



“Black Gold” Erupts through the timbers of a 1920s Oklahoma Oil Derrick. These derricks were called *rigs*, and the men who built them *rigbuilders*. Rigbuilding was a rough, tough, business - and no one practiced it with more drive and determination than Ardo Van Tuyl during the 1920s Oklahoma oil boom and 1930s depression [Courtesy: University of Oklahoma Western History Collection]

Chapter 18

Oklahoma Oil 1912 ~ 1941

Riding the Rails to the Golden State

They rode for free in whatever spaces the freight cars allowed, all the way from Kansas City to just this side of Denver. Warned about *railroad dicks* at the Denver freight yards who would beat a man senseless for hitching a ride on the rails, Harold and Ardo Van Tuyl did the prudent thing: they bought tickets from the first stop east of Denver to the first stop west, then got back into the freight cars with their older, more worldly, hobo travelling companions. Across the mountains and the desert all the way to Los Angeles they travelled, where they jumped off the moving train onto California soil. This was the Van Tuyl brothers' first trip out West, but it would not be their last.¹

In 1912, Lew Van Tuyl was busy building a new city - San Diego, California. His sons Harold and Ardo joined him there that year and were promptly put to work laying concrete and doing all other manner of backbreaking labor for their taskmaster father. Ardo, 19 years old with an 8th grade education, got to attend high school in San Diego, to play on the football squad, and develop some proficiency as catcher for a local baseball team. He joined his buddies diving (they called it *nuding*) in the coves at seaside La Jolla, and took a motorcycle ride over dirt roads to the village of La Mesa Springs. In the spring of 1913, he posed in new city duds at a photographer's studio, had the photo made into a postcard, and penned the following note to his mother back in Edwards, Missouri:

Dear Mamma: How's farming by now? ... Got a card from Mingo, guess she is home by now, wish I was.

Edwards, Missouri never was a village of any consequence - you won't find it on any map, and nobody can tell you how to get there - but for Lynn Van Tuyl early in the 20th Century, it was a place where a divorced mother of two grown boys could afford to spend her hard-earned wages on a place of her own.² Lynn had been Malinda Viola Chumbley of Verona, Missouri before her marriage to Lew Van Tuyl, the father of her sons Harold and Ardo and her daughter Tishomingo (called "Ming"). Divorced by 1905, Lynn later worked as the cook and manager for a small itinerant construction crew that travelled from their home base in southern Missouri to as far away as Georgia, building sidewalks. Her teenage sons Harold and Ardo travelled with her, pitching in with the work crew. By 1912, Lynn had remarried and moved with her contractor husband first to

¹ The recollections of Ardo Van Tuyl, as told to Rory Van Tuyl in the 1950s and 60s.

² This Ozark land was notoriously poor - it yielded only 10 bushels of corn to the acre. Modern Iowa farms yield 100 bushels of corn per acre with aggressive farming methods.



Ardo Van Tuyl rode the rails from backwoods Missouri to California in 1912. Working as a construction laborer for his dad [Lew Van Tuyl], the 18 year old lad still found time to get duded up for the photographer [left] and to play football on the local high school team [below].

Ocean swimming, baseball playing, and inland motorcycle excursions were all part of his good times in San Diego.

Having seen a bit of the California lifestyle, Ardo preferred to return to Edwards, Missouri, where his divorced-and-remarried mother was living. By 1920, he was building oil derricks in Oklahoma while his dad was continuing to boss construction jobs in San Diego and Los Angeles.



↑
Ardo

Illinois, then to Edwards, where she bought a 40 acre farm with her savings. When the homesick Ardo wrote to his "Mamma" in Edwards during the spring of 1913, he was torn between two alternatives: return to Missouri...or go north to Alaska?

In May, 1913, with construction earnings in his pocket, the 20 year old Ardo Van Tuyl climbed aboard the coastal steamer *Harvard* in San Diego, and headed north for San Francisco. No more freight cars - he would be travelling in style! Like any impressionable lad, he was stunned by San Francisco. Following an older man's advice, Ardo put all his money into his shoe, and set off for the sinful *Barbary Coast*. What experiences he had in that part of San Francisco are long forgotten, but he did visit Chinatown, where he witnessed "Chinamen" stretched out in an opium den, thoroughly intoxicated from their opium pipes.³ His San Francisco escapade behind him, Ardo boarded the *Admiral Farragut* bound for Seattle, still harboring notions of Alaska. But in Seattle, he turned east instead, first to Washington, then Idaho, before departing by train on New Year's Day, 1914, bound for Kansas City and home.⁴

Edwards, Missouri

Waiting at home for the young adventurer were three women who cared about him. First, his dearly beloved mother, Lynn; second, his cousin Olatha - much enamored of her travelling relative; and third - and most importantly as it turned out - a 17 year old "hired girl" named Lola McGinnis. Lola was a semi-orphan (her mother had died and her father was an alcoholic) who had been sent to live with her grandmother in Edwards, Missouri. Lynn, then 42 years old, had contracted breast cancer, and Lola had been hired to help her out. The two women formed a sisterly bond, with Lynn confiding her secrets to Lola. When Ardo returned home - a handsome 20 year old fresh from his manly adventure out west - Lola saw her opportunity and took it. A romantic soul with a gift for words, Lola had attended school only through the 3rd grade. But she was a bright and determined young lady who often got her way. The very next year, Lola took Ardo to the altar. Edwards being too small to have its own church, the young couple hid themselves to the nearby village of *Nobby*, had the preacher say the words after church, and listened to the choir and congregation sing: "*Will the Waters Be Chilly?*"⁵

In need of money, the young couple hit the road in search of seasonal farm work. While harvesting wheat in Kansas during September of 1916, Lola gave birth to her first child, a boy she

³ Big cities and drugs went together even in 1913. But the local Chinese were allowed their vices - just so long as they didn't cause any trouble for the white population. Present in California since the Gold Rush, Chinese had built the original transcontinental railroad and contributed enormously to the growth of the Golden State. But from 1882 to 1943, Chinese were prevented from immigrating legally to the United States, and from 1906 until 1948, were legally barred from marrying Caucasians [Dicker, L., "The Chinese in San Francisco, pg. 14].

