Doubly Invisible: Women's Labor in the US Gulf of Mexico Offshore Oil and Gas Industry

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Introduction

Betty[1] and I got our bowls of gumbo and sat down at one of the school cafeteria-style tables in the church hall to enjoy the Lenten luncheon. Betty and I had spent a lovely day at her home in the historic section of Thibodaux, Louisiana just the week before. A lifelong resident of Thibodaux who raised three children and worked as a substitute teacher, Betty had been eager to share her observations of her community and how it had been affected by the offshore oil and gas industry in the US Gulf of Mexico. She had invited me to the luncheon to introduce me to others who might be interested in talking to me. As we sat down across from Carolyn,[2] Betty introduced her as a woman who did interesting artwork—painting ostrich eggs. Carolyn and I chatted a bit about her art and where she obtained the ostrich eggs, and then Betty told her why I was in the area. Carolyn told me she had been the first female production operator offshore in the Gulf of Mexico and that it had taken more than 3 years to get anyone to hire her. I asked how she came to work offshore, and she said she had wanted to get out of the Mississippi cotton fields. After a bit more chatting, she agreed to talk again another time. When I called her, though, she was hesitant to talk because she did not want to dredge up hard feelings or cause

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problems for anyone because "that was all water under the bridge." I replied that she could talk about whatever she wanted to, and she agreed to get together. We met at a restaurant in Thibodaux and talked about our personal lives and trajectories. During that meeting and several more at her home, Carolyn shared many stories and experiences. She did not want to be recorded but allowed me to take notes during our conversations.

As I got to know more women, I learned that Carolyn was not alone in her reluctance to "dredge up" the past. Nor was the indirect manner through which I found and came to interview her unusual. While a few women learned about our efforts to document the history and effects of the offshore industry and reached out to me and my colleagues, in most cases we relied on trusted friends and family members who encouraged women to participate. The reasons for this are complex and have to do with the special place that the offshore oil and gas industry holds in the social, political, and economic lives of communities that have been central to it since the middle of the twentieth century—men, too, hesitate to talk with researchers until they or members of their social networks get to know us. But, they also stem from the particular roles women play in those communities and the industry, and the fact that, despite decades of campaigns to bring more women into the industry, their numbers remain low and their presence often uneasy.

Like Carolyn, many offshore workers have interesting and important stories to tell. My experiences with them range from single encounters to friendships that have spanned almost two decades. To date, over 700 people have participated in oral history interviews that have been recorded, transcribed, and placed in university and community archives by me and my colleagues. Of these, just over 100 interview participants have been women, including wives and prominent community residents such as Betty. The participants represent only a fraction of the people who have worked in this industry or have been affected by it. At the start of the twenty-first century, around 35,000 people were estimated to work offshore in the US Gulf of Mexico.

It is impossible to know how many people work offshore on any given day, much less how many did so in a given month, year, or decade. Exploration, development, and production take place over open water on thousands of platforms and the many rigs, helicopters, and vessels operating in the Gulf. At the same time, much of the work associated with that activity, such as the leasing, construction of rigs and vessels, and development of drilling fluids and muds, takes place onshore and stretches

across the Gulf Coast region from Texas to Florida (heavily concentrated in Texas and Louisiana). Some companies work exclusively for the oil and gas industry and some work entirely offshore, but many work both onshore and offshore or also manufacture, sell, or transport machinery and equipment for other industries.

This is trie for the energy companies (operators) as well as the service firms with whom they contract. Many of them hire contract or contingent labor, and those contracting companies provide workers to a number of industries. People may spend their time with a single firm (staying even as it is absorbed by another one) or they may move from one firm to another as they are laid off or fired, or seek higher wages or better benefits elsewhere. Consequently, some people spend their entire careers offshore, others work for service companies that have offshore and onshore crews and go back and forth between them, and others work offshore for a while but then return to onshore positions. Thus, even the decision to consider someone an offshore worker or not is always a bit arbitrary. These factors also contribute to the challenges for labor organizations and others concerned about the conditions of labor in the Gulf of Mexico offshore industry.

The purpose of this essay is to provide a glimpse into the world of a small group of women who lived in southern Louisiana and worked offshore in the Gulf of Mexico between 1970 and 2000. The essay draws upon my experience in southern Louisiana and upon hundreds of ethnographic and oral history interviews my colleagues, students, and I conducted between 1999 and 2015 with men and women who have worked offshore, onshore in the industries that support offshore, and in the communities that are hubs for offshore activity.[3] It focuses on the stories and experiences of the 14 women in that sample whose work took them onto rigs, platforms, helicopters, and service vessels in the Gulf of Mexico. Human resource managers and offshore workers have reported a noticeable increase in the number of women engineers working offshore over the years, but many engineers live in large cities such as Houston, beyond the study area; the sample includes only one woman engineer.[4]

Labor in the US Offshore Oil and Gas Industry

The oil and gas industry moved off the coast of California and into the Gulf of Mexico in the 1930s. Exploration in the Gulf was halted during the Second World War by German U-boat presence, and the offshore industry did not advance until the war ended. In southern Louisiana, oilfield

employers, and especially the major oil companies,[5] provided among the best paying and most stable work available, and employees earned higher pay working offshore than in comparable jobs onshore. Yet, few women made it into the oil and gas industry, and it was not until the 1970s that working offshore became an option for women.[6]

Labor demands spurred changes in the offshore workforce. By 1970, US oil and gas fields had matured and were in decline, and the government eliminated import quotas. This brought the United States squarely into the global energy market to face the extreme geopolitical and market volatility of the 1970s and 1980s.[7] The Middle East oil embargo against Israel's allies in 1973, the drop in production by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and the quadrupling of oil prices through 1974 had immediate effects in the United States as drilling activity expanded rapidly, particularly in the offshore waters of the Gulf of Mexico and on Alaska's North Slope.[8]

The increased labor demand coincided with a period of significant changes in US federal policy. President John F. Kennedy established the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women in 1961. The US Congress passed the Equal Pay Act of 1963 to eliminate wage disparity based on sex. The following year, the Civil Rights Act addressed discrimination in employment, voting, public accommodations, and education.

