

ENERGY

Black Rain: Veracruz 1900–1938

By Myrna Santiago

Early in the last century oil baron Edward Doheny created a surreal garden to adorn the grounds of his California mansion: a tropical rainforest in the middle of the arid Los Angeles basin. There, he housed exotic specimens collected on trips to his oil fields in the state of Veracruz, Mexico. But what became of the real rainforest?

Before 1900, Veracruz was home to the northernmost tropical rainforest on the American continent. Also known as the Huasteca Veracruzana, the region was the first site of oil production in Mexico as well as the first tropical rainforest in the world to experience oil extraction. At that time, the local population included families of old Spanish stock, the *hacendado* elite; mestizo small ranchers; and the Teenek, distant cousins of the Maya, also known as Huastecos, who owned land communally.

Foreign oil extraction, which began in 1900 and lasted until 1938, drastically altered both the ecological and social make-up of the region. Domination of the area by American and European oil companies transformed land tenure patterns, land use, social composition and social structures. The oil industry created its own web of life — an ecology of oil — that changed both the relationships among humans and the relationship between humans and their local environment.

The first change the companies brought to the Huasteca was a shift in land tenure patterns. The oil barons introduced a new concept to the area: the commodification of land. For the



Oil derrick in northern Veracruz, 1920.

first time in local history the rainforest had a price and could be leased, bought or sold. The hacendados jumped at the opportunity to make business deals, happy to make money in quantities never before seen. The Teenek were not so sure. They had been fighting against individualizing property since Mexican independence in the early 19th century, distrustful of promises of riches that seldom materialized. Many

Teenek heads of household refused to sell.

The companies increased the size of their offers, unleashing speculation and a land grab without precedent in the history of the region. Some Teenek sold out. Those who would not suffered the consequences. They were ambushed and killed by strangers, stabbed or shot in suspicious brawls. Illiterate widows received condolences from company land agents and were pressured to sign on the dotted line, losing their patrimony. By the 1920s, foreign oil companies controlled about 46 percent of the Huasteca.

Control over the rainforest led to the second radical transformation in the ecology of oil: change in land use patterns. Before 1900, the hacendados raised cattle in the forest with great difficulty. The Teenek planted corn in small patches and exploited the rainforest for their needs. That changed with oil production. The industry required infrastructure: roads, pipelines, pumping stations, storage tanks, refineries (14 total in the region), factories, housing, workshops, telegraph lines and, by the early 1920s, airplane landing strips. Infrastructure alone covered vast areas of the rainforest. Then there were the wells and the spills they caused.

Between 1904 and 1938, it rained oil in the Huasteca. Forests, mangroves, swamps, marshes, sand dunes and everything in between were blanketed in oil at one point or another. The oil companies didn't lay out pipelines until they could be sure of a return on their investment. Freshly discovered oil spewed out of

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the land until the pipelines were finished, creating open oil pits, or “dams” from seven to 30 feet deep. By 1918, there were 66 oil pools in the Huasteca. The result of oil extraction, therefore, was dramatic pollution. By 1920, for example, the Tampico Chamber of Commerce complained of losing the Gulf Coast beaches. Waves carried oil and dumped it on the sand; beachgoers could neither swim nor sunbathe. Rivers, streams, estuaries, lagoons, lakes and other bodies of water along the Mexican Gulf were contaminated as well.

Numerous wells also caught fire. The worst conflagration took place at Well #3 in San Diego de la Mar, which spurted a black column of oil and burst into flames on the Fourth of July, 1908. The explosion was so large that the earth sank and left gaping holes like two mouths. The place has been known as “Dos Bocas” ever since. The fire lasted 57 days; nothing could put it out. The black cloud of smoke could be seen from miles away; sailors at sea in the Gulf of Mexico read by the glow of the fire. In Tampico, 65 miles north, it rained black ink as the cinders dissolved and fell on city streets.

Dos Bocas remains the largest oil spill and fire in history: about 420 million gallons of oil buried 30 square

miles of forest, swamps, mangroves and marshes in oil. By comparison, the 1989 Exxon Valdez spill was 10.8 million gallons and the 1991 Gulf War spills and fires lost 240 million gallons. When the fire burned itself out, a toxic lake remained. Poisonous gases rose in clouds from its waters. One hundred years later, the lake is still there; the environment has not recovered. Neither has the rainforest: by 1938, it was gone, never to return.

The labor force needed to make these changes possible did not exist in the Huasteca, so the companies had to import it, thus changing the social composition of the region. The oil barons recruited Mexican men by the thousands. At the peak of employment in 1921 there were some 40,000 men on the payroll. That great influx meant that the local population — specifically, the Teenek — were totally marginalized. Socially, economically and politically, they were dwarfed by the sheer numbers of immigrants.

The oil companies also introduced new hierarchies to what used to be agrarian societies. They organized the labor force according to color, race and nationality. The top layer of executives and managers were white Americans or Europeans. The drillers and other skilled workers

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Dos Bocas, still toxic nearly 100 years later.



Photo courtesy of Myrna Santiago.



Photo by Melanie Bateman.

Lázaro Cárdenas remains part of the Mexican landscape.

were foreign, too. These top layers of employment were forbidden to Mexicans, who did the manual labor, as formal discrimination was inscribed in the social organization of the oil industry. Furthermore, the companies created in Mexico the same system of segregation that existed in the United States with whites-only housing, dining halls, infirmaries, social clubs, swimming pools and other facilities.

The segregation, discrimination and racism used as organizing principles by the oil companies had an impact on the relationship between men and/in nature. The executives hunted, fished and collected “exotic” rainforest plants and animals. They fancied themselves masters of nature and masters of men. The workers, by contrast, felt the brunt of an inhospitable environment. Relegated to crowded housing built up against the wells and refineries, the migrants caught malaria, tuberculosis, yellow fever and smallpox in addition to suffering numerous accidents and being routinely exposed to toxic chemicals on the job. Thus the ecology of oil meant that the human experience of/in nature and the environment depended on class status. The lower in the social hierarchy a worker was, the higher the risks of adverse environmental effects on health and body.

As a result of such social and environmental conditions, oil workers became one of the most radical segments of the Mexican working class. They positioned themselves on the left wing of the revolutionary movement that began sweeping

through Mexico in 1910. They developed a scathing critique of the oil barons and capitalism in general, raising the issue of nationalization with President Lázaro Cárdenas before he was ready to consider it.

Between 1936 and 1938, the union and the companies fought hard over the first collective bargaining contract in the industry. It was a violent confrontation that paralyzed the industry throughout the country for the first time ever, prompting the Supreme Court to resolve the issue. When the Court ruled in favor of the workers on March 1, 1938, the companies announced they would not comply with the ruling — Mexican law did not apply to them. Faced with foreign companies who openly flouted Mexican law and the prospect of a second nationwide oil strike, President Cárdenas nationalized the industry on March 19, 1938. That decision made Cárdenas the most popular president in Mexican history to date. Yet he did not make that decision alone. The oil workers also deserve credit. Their militancy had made that decision possible. It was their victory, too.

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