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**GOOD OLD BOYS IN CRISIS:
TRUCK DRIVERS AND SHIFTING OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITY
IN THE LOUISIANA OILPATCH**

by

Andrew Michael Gardner

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**A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the
DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY
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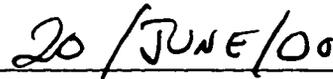
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**APPROVAL BY THESIS DIRECTOR**

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ABSTRACT

While federal deregulation of the trucking industry had little impact upon the truck drivers serving the Acadian oilpatch, recent legislation deregulating intrastate transportation yielded vast changes in the structure of the occupation. In the past, success as a trucker in the oilpatch depended upon an individual's entrepreneurial drive, as well as the social and familial networks upon which that individual could rely. Intrastate deregulation allowed several truck companies to dominate the industry; these companies grew via a complex series of alliances between transportation companies, service companies, and large oil concerns. These alliances disrupted the process by which individuals transformed social capital into economic capital. The foremost impact of these changes is a rapid drop in trucker's income – many now exist on the brink of insolvency. At the same time, the period of crisis has opened the sector to previously inconceivable options, including forays toward unionization, as well as the entry of women, blacks, and outsiders into the labor pool.

I. Introduction

Introduction

This paper seeks to address several gaps in our collective knowledge. Foremost among these goals, this paper seeks to describe a group of people and a section of the United States' industrial structure that have, to date, received little attention beyond an occasional article in the local newspaper. The truck drivers of Acadiana – the group with which this paper is concerned – were not a part of the spate of attention truckers received in the early 1980s. At the turn of that decade, the federal government moved to deregulate interstate trucking; a variety of studies both preceded and followed this policy change. However, the trucking industry of the Acadian oilpatch is mostly, although not entirely, based within the state of Louisiana, and therefore felt little impact from the policy changes implemented by federal deregulation. As a result, the bulk of the work during this period focused on the impacts of deregulation upon the interstate truckers one sees on the freeways and backroads across the nation. Little attention was given to the regional trucking industries, particularly the Acadian one, which was so closely tied to the domestic oil industry.

Acadiana also came under the scrutiny of the social sciences in the 1980s, a period in which the economy of the region collapsed after the bottom fell out of the international oil market. Research explored the impact of the offshore oil industry on coastal communities, conceptually tied the region to the existing literature on the boom/bust cycles of extractive economies, and, at times, explored the social impact of technological

change in drilling and production. For studies focused specifically upon the oilpatch, however, trucking nearly always fell outside their circumference of research; the oilpatch truckers were neither part of the standard definition of the oilpatch industry nor oilpatch labor. For that reason, they were again omitted from the analytic tapestry constructed for the region.

Furthermore, the general literature on truckers and trucking is hardly fulfilling. Most of the books I found in the library approach the subject from a dry, economic point of view; the authors do little to describe the men and women who choose this as a vocation or the decisions and dilemmas they face in both the course of the day and over the span of their careers. The anthropological literature is particularly sparse. Two works explore the truck as a semiotic template; both are concerned with truck drivers in less developed countries (Bolton 1979; Lefebvre 1989). Two early works explore the occupational identity of cross-country trucking in the United States (Flittie and Nelson 1968; Blake 1974); in the late 1970s, a single article appeared concerning sexual encounters at truck stops (Corzine and Kirby 1977), and two additional articles in the early 1980s examined the experiences of women drivers in the cross-country trucking (Lembright and Riemer 1980; Lembright and Riemer 1982).

As I will describe below, this paper will explore the nexus between industrial restructuring, social capital and occupational identity through an analysis of the changing structure of the oilpatch trucking industry. Several publications from the 1990s provide a starting point for these themes. Fried and Wolf's (1994) valuable contribution traces the

connection between the structure of the industry and the fate of the individual truck driver – they utilize a fairly orthodox Marxist perspective to suggest that industrial restructuring has allowed the capitalist to recapture the surplus value generated by the independent truck driver. Alvarez and Collier's 1994 contribution is even more lucid: although they utilize a comparative approach based on interviews with truck drivers in northern and southern Mexico – contexts very different from the Acadian oilpatch – the authors draw clear connections between the structure of the industries, the social structures on which they depend and the way individuals carve an identity from such a vocation (Alvarez 1994).

The prism through which this paper explores the changes in the oilpatch addresses two other gaps in our anthropological knowledge, both of a more theoretical nature. In the course of explaining the social impact of industrial restructuring, I rely on the notion of social capital as the fulcrum of change in the industry. There is certainly no shortage of publications exploring both the theory of social capital or the application of the notion; this paper, however, will follow a new strand of this debate that seeks a better balance for the application of the term. Most contemporary practitioners encourage the growth of social capital and, in doing so, forward a definition of the term imbued with only the most positive connotations. Recent work has revisited this starting point, noting that the systems in which social capital flourishes can (and often do) manifest both positive *and* negative aspects (Waldinger 1995; Portes 1996). The trucking industry of Acadiana provides an emblematic example of this more nuanced view of social capital.

Finally, I contend that the disruption of the transformative process – a process through which social capital could be redeemed for economic capital – has pushed the occupational identity of the truckers into a liminal and contested state. In this sense, I use the example of the oilpatch truckers to examine one of the less-developed aspects of the identity literature: the topography of occupational identity, its construction, and its deployment are often eclipsed by the more frequent investigations of gender and ethnic identity. There are other good explorations of the central place of work in the construction of identity (Klubock 1998; Striffler 1999); through exploring the world of the truckers in the Acadian oilpatch, I hope to better describe this connection – to show not only how the infrastructure and organization of work can produce a particular identity, but also how that identity exists separate from that material base and can be the forum in which power, dominance, and hegemony are both contested and won.

After a brief description of the methods utilized in the course of this study, I then turn to a general and descriptive overview of the Acadian oilpatch, the trucks that serve it, and the history of the oilpatch trucking industry. The next section, entitled “Regulation and Deregulation” is the largest in the paper; it begins with a detailed description of the organization of the industry under state deregulation, followed by several sections that attempt to describe changes in the organizational resulting from deregulation, as well as the social impacts of that change. The next section – “The Acadian Oilpatch in Context” – places these organizational changes in a global context. The penultimate section,

entitled “Social Capital and Shifting Identity” comprises the analysis: in this section I revisit the structure of the industry and the fulcrum of organizational change through the lens of social capital. This leads to a discussion of the Acadian truckers’ occupational identity, its primary components, and the relation between these components and the material and structural topography of the deregulated industry. I suggest that, as a result of the diminished role of social capital in the trucking industry, the occupational identity of the oilpatch trucker is highly contested. There is a friction between the idealized identity of old and the new identity suggested by the deregulated industry. This liminality has not only shut off certain avenues of action, but has also opened up new possibilities, the results of which remain to be seen.

I would like to thank several people for making the completion of this thesis possible. At the University of Arizona, I would like thank Tim Finan, Tom McGuire and Mamadou Baro for their patience and encouragement. Their mentorship was a key component of my education, and for that I will always be grateful. I would also like to thank Melissa McCormick for helping me recognize that anthropology and I were a good match. Karen Coelho, Rylan Higgins, and Erin Dean read early versions of this thesis – I hope their comments and critiques have left their mark – and Harry Luton, our contracting officer’s technical representative, also provided a succinct, good-natured critique of the paper during a short visit in February of 2000. Kristin Giordano, my wife, counseled me through countless trials and tribulations during the course of fieldwork and

writing– without her, I could not get through the day. Most of all, however, I would like to thank Diane Austin for her seemingly limitless energy in guiding my work. Our late-night discussions on the bayou, our frequent email exchanges, and her effort with several early drafts is the foundation on which this paper was built.

During my time in Acadiana I made innumerable friends. Most of all, I would like to thank Ramana and Moon for their hospitality and friendship. We spent many good nights at the Southland Inn – New Iberia’s “working man’s motel.” For the truckers of Acadiana, this is a dangerous time. Many are considering collective action and, as a result, tensions are high. Because I spoke in confidentiality with all the participants, the names that appear in this paper have been changed. This prevents me from thanking the participants by name. I hope that the participants know how much I appreciate their candor, and, most of all, I hope that this document will be of some use to them.

Methodology

The ethnographic data at the foundation of this paper were gathered during two short stints in the field, both part of a project funded by the Minerals Management Service (MMS), an agency of the U. S. Department of the Interior. The MMS contracted the Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology (hereafter BARA), a research unit within the Department of Anthropology at the University of Arizona, to explore the onshore community impacts of offshore drilling activities (Contract No. 1435-01-98CT-30897). Our study falls under the umbrella of what is commonly referred to as a social

impact assessment. As one member of a team comprising both student researchers and department faculty, I started the project with two distinct tasks. First, I was to search out and interview labor at the bottom of the oilfield job ladder – the roughnecks, roustabouts, sandblasters, welder-helpers, and jacks-of-all-trades that drift in and out of the area with the economic tide of the industry. Second, several of our initial contacts in the field indicated that oilfield truckers were, as one informant put it, “getting screwed,” and that we ought to look into the subject. It is this second task that, after the first interview, caught and sustained my interest.

Contract work is the bread and butter for many of the cultural and applied anthropology students at the University of Arizona. As students in a well-regarded but cash-poor department, contract work – primarily through BARA – provides a mechanism for students to get hands-on training in the field and to work closely with the faculty, as well as providing a way to pay rent. At the same time, contracting agencies often impose methodological limitations on research, and these limitations can frustrate the bright-eyed graduate student fresh out of an anthropological methods course. This was certainly the case in the study that follows. Modifications to the Paperwork Reduction Act, passed as part of the Republican’s “Contract with America,” prevent the branches of the government and their contractors from conducting repetitious data-gathering research. For our project with the MMS, this policy forbade us from asking the same questions to more than ten contacts. Students of applied anthropology at the University of Arizona generally pursue research designs based on the *mixed methods* approach, which seeks a synergistic

balance between qualitative and quantitative methods. As a result of the restrictions imposed by federal policy, however, the methods of this study tilt toward the qualitative side of the balance.

I spent much of my first stint in the oilpatch (June 6, 1999 to July 10, 1999) meeting with the drivers and owner/operators at truck stops, coffee shops, bars, garages, depots and industry yards, while also interviewing oilfield roustabouts, roughnecks, welders, sandblasters, and anyone else I bumped into. On my second visit (October 13, 1999 to October 30, 1999), I focused solely on truckers and trucking companies. Few interviews were taped. In part, this was because the bars, industrial yards, and truck stops at which the interviews occurred were often too noisy for effective taping. At the same time, many of the interviews strayed into detailed indictments of the trucking companies – the drivers’ primary employers – and many of the men and women were reluctant to go on tape. All informants were promised confidentiality, although a fair number insisted their comments were on the record and for the public. As a result, most of the names that appear in the thesis below have been changed.

The bulk of the data were the product of informal interviews, often with two or three individuals at a time. After finishing the first round of fieldwork in early July, I prepared a question outline for upcoming fieldwork session, yielding semi-structured interviews. The set of questions underpinning the semi-structured interview evolved both in the field and between visits as new directions of inquiry became clear. I took detailed notes during each interview; at night, I typed these notes into my laptop. Nearly all the

interview notes were transcribed within 24 hours. I later entered these data into a NUDIST qualitative database, which allowed our research team to search out sections of other team members' interviews dealing with relevant topics.

In order to select study participants, I utilized a purposive snowball sampling method (Bernard 1995). This seemed like an ideal method for several reasons. First, I entered the field with very little knowledge about oilpatch trucking and the various players in the business. Purposive sampling allowed me to shift areas of inquiry as I learned more about the industry. Second, my initial interest in social networks and social capital meshed with the snowball sampling method, as the names recommended by each informant helped me discern some of the basic social divisions within the industry. Neither purposive nor snowball sampling are statistically representative methods, and this study would certainly benefit from a foundation in the quantitative methods based on a representative sample. As mentioned, however, this would have to occur outside the purview of the MMS and its methodological restrictions.

Finally, I have used a simple notation for the direct quotes that appear in the text. Because we worked as a team, each interview was labeled with the initial of the interviewer and a sequential, unique identifier ([AG22], for example). Although I interviewed most of the truckers, several of my colleagues conducted interviews of interest to the topics of this paper. As a result, some of the quotes that appear below come from interviews I did not conduct.

.

II. Overview and Description

The Louisiana Oilpatch

In early January of 1901, Anthony Lucas, an Australian-born mining engineer working in the salt mines of Louisiana learned of efforts to drill for oil at Spindletop Hill, just south of Beaumont, Texas. With assistance from several Pittsburgh-based wildcatters¹ and with financial backing from Andrew Mellon, Lucas gathered a team and struck oil on their second attempt. Once spudded, the single well produced 80,000 to 100,000 barrels of oil a day. By 1902, with 285 active wells on Spindletop Hill alone², the focus of the nascent American oil industry shifted to the south. The vast reservoir of subterranean oil fostered the growth of the first giants in the petroleum industry, and their reign in the oilpatch solidified with the outbreak of the First World War. The shift away from mass transportation to the automobile, the outbreak of the Second World War, the rapid suburbanization of the American landscape, and the global switch from coal to oil power mandated by the Marshall Plan pushed the demand for oil to increasing heights. Already the epicenter of global oil production, the Gulf-based petroleum industries were able to increase production through a series of technological advances, foremost of which was the ability to drill for oil offshore.

The offshore oilfields stretch for hundreds of miles along the Gulf Coast, beginning just west of the Florida Panhandle and ending midway down the Texas coast.

¹ The term *wildcatter* refers to the men and companies that drill for oil on unproven land.

² From www.house.gov/jacksonlee/spindle.htm, August 12, 1999

Cities and towns grew in response to the availability of jobs, and wealth streamed into the region. Over the span of the 20th Century, oil eclipsed other traditional industries of the region. Sugar production and fishing, once primary economic components of the Acadian livelihood, became economic footnotes to the booming industry of oil and gas production.

Two great cities – Houston, and to a lesser degree, New Orleans – thrive on the wealth generated by the oil-producing regions of the Gulf. Lafayette, Louisiana, a city of nearly 100,000, is a regional center also of importance to the petroleum industry. Most of the larger oil and service companies maintain corporate offices in Houston. However, through a series of consolidations and mergers, many of the white-collar, oil industry jobs shifted from Lafayette to Houston over the 1980s and 1990s. Other mid-size oil cities along the Gulf include Lake Charles, Port Arthur and Galveston. The Acadian oilpatch is a subset of this larger, oil-producing region of the Gulf coast, and stretches from the Texas-Louisiana border to just west of New Orleans. In the low country of Acadiana there are countless smaller towns strung along the bayous, many with small industrial centers of their own. Larger towns such as Houma, Morgan City, and New Iberia, along with the many smaller towns and ports, provide the labor pool for both offshore work and the industries that support it. Many of these towns and cities lie along Highway 90, the four-lane corridor connecting Houston, Lafayette and New Orleans.

Acadian culture, language, and traditions of the people who live there.

In contrast to the refineries of the Port Arthur and Lake Charles areas, the industries of the Acadian oilpatch primarily deal with the *upstream* component of oil production – exploration, fabrication, drilling, and support (Liebow, Butler et al. 1980). The *downstream* component of the industry – refining – mostly takes place outside the Acadian oilpatch. Refineries in the Houston/Port Arthur corridor, as well as the Lake Charles area, handle much of the offshore production. The Acadian oilpatch is nonetheless a highly industrialized region; the fabrication yards loom above the low swamps and marshes, and smaller industrial concerns dot the highways and backroads of deltaic plain.

Fluctuations in the price of oil consign the regional economy to substantial peaks and dips. High oil prices on the global market result in a virtual drilling stampede in the waters offshore. The highways buzz with activity, billboards announce that help is wanted in the fabrication yards, and labor streams into the region from around the country and from abroad. Academic researchers, newspaper reporters, and petroleum laborers alike describe these economic fluctuations in terms of *booms* and *busts*. The most memorable boom in recent memory began sometime in the mid-1970s and ended in the mid-1980s. The older oilworkers in the Acadian oilpatch have countless stories from this period – they tell of inordinately high wages, new cars in every driveway, and long hours offshore. In comparison to other regions of the Gulf of Mexico oilpatch, particularly those with a large refining industry, the lower Acadian parishes are more economically dependent

upon drilling and production, and are therefore even more susceptible to fluctuations in the oil market.

The events associated with the economic expansions and contractions loom large in the memories of most oilfield workers. However, no strong consensus on the timing of these economic cycles emerges in discussions and interviews. This can perhaps be attributed to the complex structure of the contemporary oil industry in the region. A drop in the price of oil may lead to a sudden decrease in the number of exploratory drilling operations in the region, but the companies involved do not act in unison. Furthermore, support industries engaged in rig maintenance, refining, and similar activities feel less impact from such a recession. Therefore, despite the general patterns of boom and bust readily observable in the history of the region, there is a cross-cutting specificity to the fluctuations that depends on the assets, management, and global reach of particular companies, their role in the industry as a whole, their particular geographical focus, and a variety of other factors. This degree of variability is often ignored in economic descriptions of the region.

The history of the bayou communities and their connection to the offshore oilfields is both long and multifaceted. The parishes that comprise the Acadian oilpatch are at the heart of the Gulf oilfield; the oilpatch industries fuel a regional economy that stretches from Houston to New Orleans. The wealth generated by the industry is not steady, but instead characterized by widespread fluctuations – booms and busts. These general trends mask a degree of specificity and variability not always accounted for in

economic descriptions of the region. As this overview seeks to demonstrate, the oilpatch is not merely an agglomeration of wells, but a varied system of industries and small concerns serving the oil companies. And it is even more than that. Nearly every family one talks with has a member working in the oilfield, and all businesses in the region are in some manner dependent on the income generated by oil extraction. The Louisiana oilpatch is more than a regional economy – for the people of Acadiana, oil is a way of life. As one study participant noted, “we around here were born to oil – it’s in our blood” [AG44].

The Trucks and Trailers of the Louisiana Oilpatch

The mountains of metal, miles of pipe, and sea of oil extracted from the offshore fields require a robust and unique transportation infrastructure. The marine component of the transportation industry includes barges, crew boats, and supply boats.⁴ Barges are used to transport large pieces of equipment offshore, to move equipment between different places inshore along the intracoastal waterway⁵, to transport crude oil within the region, and for commerce between the Louisiana oilpatch and other regions of the United States. Supply boats are the primary connection between the industries of the shore and the oil-producing offshore rigs. Most supply boats are 300 to 500+ tons and ferry

⁴ Our team’s project included an in-depth analysis of the marine sector of the oilpatch transportation system. An early overview of these results was presented at the Society for Applied Anthropology Conference of 2000 (Austin 2000).