⁴ He worked on a dairy farm in Snohomish, Washington for 2 months; on the Gillette Ranch in Lewiston, Idaho; and in a Spokane clothing store before heading east [Bob Van Tuyl recollections].

⁵ Lola delighted in telling this tale - and many others - over and over to her grandsons.

called Bobby Lynn.⁶ Returning to Missouri, Ardo bought 12 acres of woodland in Edwards, cleared the trees and brush from it, and set the harvested logs aside to build a cabin for his new family. As his son Bob remembered:⁷

As the day came to start [building] the cabin, a neighbor asked Dad to come help with some task on his farm. Of course Dad was disgruntled, but in that day and age no one could refuse a call for help. Dad worked like a demon and, despite the fact that the neighbor kept dragging his feet, the task was finished by 1 O'clock in the afternoon and Dad set out immediately for his own farm with the neighbor tagging along behind him. You will understand Dad's surprise when he found that the men of the whole countryside had built the cabin and were just putting the finishing touches on it as Dad arrived. This left nothing to be done for the rest of the afternoon but [to] have a picnic with all the food the ladies of the countryside had prepared. Over 50 years later, I was told by one of the old-timers that they believed it to be the last "log rolling" in the State of Missouri.

The home place was planted in beans and potatoes, but to support his wife and child Ardo had to travel throughout the West in search of whatever work he could find.⁸ Life must have seemed a daunting prospect to the young father. In April of 1917, the United States declared war on Germany and patriotic fervor swept the land. As a result, Ardo and his brother Harold - along with other young men from Edwards - drove to the county seat one day, where they enlisted in the U.S. Army. The wives of Edwards - fit to be tied - hitched up a wagon, drove themselves 20 miles into town, and told the Army recruiters in no uncertain terms that their men would not be going to war! Their arguments prevailed, and Ardo and his cohorts returned to life in the backwoods and on the itinerant labor circuit. From that day forward, he would no longer seek adventure in far away places: the reality of family life had finally taken hold.

Looking for a better life for himself and his family, Ardo Van Tuyl once again boarded the train in July of 1918. This time he was headed for Montana, with the idea of taking up a homestead for his family.⁹ Along the way, word reached him that his mother Lynn had died. Ardo returned at once to Edwards, his homesteading ambitions set aside. He was deeply attached to this woman who had seen him through the rough times they faced together with no husband and father to support them. Not surprisingly, Ardo Van Tuyl throughout his life felt little, if any, affection for his dad. With his mother gone, he would have no real reason to stay in Edwards, so he redoubled his efforts to find a way to make it in the rapidly-changing 20th century world beyond the Ozarks.

⁶ The "Lynn" middle name was in honor of the child's grandmother, the much-loved Malinda.

⁷ Van Tuyl, Bob, "As I Remember," unpublished autobiography circa 1980.

⁸ Postcards to and from him in Mankato, Kansas [1916?] and Shelby, Idaho [1917] survive.

⁹ The U.S. Homestead Act of 1862 allowed people essentially free title to large tracts of public land in exchange for their developing that land as a family farm. Most homesteading took place in the late 19th century, but the practice was still alive as the 1920s approached.



Lola McGinnis Van Tuyl [right] held her baby Billy up for inspection by his older brother Bobby. The time was 1918, and the place was the tiny Ozarks hamlet of Edwards, Missouri. The family, headed by Ardo Van Tuyl, was living in a dirt-floored log cabin raised by neighbors. The logs were prepared by Ardo in the traditional 19th century way: he cleared his 12 acre property and used the tree trunks to build a house. The winter winds were kept at bay by a caulking of mud and straw. Though they lived in coarse rural poverty, the Van Tuyls never lost hope, even when Billy died of a childhood ailment and Lola miscarried her third child. Two years after this picture was taken, they joined the 20th century: Ardo moved his family to a new life in the Oklahoma oilfields.



Country Medicine

Ardo Van Tuyl, who seldom had a good word to say about anyone who wasn't of white Northern European extraction did, however, have a tender spot in his heart for two unlikely groups of people: Cherokees and Gypsies. His mother, Lynn, claimed to be part Cherokee, and though she had no evidence of it, her claim was enough to persuade Ardo. But as to Gypsies, the story was more complicated. These wandering folk had invaded the Midwestern United States by the 1880s, and - as they always had been in Europe - were feared and despised by the whites. Mothers would warn their children to hide when Gypsies approached, fearing the swarthy nomads would steal the little ones. But when a Gypsy woman approached Lew and Lynn Van Tuyl's home in Verona, Missouri in 1894, she came on an errand of mercy. It seems that their baby, Ardo, was dying of an ailment the local doctors had no idea how to treat: *erysipelas*. "If it is *erysipelas*., I can cure it," asserted the Gypsy woman. Having no choice in the matter, the parents agreed to the woman's bizarre - but effective - plan. Erysipelas is a bacterial infection of the skin, and the Gypsy woman's proposed cure made logical sense, even though it drove Lynn to tears. "Gather up all the *fresh* cow dung in the area," she said "and I will pack him head-to-toe in it." "He will survive." The bizarre treatment was followed to the letter, and Ardo Van Tuyl survived - his recovery a testament to Gypsy folk medicine.

