Lafayette wildcatter writes about his life, oil industry

By Frances Love
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“Wildcatting in the oil business is all but gone,” says J. P. “Jimmie” Owen in a 287-page hardback book containing 144 photographs. It is called “Let the Eagle Fly Again” and consists of the memoirs of this oil industry leader, including his life and times, his country, his family and his business.

“Wildcatters prided themselves in a handshake and their word was their bond...so much more can be accomplished by a trade between individuals or companies and a handshake, followed, of course, by a written contract or agreement,” he says.

The book is a limited edition and has already been ordered in large lots by several oil companies and individuals in Louisiana and Texas.

Oil business anecdotes with President George Bush, when he was president of Zapata Offshore Drilling Co. in Houston, as well as stories about the U.S. Secretary of Commerce Bob Mossbacher of Houston, the New York Rockefeller family, H.L. Hunt and his sons in Dallas, and other well known oilmen, such as T. Boone Pickens, Howard Keck, Jim Bob Moffett and Ken McWilliams.

About a dozen Lafayette oil leaders are mentioned as success stories, including Joe Elsbury, Frank Harrison, Paul Hilliard, Jack Wilson, Bob Mcdams, Baker Littlefield, Ed Lamb and others.

Orphaned early in his life, this native of Waco, Texas worked his way through Southern Methodist University until the USA entered World War I. He served as a lieutenant fighter pilot, and then started to work in the booming west Texas oil fields when he became a civilian again. His long career has included the two world wars, the depression of the 1930s, great success in finding and producing oil fields, bankruptcy, the recession of the 80s, and he continues to operate in the oil industry today.

During his long career, he has operated in exploration and production throughout Louisiana, Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, New Mexico, and Canada. In 1923, he worked for five leading American oil companies as their representative for the industry in Tampico and Vera Cruz during the last big Mexican revolution.

In addition, he has sold cotton seed and mules, worked for General Motors, run a car dealership in east Texas, and run five bus lines in Texas and Louisiana on contract with the federal government.

A longtime Methodist, he has donated the Owen Art Center to SMU, which is a part of the Bob Hope Theatre complex. Locally, he and Mrs. Owen have made large donations to the building of the Art Center for Southwestern Louisiana (now called the USL Art Museum) and to Owen Auditorium during the construction of Lafayette General Hospital (now Lafayette General Medical Center), among other contributions in Lafayette, Dallas and Henderson, Texas. These facts are not a part of this book.

Corita Jean Owen Smith, a former Lafayette resident now living in Rancho Palos Verdes, Calif., worked with her father in writing his recollections.