⁵ The intracoastal waterway stretches from Trenton, New Jersey to Brownsville, Texas. The waterway is maintained by the Army Corps of engineers to a depth of 14ft and is the primary artery for the domestic maritime industry.

equipment to and from existing offshore rigs. Smaller crew boats move personnel to and from the rigs. In addition to the boats, the largest domestic fleet of helicopters works in much the same capacity, moving personnel to, from, and between the offshore rigs.

On land, the transportation industry comprises two primary components, commonly referred to as *modes*. Some of the support equipment for the offshore oil industry arrives by train, and much of the oil and gas produced in the region moves about by similar means. The state contains 2,761 miles of operational rail carrying over 3.2 million tons of petroleum products annually.⁶ Finally, vast fleets of trucks carry much of the equipment and resources within the region. These trucks vary from large, heavy-duty 18 wheelers to small pickup trucks, commonly referred to as *hotshots*. The trailers that the larger trucks pull – and sometimes the trucks themselves – are often specially designed to serve the unique demands of the petroleum industry. An overview of the trucks that serve the industry is provided below.

Hotshots

The smallest vehicles of the fleets that serve the petroleum industry are really glorified pickup trucks. Most are produced by the three major American auto manufacturers – Ford, Chevrolet, and Dodge. These pickup trucks, called *hotshots* in the Acadian oilfield, come in a variety of shapes and sizes; the smallest being the half-ton trucks, the largest over a ton, and many have been converted to flatbeds in the rear. The

⁶ From the Association of American Railroads homepage at www.aar.org

state does not require commercial driving licenses for the hotshot drivers. Nonetheless, these trucks fill the major corridors in the Louisiana oilpatch, and the drivers of the larger trucks consider the hotshot



drivers their brethren in oilpatch trucking. New models of these trucks retail for anywhere from \$25,000 to \$35,000 dollars, making them the least expensive way for an owner/operator to enter the oilpatch trucking business. For that reason, and because no commercial driving license is required to operate the pickup trucks, many drivers get their start as hotshots.

The term *hotshot* refers to both the trucks themselves and the drivers. For decades, these small trucks have served as a means of moving small pieces of equipment quickly from one place to another. Because much of the operating equipment in the petroleum industry is so capital intensive, the breakdown of an essential piece of equipment – a drill bit, for example – can cost a company tens of thousands of dollars in down time. The hotshot is the transportation sector's response to the unique demands of the industry; these trucks ferry key pieces of equipment to and from the docks and between the service companies scattered across the delta. The drivers' ability to carry vital pieces of equipment at top speed earned them the nickname *hotshots*.

Gin Poles and Single-Axles

Gin pole and rig-up trucks were once the mainstay of the oil industry. These trucks were not only capable of hauling heavy loads, but could also load the equipment onto other truck beds, thereby saving on expensive crane costs. The gin pole trucks functioned as portable cranes; they were owned by the



trucking companies and accompanied other trucks to the loading site. These trucks vary in size; the one pictured here is a 25-ton truck capable of loading 45,000 pounds by pole. Few of these trucks are still active in the industry as separate contractors now manage the loading and crane duties. At the same time, many of the 18 wheel owner/operators purchased lowboy trailers (described below); many of the lowboys include a winch and rolling tailgate utilized for self-loading.

Although the gin-pole has fallen by the wayside, many oilpatch truckers drive mid-sized single-axle trucks. These trucks look much like the gin-pole pictured above but do not have the loading gear attached to the flatbed at the rear. Like the operators of other large trucks, operators of the single axle must obtain a commercial driver's license.

The Eighteen Wheel Tractor

The current mainstay of the oilpatch trucking industry is the eighteen-wheel tractor. These trucks come in a variety of makes and models. The top-of-the-line tractors usually have an exterior constructed of durable aluminum, accoutrements made of chrome, and the dog-nose style that provides easy engine access. Less-expensive fiberglass models have proven quite popular with the oilpatch drivers as a cost-effective alternative.

New top-of-the-line tractors retail from \$105,000 to \$130,000, while less expensive fiberglass models retail for \$40,000 to \$80,000. Because oilpatch truckers are often forced to sleep over at the various industrial yards as they await loading,



many truckers opt for the more expensive sleeper models as pictured above. Unlike the smaller hotshot trucks, the diesel tractors are built to run for hundreds of thousands of miles if properly maintained.

Goosenecks, Drop-decks, Lowboys, and Platform Trailers

The standard, flatbed trailer is the most common in the oilpatch. Flatbed trailers (also called platform trailers) usually come with pine floorboards and are built to carry

45,000 to 48,000 pounds. Most new trailers come with an air ride system that minimizes jostling and impact to the cargo. Platform trailers are used to carry all sorts of oilfield equipment, although it would seem to the casual observer that most platforms on the road carry pipe. These trailers retail for between \$15,000 and \$20,000, although further customization can push the price well beyond \$20,000.

Many of the truckers in the oilpatch pull drop-decks instead of regular flatbed trailers. There are several advantages to the drop deck trailers; loading and unloading heavy freight is made easier by the lower deck, the lower center of gravity prevents tipping, and the trailers can carry tall pieces of equipment without exceeding the state



limits on cargo height. These trailers retail for several thousand dollars more than the standard platform trailers, and are usually capable of carrying nearly the same tonnage. For the purposes of billing, these trucks are considered special equipment, and therefore incur additional charges to the vendor. The drop-deck is widely popular in the oilpatch. The term drop deck trailer refers to both single-drops and double-drops. The single drop trailer (pictured here) contains a single vertical drop just behind the tractor. The double-drop contains a longer drop near the tractor and a second drop just in front of the rear axles. As a result, the main deck of a double-drop is even lower than that of a single-drop.

Another modified trailer is the lowboy. Lowboy trailers are constructed of heavier steel and are built to carry loads as heavy as 120,000 pounds. Lowboy trailers are often manufactured with swing-out attachments allowing the owner to widen the trailer, and often include a rolling tailgate and a winch for self-loading as well. The trailer in the center of the photograph to the right includes such a rollbar; to the left of this lowboy trailer is a single drop lowboy constructed of the same heavy, reinforced steel. Along with such materials, extra axles help support the extra weight.



Finally, many of the trucks in the oilpatch pull trailers called *goosenecks* (pictured below). Gooseneck trailers come in various sizes; the name refers to the particular design of the trailer's hitch. The full-size tractors can pull a gooseneck trailer much like the lowboy described above. More commonly, however, hotshot owners purchase light gooseneck trailers to increase the weight and size of their hauls: because the pay for particular hauls correlates to the weight of the load, these smaller lowboys provide a way



for hotshot owner/operators to increase the earning potential of their equipment. The gooseneck trailer pictured above is designed for just such a truck.

Operating Costs

The costs of operating and maintaining the rigs described above vary according to size and make. Unlike the many interstate truckers, Louisiana truckers do not have to contend with the variable gas consumption of the more mountainous states, as they are rarely more than a few feet above sea level. Like all truckers, however, oilpatch truckers must keep up with regular maintenance costs. Tires expire every 40,000 to 50,000 miles and cost \$350 to \$400 each. Brakes need to be regularly serviced, and the various lubricants and fluids must be changed. An oil change alone costs \$25 to \$35. In addition, owner/operators must pay an annual road tax of \$500, a fuel tax of \$200, and, hotshot owners excepted, the fees associated with the commercial driver's license. Finally, should an owner/operator encounter more serious mechanical problems, he or she can expect to pay upwards of \$35.00 an hour for a diesel mechanic. Some owners, particularly those with multiple trucks or small fleets, save on maintenance costs by either doing their own work or hiring an in-house mechanic.

Most of the owner/operators in the oilpatch finance their trucks through specialty creditors; banks, several participants noted, are wary of the inherent risks in the oilpatch trucking industry, and are particularly wary of financing owner-operated trucks. Many of the older truck drivers in the region financed their purchases through banks, but this

seems to be a less common alternative in the deregulated oilpatch. One participant also noted that several of the independent trucking companies had, in the past, helped finance trucks for the owner/operators under lease, but this too is less common today. As a result, several companies that specialize in truck financing now operate in the region. With the price of a new tractor and trailer often exceeding \$100,000, owners often face a monthly credit note for \$2000 or more.

Over time, the trucking industry in the Louisiana oilpatch evolved into a specialized, regional sector of the larger commercial trucking industry of the United States. Oilpatch trucking is clearly differentiated by the presence of a large number of small trucks, pickups, and trailers built specifically for hauling small, heavy items. Similarly, one may see drop-decks and lowboys in other parts of the country, but in the oilpatch they are commonplace. Equipment investments made by these truck owners tie them to the oilpatch industry and its specific technological demands. In times of crisis in the oilpatch, this makes it difficult for the drivers to move to other sectors of commercial trucking, such as the local sugarcane harvest or interstate commerce. For the owners of the larger trucks, this is largely due to trailer design. For the hotshots, there is little demand outside the region for the heavy pickups and gooseneck trailers. In this sense, the truckers in Acadiana are oilpatch laborers. Through an overview of the history of the industry, the specificity of the truckers' bonds to the oilpatch should become even clearer.

History of Oilpatch Trucking

During the Great Depression, the trucking industry emerged as the primary competitor to the established rail companies. The contracting economy of the 1930s invigorated the nascent trucking sector, favoring it over rail transportation because of its implicit flexibility and low costs (Teske, Best et al. 1995). The importance of the trucking sector did not diminish, and by 1990, 77% of the U.S. freight market traveled by truck (Teske, Best et al. 1995).

A complex, two-tier regulatory system emerged with the growth of the trucking industry. As an outgrowth of the regulatory systems developed for the rail sector, states began imposing a series of regulations on the trucking industry that, at the time, largely consisted of localized transportation networks that were relatively easy to regulate. Intrastate regulation focused on the issues of safety, service quality, and the maintenance of consistent pricing (Teske, Best et al. 1995). By the mid-1930s, however, the quantity and importance of interstate freight hauling had increased rapidly, and the federal government, through the Motor Carrier Act of 1935, moved to establish a regulatory framework for interstate trucking to be managed by the Interstate Commerce Commission (ICC). The legislation left the states' regulatory purview over intrastate trucking intact, resulting in variable regulatory structures particular to each state. Federal regulation of interstate trucking remained in place until the passage of the Motor Carrier Act of 1980, which dismantled many of the key regulatory components of the ICC (Felton and Anderson 1989). The Act did not alter state-level regulation of intrastate traffic;

Louisiana, along with many other states, solidified its intrastate regulatory structure in the window between interstate and intrastate deregulation, and it was not until the passage of the Airport Improvement Program Reauthorization Bill of 1994 that the process of dismantling the state regulatory structure began.

In Louisiana, the Louisiana Public Service Commission (L.P.S.C.) regulated the trucking industry through several mechanisms⁷. At the foundation of the commission's regulatory duties were two functions: the commission managed the distribution of the state operating permits required for business, and the council established the price for *line hauls* – the term used for point-to-point freight hauling. The policies and rates established by the L.P.S.C. applied to all forms of trucking within the state – private carriers, contract carriers, towing companies, and so on – but the oilfield haulers represented the most significant contingent of intrastate truckers in Louisiana [AG56]. The intricacies of these functions in relation to the organizational structure of oilfield transportation will be explored in the sections that follow. In general, however, the two functions described above comprised the core of Louisiana's regulatory system. By controlling the distribution of permits, the L.P.S.C. limited entry to the oilpatch transportation sector; by establishing the price for line hauls, the L.P.S.C. maintained comfortable profit rates for Louisiana oilpatch haulers. The role of the L.S.P.C. in managing entry to the

⁷ The L.P.S.C. has a long and colorful history in the state. Originated as the regulatory agency for oversight of the rail industry, Huey Long transformed the Commission into a political springboard in his ascension to the post of Governor (Williams 1969). The Commission continues to play a central role in Louisiana politics.

transportation business and establishing the price for line hauls ended in January 1, 1996, resulting in a series of dramatic changes in oilpatch transportation (Wolf 1996).

Oilpatch trucking differs in significant ways from other subsectors of the national trucking industry. First, the oilpatch is geographically bounded. Unlike interstate trucking, Acadian truckers rarely carry loads beyond the Gulf Coast; most hauls keep the drivers fairly close to home and in communities with which they are familiar. Second, servicing the transportation needs of the oilpatch requires special equipment and specialized knowledge, as illustrated in the previous section. While contemporary interstate hauling rarely requires the driver to even leave the cab (commonly referred to as *no-touch hauling*), oilpatch truckers traditionally assisted with loading, knew the type of equipment they hauled, and had specialized trailers built to move the oversized loads common in the oilpatch. Furthermore, the large fleet of “hotshot” pickup trucks serving the oil sector is unique in the national trucking industry, and is a result of a third unique quality of oilpatch transportation: the capital-intensive nature of offshore oil drilling and production requires almost immediate delivery of key equipment and personnel. The fleet of hotshot pickup trucks allows small, vital pieces of equipment to be quickly transported to various ports and industries of the Acadian oilpatch.

The parameters of the oilpatch workday also differ from interstate trucking. Most truckers work in an on-call status, linking together a series of short oilpatch hauls in order to bring home a paycheck. As one participant noted,

“Working in the oilfield is twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, and response time counts. A rig might be shut down, maybe the pipes burst, or nine out of ten times the rig coordinator forgets a crucial piece of equipment. That’s the thing about oilfield trucking – it’s essentially a hotshot service. As a driver, you’re allowed time to wake up and get dressed, but you’ve got to be on the road fast, and you’re on call for twenty four hours” [AG46].

Drivers and owner operators may spend the bulk of their day at home waiting for a call from the dispatcher; these calls can arrive in the middle of the night or on a weekend afternoon. This not only prevents drivers and owner/operators from pursuing other occupations or jobs that require significant time commitments, but also takes a toll on family life.

Finally, the oilpatch trucking industry can be differentiated from interstate trucking in terms of the utilization rate. The oilpatch maintains a much lower utilization rate than most other sectors of the national transportation industry. Again, this can be attributed to the capital-intensive nature of the oil industry. During a boom cycle in the oilpatch, demand for transportation rises rapidly. Truck companies maintain a surplus of equipment in order to meet this peak demand; with the cost of operating the rigs and platforms on the Gulf, delays caused by a shortage of trucks can incur inordinately high costs in terms of rig down-time. As the owner of an independent trucking company noted,

“The oilpatch is a lot different than trucking in other parts of the country. We’re on call 24/7, and we have a low utilization rate. There’s a lot of trucks and trailers that just sit around idle, but they’ve got to be there and be ready. Utilization is sometimes as low as 50%, but when an oil company is in a jam, they need everything at its destination as fast as possible, and that’s what all this is for. It’s not like the freight industry. Putting a load of stereos on hold until a truck is available doesn’t really cost anyone that much, but if a rig has to wait another day for an essential piece of equipment, costs go up real fast” [AG50].

Under the regulated system, the line haul rates reflected the trucking companies' need to maintain this surplus of equipment. With the deregulated rates, maintaining these surpluses has proven increasingly difficult. After a description of the organization of the regulated trucking industry, the next section will explore the articulation of the policies that deregulated oilpatch transportation.

III. Regulation and Deregulation

Organization of the Industry

Until well into the 1950s, many oil and service companies of Louisiana maintained their own fleets of trucks, hiring drivers as employees, while other individuals owned fleets of trucks that were leased to the oil industry. Neither of these organizational systems was particularly efficient. Companies that maintained their own fleet of trucks found the truck-utilization rate too low to justify the costs compared to leased trucks. Both systems resulted in poor equipment maintenance by the hired drivers, and the process of establishing a business of either type was capital intensive. In the early 1950s, a New Iberian truck company owner named Sam Broussard, Sr. sought a business design that would minimize equipment abuse to his fleet of trucks and solve this problem of capital-intensive start-up costs.

Rather than purchase the trucks, Sam Broussard Sr. configured a system in which the trucking company leased trucks from independent owners and owner/operators. The owners of the trucks were responsible for maintaining and operating the trucks. Owners of multiple trucks often hired drivers. The advantages of the system were obvious, as Sam Broussard Sr.'s son notes:

“My dad came up with the concept of leasing in the oilpatch. He thought that instead of having a company with employees, he could figure out a way to go in as partners with them. That was the concept of the lease. Because the drivers would own the trucks, they would not only take care of the equipment, but they'd go out and hustle jobs, and then all would be better off. He brought the idea before the L.P.S.C. and they approved it. That's how he described it to me when I was a kid – he figured the lease concept would make a man his own boss, let him run his own business, and therefore he'd do a good job. ”

Other truckers and company owners followed suit, and the independent trucking firm soon became the norm. This basic division of labor remains in place today, as few companies maintain their own fleets [DA029].

Under state regulations, establishing a trucking company required a permit from the L.P.S.C. These permits were of limited supply, and obtaining a permit required significant political clout. As one participant noted,

“At the beginning of the trucking industry, before deregulation, the permit was the hardest thing to get. You look at all the first trucking companies – the owners were all state senators or something. There was a network, and you had to have political power to get something like that. Things loosened up in the 80s, though, but back before then, you had to pull some strings to get a business like that set up. Once you did, though, you could make a pretty penny” [AG45].

Garnering the social and political clout to obtain a permit represented only part of the battle. Federal regulations also required trucks to carry insurance. These insurance policies were prohibitively expensive for many of the owner/operators in the oilpatch. By both federal policy and the concerns of vendors, cargo and liability insurance policies in the millions were required for operation. Together, then, the twin demands of an operating permit and insurance policies represented a significant hurdle for oilpatch entrepreneurs:

[N]ot everybody could start a company. You had to go up to Baton Rouge to get a permit, you had to pay \$25,000, and you had to have cargo insurance. That was the hard part, because insurance is very expensive, and an individual just can't afford it. You need at least a million in insurance just to get on the dock ... remember, some of that cargo is worth the millions [AG46].

