

They Gamble on Offshore Oil

By **ARTHUR W. BAUM**

Far out in the Gulf of Mexico, drillers probe the deeps from fantastic artificial islands. It costs millions to play this game—but the payoff may be worth it.

IT is a little sad that harried house hunters this spring will not have on their lists one empty Louisiana apartment. The apartment is air-conditioned, roomy enough for a family of four dozen and has pretty good television reception. It is free from noisy neighbors both upstairs and down and for at least a half mile around. The landlord spent about \$1,500,000 on the structure in which it stands, alone and aloft, and there is excellent night fishing under the nearest street lamp, a big, flickering gas flare.

Unfortunately, this modern set of rooms is seven miles out in the Gulf of Mexico, commutation is by helicopter, and fresh water is obtained only by hauling or by evaporating the salt water of the gulf. The address is Platform A, Block 18, Grand Isle, Louisiana. Incidentally the landlord, Humble Oil and Refining Company, is not interested in further tenants, although the former occupants, fifty-four oil drillers, were well-behaved, prosperous, well-fed and reasonably happy during their residence.

Platform A, with its capacious apartment, is a fixed-platform oil rig. It stands like a giant stork on long skinny legs in fifty feet of water. Until recently it was drilling for oil, but it has completed its quota of six wells and it now serves as a gathering place and terminal for an underwater oil pipeline to the nearest land at Grand Isle. The drillers have moved out and the flat is empty.

The view from the windows of Platform A is, to understate it, not quite like looking down on Gramercy Park. It would be spectacular, indeed, during a hurricane, although no one remains aboard to check on the drama. In calm weather the blue of the gulf is everywhere, shadowed to the north by the hazy slat of the shore line lying on the water. Files of pelicans conduct comical maneuvers, looking like cartoons that fly. Shrimp boats occasionally lurch by, bent on the same prey as the wheeling birds. A resident can drop a fishline out any window to the surface of the gulf, forty feet below. And at night a burning gas well in the near distance, appearing pretty futile with nothing to light up, draws restless audiences of fish below and insects above.

But an observer here sees more than nature. He is witness to a representative sample of the oil industry's newest exploratory push, drilling for oil in deep water. In the surrounding distance there are visible almost a dozen other structures of the 600 that dot the gulf shelf between the Rio Grande and

the bays east of the Mississippi Delta. At hand here are samples of the two principal types of rig which spearhead the invasion that is creeping out on the submerged edge of the continent. Platform A of Block 18—a block is a leased area—is a fixed platform. It stands on steel pilings driven into the bottom. There is another kind of rig too—a curious mobile device called a submersible barge. The barges are often boats with their decks built high above their hulls, permitting the hulls to be sunk into position while the decks tower above the surface.

