10. Five Stands Off Bottom

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Drill pipe is usually run into a well or pulled out of a well in “stands” of two joints or three joints, depending on the height of the derrick. A joint of drill pipe measures approximately 30 feet in length.—Schnitz]

We were five stands off bottom when it happened. The mud tanks started running over. The well started kicking over the bell nipple. It was the derrick man’s fault because he’s supposed to take care of the mud! Most of these stories that started with “five stands off bottom” went rapidly downhill from there.

This paper is about some of the early day drillers, toolpushers, bosses, and service people who had come from boom days drilling at Spindletop, Kilgore, Ranger, Desdemona, King Ranch Stratton, and other famous oilfields. The stories are about a few of us who interfaced with them as we entered a phase of deep high pressure drilling on South Texas’ large ranches. My forty years in the Texas oil patch before I retired from Exxon gave me the opportunity to meet and work with several old-time drillers and toolpushers whose work ethic, wisdom, wit, and humor is legend.

Almost everyone had a nickname, and you will hear several of them as these stories are told. There was “The Gray Fox,” “Jew” Ober, and “Fwop Down” (because he would flop down almost anywhere on the rig floor or catwalk and sleep). There was “Blister,” who always showed up after the work was over, or “Gavilan,” the chicken hawk. My nickname was “Coyote.” They said I had shifty “coyote” eyes and I had lived in the brush country so long I thought more like a coyote than a human.
“Jew” Ober was a rotund, Mr. “Five by Five” driller with a big booming voice and a ton of humor. You could hear him holding court in the bunkhouse chow hall long before you got to the door. He told a story about being in a poker game in East Texas, where they called a Bowie knife a “Bow-wee Runner.” He said the betting had come to an end and the players were declaring their hands. One said, “I’ve got three sixes” and another declared that he had a full house. One man sitting by Jew said, “I’ve got two deuces and a Bow-wee Runner!” The player with the full house said, “You lucky son-of-a-gun. You always draw out on me.”

C. L. “Smokey” Starnes was a toolpusher when I was associated with him. He was very dedicated, hard-working, and handled the Company (Humble Oil & Refining Company, later Exxon Corporation) rigs and equipment like they were his own. In the early 1940s, a well blew out in the Greta Field between Victoria and Refugio. The well caught fire and the rig cratered; that is, it fell into the hole created by the blowout. Highway 77 had to be re-routed around the blowout for years, but one could see the crater from the highway. Several important events occurred because of that blowout that still impact drilling and producing operations today. Since the well was blowing out underground and was charging all the shallow sands in the area, even water wells were blowing out and it made all drilling operations very dicey. Smokey Starnes moved to Greta in the mid-1950s with a company rig to drill several wells. He knew the history of the field through information he got from other rig hands and drillers, and from company knowledge of the blowout history. I arrived at the location and stepped out of the company car with my hard hat and boots to help Smokey drill this particular well. He met me halfway to the toolhouse and said, “Boy, don’t you dare pull up a weed out here. It’ll blowout on you. Why, look: all the crawdad holes are blowing out”—and they were. The sands were charged so shallow that the crawdad holes were bubbling and blowing natural gas. There was at least one incident where someone stepped out of a car, lit a cigarette and threw a match to the ground, causing a flash fire as the lighted match ignited the natural gas at ground level.
When radios first started being used to communicate between the rigs and the District Office, there were some very funny conversations that took place—some of them tellable in polite company; some of them not. Smokey had been at the rig all night, maybe several days, having trouble with the well “kicking” (that is, trying to blow the drilling mud out of the hole). Chester Burrage was the warehouseman, the person the toolpusher called when they needed supplies or equipment. One morning Smokey called Chester on the radio and the conversation went something like this:

Smokey: Chester, this old well has been kicking on me all night and I need you to send me some Baroid out here right now.

Chester: How much of this Baroid do you need, Smokey?

Smokey: Hell, Chester, that ain’t near enough!

Smokey was used to the warehouseman trying to cut back on supplying equipment and materials to keep costs down.
We developed a form of communication meant to get the point across without stirring up others who might hear. For example, I would tell Gigi, who was the radio and telephone communicator at the office, “I’ll be out at Arroyo Conejo this afternoon.” She knew where to reach me. Arroyo Conejo sounded like many other South Texas ranch pasture leases. Actually, it was the nickname we had for the golf course, or “Rabbit Run.”