For those with sufficient political and social clout, trucking companies proved the ideal business structure for the demands of this particular policy environment. The companies carried the insurance policies, owned some trucks and leased others. The insurance policy covered those trucks owned by the company, and drivers were hired to operate the vehicles. In addition, the insurance policy extended to trucks owned by other individuals – these trucks were leased to the company, thereby extending the legitimacy conferred by the permit and bringing leased trucks under the pre-established insurance umbrella. The trucking companies often handled the paperwork for owner/operators as well, thereby relieving them of tedious bookkeeping duties. As one owner of a small trucking outfit noted, “In order to conduct business during regulation, you had to be leased to a company or have your own L.P.S.C. authority. I chose not to have an authority, I felt I had my hands full with sales, service and maintaining my equipment” [AG36]. For this service, individual owner/operators paid the trucking companies 20% to 30% of the *line haul* – the money charged to the vendor for transporting a particular load.

The rates for these *line hauls* were determined by the L.P.S.C., which was made up of five elected members. Petitions for rate increases – called *tariffs* – were made by the Oilfield Carrier Association, itself consisting of all individuals holding the L.P.S.C. permit to operate in the oilfield transportation industry. Members of the L.P.S.C. would then review the tariff, its justification, and either approve or refuse the increase. Not all requests were approved [AG56]. In addition to requests for rate increases, the L.P.S.C.

issued fuel-cost adjustments every six months. The L.P.S.C. published the rates in what is widely referred to by oilpatch truckers as “the book.”

Book rates, established by the state, largely negated price-based competition and shifted competition to other parameters. Quality of service and safety record were mentioned repeatedly by the participants in this study. Other factors, however, contributed to the success of drivers and trucking companies under which they were employed. Oilpatch truck drivers depended on social and kinship networks to find work, combining these established networks with entrepreneurial activities aimed at increasing one’s customer base. One can hardly overestimate the importance of the entrepreneurial activity of the owner/operator prior to deregulation: as one truck company owner estimated,

“It’s hard to say exactly, but maybe 80% of the hauls were hustled by the driver prior to deregulation. Since then, it’s been almost the opposite – 80% of the business comes right through the trucking company” [AG56].

In the regulated industry, the trucking company was tailored to fit this entrepreneurial base. Based on the template constructed by Sam Broussard Sr., truck company owners conceived of the owner/operators as business partners; indeed, with the majority of the trucking company’s business dependent on the entrepreneurial ability of the owner/operator to hustle work, no trucking company could circumvent this business structure. As a result, the interests of the trucking company and owner/operator were very much aligned.

The petroleum, service and fabrication companies usually employed a dispatcher or transportation manager to organize the transportation of materials. These individuals were the main contact point for owner/operators. Because the rates were established by the L.P.S.C., dispatchers were at liberty to select the trucking company and truck driver of their choice, and they often did so based on quality of service and social capital – those familial and extra-familial networks so prevalent in the Acadian oilpatch. In holding the purse strings in the form of work, dispatchers were actively courted by independent truckers and drivers – having a brother-in-law or an old buddy in dispatching often ensured that a trucker would receive enough lucrative hauls to carve a decent living from the business. Owner/operators cultivated relationships with dispatchers through a series of favors, including anything from stopping off at the store for a pack of cigarettes to weekend fishing trips to one of the private camps⁸ out on the marsh.

Drivers, owner/operators, and truck companies were able to further reinforce these relationships through economic incentives to customers, albeit by bending the rules of state-mandated line hauls. The rate book established prices for particular routes, and truck operators received sufficient payment to make that journey a profitable one. This leg of the journey is referred to as the *fronthaul*. After delivering the load, drivers often searched for a load going back to the region from which they came, referred to as a *backhaul*. Finding a backhaul at or near the delivery point increased the profitability of the overall journey, and because the fronthaul, state-established rate was sufficient for the round trip,

⁸ In lower Louisiana, many individuals and families maintain “camps” out in the swamp. Camps are used for

operators often discounted backhauls up to 50%. The backhaul rates were of great benefit to the customer, and were offered at the discretion of the driver, owner, or truck company. Again, the social networks and entrepreneurial skill of the truckers were essential in establishing the wide-ranging connections necessary to locate backhaul loads.

In the regulated business climate, the job ladder looked something like this: individuals usually entered the business as drivers operating someone else's truck for 20% to 25% of the line haul. Oftentimes the drivers began driving the hotshot trucks, thereby gaining experience in the oilpatch before pursuing the commercial driver's license. After saving some money, a driver might purchase a truck of his or her own, thereby becoming an owner/operator. As the truck owner, the percent of the line haul jumps dramatically – the owner/operator accrues all of the line haul minus the 20% to 25% paid to the trucking company. At the same time, the owner is responsible for truck payments, maintenance, taxes, and a host of other costs. Under successful conditions, owner/operators often went on to purchase other vehicles, hiring drivers to operate them, and developing a larger customer base. Finally, with enough financial backing and political support, the owner of a large fleet might attempt to obtain an operating permit from the state, thereby granting the owner permission to operate as a trucking company and carry insurance. The individual might then begin to lease trucks from other owner/operators, thereby garnering the 20% to 25% of the lessee's line haul in return for carrying insurance, operating permit, and various bookkeeping duties.

weekend recreation, fishing, and other outdoor activities.

Prior to intrastate deregulation, then, those service and oil companies without their own fleet contracted with owner/operators to move equipment in the oilfield. The rates for these hauls were set by the L.P.S.C. The service and oil companies employed dispatchers to organize the hauling process; individual owners and operators relied upon their social networks – their connections to these dispatchers – and upon entrepreneurial skill to find work. The businesses of the truck owners varied in size; many of the truckers owned a single truck, while others were able to build up a small fleet, hire drivers, and thereby move from the road to the office. Some of the larger outfits obtained permits and carried their own insurance, thereby becoming a trucking company. Most owner/operators in the oilpatch leased their trucks to the trucking companies in order to maintain a focus on sales, service, and truck maintenance.

Book Rates, Economic Cycles and Regulated Trucking

For the owners/operators of the oilpatch, the book rates of regulated trucking provided a stable foothold in an essentially volatile industry. The primary source of this volatility stems from the long term economic fluctuations, often termed the *booms* and *busts* of the region. Drops in the international price of oil result in sharp cutbacks in the amount of oil company money allotted for *upstream* activity – in particular, to exploration and drilling. These activities are the mainstays of the southern Louisiana oilpatch (Liebow, Butler et al. 1980); the economic impact of curtailed drilling and exploration

trickles through the industries of the region, first impacting the service companies, then the transportation sector. The bust of the 80s lasted through the end of the decade and looms large in the minds of all in the region. Nearly every trucker and, for that matter, nearly every adult you talk to in southern Louisiana remembers the bust period.

For many of the truckers driving in the 1980s bust, diversification represented a primary coping strategy. As one driver reports,

“I started driving when I was 21, just before the bust. I’d drive on the weekends, sometimes through Monday, and then go in to my cousin’s butcher shop for the rest of the time. That’s how I got through the bust – I had two things going” [AG38].

Another husband and wife team reports,

“We got started back in trucking back in 1982. My husband was working in the oilfield before that, but things went belly-up and he couldn’t get any work ... we decided to buy a shrimping boat, and we moved the family out to live on the boat. I ran the shrimping boat and the kids helped out. A friend of ours helped us get started in trucking – we bought a one-ton truck and then just kept buying more. Eventually we moved out of shrimping” [AG42].

With many of the options in the oilfield closed because of the economic downturn in the industry, truck drivers and truck owners often turned to other livelihood strategies to cope with the bust, while others left the region altogether. For those who chose to both remain and continue trucking, their ability to work out arrangements with creditors became essential, as many of the trucking businesses could not make ends meet. Also, owners and operators with enough savings or large social networks were able to persevere in the economic bust of the 1980s. Maintaining the production rigs required some equipment and supplies that, in turn, entailed some transportation. The picture that emerges from

discussions of this period suggests that the bust, while widespread, was variable. Some owner/operators were able to find work, and a few even prospered. Because the rates for particular hauls were set by the state, those able to find work earned enough money to persevere.

The lessons of the 1980s bust became part of the oilpatch trucking industry. While there is much disagreement about the precise beginning and ending points of the 1980s bust, subsequent economic downturns are perceived as manifestations of the cyclical nature of the oil industry which, in turn, engenders a panoply of responses similar to those of the 1980s: in the currents of a bust, truck drivers and truck owners tend to buckle down and wait it out, depending as best they can upon savings, credit, and alternative forms of income.

In addition to the perceived long-term economic cycles, truckers participating in the study also pointed to other cyclical processes that affect their business. Many noted impact of seasonal climatic events. Hurricane season begins in early June and ends in late November. For those periods when a storm passes through the region, rig activity comes to a halt and shipments of equipment are suspended – as one trucker related, “everything shuts down – nothing moves” [AG42]. For truckers, the fall and early winter are a time of heightened uncertainty, for a large hurricane can shut down the oilpatch for over a week. Furthermore, infrastructural damage can extend transportation difficulties well beyond the duration of the storm itself.

Truck company owners also noted the periodicity of oil company spending. One owner, describing the current situation in the oilpatch, noted,

“The bad times really started last November. By the end of the last business quarter, most of the oil company money is spent, so there’s a lot less work out there. And there’s never a lot of money spent in the first business quarter of the year. During a seasonal downturn like that, there’s just a lot less work for everybody. Drivers will go from five runs a week down to one or two” [AG42].

As the oil and service companies grow through continued mergers and vertical integration, the impact of these spending cycles becomes more intensified. The spending cycles of a small handful of companies now drive the entire industry; ancillary service and transportation industries conform as best they can to these cycles.

Together, then, the seasonal, business, and long-term economic cycles that structure the trucking industry represent an inherent component of the oil industry. The rates set by the L.P.S.C. provided a mechanism for coping with the variation resulting from these cycles. The constellation of drivers, owner/operators, and trucking companies, as well as the mechanisms they constructed to deal with the economic fluctuations of the business, changed dramatically with the instigation of intrastate deregulation on January 1, 1996.

Intrastate Deregulation

Of all the recent events in oilpatch trucking, none changed the face of the industry more than intrastate deregulation. The Act itself (a component of the Airport

Improvement Program Reauthorization Bill) became effective on January 1, 1996, but several important events presaged the legislated change.

In the years leading up to intrastate deregulation, several oilfield trucking companies grew quite large. This growth process was fed by several key changes. The larger trucking companies began to handle more dispatching, and as a result, they were able to funnel business to the owner/operators leasing under their permit. More centralized dispatching increased the leverage of these companies over the smaller independent operators, as the companies controlled a larger share in the distribution of work. At the same time, centralized dispatching allowed the trucking companies to improve logistical systems, thereby coordinating more backhauls and consolidating loads. The savings for these logistical gains were, in part, passed on to the major oil and service companies, sometimes by circumventing the purview of the Louisiana regulatory agency. For example, as the trucking companies expanded into the other states along the Gulf, they also moved out of the jurisdiction of intrastate deregulation, and large truck companies with some operations outside the state were able to package rate cuts for interstate line hauls well before intrastate deregulation.

Midway through 1995, one of the largest trucking companies approached one of the seven sister oil companies with a package deal [AG57]. The trucking company offered to discount book rates in return for an “exclusive carrier” contract; this meant that in return for utilizing only their trucks, the oil company would receive discounts on the state-mandated line haul rates. Several other large trucking companies quickly followed

suit. The L.P.S.C. reviewed the first of these contracts and declared it illegal under current law. However, the wheels of deregulation were already rolling; the oil and trucking companies moved from an “exclusive use” contract with the trucking companies to one called “preferred carrier,” thereby conforming to existing law while maintaining the rudiments of an exclusive agreement with the trucking companies. By the first of the new year, the L.P.S.C. approved deregulation, and “exclusive use” contracts became legal.⁹

With the passage of deregulation, the larger truck companies immediately moved to create *alliances* with the largest service and oil companies. Alliances established contracts between trucking companies and large vendors for exclusive carrying rights. Furthermore, all oil or service companies working for an allied vendor had to utilize the alliance for contracted business. For example, ABC Fabrication has an alliance with Overland Trucking, while Global Oil has an alliance with Chaney Transport. Should ABC Fabrication be under contract with Global Oil to construct and deliver a drill bit for offshore use, ABC Fabrication would be obliged to call Chaney Transport – Global Oil’s allied trucking company – to make such a delivery, rather than calling their own alliance partner, Overland Trucking. Should ABC Fabrication roll the cost of transport into their bill instead of billing transportation cost directly to Global Oil, they would be obliged to call their own allied trucking company, Overland Trucking.¹⁰

⁹ Several of the participants alleged that the chairwoman of the L.P.S.C., Kathleen Blanco, received significant campaign contributions from both the large trucking companies and the oil companies, and that she was essential in guiding the policy changes through the state bureaucracy.

¹⁰ The company names utilized in this example are fictional.

By extending “exclusive use” contracts through the alliance structure, the trucking companies were able to capture large segments of the market. The impetus for these deals remains decreased transportation costs – the trucking companies initially offered approximately 20% reductions from the regulated book rates. Over time, three trucking companies came to dominate the oilpatch. After the initial round of offers, these companies continued to compete for market share with increasingly lower offers to the oil, service, and fabrication companies. Through aggressive marketing and the consolidation of oil and service companies through mergers, the alliance-based trucking companies (referred to as the *majors*) were able to lock up 85% to 90% of the market.

The argument for deregulation and, within the oilpatch, for the growth of the alliance-based trucking companies, can effectively be reduced to one of economic efficiency. The majors are able to build large logistical systems to increase truck utilization. By coordinating backhauls and consolidations, the trucking companies make each truck do more work.¹¹ Increased efficiency allows them to haul for rates lower than those set by the state in the regulated context, and profits are generated by increasing volume. For example, prior to deregulation, suppose Overland Trucking operated in rotation with several other companies for Global Oil, receiving about ¼ of their \$4 million transportation budget. In the context of the regulated book rates, Overland garnered 20% of its \$1 million share from the owner/operators, resulting in \$200,000 annually. By establishing an alliance with Global Oil after deregulation, Overland is able

¹¹ The internet played an essential role in these logistical systems.

to capture all of Global Oil's business at 25% off the book rate. The result for Overland, then, is 20% of \$3 million in line haul income. Through the alliance, Overland's income from Global Oil jumps from \$200,000 prior to deregulation to \$600,000 after deregulation.¹² Through increased efficiency, part of the savings are passed on to the oil and service companies, while part make up the profits of the alliance-based trucking companies.

The customers – service, oil and fabrication companies – also benefited in other ways from the efficiency of the alliance system. Prior to deregulation, each company maintained a transportation staff to handle logistics and billing. With the alliance system, the trucking company provided a single phone number to call for all transportation needs; centralized dispatching and the geographical breadth of service provided by the alliance-based trucking companies allowed the oil and service companies to streamline their in-house component of the oilpatch transportation system. As one terminal manager noted,

“The new system is much more efficient. Before deregulation, someone figured out it was costing the oil and service companies \$58 to process each invoice – remember, at the time some of these companies were dealing with dozens of different trucking companies. Now everything is centralized ... They've figured out a way to get less trucks to do more work. It's all part of a process; the oil companies have gotten more cost-conscious, and the changes in transportation are just part of that” [AG45].

In this sense, the efficiency of the deregulated transportation industry is part of an industry-wide move to tighten budgets. After being stung by the 1980s bust, oil and

¹² Again, Global Oil is a fictitious company used only for the purposes of the example. The figures used are generally representative; the rates charged by the truck companies vary between 20% and 30%.

service companies emerged with a more cost-efficient perspective; cuts to transportation budgets were one component of an industry-wide move toward increased efficiency.

Deregulation, Alliances and the Owner/Operator

The burden of deregulation fell immediately upon the owners/operators and drivers in the Acadian oilpatch. In some places, line haul rates were cut nearly in half. The major trucking companies not only set these rates, but profited handsomely from the increased volume of hauling captured by the alliances with oil and service companies. Meanwhile, the owner/operators and drivers absorbed the cut in pay while facing fixed maintenance and operating costs. For a front-end line haul of \$1000, the deregulated rate established through alliance contract might be \$600. The trucking company takes 25% for permit, insurance and paperwork, leaving \$450. The driver of the truck perhaps receives another 25%, leaving \$300. The owner of the truck, then, receives \$300 rather than \$500 calculated for the regulated book rate. From this amount, the driver must pay the monthly note on the truck, repair and maintain the truck and trailer, and pay the annual taxes and fees associated with the occupation. The deregulated line hauls are often not sufficient to meet these costs. For many owner/operators, the contract loads established through the alliances represent a no-win situation.

More than simply lowering the line haul rates, the alliances resulting from the deregulation of the industry changed the internal structure of the business. Alliances disrupted the relationship between owner/operators and their customers. Prior to

deregulation, truckers relied on their social networks and entrepreneurial skill to establish a customer base. In the regulated company, most vendors are locked into an alliance with a single trucking company. For the owner/operator, relationships previously established with customers were quickly disrupted by the alliance system:

“Before deregulation, we went knocking on doors, handing out cards, and telling everybody we could about our equipment and our service. But you can’t do that anymore because there’s no customer base outside the alliances. The docks are locked up. Before deregulation, we’d get some business from the company we were leased to, but mostly we hustled our own business. When you call around now, all they ask you is, ‘can you haul for x amount?’ And there’s a computer sheet that tells me who I can and can’t haul for. A computer sheet!” [AG47]

Another owner/operators notes,

“I used to go door to door; some of the people I stopped in on were friends and acquaintances, but a lot of them were people I didn’t even know. After a little work with someone, we’d get to be friends and they’d call back more and more. I gave them good quality of service. But with the alliances, you can’t just go out and get your own work. Everybody’s calling the 1-800 numbers set up by the alliance truck companies. And if you do find a haul on your own, the trucking company will take it away and give it out to someone else as a backhaul” [AG42].

For the small owner/operators, the alliances completely reconfigured the topography of the industry. Relationships established over decades were suddenly broken by the alliance system. As the alliance-based trucking companies carved out large segments of the market, many of the owner/operators moved to the trucking companies that now held exclusive-carrier contracts with their traditional customers. For example, an owner/operator leased to one of the smaller trucking companies – we’ll use Atchafalaya Trucking for the purposes of this example – prior to deregulation might have established a relationship with the dispatcher Global Oil. When Global Oil forged an alliance with

Overland Transport, trucks leased to Atchafalaya Trucking were no longer at liberty to carry loads to or from the Global Oil facilities. The owner/operator previously working with Global Oil then faced a crisis situation. Many of the truckers dealt with the system by switching trucking companies. In order to keep business from Global Oil, the trucker in question dropped his lease arrangement with Atchafalaya Trucking and moved to Overland Transport.