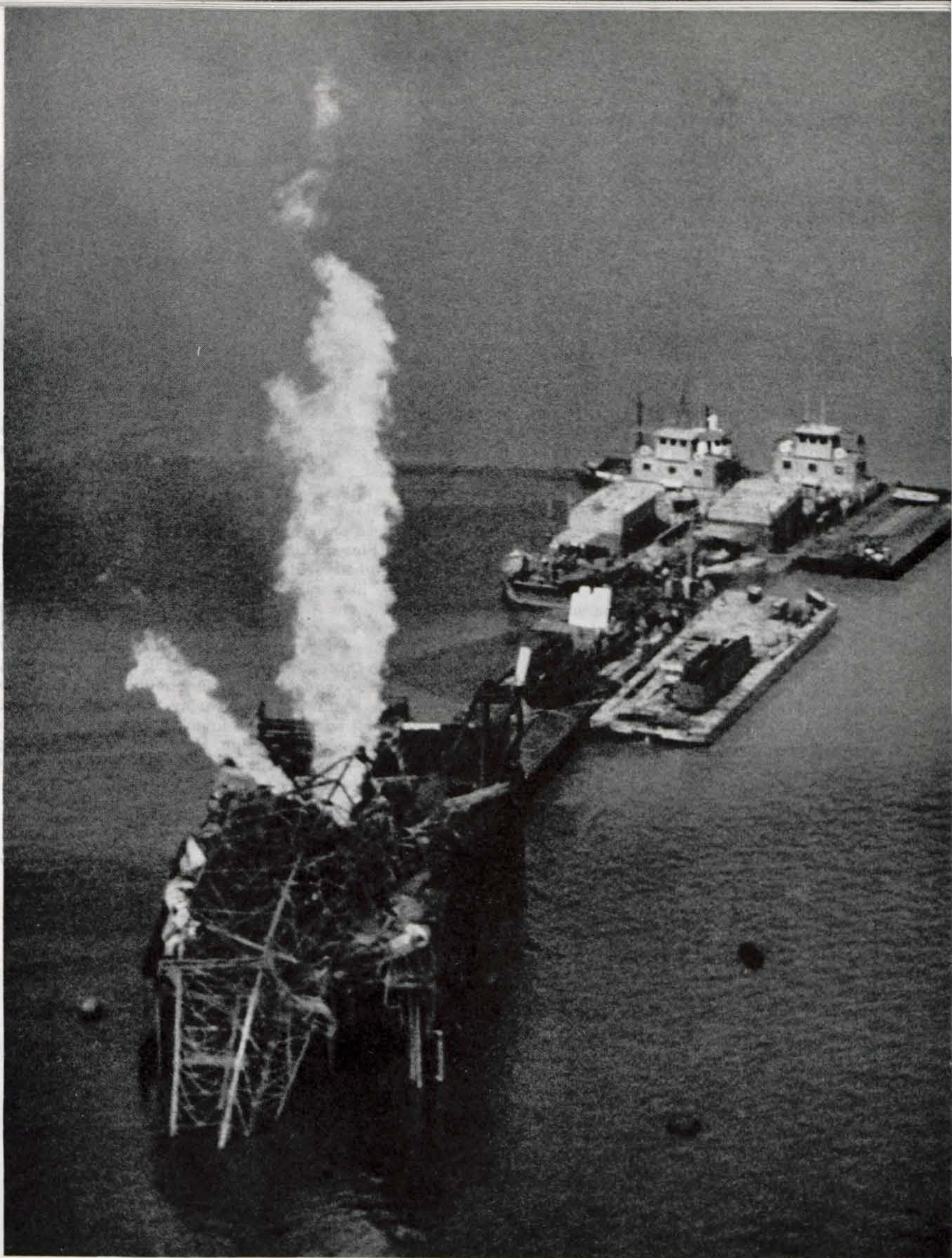
Quite likely such rigs have some significance for our automobiles and home furnaces and industries in the future. But the extent of that significance is not yet certain. Drilling in deep water is so new that the oldest possible old-timer can possess only eight years' experience as an oil-field sailor. He would be an original employee of Kerr-McGee Oil Industries, who, in 1947, brought in the first deep-water well ten miles off the muskrat marshes west of Morgan City, Louisiana.

The geologists, who can map the earth a mile below our feet, are hopeful about the comparatively flat edge of the continent that reaches far out before the gulf floor plunges abruptly into great depths. They believe that a frontier the size of an additional

Texas confronts the oil seekers beyond the beaches. Nor is this prospect dimmed by the fact that to date deep-water exploration has been erratic in pace, but always expensive, that it has been frustrated for half its career by uncertainty over whether the oil companies pay their lease and royalty money to Federal or state government, and that exploration equipment has thus far been, in a broad sense, makeshift.

