Collier's
December 28, 1940

BOOM Comes to Town

The citizens of Freeport, Texas, are still blinking. And so would you if your home town more than doubled its population in three months and prosperity flew in every window

BY J. D. RATCLIFF

Fortune seekers in modern boom towns want sandwiches and malted milks at soda fountains instead of red liquor in honky-tonks

A FEW years ago Texans read something in their newspapers about a depression. But not being people to grasp idle rumors, they paid it no mind. As a thing to worry about they put it well down on the list, along with the new rash of sun spots and the outbreak of cannibalism in Fiji. Besides, everyone was too busy to worry. Having escaped this late unpleasantness, parts of Texas—chunks the size of Grade-A Balkan countries—are now in the midst of a first-class boom. Not, understand, a quiet, well-bred boomlet such as New England would produce; but a boisterous, violent, full-throated boom.

In Corpus Christi they have a nice little plum in the form of a $25,000,000 naval air base. Houston has more building per capita than any city in the country, and on top of this Ellington Field, relic of World War I, is getting a $2,000,000 refurbishing. Randolph Field at San Antonio is getting a costly going over. At Freeport—fifty miles below Galveston on the Gulf Coast—old residents are still slightly dazed about what has happened there.

Let Mr. Bearhunter Funderburk, proprietor of Bearhunter's Café, give his slant. This solid, monolithic gentleman is a little less confused than most of the others.

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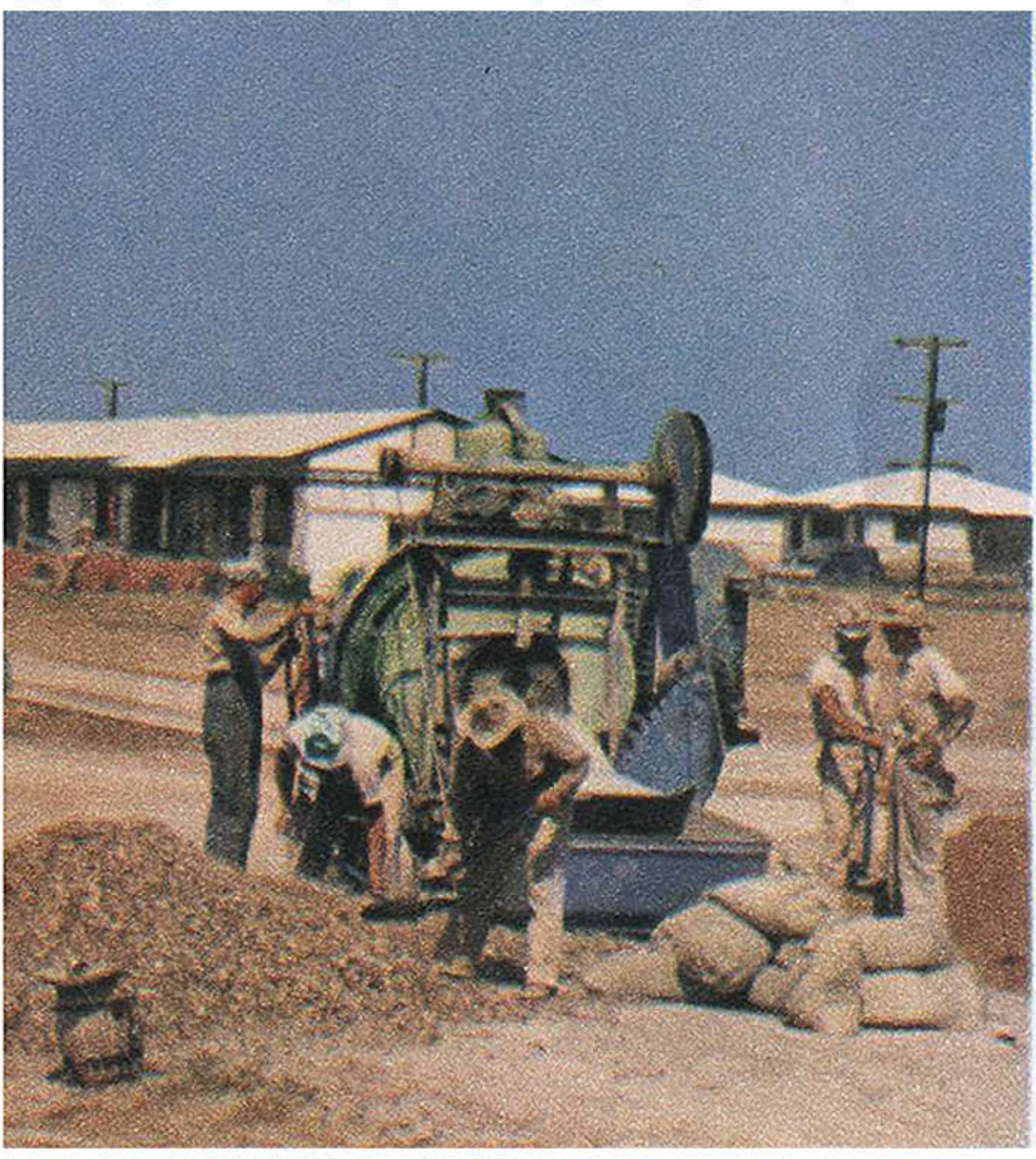