The confluence of social expectations, legal requirements, and a booming industry facing worker shortages led companies to actively recruit and hire women to work offshore. This was especially true for the major oil companies as they were quite visible to regulators. Education and training programs, such as the petroleum technology programs at the University of Southwestern Louisiana (USL) in Lafayette[9] and Nicholls State University in Thibodaux, Louisiana, began more actively recruiting women students. Nevertheless, male employers and workers continued to resist the hiring of women and the small numbers of women who worked offshore were largely confined to jobs in housekeeping and the galley.

In the 1980s, the global downturn in oil and gas prices brought accelerated industrial growth to a rapid halt and resulted in layoffs, bankruptcies, and major industry reorganization. Negative effects of the downturn reverberated throughout the Gulf of Mexico region; into the twenty-first century the period is identified as "the bust." Women with low seniority feared they would be laid off, though some companies kept their less expensive junior personnel. Kim was born and raised in Lafayette and worked in the industry from 1983 until 2005. She talked about the effects

of the downturn. "That was when they first started doing a round of huge layoffs in the industry, as well as early retirement programs for the more senior people. I remember going to work and thinking, 'Oh my gosh, you know, I got in just in time.' And then I started thinking, 'Okay, last one in, first one out.' But, they kept the younger hires and it seemed like they were going after the older people."

The major oil companies did no significant new hiring until at least the 1990s. Despite the success of some women executives to "break the gas ceiling," as one journalist has dubbed it,[10] the proportion of women working offshore—and especially outside of clerical and housekeeping positions—remained very low; well into the twenty-first century men and women who participated in interviews remembered only a handful of women who worked in their companies through the 1990s, frequently recalling the "first" woman with whom they had worked. This pattern reflects a national trend where, despite early gains, especially in professions and managerial occupations, the closing of the gender gap slowed by the late 1990s.[11]

The Offshore Lifestyle

The offshore oil and gas industry shares many characteristics of onshore exploration and development. Work availability is subject to industry cycles, wages vary based on skill and demand, and some jobs are among the most dangerous in the United States. According to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics, for example, the death rate for drilling workers between 2003 and 2007 was eight times the national average for all workers, with roughnecks facing the greatest risks.[12] The oil and gas industry has seen a major shift in employment from operators to contractors, and from long-term to contingent labor. Contract companies may work for few or many operators, in one or many industries, and on few or many rigs or platforms at a time. They and their employees must be versatile and adapt to both the physical and social environments in which they work. This has resulted in more precarious circumstances for many contract employees who provide the "just-in-time" labor that companies need when they get a new contract to construct or repair a vessel, drill a well, or fix a broken pipeline. Key factors that influence the effects of the offshore industry on individuals and households, as cited by workers and their family members, include the stability and vulnerability of employment, wages, and opportunities for advancement, patterns of work scheduling, and safety.[13]

Offshore, work is done on relatively small, isolated metal structures over open water, often many miles from shore, or on the vessels and helicopters that transport workers and equipment. The structures range from decades old rusting steel platforms operated by skeleton crews to modern drilling/production units operated by hundreds of company and contract employees. Transportation to and from work is one of the main hazards workers face. Because of the time, expense, and danger involved in transport, and the increased distances as the industry moved farther offshore, over the years companies reduced the number of trips by shifting from the standard 7 days at work and 7 days off (7-and-7) offshore schedule, with each day divided into two 12 h shifts, to employing workers on hitches of 14-and-14, or longer.

Offshore work poses particular challenges. People have to work together and live in close quarters, often sharing bunks with the individuals who hold their jobs on alternate hitches or shifts. In addition, various people come and go on shorter rotations: to conduct inspections, make repairs, and install specialized equipment. As a result, the routines of daily life can be and are frequently disrupted. And, in contrast to places like the North Sea, where government, industry, and labor all have played a role in negotiating working conditions and compensation for offshore work, labor unions have never gained a foothold.

The Women

The women whose stories anchor this essay represent a variety of backgrounds, jobs, and experiences in the offshore oilfields of the US Gulf of Mexico. Ten of the women entered the industry by the start of the 1980s downturn and the remaining four entered between 1982 and 1996. All 14 women are white. Given that the US states along the Gulf of Mexico are within the US south, the participation of women in the offshore oil and gas industry there has been significantly influenced by southern attitudes, policies, and practices.[14] While there would be much to learn from the stories of African-American women,[15] as will be discussed in greater detail below, white women first gained entry into offshore positions closely behind African-American males; at the time, African-American females were still struggling to get hired in the oil and gas industry at all. As noted on the Bernstein Litowitz Berger & Grossmann LLP website, even into the 1990s, the oil and gas industry was "generally considered to be seriously behind in minority employment."[16] Between 1970 and 2000, other

non-white groups such as Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Asian Americans comprised very small proportions of the overall regional population, and even men from these populations were rare in most offshore jobs.

The women interviewees worked for oil companies—primarily in production—or for service companies. Two women worked on drilling rigs, one for a mud company and the other employed by a catering company, but notably absent are drillers and many workers, from roughnecks to crane operators, who keep drilling rigs running. Drilling is the most labor-intensive, volatile, and dangerous phase in oil and gas operations, and although technology has made the tasks less physically demanding and safer, few women have found jobs on drilling rigs, especially outside the galley.

