

Discovery!

The Search for Arabian Oil

by Wallace Stegner

Reading Guide

At the beginning of the 20th century, Arabia was a mysterious land, closed to non-muslims, torn by fractitious rivalries between nomadic desert tribes and the citizens of scattered oases towns and cities. Its people led an ancient, though perilous, subsistence-level life centered on camels, sheep and dates. On its eastern coast, great fleets of dhows combed the reefs for pearl oysters; on its western shore, at the ancient port of Jeddah, tens of thousands of devout Muslims arrived yearly to make the sixty-mile pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca.

Both coasts were controlled by the Ottoman Turks, the deserts between them were ruled by the Bedouin, and central Arabia, known as the Nejd, was in the hands of the Al-Rashid family based in the great city of Hail in northern Arabia. For 100 years, Riyadh, the capital city of the Nejd, had been the political center for two dynasties of the Al-Saud family until 1891 when the last Saudi ruler, Abdul Rahman, was deposed by the Rashidis and fled into exile in Kuwait. Abdul Rahman's second son, AbdulAziz ibn Abdul Rahman al-Saud, was 15 at the time.

Eleven years later in 1902, this 26-year-old prince set out from Kuwait to regain his father's kingdom. With a handful of men he stormed the Rashidi garrison at the Al-Musmak fortress in Riyadh. When the fighting was over, a victorious Abdul Aziz stood at its battlements and shouted to the crowd below, "Who is with me? Who? Your own prince is with you again."

Arabia would never be the same. After 30 years of warfare, diplomacy and the considerable strength of his personality, Ibn Saud unified Arabia and proclaimed the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia on September 18th, 1932. It was a kingdom devastated by the worldwide depression – the pearl industry had collapsed, date exports had plummeted and the number of pilgrims was a fraction of what it had been for decades. The country was in dire economic straits and the Standard Oil Company of California (SOCAL), half a world away, wasn't doing that much better.

Oil sold for 75 cents a barrel, less than the cost of the steel barrel to contain it. At Socal's headquarters in San Francisco employees were paid in scrip rather than cash. After a series of failed overseas ventures, the company had tasted a modest success in Bahrain, but a previous survey of Arabia by a world-renowned geologist had declared it devoid of oil. Socal's prospects were far from certain when its representative, Lloyd Hamilton, arrived in Jeddah on February 15th, 1932.

And so Wallace Stegner's narrative begins.

Questions about *Discovery! The Search for Arabian Oil*:

1. Who was the man Stegner describes as one, “who awakes alertly in the night, hears history’s clock strike at a critical time – but counts the strokes wrong,”? Do you think he could have done anything differently and succeeded? (p. 7)
2. Why do you think Lloyd Hamilton and Shaikh Abdullah Sulaiman finally came to an agreement and signed the concession contract? Do you think that either party had a stronger position in the negotiations? (pp.23-27)
3. When Bert Miller and Krug Henry landed at Jubail on September 28th 1933, the first thing they did was explore the nearby Jabal al-Berri. On their return to Jubail Stegner describes a mirage. He begins “Unknown Arabia grinned at them.” If you have seen Lawrence of Arabia consider Stegner’s descriptive clauses as a series of film clips. Describe how they compare. (pp.33-34)
4. At the end of the above passage, Stegner describes a swift *jalbout* skimming across the Arabian Gulf. Explain the theme he is conveying through description and how he does it. (p. 34)
5. Imagine that it is 1933 and you live in the ancient port town of Jubail. Life is much as it has been for centuries, a life without electricity, machines or a reliable water supply. Imagine that you are 17 years old and Dick Kerr and Charley Rocheville land the first airplane to ever touch down in eastern Arabia. Would you be excited? Frightened? Suspicious? What would your sisters, parents and other relatives say? Why do you think the airplane was such a touchy subject with the government? (pp. 49-52)
6. After the 1933/34 field season the American geologists went to Lebanon and spent the summer in the cool air of the mountains at the Meadower Palace Hotel in Dhour el-Choueir. A romance unfolds between Krug and Annette, look at their photographs on Plate VI, paraphrase their story and cite two of the many details this novelist uses to propel the story. (pp. 65-68)
7. Chapter Six begins, “They did not come as settlers, or even as explorers ...” Stegner defines the attitude and motivation of an overseas wildcatter in the 1930s before he introduces the individual characters. Does the rest of the chapter expand on his opening paragraphs? How does he use these characters to tell the story of their disappointment? (pp.83-103)
8. In late 1937 Socal was on the verge of abandoning its concession. What happened on March 14th, 1938 that changed everything? How does the author set up this event by involving his characters and celebrating their ultimate vindication? (pp.117-119)
9. The discovery and production of oil in Saudi Arabia was not without risks. Stegner describes the terrible tragedy of the *Calarabia*. Can you imagine this event through the eyes of Al Carpenter or Captain Eid, the Saudi sailor who saved him? (pp. 145-147)