Ardo's son, Bob, had a similar close call when he was an infant in backwoods Missouri in 1918. Here is the story in Bob's own words:

In those days, embalming was done right in the home. For reasons not clear to me, Grandmother was embalmed in our cabin and half a bottle of formaldehyde was left over. Since it was the custom never to throw anything away, Mother placed the bottle on a high shelf to keep it safe from me. In time she had occasion to take everything down from the shelf and place it on the table. Before returning the things to the shelf, she went to the spring for a bucket of water. On her return, I was crying and spitting and the formaldehyde bottle was empty. Mother yelled to Dad who was planting beans. He jumped on the plow horse bareback and went for the doctor. Mother returned to the stove and grabbed the teakettle, which contained warm water, mixed a salt water solution which she forced down me. She then placed my stomach on her forearm and ran for the neighbors with my head hanging down. Just as she stepped on the neighbors porch, the formaldehyde and whatever else there may have been came up. When the doctor arrived he praised mother and told her he couldn't have done any better. As for me, I'm happy I lived to tell about it.

Thus was this unpromising line of the family Van Tuyl preserved - but just barely.

Life in the Oilfields

As his father had done before him, and as countless men were doing in his own time, Ardo Van Tuyl set out for Oklahoma in search of work:¹⁰

He arrived with a quarter in his pocket, slept on a pile of lumber...and went to work the next morning in the oil field for \$5 a day. In short order he was making \$28 a day. Naturally the 12 acres of beans and potatoes in Missouri were forgotten and he sent for mother and me....We [soon] found ourselves living in [an oil town named] Slick...Though I was only 3 1/2 at the time, my playmate was a 6 year old Indian boy...the caricature of the Indian in a fancy hat, a big automobile, smoking a big cigar is not exaggerated...even [my Indian playmate] smoked big cigars.

On Christmas Day, 1920, Lola gave birth to a daughter - Wanda - in the filthy, booming oil town of Slick, Oklahoma. A short-lived recession dried up oil field work for a 6 month period in 1921, so the Van Tuyls headed back home to Edwards. When the oilfield started up again, they said goodbye to their log cabin in the Ozarks for the last time, and headed back to Slick:¹¹

Our return to Oklahoma was made in a Model T stripped-down Ford. "Stripped-down" meant no body whatever! A box was placed over the gas tank to provide a seat for Dad to drive and Mother to sit and hold Wanda, who was still a baby. A 3 foot square platform of planks was built over the rear axle for my uncle [Harold] and me to ride on...I remember napping on that platform while my uncle held me on. Upon awakening, I offered to hold him if he wished to take a nap. He didn't seem to be sleepy...

Ardo did well enough in Slick working as an oil rig builder employed by others. But he was a natural boss - he had no doubt acquired this trait from his father - so he quickly rose to the rank of *crew pusher*. The work was rough, and the men were rougher:¹²

Working then [1920s] was pure hell...We had to hit a hard lick every time we raised our hands and keep it up all day long. I've seen rig builders piss while they was working; they didn't have time to take out to the brush, and they was so damned tired they couldn't control themselves anyway. I've worked till my shoes would squish every step I took with the sweat that'd run down in them. And I couldn't get my hands closed at nights; holding a rig hatchet or a crosscut saw all day long, working with it, the muscles in my hands would get so cramped I couldn't close my fingers. I'd have to take one hand and bend the fingers down to grasp something small like a match.

Aware of his ability to drive men to their limits - and aware, too, of his own ability to out-work any hand in the oil field - Ardo Van Tuyl decided to take another step: he would try contracting.

The Phillips Petroleum Company was in the early 1920s expending a large portion of its exploration and drilling resources in the Slick - Bristow area.¹³ One day - probably in 1921 - Ardo

¹⁰ Van Tuyl, pg. 3.

¹¹ Van Tuyl, pg. 4.

¹² De Witt, N. "The Rig Builder," [a 1939 interview with rig builder Charlie Storms] in *Voices from the Oil Fields*, P. Lambert and K. Franks editors, pg. 25.

Van Tuyl marched himself into the Phillips Petroleum office in Slick, announced that he was an oilfield contractor, and asked for work. The Phillips men threw him a small bone: he could have 4 *bobtailing* jobs - each of which would take about a day to complete.¹⁴ Ardo came out of the office about an hour after going in, joined his brother Harold in the Model T, and said "Well, looks like I'm in the contracting business." With Harold's help [Harold declined to be Ardo's partner, preferring to work for wages] Ardo exploded into action. The challenge was too great to resist. In 24 hours he returned to the Phillips office and announced that he'd finished the job. The Phillips men said "Fine, now get the other 3 done." "I got 'em all done," said Ardo, "got anything else for me?" Indeed they did! Ardo Van Tuyl walked out of the Phillips office that day with a contract for 100 bobtailing jobs. He was on his way!

Boom and Bust

The labor of oilfield men like Ardo Van Tuyl drove Oklahoma oil production skyward in the early 1920s: it rose from just over 100 million barrels per year in 1920 to 160 million in 1923.¹⁵ But supply had temporarily outstripped demand by late 1923, and Phillips Petroleum was forced to suspend drilling in the second half of the year, due to overproduction and low prices.¹⁶ Ardo Van Tuyl, having earned enough money during Slick's boom years to buy Lola a brand-new Hudson hardtop automobile, sensed the passing boom in 1923 and moved his family and his contracting business 10 miles west to Bristow - the hub of the local oilfield. Besides its proximity to yet-untapped oil pools, Bristow had one big advantage over Slick: Route 66, the "Mainstreet of America" ran right through the town, and Bristow was growing by leaps and bounds. Ardo erected a temporary house for his family on the "wrong side of the tracks", outfitting it with the first flush toilet on the block.¹⁷ Having thus provided "temporary" housing with a promise of a mansion to come later, Ardo turned his energies to building oil rigs, and making money - lots of money.