Freeport's sudden 140 per cent increase in population created a building boom, which helps along the general prosperity

Mr. Funderburk's place—he picked up his nickname a number of years ago when he set out on a fruitless journey to kick the wadding out of a bear that was annoying local citizens—is simple and functional to a delightful degree. There is a long counter—Texas doesn't allow bars—garnished with jars of pickled pigs' feet, wienies, hard-boiled eggs and other delicacies. Behind it stands a businesslike stockade of beer cases. A few tables, chairs and a cleared plot for free-style dancing round out the picture.

"This place was dead, temporary," says the Bearhunter, speaking with a considered growl. "The sulphur company shut down one of its two mines and laid off 300 men. Things weren't much good. We'd get a few fishermen over from Houston and a few sailors. It was all very peaceful. Then this thing happened."

This thing is the Dow Chemical Company's vast new plant which will extract magnesium from sea water; magnesium to be used to a very large extent in the rearmament program. Magnesium metal, a third lighter than aluminum, goes to make a hundred plane parts—supercharger housings, secondary structural parts, chair frames, oil tanks, pumps, etc.

Construction started last spring and the plant is now about ready to go into operation. Freeport's population shot up from 3,100 to 7,500 in ninety days' time. People slept in parks, boxcars, hobo jungles and on the beach. Trailer parking space fetched seven dollars a month—almost as much as an acre of land was worth a month or so earlier. Alert residents found that a rented cot would enrich the family till at the rate of five dollars a week; and one homeowner set an enviable record by sprinkling nineteen of them about the house: in the parlor, hallways, blanket closets and attic.

A rosy flush of prosperity spread over the town. People had real money to finger and there was work for all comers. The only thing that had tough sledding was the local relief project—hard-surfacing a breakwater. It had to shut down. A main street previously devoid

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Skilled artisans instead of bad men swarm to boom-town pay rolls, bringing their own housing (right, below) and their families

of entertainment sprouted a new movie house. Tent photographers began making three-minute photos, and a skeet-shooting pitch started banging away.

Used-car dealers started operation. All they needed was a vacant lot, a couple of floodlights, an oilcloth sign, and a few relics driven in from some near-by town. Help-yourself laundries —where water is free and washing machines rent at forty cents an hour— opened, and a trailer restaurant rolled into town. Reverend J. P. Rutledge, tent revivalist, started a highly profitable session of soulsaving, keeping the mourners' bench sagging most of the time. And a tent skating rink did nicely, too.

Crossroads gamblers—furtive troupes of crapshooters—got to work. Rough board shanties sprouted like mushrooms after a rain, and trailers clustered around water hydrants like cows around a water hole.

Freeport was a boom town. 1940 model. The new model is related to the boom towns of sourdough tradition—Nome, Dawson and Fairbanks—to about the same extent that a juke box is related to a wheezy phonograph with lilies painted on the horn. Which is to say that everything about the new model is quite elegant and flashy.

Tradition says that boom towns should have a thick veneer of mud. But there is no need for muddy streets when dredges can scoop oyster shells from the reefs that line the shore. They make an excellent road surface. Gun toting and social shootings? Don't pay. Today a man can't hop a horse and ride for the hills safely ahead of the sheriff. He hops in a coupé and is picked up three miles out of town by the state police. Gambling? A faro dealer couldn't get his fingers limbered up before a bunch of tough troopers were on top of him.

The old-fashioned boom town is as dead as a fried fish on Beale Street. But the new model is very much with us. The people who swarm to them know they are going to have to work and work hard for whatever gold they find. They are as tough, yes, but they work off any surplus exuberance on riveting machines and tractors. Mostly skilled mechanics —pipe fitters, steelworkers, masons— they arrive in expensive trailers and bring the wife and kids. When they've finished one job they move on to another, possibly a thousand or more miles away. Father gets top wages and the kids get to see the country.

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And Don't Get Tough!

Life for the new class of nomads isn't bad. Only the rag, tag and bobtail of the construction gang—"snowbirds" from the north and drifters from everywhere—make a feeble attempt to uphold the boom-town tradition. They arrive by freight with a couple of soggy dollars hidden in their shoes. On pay nights they make an honest effort to be rid of any stray wealth by the quickest and most violent means available.

