LITERARY CALIFORNIA

How The West was won and where we're heading

UPTON SINCLAIR

1878-1968

Invited to visit California in 1909 by the bohemian poet George Sterling and the eccentric real estate developer Gaylord Wilshire, Upton Sinclair settled in Pasadena, where he lived for the rest of his life. He was a prominent writer when he arrived: The Jungle (1906), his classic muckraking account of the corruption and brutality of the Chicago stockyards, had assured him a lasting place in American literary history. Sinclair was a writing machine, the author of more than one hundred books, and at last count he was also the most widely translated author in the history of the United States, with works appearing in more than fifty languages. His *Oil!* (1927) remains the most comprehensive account of the discovery of oil and the development of Los Angeles circa 1920. It focuses on the *Signal Hill* strike of 1921 that produced 250,000 barrels a day and poured immense wealth into Southern California and on the ensuing corruption that reached to the top of the Harding administration and into the centers of international power. A lifelong teetotaler and vegetarian, Upton Sinclair was a utopian and a political zealot, and he fought an incessant battle against corporate capitalism and the social inequity it fostered in the United States. His crusades attracted considerable support in California, and he ran as a Socialist for Congress in 1920, for the Senate in 1922, and for governor of California in 1926. He waged his strongest campaign as the Democratic nominee for governor in 1934, running on the EPIC (End Poverty in Califomia) platform as a remedy for the statewide ravages of the Great Depression.

The following excerpts are taken from from *Oil!*

Chapter 1, Part 7

The road was asphalt now; it shimmered in the heat, and whenever it fell away before you, a mirage made it look like water. It was lined with orange groves; dark green shiny trees, golden with a part of last year's crop, and snowy-white with the new year's blossoms. Now and then a puff of breeze blew out, and you got a ravishing sweet odor. There were groves of walnuts, broad trees with ample foliage, casting dark shadows on the carefully cultivated, powdery brown soil. There were hedges of roses, extending for long distances, eight or ten feet high, and covered with blossoms. There were windbreaks of towering thin eucalyptus trees, with long wavy leaves and bark that scales off and leaves them naked; all the world is familiar with them in the moving pictures, where they do duty for sturdy oaks and ancient elms and spreading chestnuts and Arabian date-palms and cedars of Lebanon and whatever else the scenario calls for.

You had to cut your speed down here, and had to watch incessantly; there were intersections, and lanes coming in, and waming signs of many sorts; there was traffic both ways, and delicate decisions to be made as to whether you could get past the car ahead of you, before one coming in the other direction would bear down on you and shut you in a pair of scissors. It was exciting to watch Dad's handling of these emergencies, to read his intentions and watch him carry them out.

There were towns every five or ten miles now, and you were continually being slowed up by traffic, and continually being warned to conform to a rate of movement which would have irritated an able-bodied snail. The highway passed through the main street of each town; the merchants arranged that, Dad said, hoping you would get out and buy something at their places; if the highway were shifted to the outskirts of the town, to avoid traffic congestion, all the merchants would forthwith move to the highway! Sometimes they would put up signs, indicating a tam in the highway, attempting to lure the motorist onto a business street; after you had got to the end of that street, they would steer you back to the highway! Dad noted such tricks with the amused tolerance of a man who had worked them on others, but did not let anyone work them on him.

Each town consisted of some tens, or hundreds, or thousands of perfectly rectangular blocks, divided into perfectly rectangular lots, each containing a strictly modern bungalow, with a lawn and a house-wife holding

a hose. On the outskirts would be one or more "subdivisions," as they were called; "acreage" was being laid out onto lots, and decorated with a row of red and yellow flags fluttering merrily in the breeze; also a row of red and yellow signs which asked questions and answered them with swift efficiency: "Gas? Yes." "Water? Best ever." "Lights? Right." "Restrictions? You bet." "Schools? Under construction." "Scenery? Beats the Alps."- and so on. There would be an office or a tent by the roadside, and in front of it an alert young man with a writing pad and a fountain-pen, prepared to write you a contract of sale after two minutes conversation. These subdividers had bought the land for a thousand dollars an acre, and soon as they had set up the fluttering little flags and the tent it became worth $1675 per lot. This also Dad explained with amused tolerance. It was a great country!

They were coming to the outskirts of Angel City. Here were trolley tracks and railroads, and subdivisions with no "restrictions "-that is, you might build any kind of house you pleased, and rent it to people of any race or color; which meant an ugly slum, spreading like a great sore, with shanties of tin and tar-paper and unpainted boards. There were great numbers of children playing here - for some strange reason there seemed to be more of them where they were least apt to thrive.

