

# Securing the Land



A large oil rig is silhouetted against a bright orange and yellow sunset sky. The rig's structure is complex, with a tall derrick and various pipes and platforms. The foreground is dark, showing the silhouettes of trees and a fence line. A green semi-transparent graphic element is overlaid on the right side of the image, containing a white oil drop icon and the text 'Drop of Oil'.

 | Drop  
of Oil

## Chapter Four:

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There's a similar thread that winds through the early oil business careers of former President George W. Bush, "Oracle of Oil" T. Boone Pickens and hydraulic fracturing evangelist Aubrey McClendon.

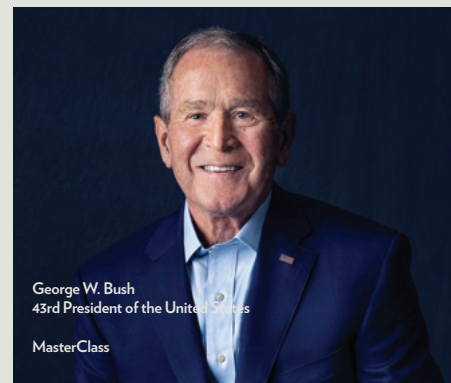
Before all three vaulted to lofty career heights – both Pickens and McClendon have since passed – each started out as a petroleum landman.

The time-tested profession, which serves as the critical bridge between oil and gas companies and the landowners who hold the valuable mineral rights they hope to access, is essential to understanding our next step in the life of a drop of oil.

At this point in our journey, we've relied on the expertise of our geologists to pinpoint the drilling locations likely to yield the most oil and natural gas resources. Now, it's up to the several-dozen experts in Pioneer's Land division to secure, assemble and bundle the acreage we want to explore.

Their roles vary – from frontline, shoe-leather work knocking on doors and combing courthouse records to cataloging a giant warehouse worth of digital records – but every unit in this department plays an equally vital role, something we've emphasized throughout this series.

A landman is responsible for assembling a *drilling fairway* – we talked about these in our last chapter – by securing land to form what's called a *drill block*, usually between 960 and 1,280 acres or so.



# Easier said than done.

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It's not uncommon for one property in all these bundled-together lots to have recorded hundreds – even thousands – of transactions as that land changed hands over several generations. Unwinding who owns (or owned) what property presents the challenge.

“In short, geologists can tell you where oil and gas are located, engineers can go get it and we make it possible to go get it,” says Land department Vice President **Brandon Lakatta**. “The foundation for any new play is to go out on Day One, figure out who owns the properties and start putting your puzzle together to make drillable fairways by acquiring those properties.



“Every single one of those tracts has its own history that you have to run backwards, and not only are you looking at the transaction history, you’re also looking to see if there are any liens or encumbrances burdening the property,” **Brandon** says. “You have a significant number of variables that come into play even once you do know who owns the property.”

**Brandon** will tell you that he kind of lucked into his line of work. The original plan, he says, was to play on the Texas Tech University golf team and study business. That’s until he happened upon the school’s land management program and found himself drawn to it – enough to make a career change. Goodbye golf, hello energy commerce degree. Before joining Pioneer, he cut his teeth at ConocoPhillips and Cabot Oil & Gas, and paid his dues working properties in the Gulf of Mexico, Louisiana and in the Eagle Ford Shale before focusing on the Permian more recently.

# One of the most

challenging aspects for a landman – incidentally, the role is gender neutral, despite the profession’s title – is plowing through stacks of property records to determine rightful ownership. And, particularly in Texas, where tracts of land have been chopped, sliced and bisected every which way for generations, some of the documents trace back to 1800s-era land grants. That’s a lot of paperwork.



“It’s a history lesson, and that’s what’s unique about the U.S. because other countries don’t have this deep-rooted history where the citizens actually own the land,” says Pioneer Land Supervisor **Rebecca English**, who we met in Chapter 2. **Rebecca**, who also holds a law degree, chanced upon the oil and gas business while pursuing her undergraduate degree at the University of Oklahoma.