Amy, who worked offshore as an operations assistant on a production platform for 8 years starting in 1989, summed up the sentiments of many: "Drilling is very dangerous, so it's sort of like the cowboys of the Gulf. They're the rough and rugged. I've never worked in drilling, but my husband has… It's a real man that goes out to drilling. Not that production men aren't real men, but it's more of an operator, overseer to make sure everything's going smoothly.… I would imagine drilling [is] a tougher breed." In 2003, she observed, "It has been all men up until probably the late '90s. Now they're startin' to have some lady drilling engineers and drill reps that go out. But [it has been] really a guy's kind of place [where they] tease you, harass you. Whereas in production you had such a mix of people; you may have foreigners, you may have young people, old people…"

Women's Entry into Offshore Work

The women whose stories are featured in this essay, whose entry offshore spanned a period of more than 25 years, all reported being among the few women in their position or at their place of work. Julia, born and raised in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, first went offshore in 1976 with a degree in petroleum engineering. She observed, "People were supposed to have women. And there weren't enough women. So pretty much every company I applied to had to offer me a job. … but it was hard because I didn't know who really wanted me. Legally, because they didn't have enough women working for them, they had to say they had tried." In 2010, Bill, whose wife, Kim, joined him in his business selling offshore leases in 1985, echoed the sentiments of many, "It's a male dominated field. It's purely a

tip of the hat to whatever employment discrimination laws that you may have. Same thing with minorities. I mean it was purely token… It was a good ol' boy, you know…. Women could certainly handle it—Kim's a shining example of that—but it was LONG and slow, I think, coming to where women were really accepted in the industry."

Of the 10 women interviewees who entered the oilfield by 1981, all but one noted that the company for which they worked had to hire women. But that does not explain why the women made the choices they did. Given the expansion of opportunities for women at that time, why did they seek work offshore? Women reported being drawn to work offshore for the same reasons men did—money and time off. In addition, women were attracted by the excitement in the oilfield that enticed many men, especially because in the small towns of southern Louisiana, women's employment options were limited.[17]

Grandfathers, fathers, uncles, and brothers facilitated entry, either directly through their contacts, or indirectly as role models. Even when the men did not intend for their female relatives to get into the industry, their knowledge of the industry and contacts proved significant. College education was becoming more important, but even people with degrees started out in entry-level positions and worked their way up. Growing up in the early years of the women's liberation movement, several of the women benefitted from their fathers' decisions to treat their daughters the same as their sons, or from employers' or coworkers' positive attitudes toward women. Many women took advantage of the training offered by companies and schools. The following excerpts illustrate the complex and varied ways that family, societal expectations based on gender, company needs, and individual aspirations coalesced in women's decisions to work offshore.

Lillian was home from college in Texas in 1973 trying to find a job and make enough money to go back to school. Her father, who had worked at a major fabrication company since moving his family to southern Louisiana from the Midwestern US in 1960, told her of a catering company that was hiring women. To show him she was serious about getting a job, she applied. She went to the personnel office every day for a month until her father convinced a superintendent to give her a chance for at least one hitch. She was sent out on her first job in the galley with several other women and was the only one to stay with the company. Having studied chemistry in college, she got the mud engineer to show her how to run the mud tests and was hooked. "I thought, 'Wow, this would sure beat making two dollars an hour as a galleyhand'." She studied mud manuals and would

run the mud tests and compare her results to the mud engineer's. "But I did something else probably every women's libber in America would hate me for. When it was cold and miserable, and I was off-duty, I made brownies and hot chocolate and took it up on the drill floor 'cause I knew how miserable they were. In exchange for that, every time they came in the galley when I was on-duty, they told me how deep we were, the mud pressure, the casing pressure." She later was invited into the 7-and-7 program at Nicholls State University, where students attended classes during their 7 days onshore, and earned her Associate's degree in Petroleum Technology, while working on a production platform.

Julia changed her major from education to engineering in 1976: "[I was] bored. I'm a sophomore in college, and it hit me that this is not what I came to college for, this is not challenging, and I don't want to do this… [I saw an opportunity] to make more money and have more time off …I was good in math and science. I felt like engineering would be challenging. My older brother was a petroleum engineer, and I looked up to him. And I can tell you when I walked on that rig floor, I was fascinated. And I still am." She noted, "There was also a lot of new technology because people had money. Like in a war, you develop weapons, when you have an economy that's gonna drill wells, [you have] lots of new techniques, new drilling fluids, new production facilities, all kind of new tools and stuff came out because of that. So that was all exciting." She and her husband quit their jobs and started a consulting business in the 1980s when oil prices dropped.

In 1977, companies were still struggling to hire women when Jill, a native of Lafayette, asked an engineer with her employer's drilling department to help her get work offshore. He tried to dissuade her, but she argued that she wanted to work 7-and-7 and make better money, so he called a contract company to get her an interview. Her father and brother-in-law worked for drilling companies, but she noted, "[N]ow you have to remember I was a secretary, so I went in high heels and a little business suit and I weighed like 95 lb. I'm five feet three. The guy looked at me and thought, 'No way!' [Chuckling] I said, 'No really, I wanna work offshore. I know I can do this.' He said, 'I tell you what, we need to hire women, and so I'm gonna hire you, but I don't give you six weeks to last.'" Jill worked for almost 2 years as a mudlogger. "[I am] very proud to say I was one of their best mudloggers and I proved that guy wrong. And I loved the job, REALLY loved the job. I thought it was SO interesting. I realized that it was about the only job I could have done offshore, 'cause

it IS a lot of physical, very dirty work. My work got dirty sometimes, but it wasn't terribly physically demanding."

In addition, the 1980s downturn put many people out of work; some women sought employment when their husbands lost their jobs or had their hours or pay cut.

Amy was born in Port Sulphur, Louisiana, in 1959. Her father worked first as a diesel mechanic for Gulf Oil and then on offshore vessels. Commenting on her experience as a young wife: "We reached a point in our young married lives where my husband just couldn't make good money doing insurance jobs or sales jobs, so he went to work on a drilling rig and worked 7-and-7. The money was nice for working half a year. At some point he needed surgery and we knew we would need extra money, and an income comin' in, while he recuperated, so I sought out oilfield work, too, through a contract company… So [in 1989] I went to work as what's called an 'operations assistant' or a secretary offshore on a production platform."

