy is redoubtably oil. Texas produces just under 3 million barrels of oil a day, or almost a third of that produced in the United States. The industry is strung between 13 deepwater ports along the Gulf Coast, from Brownsville to Port Arthur, three of which are inland. Houston is connected to water by a 50-mile ship channel.

Oil is the bread and blood of state politics. It can turn a man's heart the color black or collect in sullen pools up on his horizons. Nearly every politician or controversy in the state's history has been infused with oil money. H.L. Hunt (Hunt Oil) was the right-wing industrialist who took out full-page ads in the Dallas papers the morning Ken-

edy came to town, and whose reactionary literature was later found in Jack Ruby's pocket. His son Bunker made headlines in 1979 by almost cornering the world silver market and bringing about a worldwide silver panic. Cullen Davis (Mid-Continent Oil) is the richest man ever tried for murder in America.

Texas oil both financed Joseph McCarthy's initial Senate bid and created the secret slush fund behind Nixon's Checkers speech. And so on, up until Texas' Governor Bill Clements, whose company SEDCO leased the oil rig equipment to Mexico's PEMEX responsible for the massive Ixtoc oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico. After the attorney general refused to exempt it from liability in the matter, SEDCO took all rigs in question out into the gulf and sank them, along with Clements' stern admonition to naturalists to "pray for a hurricane."

Most of the big oil companies have by now transferred corporate headquarters from New York City to Houston. They're clumped all together downtown in giant glass boxes, covered by what look to be a million solar reflectors. Much of the oil is located elsewhere, farther up the coastline or nearer the Big Thicket, or the great Permian Basin of west Texas or the emerging Anadarko Basin of Oklahoma. But Houston still directs practically all aspects of oil production, from well-head to carburetor—exploration, drilling, refining, processing, plus the secondary industries of site construction, oilfield equipment manufacture, etc. Although Texas curricula is generally tipped in favor of Geology, virtually any engineering or natural science will fall somewhere under the oil umbrella, with the possible exceptions of biology and strict mathematics.

In addition to the oil, there is the related petrochemical industry—plastics, polymers, olefins, synfuels, fertilizers, and other petroleum-based products. There is perhaps no geography or set of natural resources better suited for petrochemical production anywhere in the world than the fertile Louisiana delta/Texas Gulf Coast crescent from New Orleans to Corpus Christi. Six hundred and seventy-five chemical plants are clustered around Houston-Beaumont-Port Arthur alone. This is all that indigenous location footage from *Urban Cowboy*, smokestacks and industrial cauldrons, the residual metaphor of Houston as some-

thing malignant, glowing, growing cellularly in all directions, unfettered by natural boundaries. On the \$20 cab ride downtown from the airport, there is a sign on a used car lot in red 10-foot letters visible from the freeway: "Owner has brain damage."

There is also a prominent mineral industry epicentered in Houston, including sulfur, aluminum, tin, magnesium, coal and uranium production, which is often overshadowed by oil. And Houston is the home of NASA's Johnson Space Center, located here in 1964 when Lyndon Johnson became president, which has drawn such California electronics and aerospace firms as Rockwell-Collins, Ford-Philco, McDonnell Douglas and Intel. NASA is best compared to JPL in California, where name prestige and research independence take precedence over competitive salary. All in all, LBJ was singly responsible for beefing up the state's industry through this selective awarding of defense contracts during the Vietnam War. Brown & Root alone went from a volume of \$639 million in 1965 to \$1.77 billion four years later, making it the largest construction firm in the country.

The electronics industry is traditionally divided between four compass points: Silicon Valley in California, specializing in microprocessors; the Boston Loop, focusing on mini-computers; the South Loop in Chicago; and the Dallas-Ft. Worth metroplex. Of these, Dallas is the youngest and fastest growing. Computer production includes micros, minis and mainframes, and with the power shift south, there is a widespread need for computer personnel, among both vendors (high-tech electronics companies) and end users (anyone with a need for data systems). Virtually all companies are involved in some aspect of defense work, which serves as a pump for generating new technology. The consensus is that Texas industry is finally approaching a point of critical mass.