¹³ History seems to have overlooked the importance of the Slick and Bristow oilfields to Phillips. According to the company ledger for drilling expenses [cumulative 1919-1929: Phillips Petroleum Archives]: District 9 [State of Texas], \$419,912; District 3 [Burbank & Kay], \$159,402; District 8 [Slick and Bristow], \$45,866; District 2 [Bartlesville], \$36,536. No other district came close to these figures. Clearly, Phillips spent more money looking for oil in Slick and Bristow than in any Oklahoma area except the fabulous Burbank fields. Rig building expenses must have been in proportion to drilling costs. When Phillips experienced hard times, as they did in 1920-21 [1920 earnings \$6.2 million, 1921 earnings \$3.95 million, 1922 earnings \$9.2 million - per annual reports], they would turn to contractors as a means of reducing company expenses while avoiding labor unrest. Ardo Van Tuyl the oilfield labor contractor performed much the same function as Otto Van Tuyl the privateer: they both got the dirty job done with dirty, rough men which they had the ability to push to the limits of human endurance.

¹⁴ *Bobtailing* involved conversion of drilling rigs to pumping configuration. Engines and engine houses were installed, along with belt halls, jack posts, sampson posts, calf wheels, walking beams and bull wheels. [Van Tuyl, pg. 7].

¹⁵ Franks, K., "The Rush Begins," U. of Oklahoma Press, pg. 133.

¹⁶ Phillips Petroleum Annual Report for 1923.

¹⁷ Van Tuyl, pg. 6.

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During the boom years 1923-28, Ardo Van Tuyl used his twinkle-in-the-eye personality to get all the contracting jobs he could handle. His fanatical work ethic - and his ability to drive men - ensured that these jobs were completed on time. One year during this period, he made \$50,000; the next year, \$80,000; and the third, fourth, and fifth years, \$100,000! He had gone from log-cabin poverty to boom town wealth in just 5 years. But although he knew how to make money, he had no talent for managing it - or even hanging on to it. So it was a good ride...while it lasted.¹⁸

Bob Van Tuyl remembered these boom years in Bristow:¹⁹

Booze flowed freely [in our house] even though this was in the days of Prohibition. Many parties were given for business reasons...I remember having to help a State Senator get his pants buttoned up [after one of these parties], because he was too stoned to do it [himself].

One Prohibition-era story stands out:²⁰

Dad made home brew in the bathroom. Every time he bottled a new batch, I would be awakened by [the sound of] bottles exploding in the night...A "holier-than-thou" religious family lived across the street from us...every time they suspected Dad of making home brew, they would call the police. The police would always call in advance to see when Dad would be home. They would come out at the appointed time and have a bottle of beer with him. Then they would report to the neighbor that they had searched the whole house and found nothing. One Christmas Dad had been too busy to make arrangements for the Christmas whiskey he felt obligated to hand out to business associates. He bought five gallons of green whiskey...[and] was assured that all he had to do was simmer it overnight to age it. He put the five gallon keg in a no. 3 washtub filled with water and set the washtub on a hotplate in the bathroom and pulled the plug in the bung hole of the keg. He turned the fire up to what he thought was good for simmering and went to bed. [Early next] morning I was jerked out of bed and shoved [out] into the cold in my pajamas and bare feet...It seems that instead of simmering, the tub of water had boiled and evaporated all the whiskey...[which was now] running down the walls. Naturally the holier-than-thou kids picked up the scent and told their parents...[who] promptly called the police. The whole force (about 4), thinking "hot dog, more beer" hopped into a car and came out to the house. Did they ever kid Dad!! He promised them some of the next batch of home brew and they invented some excuse to tell the neighbors.

In the Oklahoma oilfields, the Roaring Twenties crashed to an abrupt halt in late 1930, when crude oil prices fell to less than half their 1920s value.²¹ Phillips Petroleum posted its first-ever operating loss in the 4th quarter of 1930. The *Great Depression* was descending on Oklahoma, with the worst yet to come for most people. Ironically, Ardo Van Tuyl's world came crashing down just before the Depression hit. It seems that the Phillips Petroleum superintendents Ardo did most of his work for were caught taking *kickbacks* - i.e. bribes - from contractors. The superintendents were summarily fired, and Ardo - being guilty by association - was blacklisted by

¹⁸ Van Tuyl, pg. 9.

¹⁹ Van Tuyl, pp. 12-13.

²⁰ Van Tuyl, pp. 12-13.

²¹ For the years 1926-1929, crude oil sold for \$1.53/barrel. In the fourth quarter of 1930, the price crashed, hitting \$0.64/barrel. [Phillips Petroleum annual reports for 1930-31].

Phillips.²² Ardo had invested in two dry oil wells, two money-losing farms, business property in Tulsa, and a lumber yard in Earlsboro.²³ With the Oklahoma economy turning poor even before the main wave of the Depression hit - and due to Ardo's complete lack of business sense (he never kept books, preferring to do business on a handshake) - the properties were lost to foreclosure. Having gone through 4 Dodge touring cars, 6 Hudsons, a Ford, a sport model Nash, plus thousands of dollars worth of tools and equipment, Ardo found himself flat broke by 1930. In this, he was not alone.