Sharon was raised near Dallas, Texas, and had wanted to fly since childhood. "Actually, I applied for a job as a stewardess when TWA was up in Chicago about 25 years ago. Didn't get accepted and the guy says, 'Well, I can give you a million and one reasons why you're not going to qualify as a stewardess. Just off the record,' he says, 'Your appearance just doesn't quite fit up to our image of stewardess.' I said, 'That's all right, 'cause I really want to fly them, not just stand around in 'em'. [Laughter]" She flew helicopters for the timber and tourist industries before meeting some offshore pilots from Mississippi and heading to the Gulf Coast region in 1996.

Women's Experiences Offshore

Navigating Physical and Social Spaces

Each woman's encounter with the offshore environment was as unique as the process she went through to get there, but commonalities in the physical and social conditions across structures and vessels led to many shared experiences. Much of the work required manipulating heavy equipment, everyone had to get on and off rigs and platforms, and the living quarters on

the platforms and vessels were small and shared. Especially in the early years, women had to convince their potential employers that they could not only do the work but also live offshore and among mostly men.

Claire grew up in Carencro, Louisiana; her father worked for an oilfield fabrication company. She completed her degree in secondary education in 1974. After teaching a few years, she became frustrated with the school system and convinced an oil company to hire her. Describing her first trip out to the production platform, she recalled, "I remember going [to the dock], and you're kind of scared because you don't know what anything's going to be about. The weather was too windy so we couldn't do the helicopter, so we had to do the crew boat. On the crew boat I also remember that I could not allow myself to be seasick because I felt like if I was to show weakness as a female, it just kinda was gonna be used against me."

Amy's discussion of trying to physically keep up on the production platform captures the tensions the women experienced. "I was a whole 105 pounds at the time and didn't have the strength of a man. I had always been taught in my training that if somethin's too heavy, you don't lift it, you ask for help. And I was in this line and when they started passing five-gallon water bottles, I just looked at the person handing it to me like, 'I can't really do this.' He just looked at me and said, 'You're one of us.'… There was such a feeling of inadequacy at that point that I couldn't tote my weight… It's very much a job that a woman can do, I'm not trying to give that impression, but physically I was a weakling. … So for that reason, for those reasons, I chose to move into something that was a little more ladylike, but still had the opportunity to keep the schedule, keep the good pay and benefits."

By the 1990s, as the industry moved farther offshore, vessels, rigs, platforms, and other equipment had increased in size. While initially this created greater problems for women (and small males), as the equipment became too large for even men to handle safely, automation and mechanization reduced the differences between what men and women could do.

Space is at a premium on rigs and platforms, and most of it is devoted to the machinery and equipment needed to locate and extract oil and gas from deep within the Earth. When women first went offshore, most workers shared living quarters; roustabouts slept many to a room and shared bathrooms, and only supervisors had rooms to themselves. Some women fought to bunk with men of their own status to avoid conflicts with

their coworkers. Citing concerns from wives as well as male workers, most companies separated the women from the men and would not allow them into men's quarters, which meant that the women frequently displaced senior personnel. Where possible, companies sent two women offshore at a time and placed them on opposite shifts so they could share a room.

In 1976, Julia's employer took several measures to accommodate her when she was undergoing her engineering training offshore. The company constructed a portable building with a bed, sink, and closet which they moved from platform to platform for her to use. On the rig, the drilling foreman had to give up his room because it had a bathroom, "…but all of 'em were real nice about it." The company also assigned a man to make sure she was safe offshore. "But I didn't know that. He told me he was there to watch the facilities. If I had known he was protecting me, I would've felt awful…. I felt like I was doing it all on my own. [Laughs]"

While some companies made special efforts to house their new women employees, even into the late 1990s lack of adequate living facilities on some rigs and platforms meant lost opportunities for women working for service companies.

The women responded to the challenges by being flexible, knowing their limits, and finding ways to work around those limits. Lynda had grown up in the Bahamas and was in graduate school in Oceaneering when she started working as a cook and deckhand on offshore service vessels. Though the males on her vessel were initially hesitant about her being on board, she quickly established herself: "I remember the first time I was on board and we pulled into a dock and I handled the stern line without being told. [Chuckles] And the guys kind of went, 'Oh, okay.' It wasn't like they had to break me into the job." Onshore, too, she simply demonstrated she could do the work. "I remember we pulled into Dulac, [Louisiana] and there was a hardware store across the street, and the engineer gave me a list of pieces to buy to fix something. I had to go back there in the storeroom where they had all the pieces for the shrimp boats, find them, identify them, bring them up to the front. [Chuckles]… I think the guy was laughing when I was out there picking all the pieces of pipe, but also, I think the culture of south Louisiana where the women did work on the shrimp boats did help out. It was not unusual to have a woman go in and know what she wanted for the engine room."

Concerns with safety have been a major factor keeping both men and women out of the oil and gas industry. Offshore workers are routinely exposed to loud noise, heavy equipment, and large moving objects, as well

as the dangers associated with helicopter and boat travel. They also experience fires, hurricanes, and blowouts. Several of the women reported having seen coworkers seriously injured or killed, and five of the women interviewees became involved in safety. Tyrelle worked offshore for a major oil company for 21 years, advancing from maintenance specialist to instrument technician. She was chosen as the only female instructor at her company's fire school at Grand Isle where she trained people how to protect themselves and help minimize danger for other employees. Shortly before she was injured so badly she had to quit work as a gauger on a production platform, Lillian and a male coworker began to develop a safety training program—a task she returned to after the *Deepwater Horizon* explosion in 2010.

