

Oklahoma: Oil Magnates and Mansions

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Conoco Phillips Refinery in Ponca City Oklahoma. Beth Reiber Photos.

The Oil Legacy: Oklahoma's Oil History and Wealth

By Beth Reiber

[Oklahoma](#) is oil country, but as a resident of Kansas to the north, I find [Oklahoma's](#) dramatic upsurge in earthquakes—probably due to fracking—very distressing: 585 earthquakes with a magnitude of at least 3.0 in 2014, compared to only one or two earthquakes a year prior to 2008.

But from a historic point of view, it was oil that put Oklahoma on the map. Oklahoma's first commercial oil well was drilled in Bartlesville in 1897.

Just 10 years later, Bartlesville's population had exploded from only 200 inhabitants to

more than 4,000, and Oklahoma, which now produced more oil than anywhere else on earth, became the country's 46th state. That probably was not a coincidence.



Frank Phillips Home.

So even though I'm concerned about the state of the oil industry in the world today, I decided to look past my 21st-century bias to the early days of oil discovery, when black gold catapulted Oklahoma's oil magnates into a life of indescribable wealth.

Bartlesville and Ponca City

Although there are several names synonymous with oil in Oklahoma, including Harry Sinclair, J. Paul Getty, and W.G. Skelly, I decided to head to the northeast part of the state, where Frank Phillips made his fortune in Bartlesville and Ernest Whitworth Marland became a millionaire in Ponca City.

Both towns are home to mansions now open to the public and to oil museums. As it turns out, romance, scandal, financial ruin and mystery are also part of the state's oil legacy.

Frank Phillips in Bartlesville

Frank Phillips came from Iowa to Bartlesville in 1903, blew his first gusher in 1905 and by 1921 owned more than 900 wells. In 1927 Phillips Petroleum opened its first gasoline

station; by 1967 it had expanded into all 50 states (and yes, Route 66 played a part in the Phillips 66 name).

I don't care a drop about oil itself, but even I found the Phillips Petroleum Company Museum in downtown Bartlesville good for a crash course on oil, its production and its products, including what is probably the company's most revolutionary innovation of our time: a type of plastics used in everything from patching highways to human hearts.

For a human side to the Phillips story, I headed a few blocks south of downtown, past the 19-story Price Tower (designed by Frank Lloyd Wright and now an art center and boutique hotel), to the house that Frank built, in 1909. Expanded in 1917 and renovated in 1930, the 26-room mansion was deeded to the Oklahoma Historical Society in 1973.



Photograph of Frank Phillips in Woolaroc Lodge.

The Frank Phillips Home

The Frank Phillips Home looks like Frank and his wife, Jane, just left, with 95% of the couple's home's furnishings and personal artifacts intact. Decorated with mahogany woodwork, Waterford crystal chandeliers, Asian carpets and other decorative features, the home has seven bedrooms, nine bathrooms, secret hiding places in case of attempted

kidnapping (thankfully, they were never needed) and a six-car garage, now part of the visitors center. There were nine full-time and six part-time servants, but only one, Phillips' butler, lived in the home.

Woolaroc—Phillips' Man Cave

Although grand enough, the millionaire's home struck me as modest, but then I went to see Woolaroc, which is as much a man cave as a man could ever hope for.

Twelve miles southwest of Bartlesville, the 3,700-acre retreat was where the oil baron relaxed, entertained friends like Will Rogers and closed business deals with wealthy East Coast investors, knowing they would not soon forget the unique and—let's face it—over-the-top setting.

Visitors were picked up by stagecoach, and native and exotic animals living on a wildlife preserve included black bears, buffalo, cougars, timber wolves, camels, zebras, and kangaroos.

Today, visitors approach the rustic lodge via a two-mile drive through the wildlife preserve, now home to bison, elk, goats, lamas, water buffalo, longhorn cattle, ostriches and more.

The lodge, completed in 1927, contains eight bedrooms and 97 mounted animal heads, all of the animals that either died on the preserve from natural causes or were given to him (Phillips did not hunt).

But the star of Woolaroc is the museum, surely one of the best western art collections in the world. Artifacts from about 40 different Native American tribes are on display, including ancient Southwest pottery, Navajo blankets, beadwork, and clothing.

Cowboy memorabilia includes hats, saddles and one of the most comprehensive Colt firearms collection in the world; its rarest item is the Colt Paterson from the 1830s, the first gun with interchangeable parts. Fine art, with works by Frederic Remington, Charles M. Russell, Thomas Moran, and Albert Bierstadt, round out the museum's collection.

E.W. Marland in Ponca City

From Bartlesville, I took Highway 60, Oklahoma's newest scenic byway that provides sweeping vistas of rolling hills and tall-grass prairie, 70 miles west to Ponca City.