Hard Times in Carlsbad

No one who survived the *Great Depression* of the 1930s ever forgot it, and many were profoundly scarred by the experience. Bob Van Tuyl, who turned 13 just as disaster struck his world, experienced a strange mix of poverty and plenty through the 1930s. The experience shaped his character through these formative years to such an extent that almost every subsequent action of his life can be traced to his roller-coaster ride through the terrible decade. The boy who had reveled in his position as "richest kid on the block" in 1920s Bristow abruptly found himself transported to rural New Mexico, where he was compelled to hunt rabbits to help feed his family. Here's how it happened:²⁴

Dad began looking for another way to make a living. A hunting buddy of his [named "Blackie" Crowell] loaned him \$5000...Mother and Dad were [by then] too worldly to go back to the log cabin in Missouri, so they chose to ride out the Depression in Carlsbad, New Mexico. Dad bought a tourist camp [motel], called Camp Orange with the \$5000 plus a Whippet coupe [a car]...As soon as school was out, Mother, Wanda and I went to Carlsbad in the Whippet. The [camp's] horrible orange color was soon changed to white, and Dad renamed it Camp Navajo...The buildings included a grocery store, a filling station, and 20 cabins...Camp Orange had been used by prostitutes, and the previous owner had been able to survive by renting them rooms. There was no way Mother and Dad would have such goings-on around their children...The problem was that...in times of depression...very few people could afford to travel...[except at the 4th of July] nobody was renting rooms...the filling station wasn't making any money, but it had to be kept open or we wouldn't have had any customers for the rooms...It became apparent Dad couldn't make a go of it running the tourist camp. He had let some families stay, rent free, for long periods of time because he didn't have the heart to kick them out...

Despite his poverty, Bob Van Tuyl found a 14 year old's enjoyment in Carlsbad. Fishing, hunting, camping out, swimming in the Pecos river, and cruising around with the guys were his main passions at the time. On one occasion, he and a friend explored the remains of an ancient Indian campsite, much to Bob's fascination. But there was an unwholesome trend leading him astray. He started to smoke - it became a lifelong addiction - and he started to run around with a

²² Van Tuyl, pg. 13. Bob Van Tuyl always maintained that his dad was not involved in the scandal. Given his way of doing business with the Bristow Police, however, anything was possible. Ardo Van Tuyl never talked about this phase of his life, so he was never heard to either confirm or deny involvement.

²³ Ardo put up 50% of the capital required to sink two wells: his share was \$50,000 per well.

²⁴ Van Tuyl, pg. 14.

gang of 4 to 6 fellows who got into mischief. Stealing milk, gasoline, and car parts were among their not-so-nice activities. Bob also started to drive at age 14 (no license was needed back then) and nearly got himself and his buddies killed in the process. One night, after a fracas with another group at a local dance, Bob's gang was driving the same country road as the rivals, following close behind them:²⁵

...our driver kept crowding behind them, much to their consternation. I was sitting in the middle. All of a sudden, he jumped out on the running board and told me to drive. I was so dumbfounded that I couldn't think of anything to do but get [behind] the empty wheel and step on the accelerator. I'd been dying to drive for some time anyway. After all, I was fourteen. The other car was open with a flatbed on the back. Our driver told me to pull up close behind them, because he wanted to jump onto their car. He crawled up on the fender, over it, and stood on the bumper, holding onto the radiator cap. I pulled up close and the other car sped up to top speed. Our car was faster so it was easy for me to keep up even though I was in a state of petrified horror over the disaster that could happen...the other car suddenly slowed down. I jammed on our brakes and we went into a 360-degree spin on the gravel road. The car came to a stop in the center of the road...During the spin, I could see the boy on the fender, with his legs sticking straight out, holding onto the radiator for dear life. As he got off the fender, he exclaimed, "Boy! That was real driving." I never did tell him this was the first time I had ever driven a car.

Bob, who had been a top student in Bristow, lost interest in school while in Carlsbad:²⁶

[In school, I was conscious for the first time] of being poor. The principal was an alcoholic, the teachers were distant and aloof and involved with their own problems. The football coach ran around with the best-known whore in town. I had one pair of white duck pants to wear to school. Mother washed and ironed them every night.

Probably the lowest point in Bob's Carlsbad school career came when he physically attacked the band director one day right in the cafeteria. Years later, he confided to sister Wanda, that had he remained in Carlsbad, he would certainly have headed to jail.²⁷ Why had this bright young man become such a troublemaker? Partly, it was just the normal teenage rebellion experienced by boys throughout history. But in Bob's case it also included a large dose of resentment: resentment at being poor, and resentment toward his dad. Throughout the Bristow years, Bob had seen his dad as a successful, admirable character. But financial failure had reduced Ardo to a seeming state of incompetence in his son's eyes. Bob redirected his anger toward his dad into anger toward society in general. He was definitely headed for big trouble. Fortunately for him, the family's situation had become so desperate that Ardo was forced to let the bank take the tourist court in foreclosure, and Bob, Wanda, and Lola moved into a charity apartment run by Catholic nuns, while Ardo once again hit the road in search of work. During this period, Bob - who had been in 7 fistfights during

²⁵ Van Tuyl, pg. 17.

²⁶ Van Tuyl, pg. 15.

²⁷ Interviews with Bob and Wanda Van Tuyl. After Bob left Carlsbad, his buddies were arrested, convicted, and sentenced to 6 months in jail [suspended] for stealing money from Carlsbad Caverns.



High School students Bob and Wanda Van Tuyl, though they lived on the “wrong side of the tracks” in oil-soaked 1930s Bristow, Oklahoma were always dressed to impress by their mother, Lola. Bob owned one pair of white duck pants, which his mother would launder and iron nightly. The family had survived a period of extreme poverty in Carlsbad, New Mexico before returning to Bristow, where Bob and Wanda entered high school. By 1941, the brother and sister had made their way to California, where they both married and settled down to raise their families in postwar middle class style.



his 2 years in Carlsbad - discovered another side of his personality. He befriended a blind boy who lived in the Catholic apartment, and spent hours in the library, reading everything in sight, especially works about Indians. With Ardo gone, Bob viewed himself as the "man of the house". He was starting to grow up.