The situation was more complicated for the owners of larger trucking companies or owner/operators with more than one major customer. Individuals or companies with several different major customers were faced with impossible situations. As these customers lined up alliances with different trucking companies, the small and mid-size trucking companies that had traditionally serviced them fell to the wayside. As one owner of a mid-size, non-alliance trucking company recalled,

“When the alliances came about, we had five cornerstone customers, any one of which would have made a trucking business. One of them was Texaco; we had been with Texaco for 28 years, and my uncles had been truck drivers for Texaco from way back. With the alliances, they severed us from their business plan because we didn’t have enough trucks to handle all of their business. It was like a divorce. We’d hung with them through truck strikes, we’d been shot at by strikers, we hung with them through floods, and we’d hung with them through bankruptcy when they merged with Getty. But that was all for nothing when the alliances came about” [AG41].

Only the largest trucking companies profited from the shift to deregulation; their ability to exclusively meet the transportation demands of large oil and service companies allowed them to form the lucrative alliances. For the owners of mid-sized trucking companies, no

matter how diversified, deregulation reshaped the contours of the industry and frequently severed their relationship with customers.

In summary, through the alliance structure – and under the rubric of increased efficiency – a handful of trucking companies were able to control access to nearly all of the work in the Acadian oilpatch. In order to maintain their pre-deregulation customer base, as well as to access new customers, many of the owner/operators moved into partnership with the large, alliance-based trucking companies. This allowed the alliance-based trucking companies to grow rapidly, and competition between these companies pushed the line haul rates to increasing lows. For the owner/operator, the deregulated trucking industry resulted in more work for less pay.

Non-alliance Trucking in the Deregulated Industry

Not all oil and service companies are in alliance with the large trucking companies. The estimated 10% to 15% of the industry not in alliance are hauled by both alliance-based trucking companies and by independent trucking companies. The *independents* are small to medium-sized trucking companies (generally under 100 trucks) that exist outside the alliance structure. Their customer base is threefold: first, they court small and mid-sized oil and service companies that have yet to establish alliances with the major trucking companies. Second, many of the independent trucking companies have shifted to fleets of specialized equipment and serve a niche market in the oilpatch. Third, the independent trucking companies haul *overflow* from the major trucking companies. In

general, the regulated-industry book rates serve as the basis for pricing most of these non-contract hauls.

Small and mid-size oil and service companies fail to establish alliances for several reasons. Some have so few transportation needs that alliances are not offered by the major trucking companies. Others continue to support the independent trucking companies (and their higher prices) because of long, established social relations, although this seems increasingly uncommon. Quality of service is also a factor in the success of independent trucking companies in the oilpatch. As an owner of an independent trucking company described,

“[T]here are really two characteristics to the oil and service companies outside the alliance system. First, they’re companies that don’t have the resources and people to set up a transportation department and get the alliances going. They can’t implement the situation with the majors. Second, they’re usually small potatoes. There’s just not enough volume at most of those companies to interest the majors. Also, quality of service plays in to the equation sometimes – there are a few of the customers who stick around for that, but more and more it seems that the final decision is based on price” [AG41].

While the oil and service companies outside the alliance system continue to provide partial support to a small cadre of independent trucking companies, the current situation bifurcates the oil and service industry in terms of transportation: smaller companies continue to pay rates close or equal to regulation-era book rates, while larger companies reap the fiscal benefits of the alliance system. The system as a whole, then, puts greater economic pressure on smaller companies in the oil industry, and is one characteristic of the deregulation that pushes companies to merge and consolidate.

Several of the independent trucking companies survive by offering highly specialized equipment. Despite the large fleets under lease, the major trucking companies have access to little specialized equipment, as most of the owner/operators under lease maintain fairly standard oilpatch equipment in order to meet typical hauling demands. Particularly large or heavy oilfield equipment often requires special trailers (such as the heavy-duty *lowboy*), as well as special permits from the state. Several of the independent trucking companies have come to specialize in hauling the odd-size or heavy equipment. As the owner of an independent trucking company noted,

“I own two of the four 13 axle rigs in the state, and that’s one of the main reasons people call me. We provide service to a niche market – we can move things that are too big for most of the other companies, along with anything else they’ve got. A lot of the owner-operators for the major companies are so squeezed they can’t afford special equipment like that, and even if they’ve got some they can’t afford to maintain it [AG33].

Finally, many of the smaller independent trucking companies survive through *overflow*. The contract rates established by the major, alliance-based trucking companies are oftentimes exceedingly low. The dispatcher at the alliance-based trucking company often places dozens of calls to owner/operators before finding a driver willing to haul at the highly discounted rate. This problem that becomes particularly acute in the boom cycles of the regional economy. In situations where the dispatcher is unable to find a willing driver – and these situations are reportedly quite common – the dispatcher will first turn to one of the other major trucking companies. At the low contract rates, they often encounter the same problems, as many drivers will refuse to carry at these rates. As a last resort, the major dispatcher will call one of the independent trucking companies to

find a truck. The rates for this haul are then renegotiated between the major and the independent, with the resulting line haul usually falling between the regulated book rate and the contract rate established through the alliance. As one independent company owner explained,

“When things pick up in the oilpatch, a lot of the truckers working for the big companies turn down the contract loads because there’s a lot of better work coming down the pike. The major trucking companies try to work with each other by passing this overflow back and forth, but a lot of the time they call us to handle the load. We get it at a compensable rate; we almost never haul at their contract rates. Most of these hauls are individually negotiated. I’ll give them a break on the book price if it’s a backhaul for us, but that’s about it “[AG41].

Note that these line hauls are not offered to the major’s owner/operators, but only to independent owner/operators. For most of the independent owner/operators, overflow line hauls are an essential component of their business.

Dominance of the Major Trucking Companies

The alliances established by the major trucking companies allow them to capture an overwhelming portion of the market. At the same time, these market shares confer a degree of power and leverage upon the alliance-based trucking companies, a power that places them in a dominant position relative to both the owner/operator and customer. The next several sections will explore the manifestations of this dominance.

For each line haul, three parties are involved in the transportation: the trucking company, the driver, and the truck owner. Many owners also drive their vehicles – hence the name *owner/operator* – but, nonetheless, the waybills for the linehauls clearly

differentiate the three components. The trucking company typically receives 25% to 30% of the line haul. Lower percentages can be negotiated by owner/operators who bring their own customers, but this is increasingly rare as so much of the customer base is now under the alliance system. The driver receives another 25% to 30% of the line haul. Under the contract loads of the deregulated oilpatch, this percent – including waiting time – often amounts to less than minimum wage. Finally, the truck owner receives the remaining 40% to 50%. The contemporary waybill looks something like this:

**Table 3.1
Waybill for \$1000 Line Haul**

Line Haul		\$1,000.00	
Insurance surcharge	8.50%	\$85.00	-to trucking company
Fuel surcharge	9.50%	\$95.00	-to owner/operator
Total Cost to Customer		\$1,180.00	

Line Haul		\$1,000.00	
Trucking Company	30.00%	\$300.00	-to trucking company
Driver's Pay	25.00%	\$250.00	-to driver
Total to Truck Owner		\$450.00	

Totals		
Trucking Company	\$385.00	
Owner	\$545.00	
Driver	\$250.00	

Foremost among the complaints heard by owner/operators in the oilpatch are those concerning the formula by which pay is calculated. Owner/operators lament the recent instigation of the insurance surcharge in particular. This surcharge is added to the costs charged to the customer, but the insurance surcharge, along with the fuel surcharge, is not added to total from which the percentages are calculated. Furthermore, the

owner/operators note that the 30% paid to the trucking company has always covered insurance costs; by creating a separate insurance surcharge to the customer, truckers feel the trucking company is engaged in a sort of double billing.

The owner/operators in the Acadian oilpatch also fear that because the trucking companies now control so much of the market, they will soon seek to raise both the prices charged to the customers and the percentages drawn from the leases. As power becomes more centralized in the trucking sector of the oilpatch, monopolistic collusion becomes a real possibility. At the current time, three companies control the bulk of oilpatch trucking, and rumors suggest the consolidation of the companies into two entities is imminent. Whether three or two companies control trucking in the oilpatch, simple collusion might easily lead to price and percentage hikes. For the owner/operators on the edge – facing fixed fuel and maintenance costs – any decrease in income would be disastrous.

By controlling the access to most cargo transportation in the oilpatch, the major trucking companies have also forced an increasingly burdensome regime of ancillary costs upon the owner/operators. Health insurance is not provided by the companies, although several of the trucking companies offer health plans which an individual may pay to join. New operators and drivers are also required to pay for various other items, including a beeper, emergency triangles, a fire extinguisher, and the drug test now mandated by the state[AG42]. These items increase the startup cost for incoming truck drivers in the Acadian oilpatch.

In summary, the leverage resulting from the major trucking companies' market share has increased pressure on the owner/operator in the oilpatch. The alliance-based trucking companies have reconfigured the way pay is calculated in order to increase their percentage of the total line haul, particularly through the instigation of the insurance surcharge. At the same time, many of the entry costs have fallen to the drivers and owner/operators – fees for training, drug tests, and health care. Finally, increasing organizational consolidation in the industry poses the threat of further cuts to the percentage of the line haul received by the owner/operator.

Risk, Time and the Owner/Operator

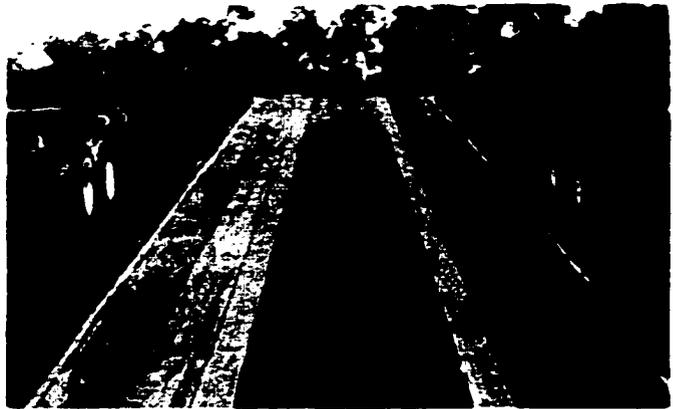
The truck drivers bear much of the monetary risk generated by the current system. The primary issue concerning the burden of risk is the weight of cargo loaded on a truck. Through the shifting organization of the oilfield trucking sector, drivers are much less active in loading their trucks, primarily because most loads are arranged from the central dispatch number. As a result, the drivers have little control over the quantity of cargo loaded on the truck. The major trucking companies reportedly both under-load and overload trucks depending on the circumstances. As one owner/operator noted,

“The trucking companies cheat on the weight. A lot of times you're under-loaded, but other times they overload your truck, and usually you have no idea they've even done it. They're giving the customer a break – underlisting the pounds on the truck is a favor, you know? But if we get busted at the scales, we have to pay the ticket. The funny thing is, that ticket is the only proof we have that the trucking companies are overloading us”[AG47].

The drivers carry the risk, then, of the underlisted load, and the penalties for these infractions cost the driver hundreds of dollars – much more than a driver might make from a single haul in the oilpatch.

The drivers are also at risk because of poor truck maintenance; the lower contract rates of the deregulated oilpatch have made it more difficult for the oilpatch trucker to properly maintain his or her truck. Changing oil less frequently or not conforming to a rigorous engine maintenance schedule puts the longevity of the truck at risk. As a systemic threat to the safety of oilpatch transportation, the impact of these changes will be explored in later sections of the paper.

However, poorly maintained equipment is not only a safety risk for the owner operator, but also puts them at risk for citation by the state police. In particular, the truck drivers in this study noted the boards and running



lights as areas of concern. The drivers receive tickets for even the smallest infractions, such as a single burned-out running light or a cracked running board. Any cracks in the board, for example – visible here in this photograph of an older trailer – subject the driver to the possibility of a large fine should he or she be pulled over. Several drivers noted that most of the damage to the boards occurs as a result of inexperienced crane operators at the docks. Repairs, whether to lights or boards, are both time-consuming and expensive;

the truck owner alone is responsible for these repairs, despite the fact that they may have occurred as a result of a crane operator or dockworker.

The drivers also carry the risk incurred from forging logbooks. Driver are required by law to maintain a logbook of activity; at the present time, drivers are allowed ten hours of driving and five hours of waiting per day. There is a current proposal to lower the road allowance to eight hours, a change which most drivers note would push them to insolvency on most runs. Often, however, the current ten hours of road-time isn't enough:

“You're allowed 10 hours of driving and 5 hours of waiting per day. But if you spend all that time at the dock waiting and have to get your load to Houston, you can't just pull over and sleep on the side of the road once you're out of the dock. You've got to go. That's why we falsify the books – the trucking companies expect it. You have to get on to the next load ... [Y]ou've got to keep going just to make the money you need to keep the truck” [AG48].

The penalties for falsifying logs are significant, and the drivers carry most of the risk.

Most drivers agree that the trucking companies expect the drivers to move quickly and, if necessary, falsify logs, yet support by the trucking companies is never explicit.

The need for log falsification often stems from the waiting time rather than the driving time. The major trucking companies now package free waiting time as a primary component of most alliances.¹³ An alliance may guarantee the customer up to four hours of free waiting time which, for the driver, means he or she may arrive at the dock and then wait up to four hours – off the clock but on the log books – for any loading to begin. As the driver below describes, the alliances provide the means to stretch this period even further:

“In one of the first big alliances they had mandated four hours waiting time, and they’d often wait until the last minute to start loading. What’s worse is that customers will sometimes order a string of trucks, and they only have to start loading the first one in that four hours. So imagine how much unpaid time that can rack up, and then you get the same thing on the other end of the haul when you’re unloading! Exxon finally moved down to two hours, but still, that’s unpaid time, and you have to log those hours. You’re on the clock for free, but you have to log it. That’s why so many drivers falsify their logs – you just have to in order to get by” [AG47].

In addition to packaging free waiting time in the alliance structure, the major trucking companies also offer free or sharply discounted *stopovers* to large customers. A truck headed from Port Fourchon to Houston may be asked to stop six or eight times to pick up small, stopover loads. Each of these stops incurs waiting time and many of them are “freebies.” Furthermore, the drivers noted that the increasing use of stopovers for small loads takes business away from the hotshots – the segment of the oilpatch transportation sector that evolved as a direct response to the need to quickly transport small loads.

Driving a truck in the deregulated Acadian oilpatch is risky business. By controlling access to customers and by lowering the average line hauls, the trucking companies have restructured the transportation industry to shift this risk to the owner/operator. The sources of this risk are threefold: the drivers are at risk for underlisted loads, for operating poorly maintained trucks, and for running with forged logbooks. These changes in owner/operator risk are symptomatic of the major trucking

¹³ The drivers and owner/operators are not consulted in establishing the parameters of these alliances.

companies' control of both information and time – key structural changes resulting from the increased market share appropriated by the companies.

Through the alliance structure, vendors and the major trucking company establish the parameters for meeting the customer's transportation needs. The owner/operators leased to the company have little influence over this process, and, at the same time, are not privy to the particularities of the alliances forged between companies. And during their day-to-day runs, the truckers also lack information about the specific amount of weight being loaded on their truck. By controlling this essential information – the details of the alliance, the bonuses or deductions awarded to the customer in the alliance, the amount of weight loaded on the truck at that customer's dock – the trucking companies maintain and perpetuate their dominance over the owner/operator.

In addition to controlling the deployment of key information, the trucking companies have increased their control of the drivers' time. The alliance contracts include provisions for waiting time; the drivers are not paid for this waiting time, but the time is a key component of many alliance agreements. Furthermore, the alliance-based trucking companies now add multiple stopovers to typical line haul, thereby increasing the amount of unpaid waiting time extracted from the driver's schedule. By controlling access to the bulk of the oilpatch customers, the major trucking companies are able to sell this waiting time to the customer, thereby profiting from their control of information and time. The next section will explore one particular mechanism by which this control over time and information is enforced.

Dispatching and the Owner/Operator

In controlling the majority of the market in the Acadian oilpatch, the alliance-based trucking companies have been able to thwart strategies devised by the owner/operators to maximize their income under the reconfigured, deregulated system. Because some, but not all, of the line hauls through the majors fall under the alliance system, driver and owner/operators leased to alliance-based trucking companies often turn down contract loads offered by the dispatchers. By turning down a contract load, the owner/operator hopes that a more lucrative, non-contract load might later be offered. This poses great difficulty for the logistics departments of the major trucking companies, and several have devised systems to prevent drivers from refusing loads.

Most trucking companies maintain a dispatch board; the board contains the name and phone number of drivers leased to the company. The drivers are usually categorized by type of truck. When a call comes in for a particular load, the dispatcher determines the type of truck required and then calls the driver at the top of that category's list. The table below shows the basic components of a typical dispatch board:

Table 3.2

Dispatch Board		
Truck and O/O	Phone	Notes
Tandems		
Ron Boudreaux	555-8976	
Ronald Venable	555-0058	Houston @ 4:00pm
Jason Raemer	555-9922	
Keith Wallace	555-7201	
John Mercer	555-3238	
Karen Vallis	555-1626	refusal, back 10/14/99
Single Axle		
Russell Jefferson	555-6790	Lafayette today
Amanda Jackson	555-2007	
Barney Dugas	555-8814	
One-ton/Gooseneck		
Joe Abbott	555-0001	
Maxie Trahan	555-4890	
Lionel Crochet	555-9141	
Everett Landry	555-8711	out sick
Hank Cormier	555-3697	refusal, back 10/14/99
Hotshots		
Vaughn Thibodeaux	555-1931	
Dodie Broussard	555-3064	
Don Romero	555-3261	Fourchon by 8:00 pm
Dennis Gaudin	555-4464	
Willie Hebert	555-3989	out sick

*the names that appear in this table are fictional

When a driver accepts a load, he or she typically moves to the bottom of the segment of the list on which he or she appears. In addition, some trucking company dispatchers will move drivers who refuse a load to the bottom of their segment of the list as an inducement not to refuse loads. Both of these practices are considered the standard in the oilpatch trucking sector.

