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EVERETTE LEE DEGOLYER

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*A Biographical Memoir by*

A. ROGER DENISON

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*Biographical Memoir*

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# EVERETTE LEE DeGOLYER

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BY A. RODGER DENISON

**O**F FEW MEN can it be said that they lived at the right time—that they brought to the problems and the developments of their era precisely the right combination of intelligence, foresight, and judgment—that they brought to their industry the proper balance of pioneering, aggressiveness, and timing in order to make the maximum effective contribution to it and thus leave the world richer in treasure and in ideas for their having lived. Such a man was Everette Lee DeGolyer.

Born in 1886 in a sod house in Kansas on the outer fringe of the expanding agricultural frontier of that day, he lived to build a fine mansion in Texas and to see this new agricultural frontier become a producer of vast mineral wealth and a contributor, in a substantial way, to the fabrication and manufacture of goods.

He was attracted to the science of geology at the very beginning of its application to the art of prospecting for oil. Starting with his own simple surface examination of the clues to oil deposits, he became the leader in bringing into use the classical earth instruments, the torsion balance and the seismograph, in the underground search for petroleum. He was, more than any other man, responsible for bringing to the art of prospecting the ability to probe below the earth's surface to find clues to the secrets locked up in Mother Nature's subterranean treasure house. He never ceased to have an interest in improving and extending the use of these devices.

In spite of this preoccupation with his "first love"—the science of

the earth—he found time to become an outstanding scholar and student of the history of early Spanish exploration in the Southwest, and to collect an outstanding library on the history of science and technology. As further evidence of his diverse but well-rounded personality, he found time to serve on a great number of civic projects and organizations in his home town of Dallas—to be an officer or a director of a score or more companies, and to be the financial and spiritual “angel” for the *Saturday Review of Literature*.

He lived to be honored by the highest elective offices and to be awarded the highest decorations of the American Association of Petroleum Geologists and the American Institute of Mining and Metallurgical Engineers. He was a lecturer much sought after, filled distinguished positions at three universities, and was awarded honorary degrees by six. Nine or more United States Government agencies, commissions, advisory boards, and committees called on him for service which he generously contributed.

This combination logically made his advice much sought after in business, and he was for many years the world's leading oil consultant. The opinion of his firm, DeGolyer and MacNaughton, on an appraisal of the worth of a property or a company was accepted as final in financial and government circles the world around. This firm was at one time or another consultant to ten or more foreign governments on subjects ranging from organizing exploration programs to the proper price for oil F.O.B. tankers in the Persian Gulf.

DeGolyer organized and directed for a time the Amerada Petroleum Corporation, the Rycade Oil Corporation, the Atlatl Corporation, and others. He inspired the organizers or provided important backing for the formation of Core Laboratories, Inc., Geophysical Service, Inc., Coronado Corporation, The Felmont Corporation, and others.

DeGolyer was a man who believed in luck. In his later years he observed that technical knowledge and skill were needed to find oil, but to be really successful you must also have luck. Said he, “If you must try to get along without one or the other, it is better to have

luck." This attitude may have been based at least in part on the fact that his earliest entry into commercial geology was a sequence of events that might well be called luck. Hired as a teamster and cook for a summer field party of the United States Geological Survey in the Bighorn Basin of Wyoming, he was given a chance to do geology because the son of an eastern politician attached to the party "flunked out." DeGolyer alone among the cook-teamsters had studied surveying. Doing geological mapping brought him to the attention of C. W. Hayes, then Chief Geologist of the U.S.G.S. When Hayes quit to join the Mexican Eagle Oil Company, Ltd., as geological consultant, he remembered young DeGolyer and hired him to work in Mexico. As geologist for the Mexican Eagle Oil Company, Ltd., he mapped the famous "Golden Lane" and advised locations for the discovery wells at the Tierra Amarillo, Los Naranjos, and Protrero del Llano fields. The Protrero del Llano #4 in the latter field was no doubt the largest and one of the most spectacular oil wells ever completed in the western hemisphere. Its initial production after flowing wild for twenty-four days was 100,000 barrels, and in its full life of eight years it produced in excess of one hundred million barrels.