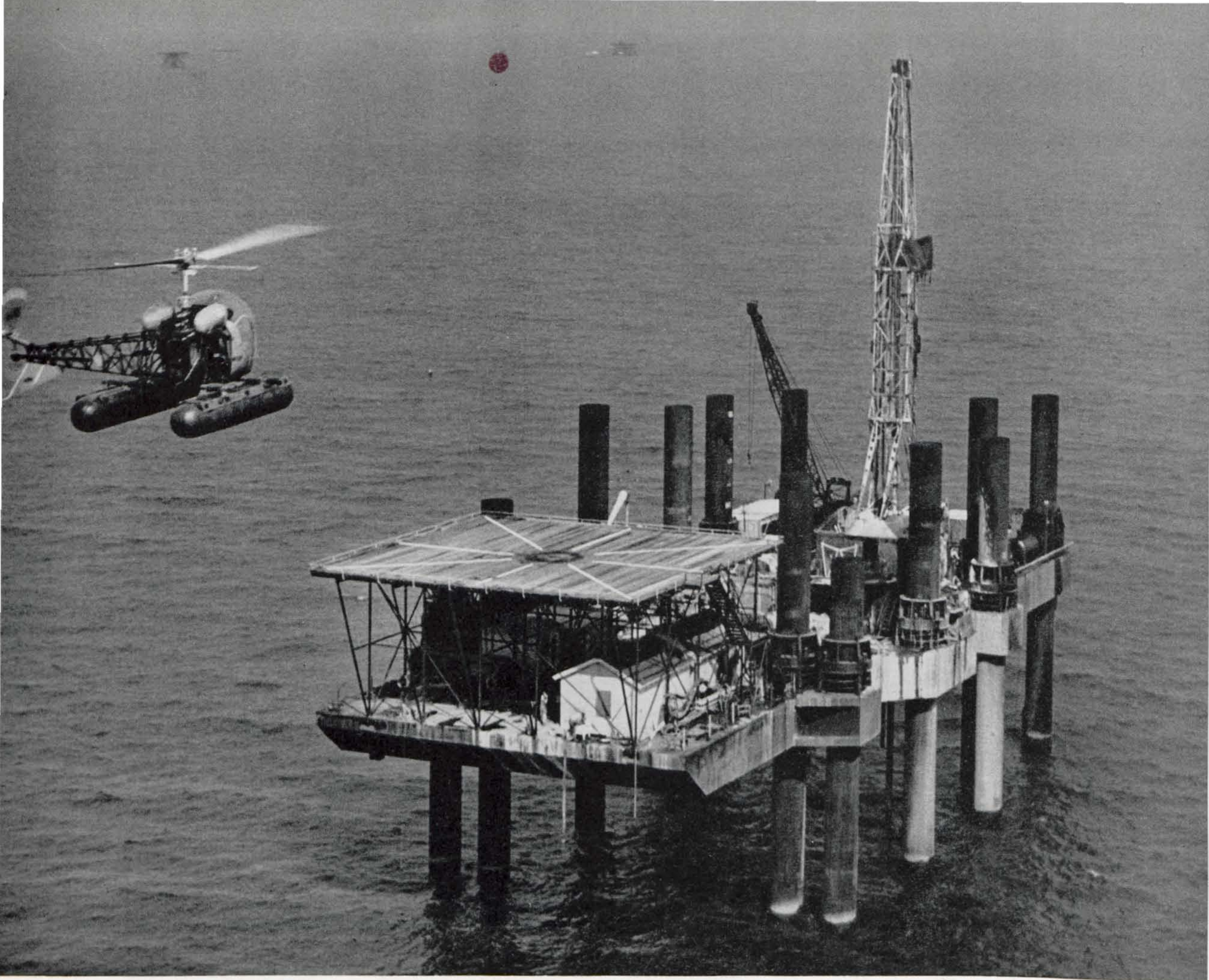
It is a fair guess that not a single prospector has yet retrieved the cost of his deep-water search, and all the oil now coming from offshore wells amounts to less than 1 per cent of our daily national use. Yet it is reasonable to hope. Iowa-farmland prices have been paid for rights to acreage lying deep under salt water. Someone expects to find something there, and it will not be corn or soybeans.