**Like her colleagues we talked to for this chapter, you get a feeling that part of the joy of Rebecca’s work is the mystery and the chase of it – it’s jumping down as many rabbit holes as it takes until the right one hits paydirt and cracks the most stubborn of property puzzles.**

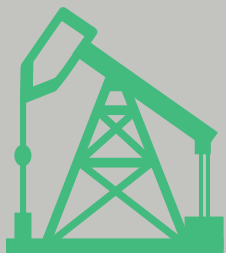
“Whether the piece of land was owned in the 1900s or the mid-1800s, or today, there could be have been one landowner or 300,” **Rebecca** says. “It’s really interesting to track down the family tree and discover that originally – 50 years ago – we were maybe working with granddad, and now we’re working with all the grandchildren.”

Like we talked about last week, the oil exploration business always comes with its share of curveballs. Routine is never routine. And no job is ever typical.

On a land case, picture every time that piece of property has been bought, sold, subdivided, inherited or transferred to a family member or distant relative going back several generations. And if there’s been a death somewhere in that chain of custody, did the landowner leave a will? And if so, where was the will filed?

There are plenty of wrenches that can get tossed into the gears.

Case in point: It may seem counterintuitive, but the smaller the tract of land and the closer it is to town, the bigger the headaches. A good example is the city of Midland. To drill just one set of wells in town, there could be *thousands* of leases on any one of the parcels that first need to be vetted through documentation and thorough research.



# “You start all the way back

from something called patent, which is essentially the initial grant and the only form of proof of absolute title to land in the U.S., and you bring that title all the way forward to today,” **Brandon** says. “It’s possible you can have thousands of transactions that occur for one property, and you just piece that whole puzzle together to understand who the parties are that you have to secure the land and/or mineral rights from.”



**To illustrate how intricate some of these record deep dives can get, Brandon offers one scenario chock full of twists.**

“Let’s say you and your brother own a property and your brother moved to New York, and he sold everything he owned in Texas to someone up in New York, and that record of sale didn’t necessarily find its way into the records in Midland County, Texas.

“Twenty years later, the person he sold it to in New York sells a portion of that property to someone else. Just looking at records, you can never connect your brother to that person. So, one of the requirements would be to go back and try to understand what the relationship is between your brother and that person to confirm that these subsequent conveyances are real, and that it’s not someone purporting to have an interest who actually has no rightful interest.

“If you look past one detail in a case like that, you might miss an entire chain of title, and that means we don’t own what we think we do,” he says. “There’s a lot of digging and research that goes into every single owner in that deck to make sure we’re confident that we’ve identified the rightful owner. And when there isn’t an obvious rightful owner, we do all these other things to minimize risk.

**“You unwind the chain of title and wind it all back up in hopes you can make it all match,” Brandon concludes.**

**It’s hard to bend your mind around a single case with that many zigs and zags, but they exist and our Land division handles them all the time.**

Here’s the real brain-bender:  
Our landmen manage  
more than **20,000 leases**,  
encompassing hundreds of

thousands of acres.  
And last year, Pioneer’s Land  
division transacted on more  
than **400,000 acres**.

“We will transact on more acres than most companies will ever dream of owning, and we’re bringing it in and out the door in one year,” **Brandon** says.

These people are good.

The hardest thing about **Rebecca’s** job is also the thing she enjoys doing – closing the deal.

“It’s difficult negotiating with outside parties, but it’s also one of the most fun things about my job because it keeps me on my toes,” **Rebecca** says. “Whether or not the person I’m dealing with is a professional, somebody who knows all the legality in terms of oil and gas contracts, or just the mom and pop who aren’t as well-versed in it, you have to adapt your communication to whoever you’re speaking with.”

Simply put, Land is a people business for the most part, built on personal relationships, and that’s why **Rebecca** says the discipline is so challenging.

“Unlike perhaps geology and engineering, which takes a lot of analytical abilities, in Land, sometimes you’re dealing with emotional people,” she says. “It’s all about personality and connecting and having a relationship with those parties so that they can feel like they can trust you to execute that contract to let us take their ownership and make value out of it.

“There’s always that long-running joke that the landmen have the personality, and I think there’s some truth to that. We’re the ones who can get everyone in the room and somehow make them hold hands together,” **Rebecca** says.

There’s another unique aspect to this profession, and it addresses what may be one of the biggest misconceptions about the job.