"Industry has progressed to the point where a chain reaction can develop as new businesses come into being to supplement, augment or complement existing concerns. These in turn spawn other businesses, generating a process that increases the general level of prosperity with the state." So says the latest *Texas Almanac* published by the *Dallas Morning News*.

Far and away the grandparent of all

other Dallas electronics firms is Texas Instruments. With interests in everything from infrared and laser technology to cryogenics to all manner of defense work to consumer lines of calculators and LCD digital watches, TI is virtually what they bill themselves as—"the only semi-conductors game in town." Once the maverick cowboy computer firm, a lone radar blip on the desolate Texas prairie, TI is now an industry mainstay. Nowadays they use smaller companies as bellwethers of reconnaissance, while discouraging personal creativity among the rank and file. "There are fraternities of ex-TI employees in both Dallas and California numbering in the thousands," says an engineer who opted for a smaller firm. opted for a smaller firm.

Because of the immense demand for new blood, Texas electronics has seen a dramatic upsurge in the phenomenon of specialized employment agencies. The largest and generally most recognized of these companies, Source EDP (Electronics Data Personnel) derives almost 80 percent of its business from referrals alone, the rest coming from classified ads in the Sunday papers. "The employment need is far greater than colleges and trade schools are able to fill" says an EDP agent. "Texas salaries have been traditionally lower than those in California, but this is no longer the case. Entry level salaries with a bachelors degree in science or computers are anywhere from \$15-20,000. With one year's experience, programmers can more or less write their own tickets."

EDP makes a policy of only accepting clients with at least a year's experience. Some agencies are more cut-throat. They assume the epithet "headhunters," from the policy of calling people on the job to offer them better ones. The opportunity for advancement becomes open-ended. The average tenure of a Southwest electronics worker at a given job is 18 months.

Overall, Dallas is a haven of sudden money—brash, cantankerous, with all the inclement vagaries and barbarities that accompany new wealth. There is a symphony orchestra, a major opera company, a television series, and the Neiman-Marcus catalogue. But more than less, culture there is still measured in meat on the hoof.

Across the Turnpike to the west, its twin city of Ft. Worth is the aggressive microcosm of Texas that Texas is of America. The Tandy Corporation

(Radio Shack) is revitalizing downtown, and burgeoning defense contracts at General Dynamics and Bell Helicopter are helping pump up the economy of a city that only 30 years ago was still known as "Cowtown."

Shoring up the third side of the triangle is I-35 south to Austin, home of the University of Texas and state government, and San Antonio just beyond. Austin is a quiet oasis enclosed by a moat of lakes and hill country springs, and the various university-related brain trusts and private R&D operations, like Radian and the newly-proposed Lockheed unit, make Austin an idyllic ivory tower cloister perfect for academic seclusion. Great music scene too. San Antonio, with the Southwest Research Institute and computer firms like Datapoint, is much faster-paced but serves a comparable function.

Going west, in fact essentially until you hit Vine Street, civilization withers except for scattered outposts—the oil towns of Odessa and Midland (which boasts more millionaires per square mile than any American city), Albuquerque in New Mexico, Phoenix and Tucson in Arizona. Los Alamos Laboratories outside of Santa Fe is a premier nuclear and weapons research center, and along with Sandia Labs in Albuquerque is the largest solar research operation in the country. These cities are connecting poles along the Silicon Curtain, a giant Christo earthwork through the Trans-Pecos desert of the Old West which links California to Texas, like the railroad which linked New York to Chicago a century before.

Nationally, the Southwest is a new growth industry. Its food, fashion, color and charisma are passing bulklike through the national fancy. Regionally, the Southwest is the new Australia. As America tightens and constricts, its urban cells decay and its wealth and movement thicken and solidify, the Southwest is just reaching bonanza proportions. It is settling into an insular 1950s boomtown optimism—miles behind along the parabola of progress, years behind in the slit-eyed cynicism it breeds. As oil influence will surely diminish, dramatic new energies idle in the wings. The party is winding down, and the whole region is just pulling up outside in a cab.

The debuting engineer or technician is advised to climb in and enjoy the ride, because the meter is most certainly running.