"Not a bad bunch," says the Bear-hunter, as he looks down the counter of his café at a long line of beer drinkers. "They get rough now and again. But I get rough right back at them. Friday night they get paid. Then they get itchy.

"If you want to stay in business you can't let one of them whip you. That"—he emphasized the point—"is very bad." He picks up a salt shaker—the square, heavy kind, big enough to salt a steer—and looks at it with impassive eyes. "This helps when the going gets bad," he says. "Come down hard with it on a fellow's head and he folds up. You can thin out a whole row of them with no trouble a-tall."

Texas is somewhat noted for the loopy things it does; and Freeport has done its share. In 1928 it built a bridge on dry land and then installed a river under it. This was done in the course of diverting the Brazos River channel. It occurred to someone that Freeport would have a good harbor if it weren't for the silt deposited by the Brazos. The British branch of the Rothschild family had the same idea a few dozen years earlier. But to them an idea wasn't as painful as it is to a Texan. When the latter gets an idea he has to do something about it quickly; usually something big and expensive. Engineers dammed the river and diverted it under the new bridge into a channel which empties seven miles below the old mouth. Then they dredged the old river bed into an excellent port for seagoing traffic, a shrimp fleet, and a flotilla of smaller boats to take sports fishermen out for tarpon, sails, dog snapper and kings.

With this job done, Freeport settled into a quiet rut until Dow engineers began casting appraising eyes on its resources. Up at Midland, Michigan, Dow had built an incredible complex of chemical industry on one basic raw material, brine pumped from wells that tapped an inland salt sea. From this brine they extracted dyes, perfumes, flavorings, organic chemicals and such drugs as iodine, aspirin and epsom salts. Dow, wonder boy of the industry, grew to become the nation's largest single chemical plant. It extracted magnesium from its brine to make industry's lightest structural material, a silvery metal used in peacetime for vacuum-cleaner housings, portable tool frames, artificial limbs; and in wartime for flares, rockets and the plane parts already mentioned. Weight saved on planes can be translated into more speed, more range.

Use of this metal has increased sixty-fold since 1928 and shows no inclination to stop its upward swing. So Dow was faced with a troubling problem. At Mid-

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land it couldn't increase brine production to take care of this new demand for magnesium metal without throwing everything else out of kilter.

Once before it had been faced with this same problem, when a tremendous demand arose for bromine to be used in antiknock motor fuels. To solve this Dow, working with Ethyl Gasoline Corporation, turned to the sea. The sea represents the earth's greatest mineral repository. Each cubic mile of sea water contains an estimated five billion dollars' worth of minerals—gold, silver, phosphorous, etc. Very well, said the Dow chemists, why not reclaim from the sea the bromine washed down by rivers in the past million or so years?

In 1934 the company built a plant at Kure Beach, outside Wilmington, North Carolina, and started extracting the stuff. At present the plant has a capacity of 60,000 pounds of bromine per day.

When the magnesium problem came along, Dow chemists and engineers began searching the coast for wanted conditions. They needed cheap fuel, cheap land and water transport. Freeport supplied these. The strategic position of the old and new Brazos River channels offered another advantage. Sea water could be sucked into the plant from the old channel. After magnesium was extracted the water could be dumped above the dam into the new channel. This would carry it several miles down the coast—thereby preventing the plant from working and reworking the same sea water.

No Time to Waste

Freeport had yet another advantage. Oyster reefs—a cheap source of lime needed in the magnesium-extraction process—lined the coast. Dredges could pull them up in endless quantities. In other words Freeport had everything. It got an enthusiastic okay from the engineers.

Without further talk construction men moved in on a 2,000-acre plot covered with pickle grass, salt cedars and other such mongrel flora. They jammed light towers into the sandy soil—this would be a three-shift proposition—kicked a few goats out of the way and went to work. They wrapped a fence around five hundred acres and started filling the enclosure with buildings. What the 3,200 men on this job have accomplished in the past eight months makes the highly touted totalitarian efficiency look a little palsied. In twenty-two days pipe stringers ran forty-one miles of gas line. Engineers built a million-dollar power plant.

To get some notion of the size of this operation realize that the seawater pumps are big enough to handle the water supply of a city the size of Chicago! By the time the plant is completed it will stand Dow somewhere in the neighborhood of $15,000,000. Its annual production of magnesium metal —something in excess of 12,000,000 pounds—will more than double the United States' supply.

Towns like Freeport, booming largely because of the national-defense pro-

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gram, are hard put to bed down the workers that swarm upon them. Bremerton, Washington, home port of the vital Puget Sound Navy Yard, is one of the hardest hit. There was a housing shortage when the Navy Yard had a civilian personnel of 3,000 men and the figure is now rising toward 8,500.