H. H. “Clearwater” Howell was a wildcatter in South Texas. He was nicknamed “Clearwater” because he didn’t believe in spending money on weighting material for his drilling mud and had his rigs drill wells with clear water. Anyone who has been around the oilfield at all knows that there is something wrong with this picture. A wildcatter in South Texas with the nickname “Clearwater” adds up to a lot of well control problems—to be brutally honest—blowouts. Mr. Howell had his drillers trained in his ways. The story goes about one driller who called in on the radio and said, “Mr. Howell, this well has been kicking on us and right now it is flowing up to the first girt on the derrick. We need some weight material to kill it.” Clearwater replied, “Hank, I’m going to send you two sacks of Baroid and I want you to kill that well if it takes every damn bit of it!” A thousand sacks wouldn’t have been enough!

Chris Dowden was a toolpusher in charge of Company Rig 44. Chris was a good toolpusher and tried very hard to achieve efficiency, efficiency in drilling and in moving the rig to minimize lost motion. Chris talked with a slight lisp and had a kind of sing-song voice that earned him the name of “Crying Chris” Dowden.

When a roughneck worked himself up the rig hierarchy to the status of “Morning Tour Driller” (working morning tour), he was rewarded by getting to be in charge of moving the rig. R. L. “Junior” Westbrook got to that point on Rig 44. He was trying his best to make rig moves go smoothly with little lost motion. But he didn’t please Chris. After observing several of Junior’s rig moves and on a day when nothing pleased him, Chris told Junior in his unmistakable voice: “Dod Dammit Junior, the first two things you move are the coffee pot and the shit house.”
“My Good Man” Thompson was a pot-fireman on Rig 11 when I knew him and worked with him. I don’t know what his first name was, but he addressed everybody as “My Good Man”—and that’s what we called him. Jody Skaggs transferred to Rig 11 as a driller and he wanted to be sure his pot fireman always had enough good steam so he wouldn’t be short of steam to drill or pull out of the hole when he had to. He was ragging “My Good Man” around about how he wanted plenty of steam available when he wanted it—no mistakes. The old pot fireman replied, “My Good Man, I could keep plenty steam up by firing these three boilers with goose feathers—and pick my own geese!”

Oilfields operated somewhat differently in the days before OSHA. A contractor roughneck dropped a piece of “spinning” chain in the casing on S. K. East B-13 in Kenedy County. We fished for several days for the chain with no progress. We decided that we needed to pick up on the casing and get the slips out to nipple up blow-out preventers and improve our fishing results. The rig pulled on the casing with a spear until the driller and toolpusher refused to pull any more, fearing they would pull the derrick down, resulting in fatalities—especially theirs. The next step was to pull on the casing with hydraulic jacks. In this way, an operator could work several yards away from the rig with hydraulic controls without much hazard to personnel. With this operation, we pulled up to 400,000 pounds on the casing to no avail.

Homco was on location, ready to “string-shot” the casing loose downhole whenever we got the slips out. The string-shot method used an explosive (prima-cord) to jar the casing connection at a depth where it was free and allow us to back off the casing. The operator on that truck was “Peewee Hodges.” Peewee said he had idea how we could get those slips loose if we could come around to his plan. His plan was to wrap three wraps of prima-cord (an explosive used exclusively in downhole operations) around the casing head and run the detonator controls over behind the pipe racks where he promised we could all hunker in relative safety. “Relative to what?” we asked. No comment from
Peewee. This was at a time when the bosses in the office didn’t want to hear about your problems, especially in the middle of the night, and didn’t care how you did the job. They just looked at the results, good or bad. Why did all that change when I got to be the boss in the office?

We took a strain on the casing with the hydraulic jacks. Peewee wrapped three wraps of prima-cord around the casinghead and put the detonator cap in place. He then ran the electric firing line a distance of about 40 yards behind the pipe racks. We company men, roughnecks, lease crews, and any others on location were behind the racks long before Peewee got there. He warned us to expect a very loud noise and to stay hunkered under the pipe to avoid any miscellaneous flying iron particles. We braced ourselves, put our fingers in our ears (state-of-the-art ear protection) and Peewee fired the shot. There was a very loud noise and iron rattled for 30 seconds, but the slips came loose!

The radio conversation to the District Office was called in the next morning at 5:30 A.M. (No one wanted to hear anything in the middle of the night, only at morning report time). The radio conversation was short and without any embellishment. “We got the slips loose on S. K. East B-13 and we’re preparing to nipple up blowout preventers and resume fishing.” I’m sure the engineers and operations supervisors went into the morning meeting in the District Office and said only, “We got those slips loose.” DON’T ASK. DON’T TELL.

