A tale of two towns

BOOM?
Federal Alien Detention
Center brings hope for jobs

OAKDALE

By JEAN COCO
Special to Magazine

The aliens will come, rain or shine, to Oakdale, La., in small numbers each day. The aliens are the estimated 35,000 people who have illegally entered the United States. These people will be funneled into the new Federal Alien Detention Center in Oakdale. The center opened March 21, will confine people to the center for six months for those who have their cases decided.

Oakdale now has a Federal Alien Detention Center. The minimum-security facility opened March 21, when INS officials arrived in town. The INS is searching for a site for alien detention centers. Several towns have applied for the center, with a 1,000-person capacity, which is the largest in the state. An estimated 35,000 people will pass through Oakdale executives every year, making it a stable industry for Oakdale. The center will serve as a dormitory for INS officials.

The town of Oakdale, population 9,000, is a typical rural town. The streets are lined with homes and businesses. Oakdale is surrounded by trees and farmland. The town has a population of 7,000, which is the same as the total number of INS officials who will be held in the center. INS officials will be held in the center for six months for those who have their cases decided. The center is expected to stay open for at least three years.

Another controversial employment issue is the age restriction policy. The INS has a policy that requires all aliens to be at least 14 years old. The INS has a policy that requires all aliens to be at least 14 years old. The INS has a policy that requires all aliens to be at least 14 years old.

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Evangeline

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during 80 years of drilling. Scrap metal and debris litters the ground, and black, oily saltwater pits, a byproduct of drilling, dot the oil field. Only scrub brush, grass and weeds cover what were once fertile rice fields.

"You couldn't grow anything there now," said Red Boone, another Evangeline native. "The land's wasted."

During a tour of the town, Bertrand stopped his car and pointed across the highway to an old graveyard. About 40 years ago, an oil company drilled a well in the middle of the cemetery. Production equipment encased in cement a few yards from the grave of the town's first postmaster marks the spot where the well was drilled.

"It caused quite a stir when they drilled it," said Clement. "But there were no laws against it then."

Neither Bertrand nor Clement remembers the name of the company that drilled the well, but it was one of the few oil companies that caused resentment among the townspeople. Most of the companies that drilled there are still thought of kindly.

"We were part of them, and they were part of us," Bertrand said. "We grew up together."

At one time, almost every major oil company leased land in the Evangeline field. Gulf and Texaco both had major starts in the town, Bertrand said. "I remember when people here would have fought for Gulf Oil," Clement added. "I feel good about them. They gave money to our people, and jobs."

In addition, the companies gave Evangeline residents a marketable skill and a certain amount of prestige. The original oil-field workers in the community are considered pioneers in the oil industry.

Through trial and error they learned how to prevent blowouts, how to stop raging oil-field fires and how to tame high-pressure gas.

"They were daredevils, really," Boone said.

The experience gained and technology developed by the workers made them a valuable asset to an ever-expanding industry.

"The people from this area made major contributions to the world and the world economy," Bertrand said. "We provided leadership and expertise in oil fields from here to the North Sea to Saudi Arabia."

To Bertrand, and many other residents, the experience gained in the oil field was almost worth the price of a town. They realize today that Evangeline's demise was inevitable.

According to Bertrand, most of the town's residents began moving to new oil fields after the deep wells were drilled. Jobs in the Evangeline oil patch had grown scarce. The fields were saturated with wells, and any new wells didn't require a work force the size of a small army.

Transportation also had improved. Roads were paved between Evangeline and neighboring cities.

An early oil crew in Evangeline

Photo from Lake B. Grow Collection

Oakdale

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shopping in our stores."

The detention center's presence has already stimulated existing businesses and industries.

The expansion of the parish airport, an influx of immigration attorneys and increased real estate sales reflect this fact.

"The parish airport will be expanded to 6,000 feet, making it the fifth largest airport in the state," cited Slim Richardson of the Airport Commission Board.

The commission hopes to get commercial airlines to service the area. Initially, its chief customer will be the INS, which plans to deport all non-Mexican detainees via jet.

Immigration attorneys in Los Angeles and Miami are now negotiating with attorneys to establish practices in Oakdale. These attorneys would defend the detained people who can pay legal fees.

"They didn't have to live here to work here," Bertrand said.

Those who wanted to stay in the area moved out of town and formed satellite communities around Evangeline. They had to move if they wanted to buy land.

"That's the main reason the town died," Bertrand explained. "Everybody who lived here had to lease.

According to Bertrand, most of the land in the Evangeline oil field was, and still is, owned by three families — the Clements, the Houssieres and the McFarlanes. They leased the productive land to oil companies. The rent was leased to the townspeople for $1 per month per household.

Bertrand said the exodus was gradual. And when families moved, they left behind "temporary" houses built during the oil-field boomtown days.

"They were just shacks," Bertrand said. "The whole town was a conglomerate of ugly shacks. Boone refers to them as "box houses." The walls were built with 1-by-12-inch boards nailed from the floor to the ceiling. The cracks between the boards were covered with wooden strips and nailed on the outside.

The ones who stayed would live in one house for a while, and when it started to deteriorate they would move on to another, Boone said.

By the early 1970s, when Boone bought the town's water system, there were still about 50 customers on line.

"But a lot of them wouldn't pay, and I couldn't afford to keep up the system," he said.

When Boone shut off the water system in the mid-1970s, it signaled the end of Evangeline. Only about a dozen families stayed. Few were willing to drill water wells on land they didn't own.

Those who stayed, and others who left long ago, remember the old town with a feeling of nostalgia.

"It's fascinating, and a little sad really, to see a growing, thriving community completely disappear," Clement said.

"Sometimes I miss the old town," he said.

U.S. Department of Justice

Bureau of Prisons

ALIEN DETENTION CENTER

Oakdale, Louisiana

- Alcoholic Beverages and Firearms ARE STRICTLY PROHIBITED
- All Visitors Must Report To Government Office or Superintendent

1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20