Several of the larger alliance-based trucking companies have now moved to a system called *forced dispatch* in an attempt to prevent drivers from refusing the low-paying contract loads. Through this system, drivers who refuse contract loads are not only knocked to the bottom of the list, but they are sidelined for a pre-determined period of time (examples are indicated in red on the above table). The punishment period is variable; several drivers mentioned that the trucking companies typically hold the driver from working for a period of three days [AG38]. From the perspective of the company, the forced dispatch system helps stem refusals that are costly in terms of both time and money. From the perspective of the owner/operator, however, the system forces them to accept line hauls so impoverished that the owner/operator often loses money.

Truck company dispatchers organize the truck drivers by type of equipment. Incoming calls often require very specialized equipment – perhaps the customer needs an 18 wheel lowboy capable of self-loading and a driver with a hazardous materials permit. This is an increasingly difficult task for the company dispatcher as many owner/operators no longer service and maintain specialized equipment and special licenses. Truck owners traditionally invested in specialized equipment in order to increase demand for their service – a particularly tall piece of equipment might require a heavy-duty drop deck, or a customer might request a truck with a winch in order to load an object, and the owners of specialized equipment received remuneration over and above the book rate prior to deregulation. Of late, however, the trucking companies have begun to withdraw the extra funds for specialized equipment. One participant noted:

“[T]he companies don’t want to pay extra for special equipment anymore – even if it’s a Haz-Mat load, or if they need a drop-deck – they don’t want to pay any extra ... I’m going to drop my Haz-Mat license this year. I’m just not going to reapply and pay the fee, because it’s not worth it from a business perspective. You don’t get paid any more, yet you have to go and get extra training, pay extra money, and often drive a lot further to stay on approved Haz-Mat routes” [AG39].

From the company perspective, then, forced dispatch becomes a mechanism for ensuring that the right driver accepts the particular job at the contract-dictated price. Because additional incentives have been removed, however, fewer owner/operators purchase special equipment or apply for special licenses. Dispatchers for the major trucking companies are increasingly forced to renegotiate these hauls with the independent owner/operators who do maintain specialized equipment.

In summary, the trucking companies have devised methods to prevent owner/operators from refusing the low-paying contract loads. From the drivers’ perspective, all of these factors have occurred at the expense of the truck owner and truck driver. However, the trucking companies argue that these changes are necessary in order to increase the economic and logistical efficiency of the oilpatch trucking industry. With that in mind, the next section explores the question of efficiency in the deregulated oilpatch.

Efficiency and Deregulation

The primary justification for the growth of the alliance-based trucking in the deregulated oilpatch is economic efficiency. Through technological advances, economies of scale, and logistical innovation, the alliance-based trucking companies are able to

decrease overall response time, consolidate and backhaul more cargo, and increase truck utilization. Because of these factors, the alliance-based trucking companies are able to transport loads at a sharply discounted rate. As a result, most trucking companies and the oilpatch industries herald the deregulated era as a vast improvement in the economy of transportation.

The drivers and owners/operators bear much of the burden in the reconfigured trucking sector. At the same time, most contend that deregulation has produced increasing inefficiencies in the trucking sector, the details of which are often masked by the dominant economic discourse. The drivers and owner/operators challenge some or all of the claims to efficiency proposed by the major trucking companies and the industries they serve. As one participant noted,

“One of the big truck companies made a deal with one of the oil companies, cut 30% off the book rate, and promised to supply 1,500 trucks for service. Sometimes they’ll get a call from the oil company for a contract load – all the loads under the alliance are contract loads – and they will have to call fifteen drivers before they find someone willing to carry at that rate. They’ll finally find someone desperate enough to take it; maybe the guy’s got a note on the truck coming due. Anyway, those fifteen calls take an hour or two, and those delays are inefficient. And that guy may not even have the right kind of equipment to haul the load. While many people claim the current system is more efficient, it’s not in a lot of ways. What the oil and service companies end up with is time increases, the wrong equipment, and a pissed-off driver” [AG50].

The company owner speaking here touches on several different subjects, but his primary focus is on the increased delays produced by the alliance system. In an industry where the rental of a drilling rig can cost tens of thousands of dollars a day, a delay of several hours can incur inordinately high costs. The major trucking companies contend that their steep

investments in logistical systems have vastly improved the efficiency of oilfield trucking. Truck drivers and independent company owners, however, contend that changes in the pricing structure and organization of the industry have created increased delays despite logistical advances by the major trucking companies.

Delays are caused not only by the increased dispatching time resulting from the low prices of contract loads, but also by the drivers themselves. Several drivers noted that the low rates now offered to the owner/operator undercut their incentive to hustle on the road:

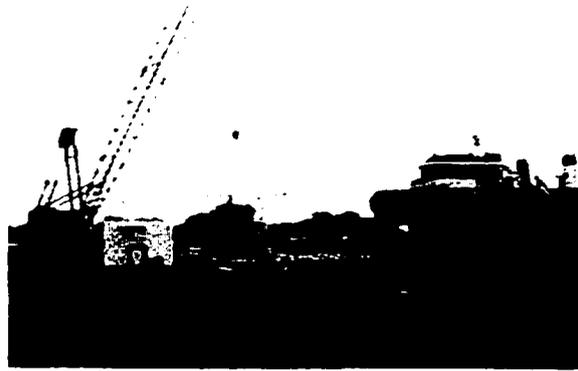
“Before deregulation we were all proud of the job we did and the people we knew, but I’m not proud of the job I do anymore, and I’m not going to bust my butt getting back and forth with my load. The drivers have become complacent, and if that rig shuts down, well here’s the world’s smallest violin. They’re not properly compensating us, they’re not paying our speeding tickets, and they’re not helping us out. We used to get business for good service, and damned if I didn’t have the tickets to prove it. We hustled that equipment down there, wherever it had to go and at whatever time of the day or night. You know, I had nine tickets between 1971 and 1985 – but those days are gone now and I’m not doing anything more than I have to” [AG47].

Although the changing economics of the trucking industry are partially responsible for the change in attitude described above, other truckers noted their frustration with impersonal aspects of the deregulated system as a contributing factor. Where once the owner/operator established personal business relationships with clientele, allied service and oil companies now call the major trucking companies’ central dispatch number for most transportation needs. As a result, the driver has little contact with the personnel at the client company. Social and occupational links between the driver and the customer are no longer commonplace in the oilpatch trucking industry. The larger implications of these

changes will be discussed in later sections; for the time being, it should be clear that drivers admit a more lethargic approach to hauling in the oilfield. Because their business is not solely based on quality of service, drivers no longer strive to reach their destination as they did in the past, nor do they court customers in the same way.

A third source of inefficiency noted by the owner/operators concerned the increased number of backhauls, again resulting in increased transportation time. Because many of the large service and oil companies are locked into single source alliances, the transportation officers at those companies are required to wait for an alliance truck to move cargo. Rather than find or send a

truck to that location, the alliance trucking companies will often wait for an unrelated delivery to go to that destination, then pick up the aforementioned load as a backhaul.



While backhauling looks good on the accounting sheets delivered to the customers, it often leaves cargo waiting on the docks for long periods of time. These delays can hold up construction or repair at other locations, while also incurring overtime costs at the client company. One participant noted, "When the vendor's got to sit on a backhaul and wait for an alliance truck, that's a salary guy out there, and he's costing them money with overtime and whatnot. It's not

efficient, but they haven't figured that out yet, and I don't know if they ever will"

[AG46].

Prior to deregulation, many of the owner/operators purchased and maintained special equipment to better serve the needs of the oilfield. Gin poles and winch rigs were used in place of the crane to load trucks, thereby saving the high cost of crane rental. Few alliance-based owner/operators maintain this sort of equipment in the deregulated context, although several of the independent trucking companies continue to utilize special equipment for the niche market. Because the costs of renting specialized equipment now fall outside the billing of the trucking companies, increased costs in areas such as crane rental are hidden under the veneer of efficiency. As the owner of a small independent trucking company noted, "We used to get paid extra for having the ginpole load our trucks, but now the customers pay for expensive cranes instead, usually with an 8 hour minimum at \$100 an hour" [AG52].

Many of the truck drivers in the oilpatch noted a similar cost-disguising process in other aspects of post-deregulated trucking in the oilpatch. The alliance-based trucking companies have fended off several lawsuits, the largest of which contended the alliance system violated the Sherman Anti-trust Act. Drivers and owners noted that whatever the trucking companies might be saving in terms of increased efficiency is counterbalanced by the higher costs to the "Atlanta lawyers" most of the large companies engage. Again, these costs do not appear on the balance sheets for the oil or service companies, but do represent significant, if occasional, costs to the alliance-based trucking companies.

Most of the inefficiencies described above are systemic. Many of the owner/operators, however, contend that the alliance-based trucking companies engage in other, covert practices that yield inefficiency. First, several truckers suggested that the trucking companies often underload trucks by, for example, placing a three-truck load on five different trucks, thereby increasing the amount of money charged to the customer. Other drivers suggested that not all loads reported to owner/operators as backhauls are charged as such to the customer. By reporting the line haul to the owner/operator as a backhaul, the trucking company pays a set percentage of a discounted total to the owner operator. However, should the trucking company turn around and charge the customer the full fronthaul price, nearly 50% of the total cost is unaccounted for. Some owner/operators allege the trucking companies routinely engage in this practice and keep the difference.

Together, the drivers and independent owner/operators contend that the rubric of efficiency touted by the major trucking companies and their employers is a false one. The veracity of this claim, they contend, is further obscured because the places where increased costs accrue are difficult to discern. Some of the increased costs appear as crane or barge charges. Others accrue in the form of wages, as the increased delays resulting from the alliance system hold the vendor's workers at the shipping docks for longer periods of time, or appear in the form of lawyers' fees or increased insurance costs. The overall transportation costs to the vendors and oil companies has increased, they suggest, but this increase has been obscured by creative bookkeeping.

Safety and Deregulation

The impact of deregulation on the overall safety record of oilpatch trucking is much discussed by the driver and owner/operators in Acadiana. The issue is highly contested – the major truck companies and state transportation safety agents claim the safety record is much improved, while the drivers and independents claim safety has reached an all time low. Truck safety isn't a major issue solely for the industries in the oilpatch; the national media have run several stories regarding safety issues, and tandem trucks are usually portrayed as a public enemy. For the owner/operators and drivers of the oilpatch, the safety issue consists of three interrelated issues: running time, truck maintenance, and the quality of incoming labor.

As many of the owner/operators noted, deregulation nearly doubled the amount of time drivers needed to spend on the road in order to meet their basic costs. As a result, logs are forged, and, during the best of economic times, drivers often link load after load together for weeks



of non-stop driving and napping. In the busiest ports of the region, the trucks line the side of the road, as pictured here; the drivers of most such trucks are waiting for the load to arrive at the dock, or perhaps catching up on sleep. As one owner/operator noted,

“You’ve got to go ... you have to get on to the next load, and you end up on the road, crazy from lack of sleep, and you’ve just got to keep going just to make the money you need to keep the truck ... I know that my future in that truck is wrapped around a telephone pole somewhere out there on the road” [AG48].

Most drivers and owner/operators recognize the risks of the deregulated oilpatch; however, from the owner/operator’s perspective, there is little recourse outside an increase in the number of loads carried. As a result, many drivers push themselves to and even beyond the limits of safe driving.

In reaction to the deregulation, truck owners have sought out strategies to decrease their maintenance costs. Some owners have been able to cut costs by doing their own repairs. Truckers across the oilpatch, however, noted that the general reaction to the sharp decrease in owner/operator income has been the delay of sometimes essential truck maintenance: Oil is changed less frequently, tires run a few more thousand miles, and the brake jobs wait another month or two. One truck driver noted,

“A state trooper spoke to our trucking company about safety issues a while back, and he talked about the changing characteristics of the trucks he’s pulling over. He said that ten years ago he pulled over a lot of unqualified drivers, but the equipment was always ship-shape. Nowadays, every driver seems to be well-trained, but he’s seeing a lot more trucks with problems – they’re just not properly maintained anymore. And that’s because an \$800 line haul is down to \$440 now. The drivers can’t keep up with the costs” [AG46].

From the owner/operator’s perspective, these are strategic moves to make ends meet.

“Oil changes happen every two or three weeks. I used to get it changed every 3,000 miles, but now I’ve jacked it up to 4,000 – I just can’t afford it anymore. Each oil change costs \$23, and I’m not making what I used to” [AG48].

Less frequent oil changes are risky from an owner’s perspective, as the wear and tear on their investment is slightly increased. Cutting corners in the maintenance of brakes and

tires, however, potentially impacts other drivers on the road. As the owner of a small independent trucking company related,

“I take care of my equipment – I just put 30 new tires on my trucks yesterday. If I don’t do that kind of thing, they’ll hydroplane and slide. I’ve seen brake pads like onion skins on some of these trucks, though, and the family that slams on their brakes in front of one of those trucks is a dead family. Do people think that the drivers are just sleepier now? It’s the god-damn equipment; the owners just can’t keep up” [AG14].

Attempts to save on maintenance costs represent one strategy adopted by truck owners in response to the lower income resulting from deregulation.

Changes in the labor pool have also impacted the safety of the oilpatch transportation industry. Some of these changes can be attributed to deregulation; others presaged the current shift. Perhaps the first significant change in the labor pool resulted from the instigation of the Commercial Drivers License (CDL) requirement. In 1992, the Louisiana Public Service Commission mandated that all truck drivers must obtain a commercial drivers license from the state. This requirement applied to the drivers of all trucks, with the exception of the hotshot pickups. In the context of the small independent trucking companies that dominated the industry prior to deregulation, many of the drivers were illiterate, and the CDL requirement pushed those drivers out of business. In retrospect, contemporary drivers and truck company owners suggest that the CDL requirement, while instigated as a mechanism to increase safety, drove some of the most experienced drivers from the industry – unsafe practices, they suggest, result from the

inexperience of the new cadre of drivers who are unfamiliar with the equipment and practices of oilfield hauling.

The lower income available to owner/operators under the deregulated system has also changed the labor pool throughout the oilpatch trucking industry. Because the pay is so diminished, owners of both small and large trucking companies have noted a significant drop in the quality of driver entering the business. As a senior officer at the corporate suite of a major trucking firm related,

“Things are really changing. The quality of drivers is way down, and the average age is going up every year ... [T]here’s just not a lot of new blood coming in, and the reason for that is money, plain and simple: there’s just not enough money to be made as a driver” [AG31].

As several company owners added, at the current wage levels, individuals can earn more working at the local grocery store, flipping burgers or mowing lawns [AG39, AG42]. As a result of the diminished quality of labor, the major trucking companies have increased training efforts, drug screening, and truck inspection efforts. The costs for these increased safety measures have, in large, been shunted to the owner/operators. Furthermore, there is a widespread belief among drivers that both the accident rate and the insurance costs to the major trucking companies have increased dramatically since deregulation.

With the changing characteristics of the labor pool, the quality of service and on-road safety have, in the trucker’s eyes, diminished:

“There are a lot of desperate drivers on the road. They see an advertisement on TV, they buy an expensive truck on credit, and the payments are \$3,000 a month. They have to haul everything that comes their way in order to pay down the note, and they don’t know a damn thing about their truck or the oil industry. In the old days the driver would get out of the truck and help with the loading. Now, the

drivers don't know a thing about what they're hauling. The oil companies are paying cheap prices, and they're getting cheap service" [AG39].

From the drivers' and owner/operators' perspective, the current conditions of the industry threaten the safety record established by the industry under the regulated system. The deregulated industry affects three distinct aspects of the trucking industry: drivers and owner/operators must be on the road much longer in order to make ends meet; the lower rates of the deregulated system force many drivers to delay routine maintenance; and the low rates attract a less desirable and less skilled labor pool. This is not to suggest that the oil and service companies are not concerned with the safety records of the trucking companies. Because the bulk of the transportation business in the region is controlled by the three major companies, however, service and oil companies are not able to select particular drivers or particular smaller companies with safe driving records. Instead, they must choose between one of the three major companies capable of meeting their transportation needs. Once that alliance is established, the service and oil companies rarely have the latitude to specify particular trucks or drivers for hauls.

As a result, there is no built in process for selecting safe drivers – the operative scope of selection occurs at the level of the trucking company as a whole during the process of establishing alliances. It is difficult to determine whether the drivers and owner/operators are correct in their assertion that the insurance costs in the deregulated industry have risen dramatically, as this information is closely guarded by the trucking companies. Nonetheless, many of the owner/operators in the Acadian oilpatch see insurance as the primary threat to the major trucking companies – it's with the safety

record and the resulting insurance costs that the efficiency of the reconfigured industry will be judged.

IV. The Acadian Oilpatch in Context

The Global Context of the Acadian Oil Industry

The economic booms and busts of the Acadian oilpatch are inextricably tied to the political economy of the global oil industry. In that sense, Acadiana is one node in a global network that includes the oil-rich nations of the Middle East, Venezuela, Mexico, Nigeria, the nations drilling in the North Sea, and the panoply of other minor oil producing nations that contribute to the world supply of oil. Overlaying these national entities, the major oil companies play a vital and predominant role in managing the production and distribution of the world's oil resources. Recent changes in the structure of this vast political economy, I will suggest in the sections that follow, can be seen as causal factors in the reorganization of the industries that support the Acadian oil producers and, more particularly, the trucking industry of the Louisiana oilpatch. First, however, I will provide a brief history of this multivalent political economy.

Since the inception of the oil industry, large concerns have controlled the production and distribution of oil. By 1880, Rockefeller's Standard Oil effectively controlled over ninety percent of both domestic production and domestic refining capacity (Williamson 1963). John D. Rockefeller quickly assembled the company in the mid to late nineteenth century; the Standard Oil Trust itself was formed in 1882¹⁴, but was presaged by Standard Oil's massive vertical and horizontal expansion during the depression of the 1870s(Solberg 1976). Twenty-nine years after the formation of the

Standard Oil Trust, the United States government took action against the Standard Oil monopoly via an anti-trust action. This breakup gave birth to several of the oil companies that now control the industry, often referred to as the 'Seven Sisters'. Exxon, Mobil, Chevron, and Amoco emerged from the Standard breakup, and along with British Petroleum (BP), Dutch Shell, Texaco, and Gulf Oil¹⁵, formed a cartel to control the production and distribution of oil resources. Of these oil companies, Exxon, Mobil, Chevron, BP, Shell, Texaco, and Gulf Oil comprise the original Seven Sisters. In 1984, Chevron acquired Gulf Oil, and from that point forward, Amoco joined the list as the "seventh sister."