As one writer reported, "DeGolyer was fascinated with luck. 'I hate to tell you,' said De, 'how many times I've made money by going against my own judgment.'" Yet with all his belief in luck De, more than any single man, brought to the art of oil prospecting a series of precise "tools" and pioneered in most cases the use and interpretation of the results. The application of these "tools" has been responsible for the major part of the oil discoveries throughout the world in the past twenty years. Today's modern way of life could never have arrived without the abundance of oil discoveries brought about by these "tools." And the United States would have been hard pressed, if indeed it had been able, without these discoveries to supply the oil which won the Second World War for our allies and ourselves. Yes, the history of our twentieth century would have been quite different without them.

DeGolyer was a restless, energetic, inquiring man whose interests were far broader than geology, the art of prospecting for oil, or the entire world oil business. He was an omnivorous reader, especially on subjects which appealed to him. Two of these were the history of science and the early history of the southwestern United States. His interest led him to assemble one of the finest libraries on the history of science in the western hemisphere. This he generously donated to the University of Oklahoma. It now contains more than 15,000 items, including some of the oldest books about the earth, such as *Study of the Universe* by Hbranus Maurus printed in 1467, an edition of Euclid's *Geometry* published in 1482, five first editions of Galileo's works, Newton's *Principia*, and other items of importance down to "modern" works of the best authors. Here in one collection are the landmarks, the books which characterize the major steps of science in the past five hundred years. His library on the history of the Southwest remains at his home and is becoming a much-sought reference and research collection. A lesser group of books on English poetry is housed at the University of Texas.

DeGolyer had a complex, many-sided personality. In conversation and correspondence about him with his friends and associates, the most frequent comments dwell on the character and quality of his mind. Such phrases as "a superb intelligence," "great mental courage," "brilliant qualities of mind," "logical reasoning," "clear thinking," and "sound judgment" are typical. But many say that his greatest talent lay in his understanding and appreciation of other people's minds, an ability to discern a good idea expressed by someone else, to enlarge upon it, even to stimulate the author of the idea to a more fully rounded understanding of his own idea. Without doubt he wielded a great influence and was a fine stimulator of other people's minds and ideas. He was truly a catalyst in many mental processes.

A man with such a fine intellect would of course have self-confidence, and an ample quantity of this characteristic is what no doubt led some to apply to him the words "cocky," "vain"—and other similar epithets. Others described him as having "a vast sense of self-

importance" and even a lack of tolerance for those less gifted. Perhaps he was even selfish or bordering on the ruthless in his more aggressive undertakings. Certain it was that he hated to lose an argument, a dollar, or a game of cards—when engaged in the latter he could seldom be persuaded to quit until he was winning.

Right alongside these descriptions we find such phrases as "a quick penetrating wit," "marvelous sense of humor," "good mixer," "makes friends wherever he goes," "thoughtful," "gracious and friendly," "a storyteller beyond compare," and "a most stimulating man." But friends and foes alike would agree that although he on occasion could be tough and stubborn, through it all he was inquiring and penetrating. Such were the diverse talents and multiple personality of the man. Possibly the sum of this complex personality is revealed by the manner of his death. Troubled for more than eight years by aplastic anemia which required constant blood replacement, and having lost the sight of one eye through retinal failure, he sensed the approach of death and, in characteristic fashion, did not wait, but went out to meet it.

Speaking on the occasion of the award of the Sidney Powers Medal of the American Association of Petroleum Geologists in May, 1950, Carey Croneis said, ". . . few people in any profession now or at any time in the past have been so honored during the productive years as Everette Lee DeGolyer. And this is perhaps the true measure of the man. For genius is easy to recognize—or even fabricate—in retrospect; it is difficult to discover—and, once discovered, sometimes irksome to acknowledge—in contemporary colleagues and especially fellow workers. But not so for DeGolyer—the recognition of his talents came early and soon became well nigh universal."

In addition to the Sidney Powers Memorial Medal, the highest honor given by the Petroleum Geologists, he was awarded two of the highest engineering medals—in 1941 the Lucas Medal of the A.I.M.E., and in 1942 the John Fritz Medal of the four Founder Engineering Societies. He was in 1925 the president of the American Association of Petroleum Geologists, and in 1927 became the first

"oil man" to be president of the American Institute of Mining and Metallurgical Engineers.

He was much in demand as a lecturer and delivered the Aldred lectures at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1929, the Brackett (1929) and Vanuxem (1941) lectures at Princeton University, and served the University of Texas as visiting Distinguished Professor in 1940. He gave commencement addresses at the Colorado School of Mines in 1925, Trinity College in 1947, and the University of Oklahoma in 1948. During October and November of 1947 he made a tour under the sponsorship of the A.A.P.G. Distinguished Lecture Committee and spoke before forty-four geological societies and university groups on the subject "Prospecting for Petroleum."

