

## History in Faces, Places, Spaces: Buckeye and a Sense of Community

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They say the first written histories were about faces (the chiefs and kings), places (the cities and nations), and spaces (the mountains and plains).

For some reason I've always been more attracted to the last of those three perspectives from which a history is told. I like historical narratives that revolve around particular geographic settings--the plains, of course, deserts, mountains, coastal lands, and others--geography that influences and often determines what happens to the humans in the story living in those places.

However, after Mrs. J.B. "Shell" Anderson brought into the Lea County Museum two fat albums of photographs from Buckeye, New Mexico, I think the list of major influences and determiners of history ought to be expanded to include "communities." Looking at Shell's photos and reading some of the personal letters and newspaper clippings she brought to me made me see the little town southwest of Lovington in a different context.

Buckeye wasn't just a small collection of homes thrown up by some big oil companies, temporary houses where workers and their families came to live for a short period of time before the people moved on and the homes disappeared.

Buckeye was a community of families who were changed by living there and who did things like folks in any small town do: They worked, went to church on Sundays, had Fourth of July picnics, played baseball on Saturdays, and did yard work around the houses in which they lived and in which they took pride.

In the 1940s and 1950s Buckeye was for sure a collection of homes built by several large oil and gas companies for the purpose of housing their employees working in fields and plants that sprang up there following the discovery of oil and gas in Lea County in the late 1920s.

At its height, Buckeye had around 250 people, a cafe, grocery store, hardware store, filling station, welding shop, a well service office, two churches, and a rooming house. The first paved highway through the area was built in 1935.

In 1956, a writer for the Phillips company magazine "Philnews" describes Buckeye this way: "After a thirty-minute automobile trip west of Hobbs...we arrive at the almost-desolate little town of Buckeye, New Mexico."

Two years earlier, 1954, that same magazine had this to say about the town: "The center of interest around this typical oil field community is two churches. Both were constructed from the ground up by members. The Church of Christ is a frame building covered with asbestos shingles which was completed about one year ago. The Baptist Church is constructed of cement cinder blocks and has been dedicated but has not been completely finished."

Six years before that, 1948, the back cover of "Philnews" featured a Christmas tree photograph of Shell Anderson, her husband J.B., and their two children Kay and Joie, who look to be two or three years old and who are dressed in their pajamas and holding toys. The caption below in part reads: "J.B. Anderson of the Natural Gasoline and Gas Department, Buckeye, New Mexico."

The photo says a lot about Buckeye, not as an “almost desolate” community, but as a small town filled with men, women, and families living lives similar to the lives experienced by all Americans in the nation’s small towns of the mid-twentieth century.

All one has to do to see that is look at the family photographs Shell collected over the years, photos in which you see such things as the children playing in their yard, swimming in a tank, and holding hands, their neighborhood of several handsome homes arranged neatly behind them.

In the 1940s and 1950s the center of tiny Buckeye was surrounded by the production plants, offices, and the housing camps erected by several different oil and gas companies: Texaco, Phillips, Shell, Ohio (Marathon), Mobil, Sinclair, and Humble.

Each of these companies had groups of homes of varying numbers. Texaco had eleven or twelve houses in the 1940s and 1950s. The Phillips Gasoline Plant had eleven houses, and the Phillips Production Camp contained seven houses. Shell Oil, Ohio, and Phillips Petroleum each had two houses, with some privately owned houses also in the area.

Phillips’ Lee Gasoline Plant and Lee Camp were named for the nearby Lee Ranch, and in the 1956 Phillips magazine there is a photo of rancher R.D. Lee and a story about his ranch and the Lee family. R.D., as many regular readers of the History Notebook will know, was the father of Bill Lee and the brother of Giles Lee. Bill and Giles still own ranches adjacent to Buckeye, ranches that were part of the ranch that their

grandfather and father, Dick Lee, first operated in 1925.

I’ll wager a month’s pay that an entire book could be written about the impact of the presence of the Lee Ranch on the physical and psychological lives of Buckeye residents.

In the Phillips magazine article, R.D. Lee recalls some of the same things the residents of Buckeye must have experienced: a vicious bluenorther in 1933; a flash flood in 1937; a grasshopper plague of 1953; and an extended killer drought in the 1950s.

In the future, after studying the photos and writings Shell Anderson brought to the museum, I won’t be thinking about the bad times her family and other families experienced in the isolated town of Buckeye. I will be thinking about Shell’s collection of images of her life there—friend Mary Jo standing beneath a tree beside a camp house, friend Vera Lucille walking between houses, J.B. beside a trophy deer hanging from a tree branch, the Buckeye baseball team standing proud following a win, and neighbors celebrating a holiday in the front yard of one of their Buckeye homes.

History is not just the stories of faces, the presidents and mayors; it’s not just the stories of places, the big cities and nations; nor is it only the stories of spaces, of plains, mountain, or coastal settlements.

History is also the narratives of small communities and the impact of neighbors whose lives were shaped by the presence of those next door to them.

It’s true that the semiarid plains of the Llano Estacado impacted the lives of those who lived in isolated Buckeye, but those residents were

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impacted more by their neighbors and the closeness of their homes and lives to each other.

Shell's husband J.B. passed away a few years ago, and as a community Buckeye is no more.

But we have the history of the little town that will always be an important part of the story of Lea County.

In the future, visitors to the Lea County Museum will be able to see copies of Shell's Buckeye photographs in the Nolan Brunson Oil and Gas Exhibit in the museum's 1931 Lister Building.