Despite the dangers and sometimes unpleasant working conditions, many of the women emphasized the awe they experienced offshore. Though several of the women noted that men, too, appreciated the beauty, the women said they were not afraid to bring it up. Carolyn wrote poems and took photographs, sharing them with others who were interested. While flying crews to and from the rigs and when on the platforms, Sharon pointed out the cloud formations, colors on the horizon, and wildlife: "The guys just sit quiet, then over time they get used to me speaking of this…. It's awesome. It's just incredible. And [the guys]'ll come to get me and I'm pointing, 'Look at the dolphins, look at the dolphins.' And they'll stop and they catch themselves and then they'll start looking. A few days later, they come back and go, 'I have gotten to where I just lean over the guard rail and look for the dolphins ever since you've been out here.'" Claire provided an ear to men who wanted to share: "The roustabout kind of had a little feminine side to him and he wrote poetry. Well, he could never reveal his poetry to the other guys because there's this male testosterone thing there."

Managing Reactions and Interactions

Because women have always made up such a small portion of the offshore workforce, most of their interactions have been with men. The Gulf of Mexico has long been recognized for its "cowboy culture,"[18] and from their initial hiring interviews onward, the pioneers confronted stereotypical expectations about both male and female behavior, and sometimes hostility, often from senior personnel.[19] During the interview she referred to as her final "interrogation," Carolyn was asked if it would bother her if some

of the men did not use the correct fork when eating. Claire's interviewer reminded her that she would not be able to run out to the store if she forgot her tampons. The challenges continued on the job. Both women described seeing men lined up their first day at work, as Claire noted, "like they're waiting, either to check me out or to watch me fail or fall or scream or cry."

Many women learned they were either with or just a step behind African-American males. Claire observed, "The only ones that really made me feel good were the other two roustabouts because they were new to the thing too and they were black, so I felt an affinity with 'em. They were the underdogs too, you know, in our society." Like other women who persisted and were promoted, Carolyn was challenged each time she moved to a new position. "One of the things when I became an operator, I had to bid for the job. [The supervisor] told me it was a sad day because a woman was becoming an operator. It was just a notch under the foreman. I said, 'Bro, females and blacks are here to stay.' It was changeover day. He gave my seat [in the helicopter] to a contractor. I had to wait till the next chopper, so I was late."

Plenty of women—just like many men—did not last more than one hitch offshore. Women who did continue and showed they could "carry their weight" also carefully navigated their relationships. In the same way that women established reputations based on their ability to handle offshore work and the physical aspects of their environment, they also became known for their ability to handle men. Several women reported problems with men who made unwanted sexual advances—and with females who had accepted such behavior. In 1973, when cleaning bedrooms on her first rig while it was still in the shipyard, Lillian was cornered by the toolpusher, slapped him, and quit on the spot. He saw her leaving and told her, "'You can't do that, it's three kilometers across this shipyard. You'll get raped and killed.' I said, 'What's the difference getting raped and killed out there or on this rig?' And I just proceeded to start walking across the shipyard."

Four years later, after Jill had been working offshore for more than a year had nothing but positive experiences, she was cornered by a company man in his office. She told one of her coworkers, who reported the incident, and the company sent out investigators. "I believe the man got fired. They came out there and they did all kinds of interviews with people. It turned out he had been harassing the other women in the galley. But it was the only, only time in all my offshore experience that happened, and it was [Slight pause] bizarre, I can't say I was scared, I was like, so shocked."

Tyrelle noted most of the guys were welcoming but a few were resistant to women offshore. However, even in the late 1970s, her company had no policies for dealing with a hostile work environment. Though faced with supervisors who behaved inappropriately, she was "too ashamed to say anything" and did not want to "stir up anything because that would only make it harder." One time she tried to report an incident and the situation became much worse. When her life was threatened she recruited a coworker to serve as her bodyguard until the man who threatened her was removed from the platform.

Several women noted that their biggest problems came from contract workers who were not regularly connected with the rig or boat to which they were assigned. Not only did Lynda's coworkers come to her defense, but, like Lillian, she took action that earned her a reputation. "[T]hey were sitting down in the galley, grinding their cigarette butts out on the clean galley floor, making obscene comments about me. So I went into the tool box, pulled out some onions and some liver, started fixing lunch. [Pause] They spent the rest of the ride hanging over the side. [Chuckles] Everybody thought that it was hilarious…. I remember one came back, and he looked at the other guy that was with him, a new guy, and he says, 'Don't mess with the cook, she's mean.'"

Several women found the men's behavior offshore was better than what they had experienced doing clerical work onshore, noting, for example, that offshore men would refrain from cursing—and admonish others who did not. Having worked as a secretary, Jill had prepared herself for the worst, "I was terrified in a way to go out there because we all had heard these stories about these roughnecks and how crude they could be and all. I was very scared about maybe the harassment I might get, so I bought clothes that were very big on me, and I had determined that I would conduct myself very carefully, that I would be kind to everyone, but I would really watch my behavior and not curse and not tell any off color jokes or things like that, things that they did in the office all the time. Amazingly, I go offshore and… I always felt I was treated more like a lady than I ever had been in my life… I knew I had kinda arrived, if you will, or they weren't lookin' at me as some kind of oddity anymore, when they started playing some of the jokes on me that they played on the other men."

Prior to coming to the Gulf, Sharon had flown helicopters in many all-male environments and found the pilots she worked with in the oilfield to be very supportive. She also was aware of how important it was to engender trust in her passengers. "These men come and go into a very

unfriendly environment," she noted. The challenge was to make them feel like they were in capable hands while distracting them from the ride. "So I get to babbling a lot," she commented, "talking, enjoying, and the next thing they know, they are on their platform and they haven't even realized it. I want them to be comfortable…and not even realize that 'She has got a lot to deal with up here and she is handling it.'"