Under the Standard Oil Trust, Rockefeller and his henchmen were able to directly control the topography of the production and distribution of oil, through means both legitimate and illegitimate by the legal and social standards of the times (Solberg 1976). The producers' degree of control was hardly changed by the Standard breakup: the fledgling companies emerging from the Standard Oil Trust breakup, buoyed by the wartime demand for oil, continued to vertically integrate within the oil sector and profited from the new oilfield discoveries in the Texas region. Over this same period of time, the U.S.-based companies secured key tax breaks from the federal government in order to spur the development of the industry, thereby establishing cooperative arrangements

¹⁴ A 'Trust' was an organizational and legal device – pioneered by Rockefeller – under which a large number of subordinate companies gave their voting stock to a central group of trustees in exchange for a set of trust certificates guaranteeing the right to receive interest payments but not to vote (Solberg 1976).

¹⁵ Unlike the Rockefeller-controlled Standard monopoly, Gulf Oil was founded in 1901 by the Mellon family (Solberg 1976)

(sharing pipelines, for example) not entirely different than the conditions of production under the Standard Trust (Gramling 1996),(Solberg 1976).

Between 1925 and 1935, however, large oil deposits were discovered in both Venezuela and Saudi Arabia, and oil production shifted from a concentrated, regional focus based in the Gulf of Mexico to a distributed, global focus. The U.S. majors moved quickly into the emergent oilfields, drawn by the low direct costs of foreign production and low leasing costs or concessions necessary to secure production (Bromley 1991). During the same period, Dutch-Shell had emerged as the world leader in terms of oil production and had made inroads into the U.S. market, new oil discoveries pushed supply beyond demand, and several price-wars broke out between the oil companies (Gramling 1996). As a result of the uncertain conditions of the market, the major global oil producers met in secret in September of 1927 to address the situation. The Pact of Achnacarry, both illegal under United States law and secret until a series of hearings by the Federal Trade Commission in 1952, consisted of an “as-is” agreement: the current proportions of global production were locked through a series of quotas, markets were associated with proximate production fields, and constant prices were established based on the barrel price of oil in the Gulf of Mexico (Gramling 1996). Despite the efforts of the Federal Trade Commission, the foundation of the agreement remained in place until the inception of the OPEC era in the mid-1970s.

During the 20th century, the demand for oil products rose at an astronomical rate. In the United States, much of this demand stemmed from the popularity of the

automobile. The proliferation of the automobile changed the contours of American life – vast suburbs expanded around all the major cities, Americans began to take to the road for vacations, and chains of motels, restaurants, and gas stations arose to serve the newly mobile public. At the same time, the United States government set aside a number of national parks, popular destinations for summer vacationers, while also constructing a network of interstate highways to connect the nation's urban centers. All of these factors spurred domestic demand for oil.

Untangling the web of supply and demand for oil – and the causal links that connect them – is a complex process. In his book Sweetness and Power, Sidney Mintz argues that the production and consumption of commodities – in the case of his book, sugar – are conceptually separable but inextricably linked by relations in the global political economy. He is primarily concerned with the process by which meaning is deployed, suggesting that the demand is expanded by the configuration and reconfiguration of meaning in the global marketplace, and that the political economy supporting the marketplace comprises both proletarian consumers and the bourgeois producers. The latter seek to shape the contours of meaning in order to increase consumption and profitability, while also positioning the forces of production to meet the demand stemming from unforeseen changes in the context of consumption.

In the case of oil, the hand guiding the patterns of demand is at times quite apparent. Beginning in the 1920s, the automobile industry began dismantling rail-based public transportation systems across the nation, thereby encouraging the automobile and

bus as a primary form of transportation(Snell 1974). Companies like General Motors took an active role in this process by purchasing electric mass-transit systems throughout the United States and converting them to less attractive diesel bus systems while, at the same time, establishing a virtual monopoly on bus production(Snell 1974). In Washington D.C., the focal point for creating oil demand was the National Highway Users Conference, an association that includes the American Trucking Association, the Motor Vehicle Manufacturers Association, the American Petroleum Institute, the Rubber Manufacturers Association, and the American Automobile Association(Snell 1974). The NHUC, or “highway lobby,” sought to organize lobbying efforts in Washington to direct public funds away from rail construction toward the construction of highways, essentially locking in continued demand for the automobile and truck. Although automobile owners paid very low taxes on the car itself, gasoline taxes were quite substantial. These public funds were diverted to the construction of roads and highways, supplementing the massive construction costs of Eisenhower’s Interstate Highway and Defense System (Gramling 1996).

During the same period, the United States helped construct the Marshall Plan for rebuilding of the nations ravaged by World War II. A key component of the plan was the industrial switch from coal to oil, much of which would be provided from the oilfields of the Middle East (Gramling 1996). The Marshall plan not only mandated the switch from coal to oil, but also fostered the rapid growth of the industries to make use of the increased oil production. In a structural sense, the Marshall Plan expanded the capitalist

world system in which the United States functioned as the economic, political, and communicative core (Bromley 1991). On the domestic front, the government encouraged the growth of suburban America through a series of low-cost loans to returning G.I.s (Solberg 1976). As public funds were diverted away from urban mass transit systems, massive numbers of Americans moved from the cities into the suburbs, and each of those families needed an automobile. Finally, through advertising, automobile manufacturers strove to associate transportation by automobile with American-style “freedom,” thereby lodging the implicit necessity of the automobile in the American cosmology and, on a more material level, ensuring the continued demand for automobiles, trucks, rubber, and oil.

In summary, since its discovery in Eastern Pennsylvania, the production and distribution of oil has been inseparably tied to a network of large corporations. At the simplest level, this fact can be tied to the capital-intensive nature of oil exploration and production. Large transnational and global corporations, as well as the national governments that control the policy environment of production, have parlayed their position into the formation of increasingly advantageous contexts. Through agreements and pacts, the supply of oil has, for much of the century, been harnessed and controlled to the advantage of the producers. At the same time, these companies have utilized their financial might to structure the topography of demand; subtle policy changes rapidly increased demand for oil over the course of the century, and despite the friction between the more nationalistic concerns of the OPEC nations and the more corporate concerns of

the companies that produce and distribute oil, both parties have benefited greatly from the vast demand for oil and oil-based products.

The Gulf Coast and, more specifically, Acadiana have long been enmeshed in this global political economy. In the history of oil production, however, Acadiana and the surrounding regions have shifted from the central locus of global production to one node in a network of production and distribution that spans the globe. At the same time, the context of domestic production has long been oligopolistic; the vertical and horizontal integration now occurring in the oilpatch is nothing new. Therefore, the increasingly global template of Acadian oil production, as well as the oligopolistic network that controls much of production, is best conceived of as part of a continuum in the evolving organizational structure of the oil industry. This continuum, however, is punctuated by several particular events that clarify the processes through which globalization, as well as vertical and horizontal integration occur, while also suggesting a degree of specificity unique to the Acadian oilpatch. Foremost among these events is the oil crisis of the 1970s.

OPEC, Acadiana, Boom and Bust

Through the processes described in the section above, the United States has led the world in oil consumption by large margins. In addition to being the largest consumer of oil, the United States are home to most of the seven sister oil companies. Despite the decreasing proportion of oil domestically produced, the large U.S.-based oil companies

were able to control much of the production in other regions of the globe, including the world's largest oil deposits in the Middle East. In the decade prior to the OPEC crisis, some 55% of the final cost of petroleum found its way to the governments of the leading, first-world consumer nations, while a mere 8% of the final cost consisted of taxes and royalties to host governments (Bromley 1991). In 1970, Libya began to pressure Occidental (an independent oil company) to lower production levels, and Libya's success with these demands served as a clarion for the OPEC nations (the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) (Gramling 1996). In 1973-4, OPEC moved against the major oil companies with production facilities in the Middle East. The OPEC nations nationalized the production facilities in the region; the major oil companies' share of control over non-Communist oil production fell from 82% in 1963 to 32% in 1974 (Bromley 1991).

Although production in the Middle East overtook North American production in the mid-1960s, the major oil companies were able to maintain vertical integration through much of 1973. When the OPEC members nationalized production facilities, however, the global structure of power was quickly complicated as the new national producers joined the global oil companies in the political economy of oil production. For the transnational oil companies, much of the generation of profit shifted from the production-based *upstream* component of this system to the *downstream* sectors that refine and prepare oil products for consumption. At the same time, as the OPEC cartel pushed the price of crude to new highs, the seven sister oil companies renewed their energy in the productive

regions they still controlled. For the Acadian oilpatch, the crisis instigated by OPEC's price hike resulted in the rapid growth of exploration, drilling, and production in the Gulf Coast oilfields, signaling the onset of a sustained economic boom in the region.

In the context of the Acadian oilpatch, this boom favored the production efforts of the major oil companies. Inland production had fallen off in the previous decade; most of the new oil reserves lay offshore, and only the major oil companies had the stature to pursue such capital-intensive deposits. The profits generated in this enterprise were large enough to offset the increased cost of foreign oil (Baxter 1999). With the profits, the oil companies not only invested in new ventures – uranium mining, retail sales, etc. – but also strengthened their lobbying efforts to, “shape domestic political discourse and government policy to define energy independence in ways that reinforced public support of oil company investment offshore” (Baxter 1999, pp. 271). The high price for oil in the international market, shifts in the American political discourse favoring domestic production, and new technological breakthroughs combined to push exploration, drilling, and production to new highs in the Acadian oilpatch.

All of this soon unraveled. In the early 1980s, the global economy moved into a recession; high oil prices are widely recognized as a major factor in this recession, and by 1982 the price of oil on the international market began to waver. After several years of instability in the market, oil prices collapsed in the summer of 1986, and the bust was on. Crude prices dropped nearly threefold; the transnational oil companies immediately cut exploration and production budgets by a third, while also commencing with a massive

series of layoffs (Baxter 1999). Unemployment levels in the Acadian oilpatch rose from 5% to as high as 20%; social services in the region were suddenly pushed far beyond their capacity, and with no end to the bust in sight, many families left the area in search of work (Gramling 1996).

As the major oil companies retracted domestic exploration and production efforts, countless smaller business concerns in the service industry fell into bankruptcy. In this sense, the boom and bust cycles of the economy favor large, diversified companies. For example, all of the major oil companies active in the Acadian oilpatch both produce and refine oil. The high oil prices established by the OPEC cartel pushed the profits of the major oil companies' production divisions to new peaks while, because the price of crude was so high, imposed a taxing burden on the refining component. With the rapid drop in oil prices, the focus of profit-making shifted from production to refining – with the global price of oil so cheap, oil companies could better garner profits at the pump. Therefore, the larger transnational, diversified oil companies with significant refining components could absorb some of the pressure of the collapse.

The bust in the oilpatch lasted for years; as the domestic divisions of the major oil companies wallowed in the mire of low barrel prices, they also searched for ways to decrease costs. Many of the larger oil and service companies pursued drastic cost-cutting measures in the Acadian oilpatch: dock facilities were consolidated, regional headquarters were closed or shifted to Houston, and intra-corporate redundancy was sought out and corrected. Transportation costs were part of this cost-cutting rubric – the large oil and

service companies explored ways of consolidating transportation costs, shifting the dispatching duties to a central location, and cutting extraneous transportation costs from the budget. Because the state regulated the price of linehauls, however, the extent of the impact of these changes upon the truckers was, in some sense, limited: as described in the sections above and below, oilpatch truckers with extensive social networks and entrepreneurial skill were able to get by on what little work was still available.

The hard times in the 1980s also fueled the vertical and horizontal integration of the oil industry. As the smaller service, oil, and fabrication companies fell into bankruptcy, mergers and takeovers became the norm. The larger companies in the oilpatch pursued these consolidations and mergers as a means of decreasing costs; by the time the bust came to an end, a handful of companies controlled the bulk of the service and fabrication industry. Although the deregulation of the trucking industry did not occur until 1995, the conditions that fostered the alliance system were well in place by the end of the bust. The mergers of the 1980s created a handful of titans in the oilpatch, and from the perspective of a trucking company, negotiating a few key alliances might put them in control of a great portion of the transportation market.

In conclusion, the history of the oil industry is one of powerful oligopolies and cartels enmeshed in a global political economy. In the Acadian oilpatch, the ebb and flow of this political economy has, at times, fostered either the rapid expansion of the industry or resulted in dramatic industrial pullbacks. Through the impacts of the OPEC crisis and

the bust that followed it, the oil, service, and fabrication companies of the Acadian oilpatch rapidly consolidated through mergers, acquisitions and bankruptcies. This context presaged the trucking sector's shift to alliances by several years, but, I suggest, was a necessary condition for the current predominance of the alliance system in the transportation sector of the Acadian oilpatch.

This section has attempted to provide a background to the shifting organization of the Acadian transportation sector. As much as the changes can be tied to the global political economy of oil production and distribution, the process by which this change occurred and the impact of that change are highly localized. In the next section, I explore the way in which the organization of the regulated trucking industry meshed with the social structure of the Acadian people, and the process by which the organizational change of the transportation industry challenges the social tapestry of the Acadian trucker. Much of this, I contend, can be understood through the lens of social capital.

V. Social Capital and Shifting Identity

Social Capital

In the past twenty years, the notion of *social capital* has made its way from the works of Pierre Bourdieu (1986) and James Coleman (1988) into the popular vernacular. The contemporary works of Robert Putnam (1995) and Francis Fukuyama (1995) tout social capital as the key ingredient to the economic success of nations, thereby reinforcing the social foundation of economic action and, therefore, the essentially cultural foundation of western hegemony. To maintain this critical social component of progressive society, they seek policy shifts to foster the growth of social capital. At the same time, the World Bank and other international institutions have carried social capital into the development process; projects now seek to quantify and measure social capital in less-developed nations, instigate policies to reinforce the channels through which social capital travels, and analyze the impact of social capital on economic development. With the increasing frequency of the term's use, however, its meaning has become muddled and confused.

Pierre Bourdieu provides the following definition: "Social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu 1992). This definition closely parallels that

provided in his earlier work.¹⁶ For Bourdieu, social capital exists in relation with *cultural capital* and *economic capital*. Each of these forms of capital are subject to a particular logic and thereby structure particular social topographies. Because of these different logics, Bourdieu resists the urge to reduce the various forms of capital to economic terms alone; instead, he suggests that power resides in the control of the process of transformation between forms (Bourdieu 1986), a process others have described as the ‘rate of conversion’ (Kilankiewicz 1996).

Like Bourdieu, Chicago sociologist James Coleman also construes social capital as one part of a triumvirate which also included *human capital* and *physical capital* (Coleman 1990). In an earlier work, Coleman also differentiates *financial capital* (Coleman 1988). His interest in social capital stems from the concept’s ability to bridge the conceptually troublesome gap between the individual and society; the various forms of social capital, he suggests, share two key characteristics: “[t]hey all consist of some aspect of a social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure” (Coleman 1990). In spite of this notion, Coleman is largely concerned with the aggregate manifestations of social capital – the system of ‘credit slips’ that comprise dense systems of social capital and allow particular groups of people to reap economic benefits. He also presents perhaps the most frequently cited example of social capital in his brief description of the Jewish wholesale diamond traders in

¹⁶ “[T]he aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition – or in other words, to membership in a group – which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital, a ‘credential’ which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” (Bourdieu 1986).

Brooklyn who, through the intensity of the social networks in which they are enmeshed, regularly pass thousands of dollars in diamonds back and forth for inspection without formal insurance (Coleman 1988). The close social, religious, and community ties of the diamond brokers foster an economic efficiency that could not otherwise be produced. Coleman suggests these conditions are analogous to those in other societies as well.

Robert Putnam is perhaps the most popular and vociferous purveyor of social capital as a concept; he is solely concerned with social capital as an aggregate indicator of national health. His initial study of regional governance in Italy led him to conclude that citizen engagement in community affairs – or social capital – was the single most predictive variable in the success of regional governments (Putnam 1995). Turning his lens on America, Putnam concludes that social capital – quantified as participation in sports clubs, youth groups, church attendance, and so on – is rapidly diminishing, and suggests that we move quickly to avert further damage to the fabric of our society (Putnam 1995). Francis Fukuyama agrees with Putnam on the importance of social capital in the aggregate, but adds a Hegelian twist to the analysis by plugging social capital into an evolutionary framework; he suggests that the particular configuration of social capital observed in the more advanced nations of the world is the reason for their success, and those social configurations differentiate them from pretenders to the throne, such as Southern Europe, Korea, Indonesia, and China (Fukuyama 1995).

Recent work has challenged these conclusions on several grounds. First, as the analysis has moved from the individual in the context of a limited set of social networks

to the aggregate, national analyses of Putnam and Fukuyama, the negative aspects of social capital have been analytically abandoned. New work has rekindled a more ambivalent view of social capital, however (Waldinger 1995, Portes 1996). Research in this area is concerned not only with the positive impact of social networks and the capital circulating through those linkages, but also with the exclusionary role capital-rich social formations can and do play in the socioeconomic realm. Research of this type suggests that, “[t]he same kinds of ties that sometimes yield public goods also produce “public bads”: mafia families, prostitution rings, and youth gangs, to cite a few” (Portes 1996). From this point of view, the capital-rich network of Coleman’s Jewish diamond wholesalers becomes not only a means for increasing economic efficiency, but also for excluding members of other ethnicities from viably competing in the lucrative wholesale diamond trade.

In the analysis of the shifting structure of the trucking industry of the Acadian oilpatch, social capital provides a prism for exploring the contours and impacts of that change. In this endeavor, aggregate analyses of social capital on the order of Putnam and Fukuyama prove much less useful than the more theoretical approach suggested by Bourdieu and the more ambivalent approach formulated by Portes and others. More specifically, the description of the system of regulated trucking in the oilpatch provided by the participants supports the more nuanced view of social capital suggested by Portes and others; furthermore, the shift from a system reliant upon intensive networks of capital-rich social linkages to one largely bereft of such connections supports Bourdieu’s

claims regarding control of the process of transformation. Each aspect will be explored in turn.

