

MAEBASHI FOCUS

Coordinator for International Relations (CIR) Newsletter

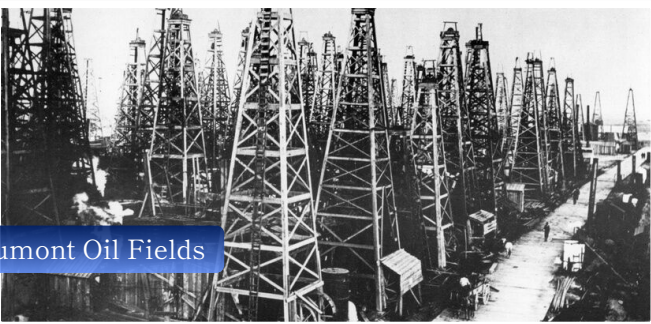
Howdy, y'all!

In this issue, I'd like to answer a question for those of y'all who may be wondering, "Why doesn't the U.S., Texas specifically, rely more on public transportation like Japan?" The answer actually comes down to a variety of factors, and Texas, specifically my hometown, played an important role in one part of the process that helped transform America from a country with extensive streetcar and railway networks into one heavily reliant on personal automobiles!



Model T

First off, compared to the America of today, public transportation was once extremely widespread. By the early 20th century, American cities had tens of thousands of kilometers of streetcar tracks. The introduction of electric streetcars in the late 1800s brought great convenience to the average city-dwelling American in an age when walking, bicycles, and horse-drawn carriages were the primary ways of getting around. At the same time, the United States was beginning to experience another major technological revolution: the automobile.



Beaumont Oil Fields

This is where my hometown of Beaumont, Texas, comes into the story.

In 1901, oil was discovered at Spindletop, just south of Beaumont. The discovery helped launch the Texas oil boom and played an important role in the development of the modern American petroleum industry. Companies such as Texaco were founded in the years immediately following the discovery, while the region rapidly developed oil fields, refineries, pipelines, and other petroleum infrastructure.

At around the same time, automobiles were becoming increasingly practical and affordable. Ford introduced the Model T in 1908, and in 1913 the company introduced its famous moving assembly line. Mass production dramatically reduced the cost of automobiles and helped make car ownership accessible to a much larger portion of the American population.

The growth of the petroleum industry and the automobile industry therefore reinforced one another. More oil production meant more petroleum products were available, while the growing number of automobiles created an enormous demand for gasoline. Texas, with its enormous oil reserves, became one of the most important centers of this new petroleum-based economy.

As automobiles became more common, America's transportation system gradually began to change. Streetcars faced increasing competition from automobiles and buses, while many streetcar systems were eventually replaced or dismantled. There wasn't one single reason for this decline. The growing popularity of cars, investment in roads, the flexibility of buses, and changes in how American cities developed all played a role.



Highway Construction

One of the biggest changes was suburbanization. Although suburbs had existed long before the automobile, suburban development expanded dramatically after World War II. As more Americans moved away from the urban core, cities spread outward, making fixed-route public transportation less convenient for many people. This created a cycle: as cities became more spread out, cars became more necessary, and as more people relied on cars, there was less incentive to maintain extensive public transportation.

The construction of America's Interstate Highway System accelerated this process. In 1956, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Federal-Aid Highway Act, which authorized the construction of a nationwide Interstate Highway System.

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The original plan called for approximately 41,000 miles of Interstate highways, connecting cities across the country and making long-distance automobile travel much easier.

When it comes to Texas specifically, all of these factors came together particularly strongly. Texas cities benefited enormously from the state's petroleum industry, but they also had something else: a lot of land.

I've mentioned this in a previous newsletter, but Texas is enormous (roughly twice the size of Japan by land area). Unlike Japan, where mountainous terrain and limited usable land have contributed to relatively dense development in many urban areas, Texas cities had enormous amounts of relatively inexpensive land available for development. Cities such as Houston could therefore expand outward rather than having to build upward.

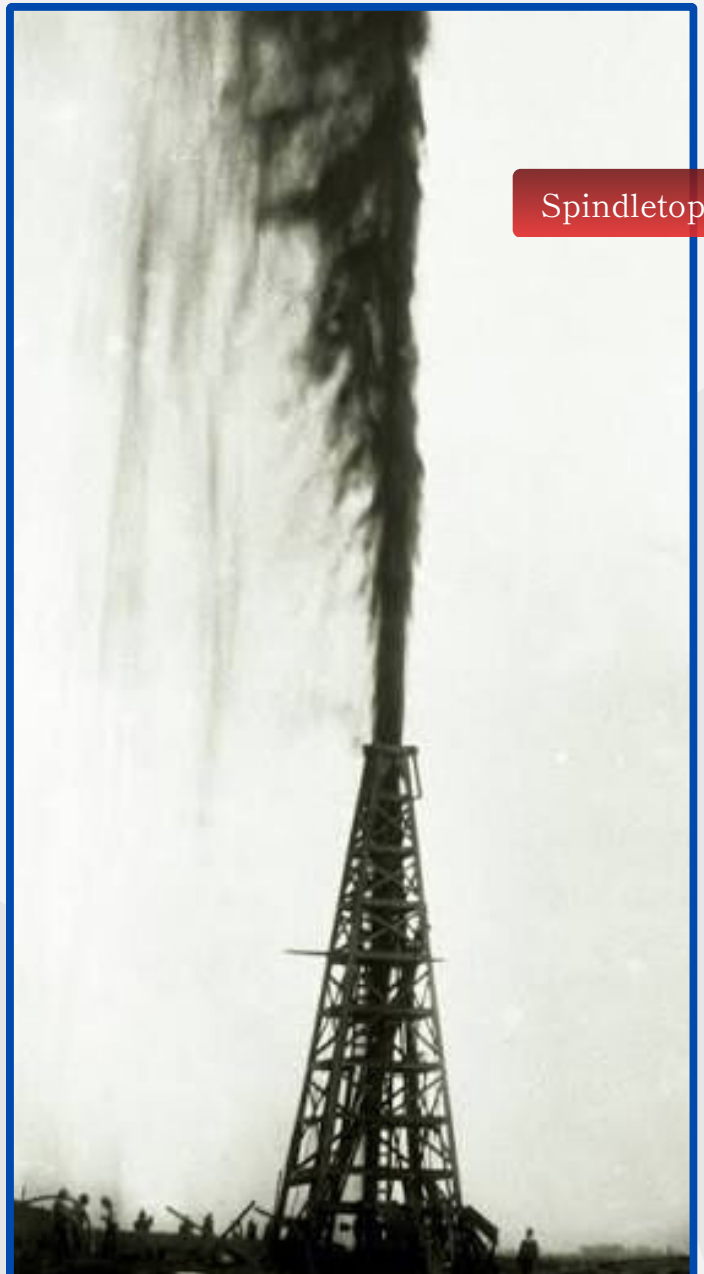


Houston Sprawl

So, while it would be an oversimplification to say that "Beaumont's oil created America's car culture," there is an interesting connection between my hometown and the transportation system we see across Texas today. The discovery of oil at Spindletop helped establish Texas as a major center of the petroleum industry. The growth of that industry coincided with the rise of mass-produced automobiles, while cheap gasoline, highway construction, and suburbanization all helped create the sprawling, automobile-dependent cities that are common across Texas today.

All in all, It's pretty fascinating to think that an oil discovery in my hometown in 1901 was part of a much larger transformation that would eventually help shape the way Americans get around today.

This is a little different from my usual newsletters, but I recently researched this topic and thought it would be fun to share with y'all! I hope y'all enjoyed this little history lesson and learned something new!



Spindletop