Whereas the oil industry in Bartlesville makes its presence known with office buildings and research facilities belonging to ConocoPhillips, the largest employer in this town of 35,000 people, in Ponca City I was startled to see Oklahoma's largest oil refinery, also belonging to ConocoPhillips and stretching south of the city about as far as the eye can see.



Lydie's bedroom in Marland Mansion.

It's not a pretty picture, but Ponca City's downtown is downright picturesque, with murals, a beautifully restored 1927 theatre boasting one of the world's largest collections of hand-

painted lobby art once used to promote movies, and a 1934 library filled with Oriental and Western art.

It's obvious that oil has played a major role in the development of this 25,000-resident town.

It all began with Ernest Whitworth Marland, a Pennsylvania oilman who came in 1908 and made his first big oil strike in 1911. In 1916 he moved with his wife, Virginia, into a brand new 22-room home, built by the same architect who designed the Oklahoma capitol.

Having no children of their own, the Marlands adopted Lydie and George, children of Virginia's sister.

The home contained all the modern conveniences of the time, including a central vacuum system, automatic dishwasher, a detached three-car garage, and Oklahoma's first indoor pool.

But it was most known for its eight acres of formal gardens, designed by Marland's Japanese gardener and modeled after those in Versailles. Marland's nine-hole golf course, open to the public for free, was just across the street.

By 1922, Marland was a multimillionaire, in control of one-tenth of the world's oil reserves. A third of Ponca City's residents worked for him, for which he provided free dental and medical care and low-interest loans from a bank he purchased so employees could buy homes.

He contributed generously to downtown projects. He owned an airplane, a 93-foot yacht anchored in New Orleans, an apartment in New York and a home in Kansas City.

Marland Mansion



Marland Mansion.

While most of us might consider Marland's 16,500-square-foot home palatial as we wander through it, E.W. (as he insisted his employees call him) dreamed bigger.

In 1925, after a trip to Europe, the Marlands began building a colossal 44,000-square-foot mansion, designed in the style of an Italian Renaissance villa.

Virginia died before its completion, however, in 1926. Two years later, Marland had Lydie's adoption annulled, made her his wife and moved into the mansion.

Needless to say, his actions raised more than a few eyebrows. He was 54, she was 28.

Decorations include Waterford and Lalique light fixtures, wood panels crafted from England's royal forests (with permission of the king, of course), and hand-painted ceilings.

It took 25 servants to efficiently run the place, nicknamed the Palace on the Prairie.

Now a National Historic Landmark owned by Ponca City and open to the public since 1976, the lavish 55-room mansion has an astonishing 10 bedrooms, closets with automatic lights, 13 bathrooms, three kitchens, seven wood-burning fireplaces, an elevator, a grand ballroom and, because of Prohibition, even secret poker and whiskey rooms, as well as a 550-foot underground tunnel leading to a boathouse so that liquor could be shuttled in undetected.

Riches to Rags

But as luck would have it, the very same year the couple moved into the mansion, E.W. was forced out as president of Marland Oil Company by J.P. Morgan in a hostile takeover. In 1931 they moved out of their spacious home, keeping it only for special occasions.

Having to reinvent himself, E.W. went into politics, serving first in the U.S. House of Representatives and then as governor of Oklahoma from 1935 to 1939.



Woolaroc Preserve in Ponca, Oklahoma.

In 1941, in failing health and out of money, Marland sold the mansion he had built and furnished for \$5.5 million for only \$66,000.

The couple moved into the former chauffeur's cottage; E.W. died six months later.

But that's not the end of the riches to rags story. Lydie continued to live in the cottage until 1953, when she loaded up her Studebaker and simply vanished.

Media reports through the years claimed she was spotted working as a maid, standing in a bread line in New York City and marching in an anti-Vietnam War rally.

It was only in 1975, when the mansion came up for sale, that she returned to Ponca City and convinced the citizens to purchase the property.

Mission accomplished, she lived in the cottage as a recluse until her death in 1987. Where she was 22 years remains a mystery.

Some Ironic Twists

At the Conoco Museum in Ponca City, I learned that there was another sad twist to the Marland story. After E.W. was forced out of his company, Marland Oil was merged with Continental Oil Company, better known as Conoco. In 2002 Conoco merged with Phillips, creating ConocoPhillips.

So while the Phillips name lives on, few people know about Marland. That could someday change. Since 2012 there's been a buzz about a movie based on the lives of E.W. and Lydie. Academy Award winning screenwriter Chris Terrio has already written the script; the Weinstein Company, producer of *The King's Speech*, *The Imitation Game* and many other award-winning films, has expressed interest.

I'm not sure whether *The Ends of the Earth* will ever see production, but I do know there are other stories to tell. Remember Phillips' butler? He worked for the Phillips family until his death in 1969 at the age of 81. Yet he became a millionaire in the 1940s. Go figure.

And Frank Phillips, whose very name connotes oil and money? Get this: The guy never learned how to drive.