He was honored with the degree of Doctor of Science by the Colorado School of Mines, Southern Methodist University and Washington University, and the Doctor of Laws degree by Trinity College, Tulane University, and the Universidad de Mexico. In 1948 he was given the first Distinguished Service Citation by the University of Oklahoma and in 1952 was inducted into the Hall of Fame of Oklahoma. He was elected to the National Academy of Sciences on April 25, 1951, and at the time of his death he was a Regent of the Smithsonian Institution. A further demonstration of his interest in higher education was his service as chairman of the Gulf District Committee of Selections for Rhodes Scholarships for ten years.

His membership in geological, engineering, and other technical societies included nearly all those in the western and eastern hemispheres. He was an honorary member of the A.A.P.G. and A.I.M.E., as well as the Society of Exploration Geophysicists. He was given the Distinguished Service Citation of the Texas Mid-Continent Oil and Gas Association in 1939. He was honored by alumni membership in Phi Beta Kappa, Tau Beta Pi, Sigma Xi, Sigma Gamma Epsilon, and other honorary fraternities. His social fraternity while in college was Kappa Alpha (So.).

DeGolyer was the author of many articles and papers—perhaps several hundred in all. The more important are listed in the bibli-



ography at the end of this memoir. In his chosen field his most significant contributions were studies in early years on the nature of salt domes, and in later years on the art of prospecting for petroleum. He was editor (1940) of a notable monograph, *Elements of the Petroleum Industry*, published by the A.I.M.E. As an indication of the diversity of his writings, he was the author of the biography of the Mexican general Santa Anna in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*.

As would be expected of a man of such outstanding reputation, his services were called for by the Federal Government. Starting in 1918 with a special report for the United States Treasury, he became in 1941 Director of Conservation in the Office of the Coordinator for National Defense and Assistant Deputy Coordinator in 1942. The following year he was first made Assistant Deputy Administrator for War, and then head of the Petroleum Reserves Corporation mission to the Middle East. He was a member of the Advisory Committee on Raw Materials for the Atomic Energy Commission, and filled many other important positions. He served on the National Petroleum Council from its beginning.

On the business side of his activities he had been during his career an officer or director of more than a score of companies, and was active in ten or more at his death. He had a keen sense of duty and loyalty to his city and state, and served in many capacities, including president of the Dallas Art Association, president of the Dallas Arboretum Foundation, and vice-president of the Dallas Historical Society.

In 1910, when DeGolyer returned from his highly successful hunt for oil in Mexico to the University of Oklahoma campus to finish his work for a degree, he was given a retainer of \$500 per month by his employers, the Mexican Eagle Oil Company, and was rated the "richest" student on that small and quite new university campus. At the close of the school year he married the girl whom he had met on his previous sojourn at the University when she was a student and he was "sharing a Sunday suit" with his roommate. Nell Goodrich DeGolyer, his wife, survives him, as do three daughters, one son, and fifteen grandchildren.

## KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

- A. A. P. G. Bull.=The American Association of Petroleum Geologists Bulletin  
 A. I. M. E. Bull.=American Institute of Mining and Metallurgical Engineers Bulletin  
 A. I. M. E. Trans.=American Institute of Mining and Metallurgical Engineers Transactions  
 Amer. Pet. Inst. Bull.=American Petroleum Institute Bulletin  
 Asoc. Mexicana Geol. Petroleros Bol.=Asociacion Mexicana de Geologos Petroleros Boletin  
 Auto. Ind.=Automotive Industries  
 Econ. Geol.=Economic Geology  
 Geol. Soc. Amer. Bull.=Geological Society of America Bulletin  
 Jour. Geol.=Journal of Geology  
 Min. & Met.=Mining and Metallurgy  
 Nat. Pet. News=National Petroleum News  
 Oil Eng. Fin.=Oil Engineering and Finance  
 O. & G. Jour.=The Oil and Gas Journal  
 Pet. Eng.=Petroleum Engineer  
 Pet. Rev.=Petroleum Review  
 Sat. Rev. Lit.=Saturday Review of Literature  
 Soc. Pet. Geophy. Jour.=Society of Petroleum Geophysicists Journal  
 U. S. G. S.=United States Geological Survey

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