While Lola worked for the Sisters in their hospital laundry, Ardo took off for Oklahoma in his old broken-down Hudson - which sported license plates borrowed from a friend. Ardo learned the true meaning of friendship when the Hudson's tires and battery gave out halfway across Texas, leaving him stranded with no money and no prospects. There, in the heart of the country's *Dust Bowl*, Ardo Van Tuyl placed a phone call, and hoped to God it would be answered. On the other end of Ardo's call was Frank Berry, his good friend and fellow Missourian. Like Ardo, Frank had started in the oilfields in 1920. Unlike Ardo, he was a longtime employee of Phillips Petroleum. A scrupulously honest man, Frank Berry had not been implicated in the kickback scandals of 1929, so was still employed by Phillips when his friend Ardo called.²⁸ Berry drove many miles to the town where Ardo was stranded, bought him tires and a battery, loaned him money, and sent him on his way to Oklahoma. In Seminole, Ardo was able to tap his old Phillips connections to work out a deal for several years' worth of low-profit contracting in Bristow. He sent for the family, who loaded into a friend's truck, with Bob riding on the open bed with all the furniture. The destitute Van Tuyls were heading *into* Oklahoma just as everyone else was headed out!

Back to Bristow

The go-go years in the Bristow oilfield were a thing of the past by the 1930s. Ardo had taken the job of converting old-fashioned wooden-legged oil derricks to steel-legged versions, and by the second summer after his return, Bob Van Tuyl joined his dad working in the fields:²⁹

I hadn't realized what hard physical labor the men in the oilfield did. It was backbreaking work from daylight to dark....There are many heavy things to lift around an oil well site and at that time there was nothing but our muscles to lift them with...I enjoyed working up in the derrick, but Dad was slow to accept my working in high places. Before my oilfield career was over I was a first class derrick man.

At the beginning of Bob's second year in the oilfields, Ardo was laid up for 6 weeks in the hospital with a urinary infection, but he still had contracts that needed to be fulfilled:³⁰

He had some derricks to build in Texas. He had found a good man to take care of this operation. He had taken many courtesy jobs in Seminole, Oklahoma, and he

²⁸ Frank Berry, "Sober, earnest, hard working, [has] a warm, infectious smile and is well-liked by all his associates" wrote the May, 1944 issue of *Philnews*, the house organ of Phillips Petroleum [Phillips Archives, Bartlesville, OK].

²⁹ Van Tuyl, pp. 24-25.

³⁰ Van Tuyl, pp. 25-26.



Ardo Van Tuyl [shown above, right, about 1928 with daughter Wanda and father Lew] made more money than he knew what to do with during the Oklahoma oil boom years 1920-28. As a rigbuilding contractor, Ardo constructed wooden derricks such as the one pictured below bringing in a gusher of *black gold*. The newly-rich oilfield contractor burned money on cars, equipment, and bad investments just as fast as he made it. A business scandal in 1928 bankrupted him, temporarily driving him out of the oilfields.



During the late 1930s, after two bouts with bankruptcy, Ardo established his business in Seminole, Oklahoma, where he and his son Bob [opposite] assembled steel derricks and attempted to enter the oilfield equipment business by building pumping units designed by Bob. Defeated by lack of business savvy and the lingering *Great Depression*, Ardo again suffered business failure in 1940.

Phone 129

VAN TUYL RIG CO.

P. O. Box 1222

Week Ending _____

Seminole, Oklahoma

JOB SHEET

Month of _____ 19__ Farm _____ Rig No. _____ Sec. _____ Company _____

NAME	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31	Total Hours	Wage	Total Amount			

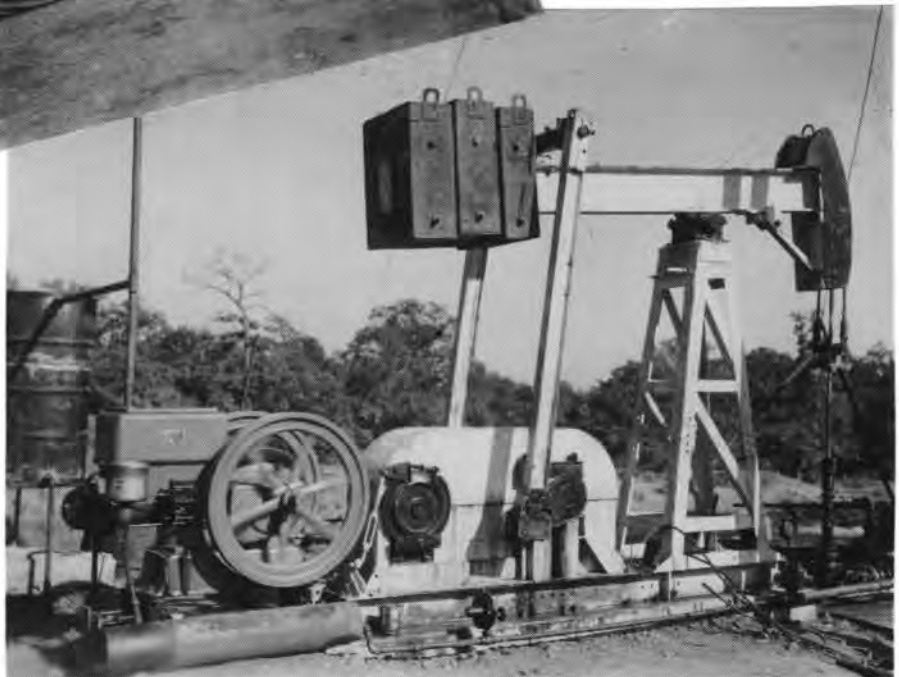
REMARKS: - Give description of work done, etc.

