What's an oil boom like?

BY JOSEPH A. KORNFELD, '30

The modern oil boom is an interesting stage play in itself. It presents varied settings at all parts of the day and night—the overtime work in the abstractors' offices, the night shifts on the derrick floors, the after-midnight groups of brokers and lease-men in the hotel lobbies, a supply yard teeming with activity before dawn. One theme predominates—standardization.

The various scenes unfold. First, the major company "landman" comes into the limelight and sits down to the settler's fireplace—talking about titles, abstracts, claims, mortgages, deeds and what-not. He is followed by the persistent royalty buyer who had caught "confidential dope" about the new "play up near Starrville." The notary public from the nearby town, who might also happen to be the village barber and justice of the peace (as at the town of Winoa) witnesses the agreements. The contract is signed up with the drilling contractor and the derrick is ordered.

Next on the stage comes the perplexed surveyor, accompanied by his two plodding chainmen. The rig contractor starts moving in material, the drilling contractor commences "rigging up" machinery and wire lines, the truck drivers roam the site, drill pipe litters the landscape, and like guardsmen—three boil-ers are set off four score feet from the derrick. The drilling crew "comes on" and the well is spudded in.

Soon the rod-man will pique the curiosity of the swarthy roustabouts as he plants his long, painted board on a leg of the derrick to get the "elevation." Out beyond the boilers is the instrument-man peering through his alidade mounted on a plane-table tripod. The major company scout will drop in for a hasty take-off from the "log-book" found in the bunkhouse. The inquiring investors will shortly park around the well, attempting to ask the drillers the depth of the well above the din of the machinery noises.

Out in the field is to be found the primary color; the town life being secondary. The field scenes—the rig builders calling down for timbers, the grinding of the pulley wheels as timber after timber goes up into the rapidly rising
122-foot derrick; the rhythmic chug-chug of the "mud-hog" pumps, the swaying of the roustabouts on the derrick floor; the jangle of the rotary table and the grinding of the drive chain—all goes into the outdoor talkie version of a drama unusual in itself. Everybody and everything out in the oil field talks, except the "oil operator" who stands off from the derrick with a solemn look. Maybe the well "is running low" or "may hit Georgetown." He walks about wondering and pondering how long it will take the truck drivers to bring over "that string of 6-5/8's," and thanks his lucky stars that the drive chain hasn't broken. The operator is the man who does the worrying, all of the derrick crew being day-laborers with definite tasks—and the drilling contractor "gets so much for every foot" he drills.

At best, oil-field life is far from being pleasant. Riding atop caterpillar tractors or behind ten mule teams, hauling boilers and rig-irons. Sleeping in crowded shacks. Joining up twenty-foot lengths of drill pipe. Climbing derricks to the crow's nest ninety feet above the derrick floor. The steady fight against time in the rush to beat the offshore operator to the prolific pay.

The wildest fiction about the milling, throbbing flow of humanity in the boom region is that everyone hopes to "get rich off of oil." There, in East Texas, they have been attracted, like bees, from all parts of the nation. There are the drifters who expect to "horn in on some of this oil while the getting is good;" the geologists who have turned to trading; the efforts of the salaried supply representatives to invest some of their easy money in "closer" royalty with the farm-owners who likely as not are "holding out" for $500 an acre for half-royalty. The settlers who had sold a lease on their land for $10 an acre back in 1929 in order to keep off the wolf from their door now realize, as the derricks constantly hedge in around them, that they were "blame foolish" for giving away their "acreage" for literally nothing.

A striking note of the boom development is the change to build. This was well exemplified in the mushroom-growth shack towns like Joinerville (named after the field discoverer, C. M. Joiner of Dallas, Texas) and Turnerville, which grew up overnight near the gushers. First, field workers would pitch tents alongside the paved highway. An enterprising business man would come along and put up a frame store, with a canopy extending over the two "Gulf Gasoline" pumps in front. This was followed by a cafe, a drug store, a garage, and a hotel. Then supply dealers sensing the trend of drilling activity, would put in a "shop." A long structure with a large sign in front marked "DANCE" was a retreat for the oil workers. The rows of single-story shacks, rarely a double story, would soon line the highway for a quarter of a mile. A cross-road leading to the field marked the center of "town." In short, another Main street was created.

