

Satchel and Trunk Men
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The “satchel and trunk men,” as Whiting’s first settlers called the Standard employees, arrived to the area in droves. After the refinery began its operations in 1890, most of the laborers who worked on the refinery’s construction stayed on to become full time Standard Oil employees. These men were shifted to various departments throughout the plant. As the refinery expanded, more and more workers were hired.

By 1896, 2,500 to 3,000 workers were employed at the Whiting refinery. Men from all over this country and throughout Europe came to Whiting, Indiana in search of employment. Every morning, anxious men waited outside of Standard’s gates hoping to get hired. The plant’s foreman had their pick, and the men who were not chosen came day after day in search of that coveted position. It was W. P. Cowan’s goal to get the rough, unsavory characters off of Standard Oil’s payroll as soon as possible. The refinery’s policy when selecting permanent laborers was to give preference to married men.

The majority of workers employed at Standard’s Whiting refinery were common laborers. They were mostly immigrants who spoke very little English. The various levels of workers often separated into their own groups. The foreign born employees often would only associate with employees from similar European countries. Some men wouldn’t even work with different nationalities.

Standard Oil paid as high a wage or even higher than other industries in the Chicagoland area. The basic wage of the common laborer was fifteen cents per hour. Firemen and still men helpers were paid sixteen and two-thirds cents per hour. Pumpers and engineers earned twenty and five-sixth cents per hour. Clerks received a wage between fifteen to twenty cents per hour.

Likewise, pipe fitters earned twenty-two and one-half cents per hour. Finally, bricklayers were given forty-five cents per hour. The average daily wage for women and girls was ninety cents. At the time, the only place where women and girls could work was in the candle factory. Boys received eighty cents per day.

Payday came every two weeks. U. G. Swartz remembered it to be a gala day in his essay "Some Early Days of Whiting". "For the first two years the pay was distributed during work hours, in cash, from a light wagon with the top enclosed with a wire screen. The paymaster and head timekeeper, with a driver, went from group to group all over the plant, through outlying places, 'Oklahoma' and 'the cottages,' handing out pay to each one. The wagon was everywhere met by groups of eager men."

In 1891 a small pay house was erected near the Whiting refineries main office. The pay house had pay windows on each side of the structure. On payday each window had a line that consisted of several employees. More care was taken in guarding the money than in the first year of operation. Standard now employed an armed watchman who guarded the cash during the payroll activities.

On the morning of payday, the money was transported from Chicago and deposited at the main office. The cash was then counted and separated into pay envelopes. This was a long and tedious task to undertake. Men from all over the plant were recruited to assist in this process. Eventually, the fear of handling such large amounts of cash lead to Standard Oil issuing paychecks.

During this time, on payday the lunch hour was shortened to twenty-five minutes, and the whistle signifying quitting time was blown an hour early. Standard Oil personnel viewed payday as a partial holiday. For young single workers, payday was a day to rejoice and spend their money at one of Whiting's many saloons. A more somber scenario was presented to the married

employees. Wives would wait at the pay house in order to intercept the pay envelope before it was deposited in a barkeeper's register. The wife guaranteed that the money went toward the family's needs first. Payday was also a great time for the merchants and saloonkeepers who dotted "Oklahoma's" landscape.

U. G. Swartz recalled that there were signs in several languages appealing to Standard's thirsty workers. "One of these freely translated, invited the wayfarer to 'take another one in memory of the loved absent ones.' How these boys did love the absent ones! Another, and yet another was called for. None was ever forgotten. Everyone loved someone."

Merchants and storekeepers, likewise, viewed payday as a gala event. It was at this time that employees would settle up any payment that was left over from the previous month. Workers who could not pay for food and other family supplies were given a loan until the next payday. At this time, no one either sold or bought items for cash. The outstanding loans were transferred directly from their pay to the shopkeepers' books. The proprietors of *Cheap Jones* and *Cheap* were in constant competition to see who could extend the most credit to their patrons. In the end, the generosity of both shopkeepers was extended too far and their shops were brought into financial ruin.

Platforms were built in the sand in front of many of the stores. Merchants could now display a variety of different merchandise. There was always an eager salesman quick to grab a passerby by the sleeve and transform him into a purchaser. The stores were filled with anything the employees could possibly need. The workingmen and their families could buy food, furniture, baby buggies, and clothing.

But, all of the money that Standard Oil employees earned did not go to stores and saloons much of it was sent home to the "absent ones." Because many of the refinery's workers were

immigrants from Europe, there were still several relatives who still lived in the “Old Country.” There was always a rush on payday to get to the foreign money window at Whiting’s post office. Immigrant workers waited in long lines late into the evening until their transactions were completed. Several hundred dollars were sent every payday to relatives back home. At one time, Whiting’s post office had the record of doing the second largest foreign money business in Indiana. Although the pay was small for some of the common laborers, they never forgot their loved ones back in Europe.