 _____ Foreman



Bob Van Tuyl

After dropping out of college, former engineering student Bob Van Tuyl designed this oilfield pumping unit, which his dad, Ardo, built. A technical success, this unit was the only one ever sold. Bob moved to California for a career designing aircraft.



Chapter 18

wanted me to take care of this work...His price for each job was so low that he hoped to barely break even. The job didn't require skilled men so he sent all his rigbuilders to Texas...When the [Seminole] crew learned a 17 year old boy was coming to be boss they all decided to quit. [But] good old Frank Racer talked them into giving me a tryout before they quit. Lack of jobs due to the Depression was also a factor. After all, where else could an unskilled laborer make four dollars a day? Within a very short time after I arrived, the crew had adopted me and their main concern was keeping me from working too hard. The crew was soon doubled. It seemed they all had a friend or relative they wanted to recommend. We increased from one [job] a day to five, and [the contract] that wasn't supposed to make any money cleared \$1000 during the six weeks Dad was laid up...The job in Texas that was supposed to be very profitable lost \$2000 in the same time period...

But as proud as he was of his apparent ability to boss a gang of working men, Bob Van Tuyl had higher ambitions. The young man who just a few years before had been raising hell in Carlsbad now saw an opportunity for a better life - a life away from the oilfield and his working-class origins. With business chugging along adequately enough to provide the necessary funding, Bob decided upon graduating from high school (he was the first in his family to do so) that he would go to college. Poorly trained in math, and not very inclined toward classroom learning, he nonetheless headed off to Oklahoma A&M College in 1936, hoping to become an engineer.

College Days

For many young people in 1930s Oklahoma, college was less an educational opportunity than it was a chance to pick one's self up by the bootstraps and march out into a new world of new possibilities. This was true for small-town girls, farm boys, and oilfield kids alike.³¹ This was, after all, the era of the *Okie* - that fabled dirt-poor, lower class dust bowl refugee with whom no Oklahoma A&M student wished to be associated. The antithesis of *okiedom* was embodied in the college fraternities and sororities, those institutions where many middle-class students - and those, like Bob Van Tuyl, who aspired to middle-class status - congregated. Barely able to survive the challenging academic environment, Bob sought refuge in the fraternity system. He joined the *Kappa Sigma* ["Kappa Sig"] house - a domain of relative elegance presided over by a *housemother* - and learned, among other things, the social graces. Naturally, there was a social hierarchy which evolved in such a system: there were "good" houses, "better" houses, and "best" houses.³² Among the "best" of the sororities at Oklahoma A&M was the *Pi Beta Phi* ["Pi Phi"] house, and Bob Van Tuyl wanted more than anything to get his sister Wanda admitted to it. Due to a mixup, the very pretty and popular Wanda Van Tuyl did not immediately get an invitation to join the Pi Phi sorority. Bob hit the ceiling, and spent countless hours trying to rectify what to him was an

³¹ The Morrill Land Grant College act of 1862 had enabled the state Agricultural and Mechanical Colleges, of which Oklahoma A&M [founded 1890] was one. Today it is the 19,000-student Oklahoma State U.

³² Founded mostly at post Civil War - often southern - campuses, these groups were of course discriminatory: no Jews (and in some cases, no Catholics) needed apply. Blacks, of course were not an issue since they were strictly segregated out of Oklahoma schools at the time. Many of the fraternities were founded on bogus medieval tradition, and more than a few - such as Kappa Sigma - practiced quasi-masonic rituals. Nevertheless, their main purpose was, and still is, social.

egregious error of judgment on the sorority's part. When Wanda finally was invited to join, a bureaucratic technicality prevented it, and Bob was dismayed. In fact, this social achievement was much more important to the socially-ambitious Bob than to his beloved little sister. She soon got over it: he never did.

When *parent's weekend* loomed (this was a time for parents to visit their children's fraternities and sororities) Bob went into a stew. The reason was his dad, Ardo. The rough, tough rigbuilder was - to put it mildly - not quite up to *Kappa Sigma* social standards, or so thought Bob. Ardo had developed the oilfield worker's habit of punctuating his speech liberally with blasphemous curses, and Bob quaked at his impending humiliation as *parent's weekend* approached. As it turned out, the wily old rigbuilder was on his best behavior during the visit, and he trotted out his famous charm for the fraternity brothers and housemother alike. Ardo, in short, was the life of the party - to Bob's everlasting delight.

After a temporary upturn that enabled him to move to Seminole and build a fine new house, Ardo's business slowed down once again, and money became scarce. Bob started working as a dishwasher in a local restaurant called the *College Shop* to help pay his expenses. It was there that he met Betty Plumer, an A&M coed who was eating at the *College Shop* on a regular basis. Betty was immediately attracted to the handsome dishwasher, and grew to admire his impetuous, masculine personality. Before long Bob and Betty were completely in love. Betty Plumer, as it turned out, satisfied Bob's desires in many ways. The solidly middle-class daughter of a small town banker, she was an excellent student, terrific athlete, and beautiful young lady. And to top it all off, she was a Pi Phi! Bob Van Tuyl always knew what he wanted when he saw it, and he wanted Betty. There was only one problem. A combination of his poor academic performance and his parent's worsening finances - along with his own desire to get on with life - caused Bob to decide to leave college. He and Betty kept up their relationship, however, and started wondering how they could make a future for themselves. These were hard times, and young people faced uncertain futures at best. Nonetheless, the young couple decided to get married as soon as Betty finished college and Bob could support them.