They called him “Fwop Down” because he would frequently “fwop down” behind the draw works and go to sleep. But this story is not so much about Fwop Down as it is about Junior Westbrook’s “new development” and beating Coots Matthews of Boots & Coots out of a blowout control job. A Flournoy rig was drilling S. K. East 28 at about 9000 feet with surface casing set at 1000 feet. Fwop Down was overall co-ordinator of the rig operations but Junior Westbrook was the on-site supervisor. I was the Drilling Engineer Specialist. This meant whenever and wherever a rig was in trouble (blowouts, lost returns, etc.) I went to the rig
until we got it under control. The well started to kicking and they
had to close the hydril blowout preventer to contain the well, build
mud weight, and pump in to try to kill the well. Junior mixed mud
and pumped in for two days and nights with no returns and no
results as far as killing the well. He would call in periodically and
tell what his mud weight was and how much mud he had pumped
in the drillpipe without seeing any results. Fwop Down would take
the radio, call, laugh, and tell Junior to keep at it.

One morning Junior was calling in a routine report and in the
middle of his conversation, he said, “Wait a minute. I’ve got a new
development. I found out where my mud’s been going.” The well
was blowing out underground at the surface casing seat and had
broached to the surface through shallow faults, blowing small geysers
of gas and condensate in Junior’s mud pits and all around the rig.

The District Superintendent called Boots and Coots and they
dispatched Coots Mathews to Kingsville. He came to town,
checked into the local motel and prepared to meet with the Dis-
trict Superintendent the next day to discuss his plans to kill the
well. My boss, Jerry Bullock, called me in and told me to get Wel-
don Whitaker and go down there and work with Junior and get
that well under control.

We called Halliburton to be on location ASAP with four pump
trucks, 5000 sacks of barite, and 5000 sacks of cement. They
arrived about dark and tied into the drill pipe and annulus. Hal-
liburton started mixing barite and cement, pumping barite down
the drill pipe and cement down the annulus, with me on one pump
truck and Junior on the other. Weldon had his explosimeter held at
hip level and was checking for explosive limits because the exhausts
on Halliburton’s trucks were cherry red from the extensive pump-
ing. Weldon signaled us that we had explosive limits at hip level all
around the rig. Junior and I certainly knew the danger we were in,
and I’m sure the Halliburton crew knew it from the look on our
faces. One Halliburton cementer later told Junior, “You big son-
of-a-bitch, if you hadn’t been blocking my way to the ladder, I
would have shut down the pumps and vacated that location.” We
continued pumping until we had the barite and cement used up, and those minutes really dragged. But activities really picked up when we finished pumping and told Halliburton to rig down.

I’ve never seen Halliburton crews knock loose and spool-up faster in my life. They rigged down and we all retreated to the sandhill above the rig. It was about 5 A.M. by then, and not yet time to call in the morning report, so we sat back in our cars and took a short nap. We called in the morning report about 6:00 A.M. and I’ll bet by now you can write the script for the radio call: “We got that well dead on S. K. East 28. You can send Coots Mathews back to Houston.” Then, we all went to Riviera and had chicken fried steak and eggs for breakfast. I’m not sure but it could have been a few Lone Stars on the table.

S. K. East 37 blew out. Now, not every well we drilled blew out. I’m just telling about the ones that were the most fun. The well was blowing gas, water and sand—so much water that the gas did not catch fire. It appeared from a distance (about seventy-five yards) that the blowout had almost cut the blowout preventer stack off the drill pipe.

Coots Mathews, Leonard Kemp, and I were standing by the toolhouse watching the rig substructure as the well was blowing wild, threatening to crater. Coots said, “You know, we need to walk down there under that substructure and see if that HCR valve is open. If it is, we could close it and maybe that would stop the flow from the annulus.” The Gray Fox looked at me, then over to Coots and said, “Where do you get that ‘we’ sh—? Who is the one pulling down the big bucks here?” We walked down there and found the HCR valve had been cut off by the blowout and was lying on the ground. So that was the end of that good plan. We drilled a relief well, but by the time we got halfway down, the blowout had bridged over and quit flowing.

Nowadays, new employees of oil companies must undergo considerable training. First, they read a lengthy Safety Manual, then the Ethics Manual and others. Things were different back while I was in college in the late 1940s. I went to work for Humble
Oil & Refining Company in the Imogene District near Pleasanton. My training and orientation session was by Superintendent A. B. Van Heuser. His words of training were, “Boy, pay attention to those old heads out there so you don’t get yourself hurt or killed, and watch out for those rattlesnakes.” End of training.

Well, with all that wisdom, training and advice about drilling oil and gas wells, I’m going to leave you “five stands off bottom.” You have a new drilling bit on and your mud man and driller are among the best. Go back to drilling. Don’t call me until morning report time, make a lot of hole, and don’t screw it up.

The author acknowledges the following referents: Leonard D. Kemp, Carroll Starnes, Georgia Clancy “Gigi” Starnes, R. L. “Junior” Westbrook, George Dabney, Weldon Whitaker, and The Halliburton Company.