By dint of constant pushing and passing every other car, Dad had got on his schedule again. They skirted the city, avoiding the traffic crowds in its Centre, and presently came a sign: "Beach City Boulevard". It was a wide asphalt road, with thousands of speeding cars, and more subdivisions and suburban home-sites, with endless ingenious advertisements designed to catch the fancy of the motorist, and cause him to put on brakes. The real estate men had apparently been reading the Arabian Nights and Grimm's fairy-tales; they were housed in little freak offices that shot up to a point, or tilted like a drunken sailor; their colors orange and pink, or blue and green, or with separately painted shingles, spotted with various colors. There were "good eats" signs and "barbecue" signs - the latter being a word which apparently had not been in the spelling-books when the sign-painters went to school. There were stands where you got orange-juice and cider, with orange colored wicker chairs out in front for you to sit in. There were fruit and vegetable stands kept by japs, and other stands with signs inviting you to "patronize Americans." There was simply no end of things to look at, each separate thing bringing its separate thrill to the mind of a thirteen-year old boy. The infinite strangeness and fascinatingness of this variegated world! Why do people do this, Dad? And why do they do that?

They came to Beach City, with its wide avenue along the ocean-front. Sixthirty, said the clock on the carts running-board - exactly on the schedule. They stopped before the big hotel, and Bunny got out of the car, and opened the back compartment, and the bell-hop came hopping - you bet, for he knew Dad, and the dollars and half dollars that were jingling in Dad's pockets. The bell-hop grabbed the suit-cases and the overcoats, and carried them in, and the boy followed, feeling responsible and important, because Dad couldn't come yet, Dad had to put the car in a parking place. So Bunny strode in and looked about the lobby for Ben Skutt, the oil-scout, who was Dad's "leasehound". There he was, seated in a big leather chair, puffing at a cigar and watching the door; he got up when he saw Bunny, and stretched his long, lean body, and twisted his lean, ugly face into a grin of welcome. The boy, very erect, remembering that he was J. Arnold Ross, junior, and representing his father in an important transaction, shook hands with the man, remarking: "Good evening, Mr. Skutt. Are the papers ready ?"

Chapter 2, Part 1

The number of the house was 5746 Los Robles Boulevard, and you would have had to know this land of hope in order to realize that it stood in a cabbage field. Los Robles means "the oaks"; and two or three miles away, where this boulevard started in the heart of Beach City, there were four live oak trees. But out here a bare slope of hill, quite steep, yet not too steep to be plowed and trenched and covered with cabbages, with sugar beets down on the flat. The eye of hope, aided by surveyors' instruments, had determined that some day a broad boulevard would run on this line; and so there was a dirt road, and at every corner white posts set up, with a wing north and a wing east - Los Robles Blvd.- Palomitas Ave.- Los Robles Blvd - El Centro Ave.; and so on.

Two years ago the "subdividers" had been here, with their outfit of little red and yellow flags; there had been full-page advertisements in the newspapers, and free auto rides from Beach City, and a free lunch, consisting of "hot dog" sandwiches, a slice of apple pie, and a cup of coffee. At that time the fields had been cleared of cabbages, and graded, and the lots had blossomed with little signs: "Sold." This was supposed to refer to the lot, but in time it came to refer to the purchaser. The company had undertaken to put in curbs and sidewalks, water and gas and sewers; but somebody made off with the money, and the enterprise went into bankruptcy, and presently new signs began to appear, "For Sale, by Owner," or "Bargain: See Smith and

Headmutton, Real Estate." And when these signs brought no reply, the owners sighed, and reflected that some day when little Willie grew up he would make a profit out of that investment. Meantime, they would accept the proposition of Japanese truck-gardeners, to farm the land for one-third of the crop.

But three or four months ago something unexpected had happened. A man who owned an acre or two of land on the top of the hill had caused a couple of motor-trucks to come toiling up the slope, loaded with large square timbers of Oregon pine; carpenters had begun to work on these, and the neighborhood had stared, wondering what strange kind of house it could be. Suddenly the news had spread, in an explosion of excitement: an oil derrick!

A deputation called upon the owner, to find out what it meant. It was pure "wild-catting," he assured them; he happened to have a hundred thousand dollars to play with, and this was his idea of play. Nevertheless, the bargain signs came down from the cabbage fields, and were replaced by "Oil Lot for Sale." Speculators began to look up the names and addresses of owners, and offers were made - there were rumors that some had got as high as a thousand dollars, nearly twice the original price of the lots. Motor-cars took to bumping out over the dirt roads, up and down the lanes; and on Saturday and Sunday aftemoons there would be a crowd staring at the derrick.