So, while Betty continued her studies, Bob went back to the oilfields. But this time he went as an engineer-entrepreneur, not a laborer. Though he and Ardo could not work well together - Bob hated taking orders from his dad - they were both dreamers who could hatch schemes together. They conceived of, and established, the *Van Tuyl Manufacturing Company*, an enterprise for designing and building oilfield equipment. Ardo lined up the first job and the required financing, and Bob undertook the design work, with Ardo doing the actual construction. Learning as he went, as he sensed for the first time how natural engineering design work would always be for him, Bob produced his first masterpiece: an oilfield pumping unit. It worked as designed, and was delivered as promised. But the *Van Tuyl Manufacturing Company* foundered due to lack of

customer interest associated with a downturn in demand for new crude oil.³³ The supply & demand situation would soon change, of course. At this very time, German forces were gobbling up Europe, and war was waiting to erupt around the world. Though Bob and Ardo didn't know it at the time, the services of men like them would soon be in high demand. Both their lives were about to change dramatically.

A Loaf of Bread, A Pound of Cheese, and Eighteen Dollars

In early 1940, with the *Great Depression* still in full swing, Bob Van Tuyl was desperate for a job. He applied all over Texas and Oklahoma for work, but the best he was able to do was to secure a job as a stock clerk in Oklahoma City at a salary of \$14 a week. But Bob was able to tolerate neither the work, nor the business owner, so he walked off the job one day in disgust. Utterly confused about what to do, Bob packed his belongings - including his threadbare clothes and engineer's slide rule - bought a loaf of bread and a pound of cheese, and with \$18 to his name started hitchhiking south toward San Antonio, Texas. Bob was thinking of joining the Army Air Corps in San Antonio. But when he found out how stiff the eyesight requirement would be, he abandoned his aviation dreams and turned west - as his father had done 28 years earlier - and headed for California.

Hitchhiking west through Carlsbad, New Mexico, where he found hospitality and work thanks to old friends, Bob finally arrived in Los Angeles on Mother's Day, May 10, 1940. Bob called his uncle Harold - then living outside Los Angeles - for help. Safely arrived, he telegraphed his worried mother in Oklahoma:³⁴

Mother's Day greetings from a prodigal son who loves his mother.

When her reply came by mail - she was too poor to afford a telegram - it was in the form of a verse composed from her heart; one which accurately portrayed the desperate situation back home:³⁵

*Should the prodigal son decide to return, no fatted calf will he find.
For I sold the beast to buy me some shoes, what a load it took from my mind...
So the prodigal son upon his return, no matter how hungry he be,
Can feast upon hamburger, bread and pot-luck, and maybe a cupful of tea.*

Though Bob didn't know it then, his parents were in a truly dreadful state, with the bank having repossessed their house. They were living day-to-day on what little Ardo could earn. Although the old rigbuilder owned some scrap iron, the only people buying were the Japanese government, and he pridefully preferred starvation over selling war material to them.³⁶ Finally, with no food in

³³ *Phillips Petroleum Annual Reports* for 1938-39. Capacity was still ahead of demand. Phillips drilled 12.6% fewer wells in 1939 than in 1938. [Phillips Archives, Bartlesville, OK.]

³⁴ Van Tuyl, pg. 43.

³⁵ Van Tuyl, pg. 43.

³⁶ Wanda Van Tuyl interview, 1995.

the house and barely enough money to buy gas for the trip, Ardo and Lola Van Tuyl left Oklahoma in June of 1941, bound for California and World War Two. They would never live in Oklahoma again.

Postscript: The Man Who Loved Flowers

Ardo Van Tuyl spent the war working in the Long Beach shipyards, where he supervised the launching of Liberty Ships, those mainstays of WWII ocean cargo transport that made such a tremendous contribution to Allied victory. At war's end he returned to the oilfields, building oil derricks all over the Los Angeles Basin [he even built one on a movie studio!]. The pay was good and the work was steady, so by the early 1950s he was able to afford a small house in a suburban area of Long Beach, California. The yard was large, and the ever-restless Ardo spent what time he could during his working years planting the fertile soil: mostly with flowers. "*I just throw it in the ground and let it grow,*" he would say when asked the secret of his gladiolas and other garden marvels. After his retirement, Ardo made the place come alive with flowers, cactuses, orchids and trees. The gruff old rigbuilder would supply the local kids with all the flowers they wanted (their moms had sent them over for the daily supply), and his grandchildren were no less impressed. Over 50 years since he had left the soil of his native Missouri, Ardo had returned to the earth with wonderful results. He died in 1973, just 7 months after Lola, his wife of 58 years, passed away. He never lost the twinkle in his eye.

Ardo Van Tuyl in Postwar California



Ardo and Lola Van Tuyl made a handsome couple as they stood in front of their Long Beach, California apartment in about 1948. Just before WWII, they were destitute in Oklahoma, now they were back on their feet as a result of Ardo's well-paid work as a wartime Liberty Ship builder and as an oil rig builder after the war. Called *Van* by his fellow workers, Ardo was a well-liked and respected figure on any job.

Ardo poses with his family about 1954 in his yard in Lakewood, California. Adults [l - r]: Bob Van Tuyl, Betty Van Tuyl, Ardo Van Tuyl, Paul Groskopf, Wanda Van Tuyl Groskopf. Children [l - r]: Lynn Groskopf, Steve Van Tuyl, Rory Van Tuyl, Lee Groskopf, Paul Van Groskopf.



After his retirement, Ardo Van Tuyl became an avid amateur horticulturist, specializing in flowers and cactuses. Here, in 1970, he admires one of his spectacularly-blooming specimens. The rough-tough oilfield hand had become a charming and popular neighborhood fixture: a man who loved flowers.