The situation at Hartford, Connecticut, home of aircraft industries—is serious, but not as acute as in Bremerton. Employment in the town's three major industries has tripled in the past few months. Similar conditions prevail at East Moline, Illinois, where the Rock Island Arsenal has added upward of 3,000 workers. Altogether, the United States Housing Authority estimates that there is an acute housing shortage in 200 national-defense cities, and at the time of this writing has earmarked $29,000,000 to help alleviate these shortages.

Freeport's mild climate makes its problem less serious than the one faced by Northern cities. Houses don't have to be so tight or so solidly built, hence they go up more quickly. Dow has built a mess hall, three barracks, a hotel and thirty-three houses, the latter designed by Alden Dow, brother of the head of the chemical company and student of Frank Lloyd Wright.

Bunkhouses accommodating hundreds, and rough lumber shanties that rent for forty dollars a month have been whipped together by local operators. Tent cities and trailer parks are everywhere. Freeport is full well beyond overflowing. Children in lower grades go to school in shifts, and there are sixty-eight youngsters in one room.

The town is doing its honest best to deliver satisfactorily for the $80,000 weekly pay roll that has been dropped in its lap and would like to see everyone enjoy himself. For milder spirits it provides The Happy Thought Ice Cream Parlor, a few assorted soda fountains and restaurants. Most of the town goes quietly to sleep, come nightfall, but there are enough bibulous spirits to give it a fine beery complexion on pay night. Local merchants and café owners stock up with enough money to cash checks for all comers, then the fun starts. The town has a variety of "literary clubs"—Texas euphemism for pool hall—beer joints and dance halls. To get a beer license it is necessary for the applicant to have lived in the town six months. Newcomers get around this annoying detail by taking a local man in partnership.

Mr. Charlie Watson's Club Snug Harbor is the oldest, and most firmly established. It is painted inside and out, something of a distinction. It has a house rule that hats must be removed on entering—other places aren't so choosy. Mr. Watson provides pool and domino tables, a dance floor and a couple of service bars. He sustains the literary flavor of his club by subscribing to half a dozen magazines; and likes everything on a high plane. Any rowdy stuff and he is apt to get dangerous. As an engineer, he went to sea for a number of years, picking up some artistic tattooing and an admirable ability to handle rough-and-tumble drunks.

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If anyone gets too boisterous, Mr. Watson escorts him to the door. He is willing to let things ride at this point, but if the customer makes the mistake of calling Mr. Watson a bald-headed so-and-so, he is bopped firmly over the head with a kid's-size ball bat. "We have," says Mr. Watson, "to maintain a nice atmosphere for the young people."

Mr. Johnnie Murphy's Joy Spot—beer, good eats, dance hall—is similarly prosperous. "Hell," says Mr. Murphy, "on a Friday night you can't stir them with a stick." This is the night the Joy Spot imports a hillbilly band from Houston; a band unique in the respect that it carries its own bouncer to fend off people who like to take pokes at the musicians and kick expensive holes in bass drums.

Mr. Murphy, who knows a good boom when he sees one, came over from Liberty, Texas, bought a few rough boards and built his Joy Spot in a couple of weeks. Like almost everything else in and around Freeport, it has turned out to be a gilt-edged investment. The back room, reserved for couples only, the counter, and the dance floor where no holds are barred, all contribute to Mr. Murphy's success. Half a dozen fights are par for the course at these dance festivals but no one seems to mind. "They only want to see who's the best man," says one patient customer.

Back in the High Cotton Now

This neighborhood never has been exactly peaceful, if one accepts the usual connotation of that word. The modern town was built in 1912 when the Freeport Sulphur Company punched a couple of 1,500-foot holes in the ground, shot hot water down them and began bringing up melted sulphur.

So far as lawlessness is concerned today Chief Constable Hays has few complaints to make. "I tell the café owners," he says, "that they should keep the peace in their own places." Then he adds philosophically, "If they don't, who will?" Every night Constable Hays rounds up the drunks unable to get home and lodges them in his three-cell jail—Hays' Hotel they call it. "Had twelve in her one night," he says proudly, "stacked up just like cordwood."

Serious trouble? "Not much lately," says the lean, tanned peace officer who looks quite a few years younger than his seventy-four years. "We have a cuttin' scrape now and again, but haven't had a murder for it must be three years now. These fellows just get restless because there aren't enough women to go around. And there's not going to be enough to go around unless they are the right kind.

"I keep looking for a riot in one of these new dance halls, but it doesn't seem to come along. Maybe it never will. All in all, I'd say things were right peaceful."

This estimate is probably correct. There isn't an undue amount of rough stuff, everything considered. Certainly no more than you would expect a boom

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town in Texas to produce.

Taken as a whole, Freeport is a lusty, vigorous action picture of America going about the business of arming itself. A shoeshine boy who ran up a stake of sixteen dollars in three days gave a nice summary of the situation. "Boy," he said, "we're in the high cotton now."