10. May 1st, 1939 the *D. G. Scofield* loads the first 81,000 barrels of Saudi oil from the refinery at Ras Tanura. Stegner writes,

“Then Ibn Saud reached out the enormous hand with which he had created and held together his kingdom in the first place, and turned the valve on the line through which the wealth, power, and responsibilities of the industrial 20th century would flow into Saudi Arabia. It was May 1, 1939. No representative of the United States was present, even as an observer. The United States had not yet accredited any representative to Saudi Arabia.”

Is Stegner writing about the kingdom's past or its future? He has reversed the direction of the oil, turning it from merely a source of wealth into a burden of responsibility. What is he implying by noting the absence of an official U. S. government representative? (p. 139)

11. Look at the pictures of King Ibn Saud on Plate XI. Relaxing in the desert on the eve of his arrival in Ras Tanura, Abdul Aziz gazes at the photographer. What has this man experienced in the last 36 years?

In the photo to the right, he is walking up to examine the top of an oil storage tank. He is smiling broadly. After a long struggle he has unified a country and guaranteed his people's future. Nearly 70 years later his kingdom is an absolutely vital nation in the global economy. Do you think that Ibn Saud deserves to smile?

12. Nine weeks after the celebration at Ras Tanura, Dammam #12 went up in flames. See the photographs on Plate XII. The well fire consumed the derrick within the first hour and burned out of control. If left unchecked, it threatened not only the well, but also the entire Dammam field. With virtually no protective covering Americans and Saudis fought the fire courageously until it was extinguished ten days later. Why did these men risk their lives? How many Saudis and Americans died in the fire?

13. The geologists visit the ancient city of Layla in 1940, where they receive a mixed greeting and then drive farther south where they meet the Old Man of Hisy. When asked how old he is, what does he say? Why do you think the people of Layla reacted as they did? (pp.184-186)

14. In one of the most audacious air raids of WW II, the Italian Air Force launched four bombers from the Greek island of Rhodes that flew non-stop across Syria and Iraq to attack Dhahran and Bahrain on the night of October 19th 1940. The aviators then flew on for over 700 miles to land in Eritrea with than less than 40 gallons of fuel remaining.

Was the raid a success in the short run? Do you think that the bombing of Dhahran was an accident? Accident or not, did the raid a strategic advantage for the Axis powers? (pp. 189-194)

15. During the Second World War, 100 Americans maintained a 15,000 barrel a day contribution to the war effort through the refinery in Bahrain. Equipment, spare parts and supplies of all kind were all but unobtainable. To provision these men, Steve Furman, a rancher's son from Oklahoma,

introduced to the local farmers a host of Western agricultural and animal husbandry techniques. One day he met an old Yemeni named Mutlaq. Stegner writes, "Arabia is not cattle country." Describe Mutlaq's 1000-mile cattle drive as if it were a Western movie. (pp.211-213)

16. Stegner believed that it was families, not eccentric individuals that settled the frontier of the American West. In November 1944, the first group of wives dodged German submarines and wartime transport shortages to return to their husbands in Dhahran. It took four months. Early on Stegner introduces Gertie McConnell and her trunk. Follow its progress and explain its role in settling the Arabian oil frontier. If you have read Stegner's *Angle of Repose* can you recall an analogy similar to Mrs. McConnell's trunk? (pp. 238-245)
17. The author ends the first chapter, *Contact!*, by remarking that "one day [the kingdom would] send Arabian oil out to the western world and bring the western world to Saudi Arabia." What is Stegner's central insight into the challenges faced by modern Saudi Arabia in 1956? Do you think that his insight remains valid to this day? (p. 17)

Readers of this guide are invited to send their comments or answers to these questions to the following address: editor@www.SelwaPress.com. From time to time we'd like to refer to your responses within the Selwa Press blog, so please specify your pseudonym, real name or desire to remain anonymous. No email addresses will be released in any way.

Discovery! The Search for Arabian Oil

by Wallace Stegner

First US Edition

ISBN: 978-0-9701157-4-4

© Selwa Press 2007

www.SelwaPress.com