Social Networks, Social Capital and Regulated Trucking

The structure of the transportation industry prior to deregulation made use of the overlaying, extended kinship systems prevalent in Acadiana. In that sense, the industry utilized the extensive social networks within the region and structured social capital as an essential component of the transportation industry. Participants in the study frequently noted the role of family in establishing a trucking company or entering the trucking business. Family members often provided the capital to purchase the first truck [AG55], while sometimes providing the capital to purchase several trucks and run a small company [AG41]. Furthermore, extended families also provided the labor necessary to operate the business – daughters and sons helped out in the office with dispatching and paperwork, family members without CDLs would operate the hotshot trucks during booms in demand, and so on.

The extended families of the Acadian oilpatch did more than provide capital and labor to the trucking industry, however. The reconfiguration of the trucking industry in the 1950s relied heavily on social networks as business networks. In moving from a system in which oil and service companies operated their own fleets of often-idle trucks to a system where companies independent of the oil and service companies contracted with the owners of single or several trucks, the social networks and capital of individual

truck owners under the lease arrangement became essential to the success of the trucking company, for the trucking companies depended on the owner/operator to find and maintain customers through their own social networks.

In this sense, the line between entrepreneurship and social networks becomes blurred. Prior to deregulation and the alliances, trucking companies relied in large part upon the owner/operators' ability to locate customers. As one owner/operator noted,

“Before deregulation, we hustled all our own work – all of it. We'd call people, stop by offices, whatever it took. We'd show them that we had the right equipment and could give them the best service possible. Our success was up to us, and over the years, I was able to develop a good customer base” [AG52].

In turn, the owner/operators often utilized extended kinship relations to seek out and establish a customer base; some call these networks the “brother-in-law deals,” and by many accounts, these kin-based relationships were the foundation of the entrepreneurial activity described above. As another participant describes,

“We were a Texaco family. You see, we're from Houma, and Texaco came to Houma after WWII. My daddy trapped for a living until he got a job with Texaco. He started as a roustabout and later owned a Texaco filling station, and all my uncles worked for Texaco too. When I came back from college, I knew a lot of people around here, and they said to buy some trucks, so I did. That's how I got started” [DA126].

While the social connections of family provided a starting point for establishing a customer base, successful drivers utilized a wide variety of social linkages and locations to build connections and conduct business. As one owner/operator from a well-known Acadian family recalled,

“Before deregulation, you had to go out and hustle your work. The hard thing about it was that everybody got the same price – you couldn't really compete on

price. I had an advantage, though, because I had a fair-sized trucking company at the time, but I also had the only restaurant worth eating at in the whole area. A lot of guys would come in. I knew them all – but it was still really a hustle. That’s the way things worked” [AG45].

Other participants noted they utilized contacts from high school [AG55], from recreational sporting teams [AG54], or, more generally, just friends of the family. These sort of social networks complement the extended kin networks predominant in the region and, for much of the history of trucking in the region, together comprised the organizational foundation of the industry.

For the owner/operator, capital-rich social networks were essential not only for purchasing a truck and establishing a successful business, but also for weathering the inevitable economic busts of the oilpatch. Owner/operators without rich and varied social networks were the first to perish in the oilpatch; many of those individuals well-established in the industry were able to hang on for the duration of the economic downturn. These owner/operators relied on familial and social networks to find or keep what little work was still available in the region, to establish lines of credit to buoy their business during the downturn, and to extend their livelihood systems into other, less volatile sectors of the local economy. As an owner/operator noted,

“Getting through the bust was tough. A lot of guys in debt went out of business. It happened all over the place. The only reason I didn’t go out of business is because my creditors weren’t interested in repossessing all my trucks and equipment. They’d been working with me for a long time, and instead of taking everything, they wanted to work with me. That’s how I made it through” [AG36].

Another truck owner notes,

“Even in the bad days of ‘81 to ‘85, we were making seven trips a week with 14 trucks. It wasn’t much, but it was enough to get by. We had to dip into our savings like most people did, but we made it. We made it because we were smart – we had our home paid for, and we paid our trucks down fast, and because I had a lot of contacts in the oil industry. A bunch of other truckers just went bankrupt, though” [AG40].

While many owner/operators sought employment outside the transportation sector (or even outside Acadiana), others shifted their efforts to sectors of the transportation sector unrelated to the oilpatch. Many moved to cross-country hauling while others sought work in the regional commodity market or in the local sugarcane sector. These moves, like those within the oilpatch, often relied on the rich familial and social networks of the individuals in question.

For owner/operators able to amass enough capital and trucks to form a company, a different realm of social capital was required to obtain the permit from the L.P.S.C. The total number of permits in Louisiana was limited by the L.P.S.C. These permits could be bought or sold by the public, but each sale required the approval of the L.P.S.C. As a result, the purchase of a permit required significant social and political clout, as well as the necessary financial capital. The intricacies of this process are described above in section III.

The social networks through which business was conducted were not idle networks in stasis. The relationships required routine maintenance and upkeep; from the owner/operator’s perspective, this was part of the business. Longstanding clients received benefits from the owner/operators – drivers would bring them boudin for breakfast [AG54], maybe stop a pack of cigarettes at the convenience store [AG35], or take them

out to the steakhouse once in a while [AG41]. More frequently, the owner/operators throw in a free haul for longstanding customers:

“You’ve got to treat your customers right. That means you might have to carry a free load for them every now and then, bring them some lunch, whatever” [AG14].

These practices were considered the standard of the business. More involved relationships between trucker and customer, however, were also common. Several owner/operators mentioned hunting and fishing trips as a typical perk organized for the customers.

Another owner/operator recalled,

“I was good at keeping customers. I’d bring them boudin in the morning to keep them happy, and on cold calls we’d go out to lunch. I’d get attached to customers quick, and we’d have more fun than the law allows. We’d have dinners together, barbecues, beer – my wife and I would blow \$300 to \$400 every once in a while on those barbecues. That’s just the natural way of living down here. And after a while there weren’t many cold calls left to make – most everybody knew me” [AG54].

Or, as another driver mentions,

“You had to do a lot of favors for the customers, but that was your business, and it was a good one. I’d bring them lunch, pick them up when they were out drunk somewhere, whatever. There was one guy I built three racecars for. You had to entertain the customers and keep them happy, or you had to have a brother-in-law that likes you at one of the companies. Either way, that’s the way the business worked” [AG53].

As the truckers make clear, the activities entailed in the maintenance of the social networks were conceived as an integral and inherent component of the oilpatch transportation industry. This template had been established early in the reconfiguration of the industry from the corporate-fleet system to the leased system of the owner/operator. Through this reorganization, trucking companies took advantage of the extended family

and kin groups of the Acadian oilpatch; these familial networks functioned as the foundation from which individuals expanded their network of customers through entrepreneurial effort. Establishing and maintaining these capital-rich networks proved essential in financing entry into the trucking industry, establishing a customer base, weathering the periodic busts in the oil economy, and obtaining the permits necessary to form a trucking company.

The impact of deregulation altered this system in multiple ways. Foremost, by deregulating the transportation sector of the oilpatch, the process by which social capital – as described above – was transformed by the owner/operator into economic capital was interrupted. As a result, control of the profits generated in the oilpatch trucking sector passed from the hands of many to the hands of a few. Before exploring the intricacies of this process, however, I will explore a more nuanced view – as suggested by Portes – of the pre-deregulation system described above.

Good Old Boys in the Louisiana Oilpatch

The social networks of the Acadian oilpatch served as a mechanism for organizing the trucking sector of the transportation industry; through combinations of kin-based networks and entrepreneurial activity, individual drivers were able to enter the business, build relations over time, and ascend the job ladder from driver to company owner. While this system provided opportunities for a wide segment of the Acadian population, the capital-rich social networks described above also functioned in an exclusionary sense.

Exploring these aspects of the industry reveals how social capital and social networks play a dual role – not only do they comprise the bonds of oilpatch community and the system by which some of its industries are organized, but also exclude others from deriving the very benefits produced by intensive systems of social capital.

As described in the previous section, the networks and relations by which the regulated trucking system operated built upon the foundation of kinship groups through entrepreneurial activity. While any individual might exhibit a high entrepreneurial drive, the importance of familial and kinship relations to the success of transportation-related business ventures prevented outsiders from successfully entering the industry. In the Acadian oilpatch, these “outsiders” certainly included those from other regions of the country, but also women and blacks from Acadiana. As one woman in the business noted,

“It’s always been a white, male business. There are very few blacks in the business – at the terminal next door, there’s probably two blacks out of fifty drivers. I heard about a black woman who ran a hotshot somewhere around here, but she only lasted a couple of weeks. You just never see blacks in the industry. They mostly haul cane and gravel” [AG46].

Because interracial marriage is a rarity in Acadiana, it proved difficult for blacks to penetrate the capital-rich networks of kinship relations upon which the trucking industry was based. As a result, blacks were traditionally relegated to hauling gravel and cane – both less lucrative than oilpatch hauling.

For women in the oilpatch, trucking was rarely an option prior to deregulation. Although many were members of the extended familial networks upon which the industry was based, few pursued trucking as a vocation. In part, this can be attributed to the

locations in which social networks and capital were established. From the earliest period in independent trucking in the oilpatch, the construction and maintenance of social networks occurred in highly masculinized spaces and places. These included the aforementioned athletic teams [AG54], hunting and fishing camps [AG14], and lunches at the steakhouse [AG41]. Or, as one driver recalled,

“There’s a place up in Lafayette called ‘Desperado’s’ ... it’s a classy titty bar. When the oil show is going on up there, that’s where all the business moves to after about four o’clock ... I’ve never been there myself because I’m not really a tit-man, but everybody knows about the place. There was even more of that stuff going on back in the 1970s when the money was really flowing – expense accounts were really loose then” [AG54].

With the establishment of trucking-related social networks largely confined to highly masculinized spaces, women had difficulty entering the industry in any capacity other than their husbands’ assistants.

The same white and male social networks controlled the conduits through which financial capital flowed into the trucking industry. Many of the larger trucks were priced prohibitively high; amassing the funds necessary to purchase several trucks – and thereby form a trucking company – required financing, and the avenues to this funding were tightly controlled. The owner of one truck company recalled,

“The real old-boy network was down at the bank. If you needed money, you had to work that network. There was this guy down there at the bank, and he financed every truck and crane I ever bought. He made all of it possible for me. I still go to see him at the nursing home every now and then” [AG41].

Through these networks, men of the right social standing and right family were able to enter and succeed in the trucking industry. Intensive networks of social capital

constructed around a kinship template prevented outsiders – including women and blacks – from successfully entering the trucking industry. The deregulation of the trucking industry in 1995 resulted in a series of changes, including a shift in the articulation of social networks and social capital in the trucking industry.

Mitigating the Fungibility of Social Capital

The policy changes stemming from deregulation of the trucking industry resulted in the abandonment of the book rates established by the L.P.S.C. In the past, the axes of competition among the truck drivers included variables such as the social networks described above, as well as safety records, knowledge of equipment, and other factors. After deregulation, price emerged as the focal point for competition. The large trucking companies formed alliances with the larger customers, guaranteeing lower prices for exclusive rights to provide transportation services. The details of this shift are explored in section III above; this section seeks to reconceptualize the impact of this shift in terms of social capital.

The alliance structure adopted by the major trucking companies disrupted the networks of social capital in the region. The formation of the alliances prevented customers from selecting their own trucking companies or drivers; the dispatchers' prerogative to select particular drivers ended, and the right to select particular trucking companies shifted from the dispatchers hands to the corporate offices of the oil and

service companies. As a result, the economic importance of social relations between truckers and customers came to a rapid end. As one truck owner noted,

“When deregulation went through, everything came to an end. I mean, I’ve still got customers all over the place, but they can’t call me anymore because of the alliances. If we went back to regulation tomorrow, every one of them would call me back and I’d have twelve trucks back on the road in a week” [AG52].

Another driver noted the conjuncture between the alliances and the increasing number of mergers in the oil and service companies of the Acadian oilpatch:

“I had a good relationship with Drilling Tools. They knew they could depend on me to get their stuff around quickly and safely. But when the mergers started, people get laid off. They’ll let a dispatcher go or something, and suddenly you’re out of business with them. And the oil companies they’re billing to have alliances, so oftentimes I can’t haul loads for my friends. I lost most of that work” [AG54].

More specifically, the transportation customers were required by contract to call allied trucking companies for hauling loads. These companies use the dispatch board (described in section III) to select a driver; customers are not at liberty to select particular drivers. As a result, entrepreneurial truckers are now relegated to pursuing the small portion of the industry not part of the alliance structure. Beyond this portion of the market, social capital is no longer a factor for truckers seeking a set of customers.

At the same time, it is important to note that the social networks in which social capital exists were little changed by the policy changes resulting from deregulation. People still play softball together, meet for fishing and hunting trips, and gather together at the bars in the evening. Furthermore, these are not capital-free networks, as decisions are still made in these social spheres. These social groups conduct some business, select the politicians they will support in the upcoming election, and so on. The change resulting

from the deregulation of the trucking sector is much more precise than a general suppression of social capital: within the context of the trucking industry, the ability to *transform* social capital into economic capital has been disrupted. The alliances form a contractual barrier between economic and social capital, particularly in the process of establishing a customer base in the oilpatch.

The change from regulation to deregulation – and away from the structured use of social networks – has been a processual shift; while the alliances emerging from the deregulation resulted in several dramatic and rapid changes, other changes have been more gradual. In this sense, social capital continues to play a limited role in some key aspects of the industry. This is particularly apparent in the variable relations between the alliance-based trucking companies and the truck owners. These majors established their alliances with customers over time, and individuals with significant social networks in the industry were able to bargain with the major trucking companies and often to win higher profit margins with the trucking company. For example, a successful trucker might have entered deregulation with a diversified customer base worth \$3,000,000 a year (gross). Perhaps \$2.5 million of that business is with a service company not allied with any of the major trucking companies. The three or four major trucking companies of the oilpatch would then approach the driver in competition for the right to absorb that work. They would offer the trucker rates lower than the standard 30% charged to the truck owner in return for the opportunity to establish an alliance with this customer. The truck driver, then, utilizes the social capital he has established with the customer in order to bargain

with the trucking company. The trucker agrees to deliver the customer to the trucking company and to haul at the lower contract rates established by the alliance, while the trucking company agrees to charge a lower percentage to that trucker for overhead and the permit. For many of the truckers in the oilpatch, this scenario was preferable to losing their customers outright to an alliance; differences in social capital explain the variation in the rates charged by the trucking company for overhead and insurance.

Despite the continued, albeit limited, role of social capital in the contemporary oilpatch transportation industry, the legal and contractual changes resulting from deregulation broke the relationship between social and economic capital. The current situation in the oilpatch not only lends credence to Bourdieu's focus on the logic of capital conversion (Bourdieu 1986), but also suggests the role of human agency in this process. In the oilpatch, the owners of the major trucking companies actively pursued legal and contractual agreements to stem the conversion of social capital to economic capital. Because these moves resulted in the mitigation of the transformative process rather than the disappearance of social capital altogether, aggregate measures of social capital (such as those explored by Putnam and Fukuyama) are of little relevance to the changes in the oilpatch – it's not that people don't get together, socialize, and capitalize on those relationships; rather, they are unable to capitalize on those relationships within this particular sector of the local economy.

Social Capital and Shifting Identity

The economic impact of the organizational changes resulting from deregulation merits close attention. Truck drivers and truck owners often make 25% to 50% less on each haul than the book rates established before deregulation. At the same time, fixed costs continue to rise: repairs, maintenance, licensing, insurance, and all the other costs push the oilpatch trucker to the brink of insolvency. The reconfigured system under which oilfield transportation occurs provides no avenue for the truck driver to build capital, invest in additional trucks, or operate a transportation business in the oilpatch. Furthermore, the social networks of the drivers and owners have been rendered useless by the reorganization. The economic impact of these changes are quite visible – trucks are mothballed or repossessed, poor truck maintenance results in an increased accident rate, and the drivers and owners seek other means to generate a livelihood.

The impact of deregulation and the ensuing corporate reorganization has also resulted in a crisis of identity for the truckers in the oilpatch. Although the scope of this crisis is difficult to gauge in quantitative terms, crises of identity can result in very real impacts at a material level. This connection has been well explored in recent literature, much of which describes the impact of shifting economic and organizational structure on the identity of groups and individuals and, in many cases, the material reverberations of those crises (Klubock 1998; Striffler 1999). In the Acadian oilpatch, these reverberations include a growing inability to attract new labor to the transportation sector, widespread driver unrest, an attempted lawsuit, and a movement toward unionization.

At the center of this process is the identity constructed in the industrial workplace of Acadiana. This differentiates this case study from the bulk of the anthropological literature concerned with identity construction; most of these works deal with identity in terms of gender and ethnicity. The close association of identity with gender and ethnicity no doubt results from the particular salience of the concepts in contemporary culture. Nonetheless, the continued focus on gender and ethnicity has eclipsed the study of other forms of identification – particularly class and occupation (Grillo 1999). While occupational identity seems to present the most obvious starting point for the analysis of trucking identity in the Acadian oilpatch, this is not to suggest that the identity of the oilpatch trucker is constructed solely within the occupational context. In one of the first anthropological books to deal explicitly with identity, A. L. Epstein noted that, “None of us has just a single identity; as members of society each of us carries simultaneously a range of identities just as each of us occupies a number of statuses and plays a variety of roles” (Epstein 1978). While untangling this multiplicity of identities presents some difficulty, the relations between these multiple identities comprise the very meaning of the particular identity (Mars 1999). In other words, because of the multiplicity of identities manifest in any individual, analysis must gauge the logic of the relationship between these components.

In the context of truck driving as an occupational identity, the truck drivers of the Acadian oilpatch clearly differentiate themselves from cross-country truck drivers. As one driver noted,

“We’re not cross-country drivers. You’ll see us on the same road as them, but we’re oilfield haulers. We have specialized equipment and specialized skills” [AG47].

Another driver added,

“Cross-country truckers are wheel-holders, that’s all. They don’t load or unload, and they don’t know their cargo. In the oilpatch, we’re out bustin’ ass, rolling pipe ... we’re a different breed down here, and I don’t know how those interstate guys keep a family being away from home all the time” [AG54].

The knowledge and skills required of the oilpatch trucker differentiate the driver from the cross-country driver – many of whom remain unaware of the contents of the trailers they haul. By making this distinction, the truck drivers subsume their identity within the encompassing identity of the oilpatch worker. They are, by their own account, an essential component of the industry that puts gasoline in American cars.