Petroleum has always jerked back and forth from periodic alarms over threatened exhaustion to depressing gluts. We are always running out of oil and always finding more. We are consistently rescued by discoveries that may be pure whimsical wildcat, that may be logically tracked and found, or by new finding techniques. The additional sources thus touched off may or may not be welcome at the precise moment of discovery, but (Continued on Page 96)



The drill bit was 5000 feet down when the blowout happened. The sudden spurt of gas caught fire, tumbled a derrick into the sea, and the conflagration lasted several days. All crew members escaped.

JOE HOMER



Drillers arrive by air at a rig in Block 18, seven miles at sea off Grand Isle, La. By picking up its feet, this platform can turn itself into a barge. BILL SHROUT



"Roughnecks" Henry Dounds and Herbert Vegas man a drill at a Block 18 rig. Their pay: about \$500 a month. BILL SHROUT



Kermac 44, a submersible barge. When this monster is operating—at a cost of thousands of dollars a day—its hull sits on the gulf floor. Its drill can reach a depth of three miles. INGALLS SHIPBUILDING CORP.

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in the end they are always cherished. The giant East Texas field was found just in time to help drive oil prices to almost nothing, certainly an untimely discovery, but not long afterward it helped win a war.

The new deep-water frontier in the Gulf of Mexico is not presently vital. More oil is not urgently needed just now. But it will be later, and if there is a relative of East Texas somewhere under the cruising redfish and pompano, it is at least going to be of interest to our old age or to our children. The greater likelihood, however, is that future finds under the gulf will be related not to East Texas, but to Spindletop, the granddaddy of the salt domes, which is exciting enough.

The whether and where of potential Spindletop cousins on the gulf shelf depends, believe it or not, on the weight of dirt which was originally under the spot on which you now stand, if you are anywhere on the mid-continent. A melting icecap once provided all of mid-America's huge rushing rivers with dirt and boulders to spread over the southern edge of the country. These billions of tons of fill were piled on top of ancient salt beds from ancient seas. The burden was heavy and irregular. Frequently it acted like two hands slightly apart pressing on a toy balloon, squeezing the salt underneath into rising thumblike bubbles. As the salt columns rose, they tilted and broke the strata of sediments through which they passed, forming niches and traps into which petroleum was driven and held. Usually these blind alleys for oil are draped on the flanks of the salt domes. Sometimes they exist as caps.

For more than fifty years Texas and Louisiana have drawn oil from salt-dome structures under the land. Now, since the continent continues underwater in a form similar to that on the dry side, it is fully expected that the same structures exist underwater that are already familiar on land. The landward belt of Spindletop relatives is from twenty to ninety miles wide. A corresponding belt seaward would reach to an average water depth of about 160 feet.

The promise of this unexplored domain has been put in sober trade terms by Dean McGee, of Kerr-McGee, the largest contract drillers. Addressing the American Petroleum Institute, he said, "... offshore well data indicate that nearly all formational units are continuing to thicken seaward. Geophysical exploration has disclosed favorable structural conditions far at sea. Certainly, exploration to date has shown the offshore area to be comparable, in number and quality of salt-dome structures, with the coastal belt."

Oil wells "far at sea"—sounds romantic. But no one is in a swivet for oil production. Texas and Louisiana are both choked down by "allowables," which are permits to produce only a fraction of the amount wells could produce if they were opened wide. Then why is the industry putting out to sea to find oil in an area which is definitely inconvenient? And if this submarine search is undertaken, just how do drillers go about it?

Oil companies never find all the oil they want, and never will. They do find a lot, of course, but under the wise conservation restrictions on production today, the possession of oil in the ground

does not necessarily mean large immediate income. Consequently, to get more money to find more oil, the explorers need more wells than they otherwise would. Further exploration is financed not by possession, but by production. These economics are plainly illustrated by the location of today's offshore wells. Louisiana permits offshore wells to produce about 90 per cent more oil than equivalent wells on land. Texas does not. That makes it simple. Louisiana waters are getting most of the offshore wells.

Another powerful magnet operates off the coast of either state. Drilling on land is customarily complicated by the necessity of making leases with dozens of farmers, ranchers or other owners. It takes a regiment of lawyers to provide even a little elbowroom, to pool acreage, to settle inevitable drainage claims and to solve other problems. And in the chopped-up checkerboards of land oil fields, the competition is always too close.

