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Bowling Green Lady Left Her Mark On Kentucky's Oil Industry

By Jonathan Jeffrey

In the final years of the Victorian Era, a new phenomenon emerged—women ventured out from the hearth, not from necessity but from inclination. They wanted an education, wanted career opportunities, wanted more independence and wanted a greater say in how things were accomplished. This new breed of woman was sometimes referred to as the “manly” woman. A paradigm for the “manly” woman, Margaret Morehead Hobson of Bowling Green, Kentucky, ventured into areas typically considered a man’s realm, particularly her fifty-year association with the petroleum industry.

Margaret Hobson was born in March 1890 to Ida and William E. Hobson at Walnut Lawn, 3 miles west of Bowling Green, Kentucky. Her mother was forty and her father forty-eight at her birth. As with many autumn children, Margaret probably enjoyed a few more privileges than her five older siblings. Her father had served as the youngest Union colonel in the Civil War, a point of great pride for her family and the community. The Hobson name was well respected in Bowling Green.

At the age of seven, Margaret enrolled in Florence Ragland and Fannie DuBose’s Private School in Bowling Green, where she learned how to appear and act as a lady and to appreciate nature, something that became a lifelong avocation. Margaret said that she remembered little more from the lady’s tutelage, but felt the lessons in character development invaluable. Because her grandfather purchased stock in a local girl’s seminary, Margaret attended one of the finest women’s schools in the upland South, Bowling Green’s Potter College. Later in life, she often remarked that her education there was a little too liberal

Not an exceptional student but possessing a latent artistic ability, Margaret fell under the influence of the school’s art teacher, Miss Beulah Strong, who later headed the Art Department at Boston’s Smith College for 30 years. Because Margaret was a resident student, she did not participate in any of the social, honorary or literary clubs at Potter College. She graduated with a Bachelor’s degree in 1909, the school’s final commencement.

Margaret’s father also died in 1909. Although a lawyer and owner of extensive mining leases in California, William Hobson’s death left the family in an unstable financial condition.

The family continued to raise cattle on the 308-acre Walnut Lawn farm, and her brother Edward, developed a fine reputation as a breeder of hunting hounds. During the 1920's, Bowling Green enjoyed quite a reputation as a center for backwoods hunting and formal fox hunts in which Margaret regularly participated.

In 1918 the 11,000 residents in the sleepy town of Bowling Green were electrified when their town became the center of a five-county oil boom. The boom began south of the city in Allen County and gradually incorporated Warren and all its contiguous counties. As the railroad center for south central Kentucky, Bowling Green acted as a hub of this action. When discovered northwest of town in 1919, the Davenport pool focused development activity in Warren County. Hundreds of transients moved into the city, causing inflationary prices for foodstuffs and unusually high rents at boarding houses. Men lived in tents when they could find them. At one point over 125 rigs were drilling in Warren County. The area's shallow wells guaranteed low drilling costs, so developers punctured the Warren County soil mercilessly.

Margaret said everyone in Bowling Green got involved in the speculation in some way. As news of the Bowling Green fields reached the East Coast, hundreds of investors flocked to the area or called on local leasing agents to find options for them. Women leasers who came to the community and did well, inspired Margaret, particularly Eva Marie Miller. Miss Miller came to Bowling Green with \$250 and within six weeks had netted \$3,000.

Although Margaret did not make a fortune during the boom, she cashed in on the experience. She spent long hours learning the topographical maps, geological formations and the business jargon. She lingered around the oil exchange downtown and leased for clients. She also spent long hours talking about the oil business with the multitude of guests at the city's hotels and boarding houses. When reminded of the rough characters involved in the industry, she simply pointed out that they were "diamonds in the rough."

During this period, she also learned the importance of initial appearances. "First impressions are important, before they become cluttered with details," she wrote a friend. When Margaret went on leasing jaunts, she always appeared in fine tailored clothing. In the winter, she made sure her coat was of the finest quality and immaculately clean. This assiduous attention to detail was a part of the game which she learned to play very well.

During the early years of the oil boom, Margaret made friends of two petroleum geologists who remained lifelong business associates: William L Russell and Frances Barton

Freeman, both with the Kentucky Geological Survey during the Kentucky oil boom. By the mid-1930's Margaret's proficiency in geology was amazing. The close resemblance between her business letters and geological reports, which have distinct formats, was uncanny. However, Margaret realized she was not a geologist and recognized the need to cultivate relationships with these two geological experts. Her correspondence with Russell is sterile and very professional. The Freeman correspondence is professional, but it also contains homey asides, reflecting the sisterhood of two highly motivated females.