The skills and technical knowledge required to haul in the oilpatch also allow oilpatch truckers to distinguish themselves from other truck drivers in Acadiana, particularly from the cane haulers one frequently sees on the highways. Cane haulers are not required to obtain a commercial driver’s license, nor do they assist with the loading and unloading of the trucks. As a result, cane haulers are viewed as an untrained, unskilled pool of labor by the oilpatch haulers. Traditionally, cane haulers received less pay than oilpatch haulers and, as previously noted, cane hauling was also viewed as the segment of the trucking industry best suited for blacks. While these conditions have changed with the restructuring of the trucking industry, the skilled vs. unskilled differentiation continues to be employed by oilpatch truckers describing agricultural trucking.

Beyond the relational structure of trucker identity, the truck drivers of the Acadian oilpatch have largely constructed their identity around the entrepreneurial aspects of the pre-deregulation trucking industry. One truck driver related the reasons he got started in the business while also drawing on the more generalized oilpatch identity:

“I liked the independence of the job. You really had to hustle your own customers, and you could work for whoever you wanted to. I was born in the oilfield, and I was raised in that environment. One of my first jobs was as a roughneck, so I’ve always known the equipment pretty well, and that used to make a big difference in the business. I also liked the schedule a trucker has – there’s no office I go into at 8:30 every morning. Things are different because there’s no set schedule” [AG53].

As another driver noted,

“I was working for the State as a meat inspector at the slaughterhouses, and I always liked being on the road driving, so I decided to get into trucking. I enjoyed the challenge of it, I enjoyed meeting new people – soliciting and keeping business. Theoretically you were doing what you wanted to do, but in reality you were working all the time to keep your customers happy. It was always nice to hear the customers were happy. You know that they can go home and sleep because their equipment is going to be there on time. The whole job was a thrill and we were proud to be truckers” [AG48].

Entrepreneurial skill and the social capital underpinning it comprised the foundation of the oilpatch trucker’s identity and, in many ways, continue to do so. In a very real sense, truck drivers were their own bosses before deregulation. The often-noted “freedom of the road” functioned as an analogy for the way they perceived their role as businessmen and, occasionally, businesswomen; their success depended upon their own ability to utilize social networks, maintain those relationships, and extend those networks through entrepreneurial effort.

The organizational structure that fostered this identity shifted rapidly with the deregulating policy changes of 1995. As described in the previous sections of this paper, the social networks through which the trucking industry had traditionally functioned were interrupted. Yet while the economic and organizational template of oilpatch trucking shifted rapidly in the ensuing years, changes in the structure and composition of trucker identity proved much more elusive. Despite the fact that oilpatch truckers now work for large companies, are not required to have specialized knowledge of the oilpatch equipment and skills, have very little chance of advancing their position and have little control over the course of their career, they continue to subscribe to the identity of the pre-deregulation trucker. This identity refuses to recognize the trucker as a pure laborer – a “wheel holder” – but instead continue to stress the now-defunct skilled aspects of the job, including both knowledge of oilfield equipment and the entrepreneurial activities necessary before deregulation.

This lag between the organizational structure of the trucking sector and the identity of the industry participants represents a source of friction, and would seem to suggest a variable amount of time between structural shifts and the identities that arise in response. In the oilpatch, the reconfigured trucking sector implies a much less attractive identity for the owner/operator: no longer is he or she a partner in business with the trucking company, social networks and entrepreneurial skill have little impact on his or her success in the industry, and so on. Clinging to the traditional identity is a strategic move for the truckers of the oilpatch, for it allows them to distill the qualities of the

reconfigured transportation sector that contradict essential components of their identity – the things that, in their mind, make trucking a worthwhile occupation. These key issues are then parlayed into the political and legal skirmishes directed at the contemporary trucking industry by the truckers of the oilpatch.

At the same time, the changes in the role of social capital, as well as in the identity in which the trucking sector is ensconced, have created the conditions through which new categories of individuals have entered the trucking sector. Over the last decade, many women have successfully entered the industry; this study included eight interviews with women truckers, and the women truckers are particularly active in the associations and meeting through which the truckers of the oilpatch are now exploring the potential of collective action. Several of the meetings and assemblies I attended included black oilpatch truckers as well. The increased entry and profile of women and black truckers suggests the breakdown of the gender and racial aspects of the industry's traditional division of labor described by the participants.

These two processes would seem to be at odds. On the one hand, the truck drivers of Acadiana cling to key aspects of the traditional identity of the oilpatch trucker as a strategy against the industry-wide de-skilling of trucking as an occupation. On the other hand, individuals traditionally omitted from the industry have successfully entered the industry and, to some degree, assumed positions of relative power.¹⁷ This would seem to be a result of the particular pattern of the industry's reorganization. By interrupting the

process by which social capital was transformed into economic capital, the channels through which individuals enter the industry were opened. The capital-rich social networks of the regulated trucking industry, then, were the means by which entry into the industry was controlled; this supports Portes' nuanced view of social capital.

At the same time, the post-deregulation identity is not some sort of static, unchanged version of the pre-deregulation truckers' identity. Instead, the truck drivers of the Acadian oilpatch have dropped key aspects of this traditional identity while maintaining and fostering others. Racial and gender boundaries have fallen; these groups fit within the new trucking identity and occupy a surprisingly unproblematic social space in the Acadian trucking industry. However, the oilpatch truckers have refused to yield the skilled, entrepreneurial aspects of their identity to the new organizational template of the industry. These components of the trucking identity are considered integral to the very definition of trucking in the oilpatch; maintaining these components of the occupational identity represents a strategy for challenging the dominance of the new corporate organizational model.

The Impact of Identity Crisis

¹⁷ For example, women have assumed leadership roles in both the pro-union and anti-union factions of the trucker's association.

In the case of the Acadian truckers, the crisis of identity stems from a set of organizational changes in the transportation industry. The crisis itself, while seemingly intangible, is not only the result of tangible, structural changes in the organization of the transportation sector, but also has produced a series of reverberations in the trucking industry, the result of which remains to be determined. The cause of these reverberations, I suggest, is the friction between the occupational identity maintained by the Acadian truckers and the topography of the reconfigured industry that now holds sway.

Foremost among the effects of the crisis is the growing inability of the transportation sector to attract new labor. The low wages under the contract/alliance system produce an economic disincentive that pushes labor to other sectors [AG57]. At the same time, the traditional social networks that, as described above, comprised the entrepreneurial base of the industry also functioned as conduits for new labor. As social networks and social capital became increasingly irrelevant under the deregulated system, the local networks through which labor was traditionally drawn vanished. The major trucking companies – with only limited success – now seek labor from outside the region. As a result, the average age of the Acadian trucker continues to rise [AG31], and sustained rumors suggest the major trucking companies face a chronic shortage of drivers. Although the factors contributing to the decreased flow of new labor include the lower pay scale and the disrupted social networks, one must also include this crisis of identity as a contributing factor: without possibility for advancement and with entrepreneurial skill

making little difference in the success or failure of an oilpatch trucker, few individuals want to enter the business.

For those drivers sticking it out in the reconfigured industry, the identity crisis described here has also resulted in a period of general unrest. Truckers under the new system are much less businessmen and much more employees for the major trucking companies; because they no longer rely on their own experience, skills, and social connections, many truckers feel distanced from the oilpatch itself. In the past, most individuals in the region felt somewhat allied with the major oil companies – these large companies were conceived of as the foundation of the Acadian oilpatch, and it was only through their heavy capital investments that oil could be profitably extracted. The contracts and alliances of the reconfigured trucking industry have altered this conceptual map. Under the new system, the oil companies, service companies, and alliance-based trucking companies are viewed as a cooperating unit deriving increasing profits at the expense of labor, and from the oilpatch trucker's perspective, he or she is now as much a part of that exploited labor pool as the pipefitters, sandblasters, roustabouts, and other laborers at the foundation of the oil industry.

These changes in the structural conditions of work, and the shifting occupational identity that has accompanied it, have together pushed the oilpatch truckers into a liminal space in which previously inconceivable alternatives now seem both opportune and apt. In the section above I described how, as a result of this process, new gender, ethnic and geographical groups have successfully entered the industry and, in some cases, assumed

leadership positions in the associations that convene oilpatch truckers. Other manifestations of this liminality, I suggest, include both the recent lawsuit levied against the trucking companies as well as the nascent movement to unionize oilpatch truckers.

In 1995, a group of owner/operators and independent truck company owners filed a civil action against the alliance-based trucking companies that had come to dominate the oilpatch.¹⁸ The truckers built their case around the contention that the alliances represented monopolistic practices that are illegal under the Sherman Anti-Trust Act and the Clayton Act. The truckers retained a lawyer from Lafayette; he slowly built the case over the next year. Meanwhile, the trucking companies called in their “Atlanta lawyers” [AG36] and quickly forced a dismissal of the case. Several of the truckers participating in the study suggested that subterfuge on the part of the alliance-based trucking companies sabotaged their efforts; while these allegations remain unsubstantiated, many of the truckers noted that legal efforts of this sort would inevitably prove futile in the political context of Louisiana.¹⁹

The lawsuit, I suggest, is emblematic of the shift in occupational identity resulting from the reorganization of the industry. In the past, the truckers and the trucking companies worked cooperatively in serving the oil industry – the notion of filing a such a lawsuit would be inconceivable. It is only through the chain of events that, at first, stripped the trucker’s occupation of entrepreneurial activity and mitigated the transformation of social to economic capital, and, second, reconfigured the trucker’s

¹⁸ Del Sanchez et al. Vs. Acme Truck Line, Inc. et al. USDC, No. 96-0629, Section “L-0”

occupational identity as laborer rather than independent businessman, only then did the trucking companies emerge as a monolithic and monopolistic strata with interests at odds with those of the truckers themselves.

The period in which this lawsuit was filed coincided with the formation of several trucker associations within the oilpatch. In 1999 – when the data for this paper were gathered – the predominant trucker association in the region was the Gulf Coast Oilfield Hauler’s Association. The association was further divided into two distinct factions. The first sought to avoid any overtures toward unionization, instead hoping that solidarity between drivers would be enough to challenge the dominance of the alliance-based trucking companies. The second faction of the association actively pursued links to and assistance from several unions. The premise for this second group, one assumes, was the recent success of the Gulf Coast Mariners’ efforts at unionizing. Both factions of the association strove to fulfill the same basic goals; the non-union faction merely sought to avoid the “union” moniker, a move which, in the context of the traditionally anti-union South, makes some sense.

The very fact, however, that the move toward unionization – whether through direct overtures or through the trappings of a quasi-unionistic association – is being entertained by the truckers of the oilpatch merits attention. The lack of success of Southern unionization movements is well documented (Aronowitz 1998); over time, the stability of this facet of the occupational landscape in the South has fostered an animosity

¹⁹ Despite this, oilpatch truckers recently mounted a second legal challenge to the alliance-based trucking

toward unions even within sectors of the workforce that seem adamantly pro-union in other regions of the United States. For the truck drivers of the oilpatch, the combination of this traditional hostility toward unions with an industrial structure that configured their role more as entrepreneur than laborer resulted in a durable resistance against union overtures. I argue that, as much as the structural reconfiguration of the industry can be cited for the insurgent unionization movement, it is the liminal state of the truckers' occupational identity that truly opened the door to the possibility of unionization: for the truck drivers of Acadiana, unionization became possible only after they had been relegated to the role of oilpatch labor.

companies. This lawsuit was underway at the time of this document's publication.

VI. Conclusion

In the course of this paper I have covered several diverse topics. My foremost goal – and one I hope I achieved – was to give the reader a clear picture of the social impact of deregulation. Deregulation is typically gauged in purely economic terms – we learn in the newspapers, for example, that regulation might be costing the average consumer an extra dollar for every hundred spent on airfare, or that the cost of sugar has been held at an artificial high through collusion between government and industry. Americans' reaction to regulation is visceral, and there is certainly some sense to this reaction.

At the same time, however, the methods of applied anthropology have a way of turning over those unturned stones and, in the course of this process, yielding a new take on an old question. At the onset of this study, I sought to look at the social impact of deregulation. The participants had much to say about this, but they also pointed to cracks in the economic arguments for the efficiency of deregulation. The truckers make good arguments for the economic *inefficiency* of deregulation in the oilpatch, and as many participants added, we can only hope that the oil companies will revisit the issue before it is forgotten once and for all. These arguments parallel their stories about the broad social impact of deregulation.

These social impacts are difficult to measure in quantitative terms. Deregulation has certainly pushed many drivers in the region to the brink of bankruptcy (or beyond). Even the casual observer visiting the bayou will notice innumerable trucks lining the road, and with a little background, the same observer might connect the strips of worn tire

rubber on the sides of the highway with the truckers' inability to meet their basic maintenance costs. The economists that led the regulation/deregulation debate in the 1980s do not see into the oilpatch truckers' houses and trailers, however, and these researchers can at best only perceive the rough outline of the impact of the industry's restructuring – one that keeps fathers and mothers out on the road for longer and longer stretches of time while putting less and less money into their hands at the end of each week.

In this argument, I suggest that the economic impacts of deregulation have a largely unmeasured social impact. The truckers with whom I spoke, however, pushed me toward a more complex conclusion about the social impacts of deregulation: the legislation not only made most truckers poorer, but it changed the way business was done in the oilpatch trucking industry. Prior to deregulation, the structure of the trucking industry made use of the social and familial networks of Acadiana. The success of any particular component of the industry depended upon the ability of the individuals comprising that component to hustle their own work – to take whatever customer base they might have through family and friends and to build upon that with their own entrepreneurial skill. With enough work, an individual could make a business in the trucking industry and make a name for himself with the people of Acadiana. Under regulation, then, the border between business and the social life of the trucker was difficult to discern. The process of building and transforming social capital into economic capital was the essence of the industry.

With deregulation, the paths up through the industry have been closed. Truckers can rarely save enough money to purchase additional trucks, and these additional trucks make so little profit that any effort to do so would hardly be worthwhile. Through the monopolistic alliances formed between trucking companies and the customers of the oilpatch, the quantity of social capital possessed by a particular individual is meaningless in his success or failure. In this way, deregulation shifted the very structure of the industry.

More importantly, however, by locking access to work in a series of alliances, the major trucking companies of the oilpatch pushed the truckers into a crisis of identity. The trucking companies that now dominate the oilpatch no longer need individuals with wide-reaching social networks or an abundance of entrepreneurial hustle. Instead, they merely seek individuals to hold the wheel and follow the itinerary designated by the trucking company. Because their position has been deskilled, because the potential for advancement is remote, and because the individual's success in the industry has little to do with his or her personal qualities, I contend that the truckers of Acadiana are mired in a crisis of identity. Under regulation, their role was that of independent businessman. Under deregulation, their role is that of laborer.

The truckers have not simply adopted this new occupational identity. Instead, this identity has become the forum in which the battle between trucker and company is being fought. The course of this contest suggests that, first, there is a lag between changes in the structure of the industry and changes in identity. The occupational identity of the oilpatch

trucker was constructed under the regulated system over a period of decades. While the infrastructure underneath this identity changed rapidly with deregulation, the identity did not follow suit. Rather, the truckers grapple with the relationship between the new organization of the industry and their occupational identity of old.

This opens up the second process: during this liminal period, the truckers devised strategic means for battling the dominance of the major trucking companies through selectively revising their occupational identity. The changes wrought by deregulation opened the industry to new categories of labor – women, African-Americans, and individuals from other regions of the country began to enter the oilpatch transportation sector. Over the years succeeding deregulation, these groups were eventually welcomed into the fold of an occupational set traditionally comprised of white Cajun men. In a sense, these borders of the oilpatch truckers' occupational identity were abandoned. Instead, energy was focused on what are perceived as the integral components of the truckers' occupational identity: skilled, entrepreneurial, and self-employed. These are the qualities that the truckers refuse to yield.

Finally, I argue that the current liminality of the oilpatch truckers' occupational identity is responsible for opening the doors to previously incomprehensible possibilities. Not only have women, blacks, and outsiders made an entry into the oilpatch, but together the truckers are now exploring the possibility of collective action. The lawsuits and clandestine union movement are unusual facets in the Southern labor market; I argue that these possibilities were opened not just because the drivers have been relegated to the role

of oilpatch laborers – there are plenty of non-union laborers in the South – but rather because the changes brought about by deregulation altered the very fabric of Acadian life, at least for the truckers and their families. Deregulation didn't just take money out of the truck drivers' pockets – it changed the way they knew each other, and it changed the way they thought of themselves. It is against these changes, along with the economic impact of deregulation, that the truckers now fight.

The methodological and theoretical contributions I sought through this paper are threefold. First, I hope that the paper demonstrates the value of applied anthropological approaches to the study of policy and labor. In reading over the journal articles and books that dealt with deregulation, it became increasingly clear that anthropology offers a unique approach to the study of these problems, primarily because it puts researchers in the field with the population in question, and thereby explores extra-economic impacts. Very little of the information provided above could be gleaned from the library, from discussions with transportation experts at the various state agencies, or from the owners of the trucking companies. The truckers live with the problems and dilemmas of the industry every day; through our interviews and discussions the truckers imparted a rich and detailed description of their work and life. I hope that at least some of this richness has been conveyed.

Second, I have sought to provide an argument for a more nuanced understanding of social capital as a concept. In the oilpatch, the trucking industry relied upon the social

capital of the truckers and drivers, and through deregulation, social capital was rendered irrelevant. Yet the social networks in which this capital traveled were the same networks that monitored the boundaries of the truckers' occupational identity – preventing women, outsiders, and African-Americans from successfully entering the industry. Deregulation has certainly wreaked havoc upon the truckers of the Acadian oilpatch, but it has also broken the replicative bonds between the social and occupational realm. The description of the trucking industry provided here demonstrates that social capital is not always put to good use – or, more specifically, that particular systems of social capital can manifest both good and bad qualities simultaneously.

Finally, explorations of identity have for the most part been cast as antithetical to applied work. I have sought to demonstrate how analysis of the construction and deployment of identity might comprise a part of an applied research design. For the truckers of the oilpatch, their occupational identity has become the point of contestation, and, furthermore, the motivation for their continued struggle against the dominance of the major trucking companies. At least the seed of this idea is present in this thesis, and it provides a starting point for future research on this complex connection between social networks, occupational identity, and the allocation of material resources.

VII. References

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