The blue waters of the gulf wash away these costly and irritating pica-yunes. State or Federal blocks of submarine surface are available in large chunks and open to bids. A single operator can lease a square mile or more at a crack and possibly realize the beautiful dream of possessing a whole salt dome or other formation to hug to its own corporate bosom. This kind of monogamy is hard for an oil company to resist.

To go about what is called "doing business in the ocean" is an easy matter. Simply take a few million dollars and start spending it. Peanuts will not do. The initial costs are high, estimated at four times as high as drilling on land. A first step is to pay as much as \$1000 an acre for a lease on submerged mud and old oyster beds. What happens after that is typified by a modern example of drilling until recently located at longitude 92°45' west, three miles off a marshy game refuge on the shore of

Cameron County, Louisiana, about 150 miles west of Block 18. Here Shell Oil drilled the easy way. Shell hired Kerr-McGee to do the work. Specifically it rented from the drilling contractor a rig and all necessary services for a daily rental of a few thousand dollars.

Kerr-McGee provides a rig, a fleet, an organization, shore installations and a radio network. The rig is Kermac 44, which may be described as one of the newest boats afloat while it is afloat, or one of the latest sunk while it is in the position it is now in. No. 44 is a submersible barge. It is at once a boat, a platform, a working drill capable of reaching three miles below the gulf floor, a storage and handling depot and a hotel. Under tow it can whiz along at one to five miles an hour. While afloat it looks like a huge double bunk from an Army barracks. The bottom bunk is a barge hull, the top one is a two-story house, and the two are separated by nearly a hundred feet of legs and bracings. It is fixed in drilling position by flooding and sinking the barge hull together with pontoons affixed thereto. In a water depth of forty-two feet, this leaves the upper house—the working and living decks—about forty feet above the surface in calm weather. And with a tall derrick rising above the top platform, the whole effect is that of a partly finished twenty-five-story skyscraper which someone has carelessly built in water that comes up to the ninth floor.

This lonely station is reached by way of Bill Leblanc, formerly of Bayou Lafourche. Leblanc, in turn, may be reached by a sixty-mile trip southward over blacktop and crushed oyster shell from Lake Charles, Louisiana. The road runs through land that is flat, frequently moist, and overcast with the light atmospheric glow that bespeaks the near presence of a sea. This is Cameron County, the largest source of North America's muskrat fur. Near the gulf shore, the road turns west at Creole. Before deep-water drilling began, there had been drill rigs in the Creole field with their feet in the surf, progenitors in a way of the ventures to come.

West of here, near where the Calcasieu River pours slowly into the gulf, is the mosquito-afflicted town of Cameron. Kerr-McGee has a dock at Cameron, a branch of the Morgan City headquarters, and in a small white office here there is a radio party line connecting Cameron, Morgan City, all the supply and crew boats of the fleet and the company oil rigs offshore. No. 44 is one of these rigs. As this is written it is a little less than four hours distant by crew boat.

Although Kerr-McGee is an Oklahoma company, most of the offshore crews are young Texans and Louisianians. Bill Leblanc is a Louisianian and consequently a natural boat handler, just as Texans are natural oil drillers. Other differences between the two groups, colorfully claimed by each, are false. Louisianians do say "white beans" when they mean navy beans, and they apparently cannot distinguish between hot pepper sauces and blowtorch flames, but they are not, as the Texans claim, related to raccoons.

To most of the young men who have taken up the life of oil-field sailors on No. 44, duty tours—always pronounced "towers" around oil wells—begin at Leblanc's little white office. The men check in here and leave their car keys available in case high water threatens the parking grounds while they are away. They split their time between

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PUT IT THIS WAY

By FRANKLIN P. JONES

- ▶ Young men these days seem to confuse starting at the bottom with getting in on the ground floor.
- ▶ When a girl won't play ball with you any more, she may be calling the game on account of darkness.
- ▶ Vanity is what makes you see yourself as others see themselves.
- ▶ A road map is a device for finding out what route you should have taken.
- ▶ Women are unpredictable. You never know how they are going to manage to get their own way.
- ▶ Punctuality is a fine thing. Particularly if you want to avoid people.