Although it may seem the Land department is mostly involved on the front end of a drilling operation, the division is actually responsible for that lease throughout the life of a well. It includes work to remediate and restore the site up to the standards set out by the surface landowner in the lease after a well is plugged.

“We’re one of the few departments that does what we call cradle-to-grave work, where you’re involved early on in the process, where you clear the title on the land, then keep in constant contact with the surface landowner for however long the well is in operation, all the way to when production ceases,” says Pioneer Land Director **Blake Brazelton**, who manages the Midland Basin on the development and acquisitions side.

**Blake** grew up in the oil and gas mecca of Odessa, but when he started at Texas Tech University around 2001, the energy industry was sputtering. He saw friends laid off, plus his folks cautioned against going into the business because of the volatility.

But, much like **Brandon**, he saw something that drew him into the petroleum land management program that was housed in the business school. He was one of just seven students who graduated the program, but his timing was perfect: Oil and gas companies were searching for younger landmen as retirements among veterans mounted. The rest is history.



**There are three linchpins of our smoothly run Land division: planning, more planning and even more planning.**

It’s calculating not only how many wells Pioneer has drilled, it’s looking for the next opportunity – the next parcels to pursue. With the company’s recent acquisitions of DoublePoint Energy and Parsley Energy, our land portfolio increased exponentially in a very short period of time.

“We have the rigs that are drilling in the near term, and we have to make sure we’re ready for those, but we’re one of the few groups, I feel, where we’re always working ahead, too,” **Blake** says. “Not only do you have to know what’s going on now, but it’s also what we can do to get acreage ready in the future.

“So, we are responsible for adding new development projects to the schedule,” he explains. “The workload increases because not only are you clearing wells for near-term development, but also just trying to think about what we need to do with the acreage that’s not horizontal-ready, and what we need to do to get it that way.”

In this line of work, the work is never really “over.”

**Cole Weathers and his team have heard it over and over, like a skipping record, about the archetype charismatic landman who ventures out to acquire oil and gas leases, negotiate contracts and close the biggest deals. Cole, Pioneer's Land innovation and senior data manager, wants to amend that narrative a bit.**

“There is a whole army of people who stand behind that forward-facing landman to take all of the data that's associated with that contract, organize it so Accounting can get what they need, and then the company's asset teams can develop the land.” Cole says. “People see the land acquisition part and the horizontal wells going into production after that, but the data side of it – what it looks like on the back office end when it comes to maintenance, our divisions of interest and our lease records – that's really the side of Land that people don't have a good feel for.”



Cole originally harbored dreams of becoming a literature professor, but after changing majors “18 different times,” he jokes, he realized oil and gas was “a little more profitable.” What appealed to him about the energy industry and, more specifically, possessing a data management skillset, was the sheer challenge.

He taught himself to code by working and reworking processes until he understood how it was done.





“Everything in Land is all kind of a puzzle,” says **Cole**, who keeps several Rubik’s Cubes in various stages of completion on a side table in his office. “It’s always something to solve and tackle, so that’s what really sparked my interest and kept me hooked on oil and gas.”

**Cole’s** unit is in charge of maintaining and updating digital copies of well leases and *division orders* – records of interest in a specific well – to calculate figures like the company’s interest and net revenue on existing wells and wells tabbed for future development. There’s no room for error – one data glitch or input slip-up could throw off those calculations.

“This isn’t when you get to be happy you got a ‘95’ on a test,” **Cole** says. “It has to be 100%, every time.”

It’s probably not the best metaphor, he admits, but **Cole** compares the Land department to the classic role-playing game Dungeons & Dragons.

“You have a team of people, and within that team, you usually have someone who’s the face of the party, and to me, that’s always the charismatic landman who can pull people together and encourage them to get something done,” **Cole** says. “But you still have your wizards in the background who are actually casting the spells; you’re going to have the clerics who are cleaning things up and healing wounds, or errors in the chain of title in our case. So you always have these extra people in the background shoring things up.

“Each of them has their own role, but we all get it done together,” he says.



**COMING NEXT WEEK:**

We're finally ready to drill. We'll meet some members of our Permian drilling team and learn about daily operations, challenges and expectations that come with this labor-intensive step in the life of a drop of oil.

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