The New Oil Landscape

Photograph by Eugene Richards

Natural gas flared as waste is a new sight on the Dakota prairie, where fracking—a way of extracting hard-to-reach oil—and directional drilling have sparked a boom.
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This pump sits on property belonging to Richard and Brenda Jorgenson’s neighbors, but the well runs under their property. Like many ranchers, the Jorgensons own their land but not the mineral rights, so they had no say in the placement of the well. Three more wells will be drilled within view of their grandchildren’s swings. “It’s scary,” Brenda says.
A row of mobile homes alongside an abandoned farm building in Watford City signals a reversal of fortune in a state that had steadily been losing population. Since 2010 tens of thousands of people—most refugees from the great recession—have flooded into the oil patch hoping to find work. Those who don’t succeed risk ending up homeless and jobless.
Susan Connell, who calls herself a “badass trucker,” transfers salt water from her 18-wheeler to a waste-disposal tank on the site where the water will be injected into the ground. Unlike Connell, most women here work in service industries.
After hanging the laundry, Brenda Jorgenson pulls weeds near her house overlooking the White Earth Valley. With oil wells being drilled on and around her property and a high-pressure gas line likely to be built along the valley floor, she fears for the prairie lifestyle her family has enjoyed for more than 30 years. “The serenity,” she says, “is being destroyed.”
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Photograph by NASA Earth Observatory

In a nighttime satellite image northwest North Dakota, relatively dark a few years ago, glows with lights from oil rigs, gas flares, and new housing for workers drawn to the boom.
Near Epping, Arlin Fischer (hand on hip) oversees a workover rig, which allows the men to replace large drilling pipe with smaller, less expensive production pipe. Some 8,000 wells have been drilled in western North Dakota; there could eventually be 50,000.
Photograph by Eugene Richards

Roughnecks remove two miles of heavy steel drilling pipe, one 32-foot section at a time, as oil and natural gas spew from the well. The hard, dangerous work on oil rigs pays up to $120,000 a year.
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Travis Cox siphons oil stored in a holding tank after it gushed out while rig workers removed pipe. The oil is a nuisance, but escaping gas can ignite, causing severe burns, even death.
A lined pit containing rainwater and borehole waste lies at the foot of Thunder Butte, sacred to area tribes. According to legend, the butte is the source of the world’s rain. Fracking requires large amounts of fresh water; in this drought-prone region, drawdown and contamination of aquifers worry many.
Residents of Tioga enjoy a break from the industrial frenzy during a Fourth of July parade. An immense rail depot has been built nearby to help ship oil to other parts of the country. The discovery of oil in 1951 near Tioga sparked North Dakota’s first boom.
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Sometimes western North Dakota seems like a truck jamboree featuring traffic-choked towns and semis barreling down country roads. For many longtime residents, driving to the store or church has turned into an unpleasant—and hazardous—undertaking.
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Off-duty rig workers (from left) Jerry Roberts, T. J. Hibley, and Wallace Barnett ham it up at the “man camp” where the Mississippi natives live, south of Watford City. Most oil workers are transient, but the mayor hopes more will settle here.
Rooms at this man camp in Watford City are small and spartan. But they’re an improvement—especially during the brutal winter—over the truck cabs, campers, or RVs where many oil industry employees live.
Workers swap stories in the common kitchen at their man camp. The atmosphere in the camps resembles that of a lively college dorm, as men from varied backgrounds and parts of the country are thrown together.
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Curtis Hibley (left) chats with his wife, who’s at home in Mississippi, while his roommate, Danny Ledet, watches TV. The separations—these men work three weeks on, three weeks off—are hard on families.
Travis Hibley (at left) shoots a game of eight ball at the American Legion bar in Watford City. Providing safe and legal recreational outlets for the thousands of men in the oil fields is a challenge.
Photograph by Eugene Richards

Becky Johnston and her teenage son Tyler (aiming a toy gun) aren’t happy about leaving this Williston apartment complex. But like her neighbors, Johnston, a single mother, had no choice. An oil company bought the building to house workers, then evicted everyone. Across the oil patch, rents have increased up to fivefold, displacing people on low and fixed incomes.
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A natural gas flare illuminates an evening tableau of discarded vehicles and farm tools. The region is changing quickly and drastically, yielding consequences few foresaw. “We’ve set in motion an industrial juggernaut that probably can’t be restrained,” says Clay Jenkinson, a North Dakota historian. Now the juggernaut is influencing national energy policy and efforts to address climate change.