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land and gulf. They work a week and have the next week off. And during the week they are out on 44 they split again, twelve hours on and twelve off each day. For the trip out they board an ex-shrimp boat, sixty-five to eighty-five feet long, sturdy enough to live through gulf storms and, because of that, rather slow. There must be three of these boats for each rig, one in use, one in reserve and one standing by for emergency at the drilling platform.

The crew for No. 44 changes on Friday, and on that morning the boat at Cameron absorbs between two and three dozen men like a blotter. Those who have driven all night from Thibodaux or Houston will dive for soft spots and sleep. Poker players and kibitzers grab a below-decks table for a last session with somewhat higher stakes than are permitted out on the rig, where the company sees to it that the games remain harmless. Comic books and lurid paperbacks appear in abundance—there will be plenty of lounging and reading time aboard 44.

A few roughnecks slump against the rail as the boat heads down the Calcasieu for the Gulf. They swap lies about the home week just ended, with women and money never very long out of the conversation. A herd of cattle on shore naturally fascinates a young Texan. "That's for me," he drawls. But it is not for his companions. "Yeah," one of them snorts, "but you cain't make any money at it." The offshore rigs do have their advantages—around \$500 a month, and for half that time everything found.

The boat slugs it out with the choppy waves. In about two and one half hours No. 44 is a faint splinter on the horizon, then a thin upright pencil, and finally a tin skeleton growing out of the water. Somewhere farther out, twenty-seven miles offshore and in more than sixty feet of water, is a Continental Oil platform. At this moment, but probably not for long, it is the farthest outpost of the oil-and-water frontier. But outward distance means less than proxim-

ity to a harbor, and No. 44 is isolated enough for the men who live on it half their time. Toward the end of the week they itch for families, cars, the earth itself, and in some cases for an atmosphere less teetotal than on the rig.

Arrival on 44 is a short jump to a swaying steel catwalk and then a long climb up steel steps. Lunch is ready. It is a massive meal because "feeding good" is a vital part of attracting and holding employees on offshore rigs. There are two kinds of soup—gumbo and rice—roast beef and mashed potatoes, beans with frankfurters, cabbage, fresh salad, fourteen kinds of spicy condiments and sauces ranging from normal to Louisiana hot, plain or chicory coffee, lemonade and milk, and two desserts. Dinner will be heavier. Coffee and snacks can be had any time. The cook considers it part of his job to be good-natured and to keep his model kitchen open to coffee drinkers and anyone with a minor peeve to get off his chest. He will listen and cluck sympathetically. He will also prepare and serve fish caught from the edge of the platform or freeze it for carrying home. But only newcomers fish with enthusiasm. Out here the fish are a little too easy to catch.

At night the black windows of the recreation room might well look out on an Oklahoma prairie or West Texas sagebrush. The incessant card games give only a slight hint that the rumble from the drill as the driller plays the clutches and pressures of his console is not a normal land operation. There is a little more time-killing air about the games. Variations are tried, new games thought up and old ones revived. A couple of youngsters are playing casino. The television set, its picture a trifle snowy because the salt air tends to corrode the aerial, is rarely turned off. Conversations turn a little more toward the work that is being done here and the gossip from other, equally isolated rigs. The last hurricane is recalled, and which rig it pushed fifteen feet off location and whose machinery

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was smashed. Weather shutdowns average only about 4 per cent of total time. The few cases of blowouts make recurrent talk, because a well that suddenly and destructively spouts gas or oil can send everyone over the side to the stand-by boat in a real hurry.