Offshore Work in the Context of Women's Lives

When the oil and gas industry moved into southern Louisiana in the 1930s, it took advantage of a labor force characterized by poverty, low levels of literacy, and limited alternatives. Workers also offered diverse skills, entrepreneurism and willingness to take personal and financial risks, and an ethic of hard work and loyalty, and they came from large families with strong social networks.[20] By the 1970s, the industry was firmly a part of the region's culture.[21] It coexisted alongside the fishing sector, and many men moved between the two, buffering the economic cycles.[22] The women differed from men in this regard; they took over family responsibilities when they were not working.

Balancing Work and Family

While employed offshore, women interviewees were responsible for their own children, their nieces and nephews, and their aging parents. Many men, too, had responsibilities at work and home, but the women interviewees were more likely to have had to arrange the care of family members in their absence. They described a range of strategies for meeting their family needs, for example, coordinating childcare among their husbands, parents, and babysitters. Though the concentrated work schedules common to offshore work created childcare challenges, and especially for couples who both worked offshore, some families found that the long periods at home improved the quality of their interactions. For families with long experience in the industry, and in communities that are industry hubs, flexible childcare arrangements were not unusual.

Coworkers played a major role in women's experiences, regardless of company policies. Tyrelle had worked offshore for 10 years when her son was born in 1988; she worked up until a month before his birth. She was working on a platform with one other person, and when he complained to the supervisor that he was worried he would have to deliver the baby,

Tyrelle was moved to the main platform. She did not receive maternity leave but was able to use her sick days and returned to work 9 weeks after her son was born; at that time, male employees got one full paid day off if their wife had a baby and three paid days off if she had a C-section. For the first couple hitches when Tyrelle returned offshore, she was breastfeeding, so she would pump and store milk offshore to take home. Though it was hard for her to be away from her son a week at a time, she was able to spend entire days with him during her weeks home. She found it particularly challenging to find a sitter when her son started school and relied on her parents and family members to help care for him.

Several women interviewees opted to homeschool their children and were able to offer their children opportunities to travel and apply their learning in the family business which, though challenging at times, offered great rewards. Others quit working offshore when they began to have children of their own or when their aging parents needed extra support. However, many women, like their male counterparts, took jobs offshore to support themselves and their families and, if they left the industry, generally could not find work that paid as well. Two women specifically noted that one of the benefits of working offshore was that it relieved them of some of the domestic responsibilities they were expected to perform and allowed them to escape the confines of small-town expectations.

The transition between onshore and offshore could be rough. Both men and women developed rituals that helped them ease that transition. Donna[23] worked offshore from 1996 to 1999 and described coming in from a diving job, "Usually I'd always take a couple of days off after I came in. One day to rest, one day to do laundry and pack my bags again. I'd get back in my house or jump in my truck and go to Lafayette and shop, buy myself something. Just the fact that you know you can do it."

For both women and men, maintaining family ties has required more than delaying work or leaving the oilfield after a few years. Sarah's story is a familiar one: "I really took a lot of heat because I did not want to move into a management position because then they controlled where you live, and when you reported to work." She recalled a boss telling her "The closer you stay to the well, the more you control your career."

Leaving

The 14 women in the sample worked offshore from 1.5 to 41 years; 10 of them had worked offshore more than 5 years at the time they were

interviewed. Sarah noted that few women who worked in production remain in the field for long or finish their careers offshore. Instead, they move into administrative or supervisory positions or transfer to safety or office jobs. She also observed that women had a harder time than men getting another job if they lost one.

As the women aged, both the physical challenges of the work and the many competing demands they faced in their lives increased. Injuries, threat of injuries, and other health concerns were the leading causes the women cited for leaving offshore work. Some women, like many of their male colleagues, moved to onshore positions where they took a pay cut but could continue working, at least for a while. Amy moved to an onshore position after 8 years offshore, citing various health concerns, such as noise exposure. "I knew that if I ever wanted to have children I wanted to be able to hear them cry and not have my hearing so impaired. Even with hearing protection there is some hearing loss that's incurred typically. And so I knew that if I wanted to have my goals as a woman and as a mother, that I could make this oilfield work much better if I went in the office than out in the sun and the elements and things."

Donna, too, stopped going offshore after 8 years: "My knees. They just went bad on me. I couldn't handle climbing up the stairs, squatting, bending… At the beginning, the women had to prove themselves 110%. When I first started, it was nothing but a men's field, and that was the way it was supposed to be. It was supposed to be hard. They would say if it was easy they'd have women doing it. Then it dawned on me, why am I doing this [trying to prove myself]? Why am I hurting myself?"

Despite the challenges of the work, leaving was not without some regrets. Carolyn had worked offshore for 11 years and summed it up, "I left when it was time to leave. It was time for a younger woman to come out. I hated to leave. I hated not going back to the water. I miss the water, the rough water, hanging on by the seat of our pants. It was something to be out there in rough water. [When I decided to leave, I thought,] 'I'll miss this cold and lonely place.'"

Like many of their male counterparts, some women who were attracted to challenges in the industry were turned off by the automation. Claire described the change on production platforms, "The old technicians were hands-on people because the old equipment had to be looked at individually and you had to go to each tree and do different things, whereas the [new platforms had the latest equipment] and the new technicians were behind computers and screens and just sat there. That didn't seem too

appealing to me." After her mentor's son was killed in an accident offshore and she had two close calls herself, Claire decided it was time to leave the industry.

Lessons for Life

Working offshore provided more than a job, or even a career, for many women. Women who had the courage to enter and succeed in a male-dominated environment found strength to take on other challenges. Given the predominance of the offshore oil and gas industry in southern Louisiana, women's experiences offshore helped them understand their spouses, their students, and their clients in ways that would not have been possible had they not been there themselves. Working and living with others in close quarters provided women opportunities to develop skills they might not have had elsewhere. Most of the women commented on the importance of working together. Claire contrasted the teamwork of the offshore platform to a typical school environment, "I think this was the first time where I had a job where it was like I was part of a team. And after this whole experience of my life, I feel like whenever you approach projects and you're a team, it feels so much better than if you're just alone doing the thing. It feels so good, you're working as a team, there's human, there's camaraderie, and stuff like that, and so I felt like that was a really good experience for me…. I was so happy when they needed me…. I mean that felt real good. To belong. A sense of belonging!"