Although Margaret leased in over fourteen Kentucky counties and a few counties in Tennessee and Indiana, her most important work was done in western Kentucky. Displaying her courage to step into undeveloped areas, Margaret single-handedly opened Edmonson County, Kentucky to petroleum development. James S. Hudnall, Assistant Geologist for the Kentucky Geological Survey, prepared a special geological report for Margaret in 1925, recommending a structure opposite the mouth of Mammoth Cave on the Green River. Because the area had never been completely surveyed, Hudnall cautioned Margaret about risk of the endeavor.

By the mid-1920's, the oil boom had subsided and oil prices plummeted, and it was a number of years before prices stabilized. This slump allowed Margaret and local developers free reign in the area. Until 1925, Edmonson County had experienced very little development due to its horrendous roads. Searching the Kentucky Geological Survey for references to Edmonson County, Margaret found enough evidence to pique her interest.

Unable to locate a sponsor, she arranged a deal with the Mammoth Cave National Park Association which had been formed in 1928 to promote the designation of the cave as a national park. The deal allowed Margaret "to do certain drilling in the Mammoth Cave region" if she could persuade locals to sell land to the Park Association. In less than a year, she accumulated thirty-two land options covering 4,000 acres. Several successful wells were drilled across from Mammoth Cave on the Green River. The fact that numerous individuals had told her it could not be done made the Edmonson County mission particularly gratifying. This project was a life-long bragging point. She often re-told the story of "how a woman couldn't do it," but she did.

Not spoiled by her initial success, Margaret worked hard and eventually put together deals for sponsors from a number of states. During the 1940's and 1950's she labored in a number of western Kentucky counties, including her native Warren County. Convinced the Warren County area had not been completely exploited, Louise Freeman advised Margaret to

enter into leases around the old Gillespie Pool that had seen high activity during the oil boom. Freeman's advice about the Gillespie Pool paid off. Margaret's role as leaser for the project was lauded, and she "turned the deal" to an Evansville, Indiana firm for a tidy profit.

Margaret's greatest coup came in Todd County in western Kentucky. Russell strongly urged her to lease certain areas in the county in 1943. She spent a considerable amount of time researching the prospects, poring over the surveys of the area, accumulating oil well records and samples from drillers and farmers, consulting with Ms. Freeman, and obtaining farm tracings from the U. S. Department of Agriculture. From 1945 to 1947, she leased over 21,000 acres from 164 individuals. The wells drilled in 1947 were all dry. In 1955 she leased 7,200 acres from 35 individuals for a sponsor and realized a large profit.

The Todd County campaign produced more than oil for Miss Hobson. She was involved in two court cases there, and her reaction to the innuendo reveals a great deal about her character. Margaret wrote a character witness: "So far as my associates and myself are concerned, the actual value of the lease is worthless as we have drilled two dry holes in the vicinity of the same, but I am compelled to defend my name." Margaret won the case, but lost the other on a technicality.

While working in Todd County in 1954 and 1955 her name was again besmirched. Another leaser began spreading rumors that Margaret was "nothing but a lease hound." The situation worsened, leading Margaret to write a letter to the local paper listing the wells she had assisted in drilling in the previous year. She wrote in an oil field vernacular: "I am taking this opportunity to correct some misstatements by [an] oil well contractor who is attempting to discredit me by saying I'm a lease hound. Just why he should assume that I should not have any leases in that area is hard for straight thinking people to understand." The situation gradually subsided, and Margaret mused: "Truth of course finally wins out, but I did not get quite as many leases."

Margaret's fifty years in the oil business was unique. Not a quitter, she stayed in an area until it played out, then she went elsewhere just as the drillers did. She continued to learn the game as its difficulty increased with the introduction of new equipment and techniques. She lost the game more than once, but she never quit.

In contrast to her mannish approach to the oil business, Margaret enjoyed participating in more sedate activities. She painted when she found time. Her paintings were of sentimental

subjects: family, historic structures and flowers. Combining her artistic talent and her interest in the oil/gas industry, Margaret drew maps of certain counties in which she worked; the maps often included names of farm owners, geological formations, stratigraphic information, and well locations. When the Kentucky Geological Survey began accumulating oil well records in 1972, it contacted Margaret, as she had crusaded for accurate record keeping and possessed a number of well records and samples.

Margaret's last oil leasing was done in Todd County in 1974 at 84 years of age. She remained as active as her body would allow. She refused to be congratulated for her longevity, exclaiming she had outlived all of her friends and was lonely. She died at the age of 97 and was interred at Bowling Green's Fairview Cemetery. Margaret found great fulfillment in her work and creative activities. Pride in her womanhood and high self-esteem allowed her to confidently enter the oil leasing field, traditionally considered a man's arena. Margaret found her niche in life and enjoyed it, a worthwhile tribute.