On the drilling floor the oddity of 44's location is even less apparent. The tool pusher says, "It makes no difference to me. Once the hole gets going it's exactly like on land." This is true enough. The presence of forty feet of water under the spinning drill table is of no more consequence than forty feet of earth, and, of course, below the gulf floor the sands and shales are geologically identical with those under land. Drilling bits wear out in twenty-four hours. Caves are encountered a mile down, and the bit drops through. The sides of the hole suddenly slush away and must be cemented or plugged. The mud man's work is unaffected by the gulf. He has a laboratory aboard, and he prescribes a drilling-mud formula for the bottom of the hole a mile down. There is mud aboard in sacks, a mud tank and a mud cleaner. The additives that help plaster the sides of the hole—tree bark or plastic flakes—are on hand, and down in the compartments on the sea floor are fresh water for mixing with the mud and fresher water for drinking.

There is a little less of most things, except food, because this is a small island, after all, fifty yards long and a third as wide. But the lumbering barges that bring more casing pipe and more mud and fuel and water are as dependable as trucks and railroads. Only the weather interferes. The powerful gulf itself is the problem.

But it is being learned off Louisiana and Texas that gulf conditions can be handled. Kermac 44, built at Pascagoula, is a step in that solution. Other forms of submersible barges are coming along in other shipyards—at Vicksburg, Morgan City, Harvey, Shreveport. There is a new submersible at work off the Mississippi Delta that has much of its machinery in the sunken bottom hull and an elevator to reach it. Back in Block 18, off Grand Isle, the DeLong-McDermott barge leased by Humble turns itself into a fixed platform and back into a barge in a matter of hours.

This handy trick is possible because the DeLong carries its own legs, ten of them, each one 160 feet long. When it moves out to sea as a floating barge, the legs, which are huge double caissons, are hoisted into the air. At its drilling position the legs are simply dropped to the bottom, and by means of jacks the barge itself performs the

curious maneuver of creeping up its own legs until it rides high enough to be safe from the worst hurricane waves, between thirty and forty feet above the surface. This hybrid barge-platform can pick up its feet, move and plant itself, ready to drill again in twenty-four hours.

The DeLong is the only barge in Block 18, and, in fact the barges throughout the gulf oil area are far outnumbered by fixed platforms erected on pilings. Whether this relationship will reverse or not as the gulf rigs multiply by tens or hundreds, or whether economic evolution will produce totally new and better methods is unpredictable. But for the men who work on the offshore rigs, the differences at present are not great. Most of the platforms are relatively small and contain only the drilling apparatus. Living quarters, supplies and part of the machinery are carried by a tender anchored next to the platform. This, of course, means that crews sleep, eat and spend their spare time on a mildly pitching vessel. But seasickness offshore is negligible. There is always the solid platform at hand.

Living on the tenders is less bright and airy than on the new barges for a very simple reason—the tenders are war-surplus ships, LST's or LCT's, and consequently much older than the barges. The entire gulf oil drive thus far, in fact, has been conducted largely with surplus, made-over and rented equipment. Now, however, some designing thought is being applied to the specific needs of offshore work and life. The newest barges are an indication of what is under way, and some more interesting ones will be seen shortly. Tenders are bound to change since the standard war-surplus ship is no longer available. Operators are already thinking of hydrofoil boats for faster crew transportation. These are small boats with stilts which, when they attain sufficient speed, rise up on their toes and speed along clear of the waves.

Equipment now is commonly a mixture of old with a sprinkling of new, and Block 18, off Grand Isle, is a good sample. The DeLong barge there is new; Platform A is old. Elderly shrimp boats ply back and forth between the platforms and shore, but at the same time all of Block 18's rigs have helicopter landing decks, and helicopters provide the main personnel transportation. The "eggbeaters," which are also on trial in other areas, have helped make the Block 18 operation sharply different from that of less accessible drilling areas. Although the helicopter service has been marred by one tragic

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accident, it puts Block 18 within seven minutes of land, and the most distant block served from Grand Isle only a half hour away. The boats require most of an hour for the short trip and three hours for the longer one.