The Twenty-First Century: What Has Changed and What Stays the Same

This essay has focused on the experiences of women working offshore in the Gulf of Mexico in the latter half of the twentieth century. Despite the successes of some women, workplace changes, and efforts to recruit women, particularly in professional positions such as engineering, women still made up only a small fraction of the offshore workforce in 2016. Sharon L. Harlan and Brigid O' Farrell distinguished between the pioneer era in women's employment when individuals and minorities struggled individually for access to predominantly male jobs, and the post-pioneer era after equal employment opportunities were institutionalized; they found that organizational barriers impeded women's access to and advancement in traditionally male jobs.[24] While the women whose stories are told here

demonstrate it is possible to overcome barriers, significant change will require more than the efforts of individual women pioneers or even innovative companies.

As late as 2014, after having worked offshore for 17 years between 1980 and 2014, Sarah noted that, in her experience, a man and woman with the same years of experience would walk onto a new rig, and the people already there would assume that the man knew what he was doing and how to do it well while the woman would have to prove herself to every new supervisor and in every new location.[25] The continued imbalance in the number of males and females working offshore has had subtler effects as well. One of Sarah's greatest challenges was not having access to the close relationships that many men shared. While concerns about mixing work and pleasure are present in any job, in the offshore environment, where everyone was a coworker, women spent long periods of time alone. Most importantly, in the isolated offshore environment, men and women must rely on one another to solve problems. When social bonds are contingent, or weak, safety is compromised.

As she advanced in her career, Sarah relied on her male coworkers to defend her work ethic and ability to others who might question her presence on the rig, but their efforts generally did not extend beyond that structure. People working for contract companies are exposed to many environments and groups of people, so it is not surprising that women can experience a range of work environments, from the "cowboy culture" which characterized the industry in the boom years to the more female-friendly "safety culture" of the twenty-first century. And, as illustrated by the sample of women highlighted in this essay, despite some commonalities, the women come to the industry from a variety of backgrounds and with different expectations. Thus, even on platforms recognized in the 1990s for their commitment to disrupting masculine environments, encouraging men and women to acknowledge their physical limitations and theirs' and others' feelings, admit their mistakes, and focus on the goal of safety and well-being for all workers, women made up only about 10% of the workforce more than a decade later and were found mostly in housekeeping and catering.[26]

The restructuring of the offshore oil and gas industry in the 1990s and into the twenty-first century led to significant changes in many aspects of the industry as it operates in the Gulf of Mexico, including an expansion of the use of contract companies and contingent labor; continued globalization of the industry, with both operators and service companies working

across national and regional boundaries; and increased attention to safety and the promotion of worker-friendly policies.[27] The *Deepwater Horizon* disaster, which began in April 2010 with the blowout of the Macondo Well 80.5 km southeast of the Mississippi Delta, led to additional changes. These changes, followed by a drop in oil prices, sent individuals and companies scurrying to respond.

Lessons of the past are still relevant. Andrew Clark[28] concluded that people value many aspects of work, both the external rewards such as pay and promotion as well as the intrinsic ones such as relationships, and that men and women may differ in what they value most. Gloria Miller noted that the strategies women adopt in masculine environments may result in short-term individual gains but fail to change the masculine values of the company or industry overall.[29] In a global survey, 25% of women who worked offshore reported not feeling welcome in the industry.[30] At the 2013 Offshore Technology Conference, US Secretary of the Interior Sally Jewel observed that the population of the country is far more diverse than that of the industry and remarked that the industry had a lot more work to do.[31]

Conclusion

This essay has explored the question of women in the offshore oil and gas industry in the Gulf of Mexico. It has focused on the period from the early 1970s, when companies began to hire women to work offshore, through the 1990s, and has examined women's motivations to take jobs offshore, their experiences offshore, and the circumstances that affected the duration of their work. Several factors, including the labor shortages in the industry as activity rapidly increased, the incorporation of gender workplace equality into the broader civil rights discourse of the 1960s and early 1970s, and the desire on the part of women for greater employment options, led to significant pressure on companies to hire women. Yet, while oil companies actively recruited women, and women actively sought nontraditional employment, offshore work remained largely out of reach for women.

Why look at women? Even as technology has reduced the physical demands of offshore work, and as other male-dominated industries have seen significant increases in the number of female employees, the offshore oil and gas industry has struggled to attract and keep women. It faces another transition, one being dubbed "The Great Crew Change," as many

people retire and companies search for the next generation of workers. The women's stories provide a look at how the offshore oil and gas industry has confronted difference and change. They illustrate the range of responses they encountered, from supportive to indifferent to hostile.

In addition, the industry is facing renewed calls for increasing safety, most recently as a result of the *Deepwater Horizon* disaster. Safety culture and disaster preparedness depend on workers, their attitudes, and their accumulated knowledge and expertise. Some companies have successful policies and practices to protect workers, but the industry as a whole, with its cycles and heavy reliance on contract workers, continually challenges individual efforts. Women can and do change men's behavior; an environment that is friendly and supportive of women is also likely to be supportive of men—and safer.