The drilling began, and went on, monotonously and uneventfully. The local newspapers reported the results: the D. H. Culver Prospect No. 1 was at 1478 feet, in hard sandstone formation and no signs of oil. It was the same at 2,000, and at 3,000; and then for weeks the rig was "fishing" for a broken drill, and everybody lost interest; it was nothing but a "dry hole," and people who had refused double prices for their lots began to curse themselves for fools. "Wild-catting" was nothing but gambling anyhow - quite different from conservative investments in town lots. Then the papers reported that D. H. Culver Prospect No. 1 was drilling again; it was at 3059 feet, but the owners had not yet given up hope of striking something.

Then a strange thing happened. There came trucks, heavily loaded with stuff, carefully covered with canvas. Everybody connected with the enterprise had been warned or bribed to silence; but small boys peered under the canvas while the trucks were toiling up the hill with roaring motors, and they reported big sheets of curved metal, with holes along the edges for bolts. That could be only one thing, tanks. And at the same time came rumors that D. H. Culver had purchased another tract of land on the hill. The meaning of all this was obvious: Prospect No. 1 had got into oil sands!

The whole hill began to blossom with advertisements, and real estate agents swarmed to the "field". A magic word now - no longer cabbage field or sugar-beet field, but "the field!" Speculators set themselves up in tents, or did business from automobiles drawn up by the roadside, with canvas signs on them. There was coming and going all day long, and crowds of people gathered to stare up at the derrick, and listen to the monotonous grinding of the heavy drill that went round all day - "Ump-um-ump-um-ump-um-umpum" - varied by the "puff puff" of the machine. "Keep out - this means you!" declared a conspicuous sign; Mr. D. H. Culver and his employees had somehow lost all their good breeding.

But suddenly there was no possibility of secrecy; literally all the world knew - for telegraph and cable carried the news to the farthest corners of civilization. The greatest oil strike in the history of Southem California, the Prospect Hill field! The inside of the earth seemed to burst out through that hole; a roaring and rushing, as Niagara, and a black column shot up into the air, two hundred feet, two hundred and fifty - no one could say for sure - and came thundering down to earth as a mass of thick, black, slimy, slippery fluid. It hurled tools and other heavy objects this way and that, so the men had to run for their lives. It filled the sump-hole, and poured over, like a sauce-pan boiling too fast, and went streaming down the hillside. Carried by the wind, a curtain of black mist, it sprayed the Culver homestead, tuming it black, and sending the women of the household flying across the cabbagefields. Afterwards it was told with Homeric laughter how these women had been heard to lament the destruction of their clothing and their windowcurtains by this million-dollar flood of "black gold"!

Word spread by telephone to Beach City; the newspapers bulletined it, the crowds shouted it on the street, and before long the roads leading to Prospect Hill were black with a solid line of motor-cars. The news reached Angel City, the papers there put out "extras", and before nightfall the Beach City boulevard was crowded with cars, a double line, all coming one way. Fifty thousand people stood in a solid ring at what they considered a safe distance from the gusher, with emergency policemen trying to drive them further back, and shouting: "Lights out! Lights out!" All night those words were chanted in a chorus; everybody realized the danger some one fool might forget and light a cigarette, and the whole hillside would leap into flame; a nail in your shoe might do it, striking on a stone; or a motor-truck, with its

steel-rimmed tires. Quite frequently these gushers caught fire at the first moment.

But still the crowds gathered; men put down the tops of their automobiles, and stood up in the seats and conducted auction rooms by the light of the stars. Lots were offered for sale at fabulous prices, and some of them were bought; leases were offered, companies were started and shares sold - the traders would push their way out of the crowd to a safe distance on the windward side, where they could strike a match, and see each other's faces, and scrawl a memorandum of what they agreed. Such trading went on most of the night, and in the morning came big tents that had been built for revival meetings, and the cabbage fields became gay with red and black signs:

"Beach Co-operative No. 1","Skite Syndicate, No. 1, ten thousand units, $10."

Meantime the workmen were toiling like mad to stop the flow of the well; they staggered here and there, half blinded by the black spray - and with no place to brace themselves, nothing they could hold onto, because everything was greased, streaming with grease. You worked in darkness, groping about, with nothing but the roar of the monster, his blows upon your body, his spitting in your face, to tell you where he was. You worked at high tension, for there were bonuses offered - fifty dollars for each man if you stopped the flow before midnight, a hundred dollars if you stopped it before ten o'clock. No one could figure how much wealth that monster was wasting, but it must be thousands of dollars every minute. Mr. Culver himself pitched in to help, and in his reckless efforts lost both of his ear-drums. "Tried to stop the flow with his head," said a workman, unsympathetically. In addition the owner discovered, in the course of ensuing weeks, that he had accumulated a total of forty-two suits for damages to houses, clothing, chickens, goats, cows, cabbages, sugar-beets, and automobiles which had skidded into ditches on too well-greased roads.