With this quick transport available the duty tours on Block 18 are shorter. Crews remain offshore only eighty-eight hours, during which they complete a week's work. They are then free for the remaining eighty hours of each week, and Humble is providing housing

for many of them on Grand Isle. Those who live here, or in the town of Grand Isle, or even as far as New Orleans, live fuller family lives than the average traveling salesman. Those on Grand Isle, moreover, live in a region rich with historical color. Famous storms have occurred here at the mouth of Barataria Bay. Confederate ships slipped cotton through the pass between Grand Isle and Grande Terre, and on the Grande Terre side of the pass Jean Lafitte maintained a headquarters. Another Grand Isle neighbor, Cheniere

Caminada, was overwhelmed by a hurricane before the turn of the century, with a loss of more than 1000 lives. A century ago, Isle Derniere, to the west, suffered a like disaster. The Derniere tragedy was later vividly described by Lafcadio Hearn in the novel, *Chita*, which he wrote on Grand Isle.

But Grand Isle has never before seen anything quite like the new skeletal islands distantly visible off its shore, where the easygoing newcomers are probing for oil under the salt water. Lafitte's buried doubloons have been

hunted all over these shores for years, but the new treasure hunt is more important and already has been more profitable. Grand Isle has changed with the advent of the oilmen, but out on Block 18 the life of the crews is the same as on Kermac 44, more than 150 miles west, though the work tours are shorter. It is a dormitory life. Men sleep in bunks, lounge in large recreation rooms, eat sizable meals. They work, too, and they commonly produce more per man than average land crews, since the expensive water-borne rigs can afford to produce oil only from worthwhile deposits. Tiny pockets which would be stripped on land are passed up altogether at sea.

Moreover, the fixed platforms drill several wells by simply skidding the derricks ten feet or so on the platform surface. And if costlier directional drilling is undertaken, the drill from one platform can bore sweeping curves that reach the four sides of approximately a square mile of subsurface. The barges, of course, can move themselves rapidly from one location to a new one. It is one of their principal merits. An offsetting deficiency is the fact that if they are built to operate in, say, sixty feet of water, they are too expensive to compete with less costly rigs in shallower water. A submersible barge for sixty-foot water is worth roughly \$2,000,000.

Of course, the monster barges have a steady life of exploration. They can keep searching until they find oil, and only at that point is a decision required on whether they shall stay and produce the oil or give way to the erection of a cheaper rig. The stilt villages of the fixed platforms face no such decisions. If they find oil, they remain to produce it. If not, they are salvaged. Their steel legs are blown off by dynamite at the sea-floor level and their upper parts moved or cut up.

The day-by-day story of how the search for oil is progressing crackles continuously on the various company radio networks. In the jargon of the oil fields, rig bosses and shore bosses discuss conditions the drill bit may be meeting 5000 or 10,000 feet below the gulf surface. The gossip line buzzes with the same hole problems and the same solutions that occur in West Texas or Saskatchewan. Specialists are sent for—independent cementing operators, loggers who take compass pictures a mile or so down curved holes. Boats or seaplanes or helicopters are ordered, dispatched, sometimes canceled. Last-minute, pin-point weather data is constantly on the air.

Most of these conversations are drawling and informal, but no less serious because of that. They are commonly hopeful, too, because oilmen always expect a miracle in the next 100 feet of drill hole. Despair is limited to the minor things—for example, to the dispatcher listening to a rig boss calling in a little grocery order. The dispatcher is bayou-born, and he knows that many of the men working under this particular rig boss came from the bayou country. They grew up as he did, in bare feet and hand-me-downs, and they were tickled with a fat catfish or a stick of sugar cane. Now he hears the rig boss drone on with the cook's order, "... sixty pounds of T-bone, fifty pounds of roast beef, case of maraschino cherries, twenty gallons of ice cream, lettuce, coconut, angel-food cake mix, gelatin dessert, red peppers, green peppers, hot sauce, mild sauce —"

The dispatcher slams the table. "Well, how do you like that?" he demands of no one. "And they grew up on bread and sirup! The world is sure going to hell."

THE END