Notes

1. Betty participated in an oral history interview with the intent that it be placed in university and community archives, so I use her real name. Unless specifically noted, all names are real and the recordings and transcripts of the interviews can be accessed in the archives of the Offshore Oil and Gas History Project ("Archives," accessed March 31, 2016, http://www.gulfoil.bara.arizona.edu/oral-history/archives).
2. A pseudonym.
3. This work has been funded by the US Department of the Interior's Minerals Management (MMS), renamed the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) in 2011. The studies have extended from Brownsville, Texas to Gulf Shores, Alabama and incorporated ethnographic, historical, and demographic research to examine the social impacts of the industry on individuals, families, and communities.
4. Research on female oilfield engineers includes Gloria E. Miller, "Frontier Masculinity in the Oil Industry: The Experience of Women Engineers," *Gender, Work and Organization* 11, no. 1 (2004): 47–73; and Clem Herman and Suzan Lewis, "Entitled to a Sustainable Career? Motherhood in Science, Engineering, and Technology," *Journal of Social Issues* 68, no. 4 (2012): 767–789.
5. Major oil companies include the largest publicly owned oil and gas companies that, through recent mergers, now make up "supermajors" such as ExxonMobil, ConocoPhillips, Chevron, and Shell.
6. Diane E. Austin, "Women's Work and Lives in Offshore Oil," *Research in Economic Anthropology* 24 (2006): 163–204.

7. Daniel Yergin, *The Prize: The Epic Quest for Oil, Money and Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).
8. Diane E. Austin and Thomas McGuire, "The Great Crew Change? Structuring Work in the Oilfield," in *ExtrACTION: Impacts, Engagements and Alternative Futures*, ed. Kirk Jalbert et al. (New York: Routledge, 2017).
9. Renamed the University of Louisiana at Lafayette (ULL) in 1999.
10. Rebecca Ponton, "Breaking the Gas Ceiling," 2013, accessed March 31, 2016, www.breakingthegasceiling.com/magazine-article/.
11. See, for example, Ariane Hegewisch and Heidi Hartmann, *The Gender Wage Gap: 2014.* Institute for Women's Policy Research Publication C433, September 2015 and Kim A. Weeden, "Profiles of Change: Sex Segregation in the United States, 1910–2000," in *Occupational Ghettos: The Worldwide Segregation of Women and Men*, ed. Maria Charles and David B. Grusky (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 131–178.
12. National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health (NIOSH), *Oil and Gas Extraction: Occupational Safety and Health Risks*, last updated December 13, 2012, www.cdc.gov/niosh/programs/oilgas/risks.html.
13. Diane E. Austin, Thomas R. McGuire, and Rylan Higgins, "Work and Change in the Gulf of Mexico Offshore Petroleum Industry," *Research in Economic Anthropology* 24 (2006): 89–122.
14. Austin, "Women's Work," 168–170.
15. Janice D. Yoder and Lynne L. Berendsen, "'Outsider Within' the Firehouse: African American and White Women Firefighters," *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (2001): 27–36.
16. "*Roberts v. Texaco*," accessed January 6, 2016, www.blbglaw.com/cases/0008. Bernstein Litowitz Berger & Grossmann represented African-American employees in a lawsuit brought against Texaco, resulting in the largest discrimination settlement in US history. The story was told by Bari-Ellen Roberts in *Roberts vs. Texaco: A True Story of Race and Corporate America* (New York: Avon Books, 1998).
17. Austin, "Women's Work," 168–170.
18. Jane Lewis, Marilyn Porter, and Mark Shrimpton, *Women, Work and Family in the British, Canadian and Norwegian Offshore Oilfields* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1988).
19. Austin, "Women's Work," 175–181.
20. Austin, McGuire, and Higgins, "Work and Change," 92.
21. Robert B. Gramling and E. Joubert, "The Impact of Outer Continental Shelf Petroleum Activity on Social and Cultural Characteristics of Morgan City, Louisiana," in *Outer Continental Shelf Impact, Morgan City, Louisiana,* ed. Emmett Francis Stallings and Timothy Frank Reilly (Baton Rouge: Louisiana Department of Transportation and Development, 1977), 106–143.

22. Diane E. Austin, Karen Coelho, Andrew Gardner, Rylan Higgins, and Thomas McGuire, *Social and Economic Impacts of OCS Activities on Individuals and Families: Volume I: Final Report. OCS Study MMS 2002–022* (New Orleans: US Department of the Interior, Minerals Management Service, Gulf of Mexico OCS Region, 2002); Woody Falgoux, *Rise of the Cajun Mariners: The Race for Big Oil* (Thibodaux, LA: Stockard James, 2007).
23. Falgoux, *Rise of the Cajun Mariners.*
24. Sharon L. Harlan and Brigid O'Farrell, "After the Pioneers: Prospects for Women in Nontraditional Blue-Collar Jobs," *Work and Occupations* 9, no. 3 (1982): 363–386.
25. Sarah's observation has been demonstrated in a large number of controlled experimental studies and reviews of actual decision-making processes. See National Academy of Sciences (NAS), *Beyond Bias and Barriers: Fulfilling the Potential of Women in Academic Science and Engineering* (Washington, DC: National Academies Press, 2006).
26. Robin J. Ely and Debra E. Meyerson, "An Organizational Approach to Undoing Gender: The Unlikely Case of Offshore Oil Platforms," *Research in Organizational Behavior* 30 (2010): 3–34.
27. Austin and McGuire, "The Great Crew Change."
28. Andrew E. Clark, "Job Satisfaction and Gender: Why Are Women So Happy at Work?," *Labour Economics* 4, no. 4 (1997): 341–372.
29. Miller, "Frontier Masculinity," 48.
30. Gene Lockard, "NES Survey: What Women Say About Working in the Oil, Gas Industry," *Rigzone*, April 14, 2014, accessed March 31, 2016, www.rigzone.com/news/oil_gas/a/132552/NES_Survey_What_Women_Say_About_Working_in_the_Oil_Gas_Industry.
31. Robin Dupre, "Women Fill 40 Percent of Vacancies in Oil, Gas," *Rigzone*, July 4, 2013, accessed March 31, 2016, www.rigzone.com/news/oil_gas/a/127452/Women_Fill_40_of_Vacancies_in_Oil_Gas.