When an oil boom strikes a town, neither serenity nor age-old contentment can long fail to answer its call to action. Tyler, seat of Smith county (west of the field) was as pretty a picture of a calm and settled town as a retired man could hope for, but it didn't take very long for the natives there to take advantage of the boom, reluctant as they appeared to be about the coming transformation. Cafe owners remodeled their interiors, installed player pianos and hired Hawaiian guitar trios for dinner entertainment. The erudite studio photographers made field trips out to the rising derricks and thus became "oil field photographers." The Blackstone hotel, already the largest in East Texas, added a 64-room addition. Corner locations in the business section soon became one-stop tire and oil stations. It was truly a wonder, how this settled town, where Civil war veterans grow older, could react to an oil boom with such renewed activity, after eighty-one years of contentment among the riches of cotton, peaches and roses.

In the various county courthouses (the town centers) of the area, the din and clatter of batteries of typewriters flanking either walls of the halls, greets one's ears as he makes his way to the county clerk's office to record an instrument. It is a frenzied, deafening clicking that never ceases as eight-hour shifts of stenographers keep up a machine-gun staccato the full twenty-four hours. "The instruments must go on record" their Underwoods, Royals and Remingtons seem to say as they sing on into the night. The male stenos remind one of the oil company clerks he sees back in Tulsa.

A characteristic of the East Texas farmers was that a majority of them were truly settlers, having lived on the land all of their lives; receiving their allotment from their parents and relatives who had made their homesteads roundabout after the Mexican war ended in 1846. With further agriculture on the prolific lease impossible and foolish, the newly-rich farmers moved away from their homes for the first time in their lives; a migration from country to city was in store for those whose lands were located in the prolific pay-sand belt. It proved to be forty miles in length, four to seven miles in width, and covered nearly a hundred thousand acres.

A year has rolled away since "Dad" Joiner brought in his pool-opener on Mrs. Daisy Bradford's farm out among the sand hills. Now the boom is over and the brokers and investors have heeded the call to the next oil boom—northeastern Colorado. The dilapidated frame houses with curled-up shingles that two generations of settlers called home are now empty. Their plows and harvesters are rusting near sheds that now shelter lease cars. The unruffled, slow drawl of the former inhabitants has been replaced by the curt, brief commands of the field superintendent addressed to his lease-workers. In the transformation of the region, a forest of derricks has replaced a forest of pines.

Truly, until a year ago, the settlers had lived off "the dew of heaven" converted into the form of peaches, roses and cotton. But from "the fat of the earth" has sprung another empire, far richer in its potentialities, more widespread in its effect on civilization. ▲ ▲ ▲

THE STATE OF LITERATURE IN EUROPE

(continued from page 48)

the fashion. It requires no effort to be up-to-date: the films and dance-music in vogue there are already familiar to the American visitor. And to speak French with an American accent is considered ultra-smart just now. One drops into such an environment without a struggle; it is all beautifully arranged.

A pleasant region, where one can work hard, live inexpensive, and enjoy without wear or tear. And judging by the quantities of stuff the resident writers turn out long after they should be in the Old Soldiers Home, it must be good for writers. In fact, they seem to live forever there.

I will admit, however, that inasmuch as the depression hit the states as soon as I left for France, it may be something has gone wrong with literature on the Riviera since I came home again. But if anyone will stake me to another Fellowship, I undertake to return and set matters right. ▲ ▲ ▲

Written in Norman

Part of the new book European Dictatorships by Count Carlo Sforza recently published by Brentano's was written last winter in Norman while Count Sforza was lecturing at the university according to a letter written by him to President Bizzell. Count Sforza will deliver the inaugural address for Geneva university November 4 when he will speak on "The Policy of the Roman Church from the Congress of Vienna to the Later Treaties (1815-1929)."